The Arts & Hattie Wilson High

Mrs. Joseph Madison High .... Provided a place which could be utilized as a fine arts museum and a school of art.

Harriet (“Hattie”) Harwell Wilson (whom later became known as Mrs. Joseph Madison High); was a native born Georgian, she was born on the Sandtown Plantation on the Chattahoochee River in Campbell County, Georgia on November 30, 1862.

For those of you not familiar with Sandtown Place, it was approximately 12 miles from Atlanta, and was a rather large home built in the Greek Revival Style which James Harwell Wilson (father to Hattie) had purchased after its completion in 1832. Mr. J. H. Wilson married a young lady Mary Frances Green on Dec. 3rd, 1851 after the deaths of two previous wives. Mary Frances Green was a native Georgian, she lived and studied in England before her marriage to Mr. Wilson.

Around 1863 Hattie was taken by wagon with the family to one of Mr. Wilson’s other plantations in Jonesboro, Georgia to avoid the Union Army’s descent of the area. Mr. Wilson (Hattie’s father) died July 19, 1865, and the Sandtown Plantation having been used by Sherman’s troops as a hospital and the caretaker who had been left in charge did not welcome the return of the Wilson’s, Mary and young Hattie went to Atlanta and lived in a house “below street level”. For many years Mrs. Wilson did sewing and took in boarders to support herself and Hattie. Young Mary was not destined to live a life as a widow, and remarried on December 16, 1869 to Captain Aaron Grier (affectionately known as “Gip”). Gip had been living in Atlanta after losing his leg during service with Colonel Adair’s Southern Confederacy and had remained in the city during Sherman’s siege. Hattie’s new stepfather was a cousin to Alexander H. Stephens, who visited Atlanta on business; and she was not really all that fond of either of them. Because of Mr. Grier’s wealth, Mary and Hattie once again were able to live in a spacious home and enjoy the privileged social status.

Hattie

Hattie attended Mrs. Ballard’s School (which later known as Atlanta Female Institute); and was founded by Mrs. Josephine Ballard. Hattie’s mother had attended the Bloomfield Female Institute in New Jersey and had excelled mightily in the arts, history and music. Hattie excelled at the arts and music as well. Hattie sang soprano at the choir in downtown Atlanta’s Central Presbyterian Church. She was also a member of the Colonel Dames in later years and had been offered a scholarship in voice. Hattie loved to draw and paint trees, flowers and birds as a hobby.
A Popular belle of the Post-War Era – Hattie Wilson

September 6, 1882 – Hattie married Joseph Madison High in the Grier home on Forsyth Street. There were a large number of guests including the Honorable A. H. Stephens who was staying at the Grier house while forming preparations for his gubernatorial race, which in effect he won. The couple went on a wedding trip to New York, Chicago, Niagara Falls and several other cities and moved into the Grier household where they lived for the next five years.

JOSEPH M. HIGH
born near Madison, Georgia – May 27, 1855
learned merchandising and storekeeping from his father and was considered to be successful. Moving to Atlanta in 1880 he operated a dry goods store with E. D. HERRING until 1884 when he become the sole owner of the firm which was known as J. M. High Company for more than fifty years.

The marriage of Hattie Wilson and Joseph High lasted 24 years until his death in November 2, 1906.

Children:
Ernest Grier – born in 1883 – died 1885 a couple months after Harriett’s birth of intestinal occlusion.

Harriett Mary (Hattie May) – born in 1885 married Toulman T. Williams in 1907.

Elizabeth Emerson – (Named for Joseph’s mother) born in 1887

Dorothy Madison – born in 1893 on her parent’s 11th wedding anniversary.

The family moved into their own house in the late 1880’s at 418 Peachtree Street, and the society pages of Atlanta newspapers quite often praised Hattie High’s social skills and hostess skills.

Hattie assisted in the fund raising for the 1895 Cotton States Exposition.

Aaron Grier died a year or more after the family had moved to Peachtree Street, thus Hattie’s mother came to live with them until her death a mere six years later.

Not long after 1911 after having spent one winter in Paris with her daughter Dorothy who was attending Madame Yateman’s School in Paris, Hattie made preparations with Architect Walter T. Downing to create a large Tudor home and servants quarters – on a prominent knoll @ 15th and Peachtree Streets. The mansion readied itself for occupation in 1912. Elizabeth and Dorothy both were
married there in 1914 and 1919.

During WWI the house was offered to the Red Cross and after the Great Fire of 1917 in Atlanta they opened the doors to the refugees camped out in Piedmont Park. Billy Sunday, evangelist and revivalist, also occupied the house in Nov and Dec of 1917 for a series of revivals.

Following her husband’s death Hattie assumed the controls of J. M. High Co; and was greatly responsible for its steady growth for the next 15 or more years. In the mid-twenties Mrs. High decided to sell the company while maintaining ownership of the department store buildings for their rental value and income. Her stipulations included that the name of the company would remain the same or the rent of the buildings would be subject to arbitration; in other words she maintained her husband’s name on the building and the environ thereof, which seemed important to her.

She established the Hattie Wilson High Memorial Fund for books and research at Carnegie Library in Atlanta (later H. W. H. Memorial Genealogy section at the APL). She also contributed greatly to Oglethorpe University and Berry Schools. She served on the board of Oglethorpe Univ as Art Committee Chair. Oglethorpe awarded her the honorary degree of doctor of letters, at its 1929 commencement exercise. She was personally interested in hereditary and patriotic societies, UDC, Colonial Dames, DAR, etc.

She contributed a fountain designed by her favorite architect (downing) to the City of Atlanta in 1915 the year she served as Regent of the Atlanta Chapter of the DAR. It was built at the intersection of Peachtree and 15th Streets just across the street from her Tudor Mansion. She was also a founding member of the North Avenue Presbyterian Church – and participated in the Women’s Society, serving as President from 1889 (yr established), to 1901.

Mrs. High announced in early May of 1926 that she wished to present her former home at 15th and Peachtree to the Association to be used as a permanent museum of art for the city of Atlanta..... “It is something of which I have been thinking a long time.... it is a greater favor to me to be permitted to make this gift than it could be to the city of Atlanta to receive it’.

The Atlanta constitution praised Mrs. High ... “the hopes and dreams of more than 25 years have come true, and this city will no longer be listed among those few remaining metropolises that have neglected the cultural side of life to such an extent that no shrine exists within their boundaries where man’s achievements in the realm of physical beauty may stand for all who will to see and admire..
Hattie Wilson on her wedding day to Joseph Madison High
September 6, 1882

Joseph Madison High
Photo circa 1890

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