

HISTORY

Introduction

Belmont Mansion, the magnificent Italianate home of Joseph and Adelia Acklen, has been a show place of Nashville since its erection in the antebellum period. In the time of the Acklens, visitors marvelled at the elegant structure which was filled with sumptuous furnishings and art and surrounded by spacious gardens. Although it is no longer a private home, it has continued to play the role of an important social center as it became part of the life of three successive colleges. The Acklens named the mansion, "Belle Monte" (beautiful mountain), with "Belmont" as an alternative spelling, which well described the Belmont estate located on a hill two miles south and west of the city.

The mansion was greatly enhanced by Adelia (1817-1887), its mistress for over thirty years. She had three husbands—Isaac Franklin (1789-1846), Joseph Alexander Smith Acklen (1816-1863), and William Archer Cheatham (1820-1900)—and with each of them played a different role. As Mrs. Franklin, she was the dependent wife of a wealthy planter, an older man, who upon his death left her a large fortune. As Mrs. Acklen, she was a woman of property in her own right, equal in age with her husband, and with him built Belmont Mansion on property she herself had acquired. As Mrs. Cheatham, she was the sophisticated *grande dame*, a recent traveler to Europe and procurer of notable statuary, who dominated her own world.

The career of Adelia Acklen is filled with paradox.

The Foundational Years, 1817-1846

Adelia was born on March 15, 1817, in Nashville. She was the oldest daughter of Oliver Bliss Hayes and Sarah Clements Hightower. Her father was a native of Massachusetts and a lawyer. Her mother, beautiful in appearance, was the daughter of a rich farmer of Williamson County. Adelia was probably born in the family home on High Street (Sixth Avenue North) on the west side just south of the present Hermitage Hotel. In the late 1820's, Oliver Bliss Hayes purchased Rokeby, a two-story house of Federal style, which was then in the country to the south of town. It later received the address of 1908 Grand Avenue, today the site of The Upper Room in the United Methodist Center. This location was the home of Adelia's later childhood and teen-age years. She received an excellent education at the flourishing Nashville Female Academy. She graduated in her sixteenth year and, according to the volume on the Hayes genealogy, "with highest honours." A Bill of Recitations of the Academy from January to July, 1825, listed her as enrolled in the second division of the second class with a creditable academic record and no absences.

She was reared within a Puritan heritage and, while maintaining strict moral standards, moved easily in the highest circles of American and French society. She lived in an age in which the male was master but, while observing the proprieties of a Victorian wife, she related to each husband on her own ground. Documents indicate she won the attention of her first husband and after his death broke his will. In her second husband she gained a very successful manager who greatly increased the wealth of the plantations which she and her children inherited. After years of marriage to her third husband, she, to suit her own wishes, separated from him without divorce. During the difficult years of the Civil War, she was a Confederate but at the same time gained assistance from Union officials in Tennessee and Louisiana and, instead of coming out of the war destitute as many Southerners did, survived as one of the richest women in the United States and soon a figure in international society.

On the surface Adelia appeared to live a charmed life. But she was often confronted by tragedy and critical situations. While she was assisted by her beauty and social grace and possessed a good education, she exhibited at the same time keen intelligence, courage, and managerial ability. She seemingly was never intimidated. One of her strongest attributes was her power of persuasion. As her youngest sister Corinne Hayes Lawrence stated, "She could talk a bird out of a tree."

When seventeen she was engaged to Alphonso Gibbs (1813-1834), recently graduated from Harvard Law School and the son of George Washington Gibbs, a leading lawyer and banker of Nashville. An artist painted the portraits of the handsome couple at the time of their engagement. These pictures today hang in the home of Mrs. John Bell in Washington, D.C., with copies in the home of Mrs. Malcolm Gibbs, Thompson Station, Tennessee. But Alphonso died of typhoid fever. Adelia expressed her grief in a poem of eleven stanzas which she wrote in the autograph book of Alphonso's sister, expressing such sentiment as:

That eye is closed and deaf that ear,
That lip and voice are mute forever;
And cold that heart of faithful love,
Which death alone from mine could sever.

It would be five years before she would again consent to marriage.

More than one account exists on how Adelia attracted the attention of Isaac Franklin, the wealthy planter and bachelor, who became Adelia's first husband. In

1832 he had built an imposing home, Fairvue, on his plantation of 2,000 acres, two miles from Gallatin in Sumner County. One critical account in the *Gallatin Examiner*, reprinted from the New York *Herald*, stated that Adelia with a group of happy young people arrived at Fairvue where, in the absence of Franklin, they were entertained and liberally fed. Upon their departure, each guest signed a register with Adelia supposedly adding beside her autograph a line indicating her desire to win the heart of Franklin. This audacious action brought Franklin to courtship and marriage. But possibly a more reliable account is related by Adelia's son, William, in his memoirs in which he writes that Adelia, while visiting Judge and Mrs. John J. White (a cousin) of Gallatin, was given a picnic in her honor on the Franklin plantation. Franklin came upon the picnickers and showed them his home. Upon his request for a song, Adelia responded by pleasantly singing the ballad, "Buds and Flowers," which included—

And here's your bunch of buds and flowers
And here's the ribbon round it
And here to cheer your lonely hours
Is the sweet girl who bound it.

Franklin was captivated. Whatever the truth of either story, on July 2, 1839, Franklin at the age of fifty and Adelia at twenty-two were married.

Adelia was now married to one of the wealthiest men in Tennessee. At Franklin's death in 1846, his estate was appraised at \$750,000 but was probably worth about a million dollars. Besides Fairvue, he possessed almost 8,700 acres at the confluence of the Mississippi and Red Rivers in rich cotton country in West Feliciana Parish just south of the state line of Mississippi. On this acreage he owned Bellevue, Killarney, and Lochlond Plantations and shortly before he died established Angola Plantation, which was named by Adelia. On these lands the executors of his estate created two more plantations—Loango and Panola. In addition he claimed extensive lands in Texas, apparently over 10,000 acres, most if not all in the area of Matagorda Bay and San Antonio, but these properties were of much less value than his Louisiana holdings. He owned over 600 slaves and held shares in a bank, a turnpike company, and even one-third ownership of the Nashville Racecourse.

Although Adelia obviously benefitted greatly in her marriage, Franklin also gained. He acquired a young beautiful wife, intelligent and accomplished, who was a member of the well-established Hayes family. Adelia was better educated than he and could both sing and play the piano. She appreciated beautiful things. She possessed a great love for flowers, even undertaking later in life the art of making paper ones. Although small, weighing not more than ninety-five pounds, she became a skilled horse-

woman, who, according to her granddaughter, Mrs. Jeanette Noel, would rather jump a fence than open a gate. William H. Stephenson, Franklin's biographer, has written that his marriage helped him in his transition from his former occupation of slave trader to planter, which brought greater social respectability.

In spite of the differences in age, an observer stated that the marriage was harmonious with each partner devoted to the other. Adelia gave birth in rapid succession to four children—Victoria (March, 1840), Adelia (May, 1842), Julius Caesar (January, 1844), who lived only around thirteen hours, and Emma (December, 1844). Franklin's relations with his father-in-law were excellent with the latter managing his Tennessee holdings in his absence and later serving as an executor of his estate.

The year, 1846, proved tragic. On April 27th, on Bellevue Plantation in Louisiana, Franklin died after a short illness. The body, preserved in alcohol in its shipment to Tennessee, was buried in a large stone vault at Fairvue. Shortly afterwards at Fairvue the two older Franklin daughters died—Adelia on June 8th and Victoria on June 11th—from croup and bronchitis. The young widow was left with only the youngest child, Emma, who was one and a half years of age.

According to the will of Franklin, Adelia retained any property she might receive from her father, furnishings and provisions at Fairvue, and while she remained a widow the right to live at Fairvue with revenues from the estate sufficient to maintain her and her children. If she were to remarry, the executors were to pay her \$100,000 or at her option \$6,000 a year for life with no further claim to the property. The will provided that in the case of three surviving children two-thirds of the Louisiana plantations would pass to them. Except for minor legacies, the remaining assets of the estate were reserved for the establishment of an academy at Fairvue to educate Franklin's descendants and those of his brothers and sisters and if funds were adequate also the poor children of good character from Sumner County. In an article eulogizing Franklin for his beneficence in the *Nashville Whig*, September, 1846, it was estimated that, including Fairvue, one-third of the Louisiana plantations, and additional properties outside Louisiana, \$600,000 would be available for the new institution. But this figure is inflated. In the inventory in 1850, one-third of the Louisiana plantations was valued at \$175,000 and the other Franklin property at about \$187,000 making a total of \$362,000. After deducting \$130,000 which Adelia received as a widow, only \$232,000 was available for the new school. This sum, however, was still considerable, even more so when the 1850 inventory was probably conservative in its estimates.

Franklin had provided well for Adelia. But now she was faced with making some important decisions of her own.