

William Archer Cheatham, a similar marriage agreement was finalized. In the most notorious example of Acklen's criticized independence, after her second husband, Joseph Acklen's death during the Civil War, Adelia, assisted by a female cousin, travelled to Louisiana from Nashville in an attempt to sell their cotton, rather than risk having it burned by the Confederates. The ultimate sale of this cotton to England (which netted her a fortune) in Louisiana during the Civil War involved negotiating with both the Confederate and Union troops, and she was rumored to have engaged in careful manipulation of each side in the process. She had taken control of this affair in the wake of her husband's death, and she realized the significance (both personal and financial) of the matter. After all, Acklen had written to her not long before his death, "I have nothing left now but my cotton and it is uncertain if I shall be permitted to dispose of it. I am in constant dread of its being burned." She had probably longed for the cotton to be sold because he also noted that, "my only chance of support is to sell my cotton and as soon as I can accomplish that I shall start for Nashville."<sup>8</sup> Acklen's death from sudden illness prevented him from ever making the trip home, however. Although Joseph Acklen may have never been criticized for attempting to sell his cotton out of the Confederacy, as a woman, this action drew suspicion and criticism on Adelia Acklen. In a final independent move, in advanced age, Acklen took the bold step of separat-

ing from her third husband Dr. Cheatham, selling her beloved Belmont, and relocating to Washington, D.C.

Acklen's extravagant tastes, seen in the construction and evolution of the Belmont estate, were also a source of condemnation. A nun at the nearby St. Cecelia Convent cited a supposedly oft-repeated phrase: "If the Acklen fortune were exhaustible, it would have long since been consumed by its lavish owner."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, a daughter of one man whom she was courting after the death of Joseph Acklen wrote, "She is a complete woman of the world and very fond of making a display of her wealth, which is very parvenuish I think."<sup>10</sup>

Belmont Mansion was initiated in 1853 as an Italianate style summer retreat for the Acklens. However, by 1860 the family had commissioned leading Nashville architect Adolphus Heiman to expand and remodel the structure, including the addition of a Grand Salon, and the home became the family's primary residence. Acklen had overseen construction of Belmont with her new husband Joseph Acklen after the two were married May 8, 1849.<sup>11</sup> Historian Eleanor Graham described the European influence on the estate, much of which could also be said of her art collection: "While some ideas were borrowed, the resulting layout is largely original, surprisingly comprehensive and interesting, with artistic balance."<sup>12</sup> Surprising features included a waterworks with moat, a bear pit, a bowling alley, a zoo, a 105-foot brick tower, an art gallery, as well as a vast series of under-

ground pipes that provided plumbing for the entire property. In constructing a home two miles outside of downtown Nashville (the Acklens also owned a city residence), the family became some of the city's earliest suburbanites, a class that was reserved in its earliest form for only the wealthiest people because it necessitated private transport. As streetcar service expanded in Nashville closer to the end of the nineteenth-century, this move became possible for a greater number of people, but was still limited to the wealthy. At the height of its existence, a painting of the mansion and grounds was completed and an engraving of it appeared on an 1860 map of Nashville and Edgefield. As the engraving reveals, Belmont mansion became "the show-place of Nashville," as one English visitor noted saying, "wherever I went in Tennessee I was sure to hear of this beau ideal of splendour."<sup>13</sup> A member of the Dominican sisters who opened the St. Cecilia Academy for girls in Nashville in 1860, Mother Frances Walsh, agreed, saying "the Acklen place always offered objects of interest."<sup>14</sup> The home was so much more extravagant than anything else in Nashville, that it became known to some as "The Acklen Folly."<sup>15</sup> A Union soldier described it in the same vein as a "speciality in the way of extravagance."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps escaping the sorrow of losing her husband, the Civil War turmoil, and repercussions of her bold move in selling the cotton, Acklen took her children to Europe for a time at the end of the Civil War. For much of the rest of her long life, Acklen lived primarily

at Belmont. After separating from her third husband, Dr. Cheatham, she sold the estate a few months before her May 1887 death.

Acklen's growing art collection only served to further the grandeur and paradox present in the estate at Belmont, a home beyond compare in the South. Acklen is unique in many ways, and her art collection is no exception. Most Tennesseans were interested exclusively in displaying family portraits in their homes rather than commissioning or collecting other genres, and Acklen's taste in art certainly included such portraits but also ranged far beyond them to include a wide range of European works including history, religious, and genre scenes. Like the house, the art collection also received criticism. According to one English visitor, "The walls were covered with pictures and family portraits, consisting of the mistress of the house, her various husbands (she was said to have had four), and their children. Some of the copies of Italian masters were nearly as bad as the family portraits... The rooms were rather small, and the pictures so large and in such tremendous gilt frames, that they had the effect of a house insecurely built of pictures."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Acklen regularly ordered the most ornate frames available from the Tennessee artists she commissioned, and many of the portraits at Belmont today are still housed in their original decorative gilded frames. Another guest in 1881 described visiting the house, saying, "I was struck with the enthusiasm she evinced in pointing out the merits of