

In the summer of 1867, she presented an enormous bell, the largest in the city, to the church she had attended all of her life, the First Presbyterian Church;¹⁵¹ she kept “open house” on New Year’s Day into the 1870s, despite the tradition losing some of its popularity among Nashville’s gentlewomen;¹⁵² and in the late 1870s, in conjunction with the local school board, provided for the establishment of an African-American school on the Lake Killarney plantation in Louisiana.¹⁵³ The plantations themselves, though, had created great consternation for Adelia since Joseph Acklen’s death, and it only intensified in the decade of the 1870s.

In 1865, prior to her European tour, Adelia Acklen leased the Louisiana properties, with outbuildings, stock, supplies, and an allowance for logging on the property all included, for a period of two years, and at a price of \$15,000 for the first year and \$25,000 for the second.¹⁵⁴ On her return, with the physical effects of the Civil War still fresh and the difficulty and cost of maintaining a labor force after the introduction of the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, she renewed those leases, as evidenced by the advertisement placed in the *Nashville Union & Dispatch* by her brother-in-law and agent, George Shields, in July of 1867. “Three highly improved places situated in North Louisiana, opposite the mouth of Red River,” the ad read, “will be leased on very reasonable terms this season with the privilege of three years.”¹⁵⁵

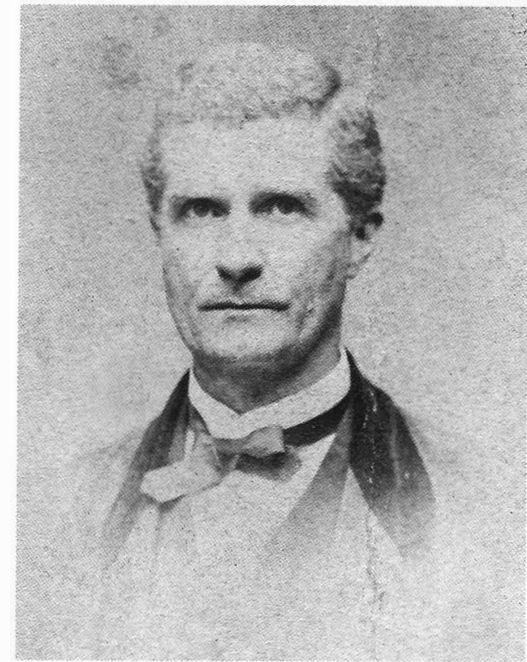
Acklen resumed management of the plantations through on-site managers in the

late 1860s, but it was becoming clear she could no longer realize a profit from them, and for numerous reasons. Repairs and upkeep previously undertaken by enslaved laborers, and particularly attention to the levees essential to keeping Mississippi River floodwaters at bay, were not undertaken by tenant farmers and managers, and the weakening and breaching of those levees, accompanied by the arrival of the boll weevil, “made the culture of cotton so precarious that the land ceased to yield an income,”¹⁵⁶ as William Ackland later recalled. In late 1871, Adelia Acklen Cheatham wrote Corinne Lawrence from Louisiana, “Joseph & I have settled our business matters without the assistance of lawyers or the Courts, which we thought was much better.”¹⁵⁷ Those “business matters” involved Cheatham buying out her eldest son’s interest in the plantations, which allowed her to “manage to suit myself.” This seems to be Cheatham’s last effort at making the plantations profitable; it is also the first time, at least in surviving letters, she expressed strong political views. “These Radicals are ruining the state,” she wrote Lawrence in February of 1872, blaming the Radical Republican Congress, and the Reconstruction governments in place throughout the post-war South, for not only high taxes, but crop failures and foreclosures.¹⁵⁸

Adelia Cheatham made only a few references in her letters to those who labored on her properties in Tennessee and Louisiana—both during slavery and after its abolition—most of them assigning tasks

to be accomplished, or reporting on births, marriages, and deaths. And while she never revealed her thoughts or opinions on slavery, she did feel responsible for the well-being of those who worked for her—some of whom she had known all of her life. In 1874, for instance, during particularly difficult economic times, Cheatham refused to lay-off laborers on the plantations, and leave them without a means of support.¹⁵⁹ Her daily contact and communication with her laborers increased in the 1870s, with her resumption of administrative control of the plantations, and the few surviving accounts of them are instructive in better understanding the complex relationships that existed in the Reconstruction South. “Morning brought us alongside the landing at ‘Angola,’” Ackland recalled of a trip to the plantations during this time. “My mother was welcomed as if she had been a queen setting foot on her own domain,” he continued, “she shook hands with the overseer and then in turn with the ‘oldest settlers’ as they called themselves. A certain precedence was observed as to age and residence. They followed her to the house and on the rear porch of the house those who did not meet her at the landing came ‘to pay their respects.’”¹⁶⁰ Cheatham wrote of these relationships herself in 1875, in a letter from the plantations to Corinne Lawrence. “The old servants here seem delighted to have me here,” she wrote, “and so grateful to see I still feel an interest in them.”¹⁶¹

In 1880, now in her sixties, Adelia Cheatham made the difficult decision to



In June 1867, Adelia Acklen married her third husband, William Cheatham, a well-known and respected medical doctor. Once more Acklen insured control of her assets through a detailed prenuptial agreement. (Belmont Mansion Association)

divest herself and her family of most of the Louisiana property, and sold the plantations, comprising about ten thousand acres, to Samuel L. James and Louis Trager for the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, guaranteed by sixteen promissory notes, with first payments due on December 22, 1887.¹⁶² She had previously sold the Texas properties, and sold Fairvue in 1882, but continued to accumulate real estate, purchasing lots in Orlando, Florida, and Washington, D.C.

“Mrs. Cheatham and her daughter, Miss Acklen, will see their friends after January 1st