

family portraits served as mementos, certainly painted primarily for personal pleasure, these works also helped Acklen proclaim and justify her rightful place among the best Tennessee and southern circles. Belmont mansion was a site of entertainment, and the portraits, painted mostly by Tennessee artists, helped remind visitors that Acklen was not only a member of an old and important Tennessee family but that she cherished her large family circle as any proper southern lady would. As art historian Lauren Lessing notes, "Through the tasteful elaboration of their domestic interiors, middle- and upper-class Americans also hoped to define themselves favorably and reinforce desired aspects of their identities."<sup>1</sup> Acklen's identity was something she hoped the family portraits would favorably reinforce. Her persona was called into question in some circles and throughout different points in her life, and her Tennessee portraits, proudly showcased throughout her home alongside her European collection, helped her define herself in traditional and acceptable modes. In addition to family members' portraits, multiple images of Acklen herself appeared throughout her home. In these, she chose to represent herself in modest roles and as a loving mother.

During her life, Acklen often stepped outside of limits that were typically placed on antebellum Southern women. She was fiercely independent, a characteristic at odds with proper bounds of nineteenth-century femininity. Mary Telfair, for exam-

ple, an unmarried and highly educated Savannah elite once noted that, "Alexander [Telfair's brother] seems to think I will be too independent for a Lady."<sup>2</sup> Despite, or perhaps because of her unconventional actions, Acklen filled her home with conventional (if abundant) portraits of her family by Tennessee artists. Therefore, despite the opulence of her tastes, which revealed itself elsewhere in her art collection and throughout her estate, in the family portraits, she stuck to the local traditions and thus aligned herself with other elite Tennessee families. Hung throughout the home and considered together, these works were carefully commissioned over the years to present specific messages about Acklen and thus to place her within what was considered to be her proper place in society.

Acklen was born in 1817 and came of age alongside the city of Nashville. Steamboat travel into the city became available in 1819 and this encouraged a period of growth and development.<sup>3</sup> Nashville had been selected as the capital of the state in 1843, and the cornerstone for William Strickland's grand capitol building was laid July 4, 1845. By 1861 Nashville was serviced by five railroad lines. The city fell to the Union in 1862, which it fortified, and the United States Army occupied the town throughout the war. Nashville, like Acklen herself, came out of the war in a somewhat enviable position. Certainly the war had taken a toll on the city, but it was not decimated as others in the South were.

According to historian Don Doyle, "Of all major southern cities, Nashville emerged from the war with fewer physical and political scars and with advantages gained in the war that prepared it for a formidable role in the new order of things."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Acklen's vast accumulated wealth, still in place at war's end, provided her advantages that she continued to enjoy throughout her life.

Like her art collection, Acklen's reputation was varied. She was a reigning Nashville socialite, and among the wealthiest people in the South, but she received her fair share of criticism as well. She was born and raised among the elite in Nashville, but some of her actions caused her to be criticized by both local residents and visitors and, at times, left her feeling like an outsider. Certainly the vast wealth she acquired as well as her lavish lifestyle at her Belmont estate set her apart. Her fierce independence also separated her from other female members of her elite class. Historian Catherine Clinton discusses the lack of control of movement and decision-making that most plantation matrons of the planter class maintained in the antebellum era. As she describes, "the planter had come to dictate her identity as well as her dependency."<sup>5</sup> Unlike most women of her class however, Acklen seemed to dictate her own identity and make decisions for herself. Her overt financial motivation was one source of criticism, and this idea guided many of her decisions.

It could be argued, for instance, that she married her first husband, Isaac Franklin, because of his personal fortune, despite the fact that much of it was gained through his successful slave trading business. He was also undereducated and nineteen years her senior. A couple of accounts exist as to how the pair came together, but each of them have a twenty-two year old Adelia Hayes expressing romantic interest in the fifty year old Franklin while she was visiting his 2,000 acre plantation in Gallatin, Tennessee.<sup>6</sup> Franklin, who was one of the wealthiest men in the state, died only seven years into their marriage. Ultimately unsatisfied with the terms of his will, she and her daughter contested it, and eventually won the lion's share of Franklin's estate even though he had dictated it for use in the establishment of a school that was never formed. According to her youngest sister Corinne Hayes Lawrence, "She could talk a bird out of a tree."<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after Franklin's death, Adelia began acquiring property of her own, including a home in downtown Nashville that she kept throughout her life, as well as the huge tract of land on which Belmont would sit. Coming into her second marriage to Joseph Acklen with a personal fortune, she stepped outside of traditional female bounds by signing a prenuptial agreement with Acklen, thus giving her and her heirs complete control of her assets. The Acklens constructed Belmont on the property that she had independently acquired. In her third marriage to Dr.