

From the days our respective mothers left their children in the care of Miss Annie, she has striven mightily to educate us and turn out young ladies. (Class History 1937)

150th Anniversary History: Meet Annie Allison

By Miller Callen '94

She never drove a car, flew in an airplane, or saw a movie. She never used a washing machine or a computer, and she certainly never conceived of wireless projectors, Google Drive, or Haiku common in today's Harpeth Hall classrooms. She never voted until age 50. She never married and never had a child, yet Annie Claybrooke Allison was one of Nashville's most esteemed educators whose "girls" numbered in the thousands.

The first classroom for this remarkable teacher came when she was a toddler. Her mother, Margaret Caldwell Allison, prepared a teaching corner in their home for Annie's older siblings. Baby Annie invariably ended up in the middle of the lessons, and from that young age, she exhibited an insatiable appetite to learn. These early "school days" planted the seeds of her lifetime pursuit of education, according to *Annie Was a Lady* by Dakie C. Cowan

Annie's mother died at a young age, and it came as no surprise that on her deathbed, she made her husband promise to "see to the girls' education." Annie and her sisters moved to Nashville, and Annie continued to prove herself a diligent and bright student.

As time passed and opportunities for educating young women expanded locally and nationally, Annie's grandmother encouraged her to apply to George Peabody College for Teachers. During this time, Annie lost her father and both sisters to disease, leaving her the head of her family at age 20. Despite such hardships, Annie graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with honors in Latin, and a minor in French. Following her studies, Annie skillfully tutored the children of many socially prominent Nashville families.

Just after the turn of the century, Annie realized her dream of opening her own school. Although her tutoring experience included all ages and genders, Annie seemed driven to educate other young women. At age 40, Annie opened Miss Annie Allison's Girls Preparatory School on 23rd Avenue. The school quickly gained a reputation for its modern educational principles where "vivacious, refined little women" went to "have their cup of knowledge filled. It was an atmosphere of flash cards, phonics, grade-skipping, rewards for excellence and foreign language taught early to bright minds."

Miss Annie served as head of school, and she taught her favorite subjects, high school French, Latin, and English. According to former students Virginia Puryear Goodpasture and Sarah Puryear Rodes, Miss Annie "expected the best of her pupils at all times." She "never left a

subject incomplete, but with great concern she would coax the student in discovering the correct answer. Praise and thoroughness were ever the props of her classroom manner.” Miss Annie was profoundly motivated and inspired her students with her “quiet grandeur.” Class sizes were small (seven to 10 students), and students “were encouraged through debates, discussions, and essays. Miss Annie saw to it that we could both speak and think on our feet. This was not the custom of the day, and women were not generally encouraged to articulate their opinions and feelings. Her passion seemed to be that each girl would feel she was special and her ideas were of great value.”

Annie always had her finger on the pulse of current events. During World War I, Miss Annie’s School was intimately involved in the war effort, making children’s clothing for orphans, rolled bandages for the hospitals, and knitted sweaters and scarves for the soldiers.

November 5, 1920 marked a memorable day at Miss Annie’s School when a student was pulled from her classroom to take a telephone call from her mother, well-known suffragette Anne Dallas Dudley, sharing the news that Tennessee’s state legislature had ratified the 19th Amendment as the decisive 36th state needed to amend the U.S. Constitution and give women the right to vote. Annie Allison was a great admirer of Anne Dallas Dudley’s, and these two leaders “remained constant in their mutual esteem and diligence in making voters out of Southern women.”

In 1923, an illness forced Annie to close her school at which time most of her students continued their education at the merged institution of Ward Seminary and Belmont College for Young Women: Ward-Belmont. When Ward-Belmont was established, the school began with the primary grades so that the students of Ward Seminary’s grammar school classes could continue their schooling without interruption. The Little School, as it was called, was always quite small with four to eight students. In 1924, Ward-Belmont President J.D. Blanton offered Annie a job as head of The Little School, and in 1925, she was installed as principal of the high school, a position she held for 20 years. During that time, Dr. Blanton and subsequent Ward-Belmont presidents entrusted Annie with hiring the high school academic faculty. “Her pattern was to engage as teachers bright, motivated women dedicated to the classical education offered on campus.” Many of these teachers were products of Miss Annie’s School or Ward-Belmont, including Mary Elizabeth Cayce and Patty Litton Chadwell.

In 1945 when she reached age 73, Annie Allison passed her torch to her young protégé, Susan S. Souby. For two decades, she had inspired young females to reach their potential. Her retirement reception was a gala affair during which a portrait of her was presented to the Ward-Belmont community in her honor with the following message: *You, Miss Annie Claybrooke Allison are a symbol and example to us of excellence in education, gentleness in disposition, and ladylike charm. Your influence will continue to inspire our children’s children.*

When Harpeth Hall was established on the P.M. Estes' Estate in 1951, a library was named in honor of Annie Allison. Today, the Annie Allison collection, totaling more than 20,000 volumes and databases, resides in the Ann Scott Carell Library.

In addition, the portrait of Annie Allison hangs in the Ward-Belmont Room in Souby Hall along with a portrait of Susan S. Souby, Miss Annie's protégé who would become Harpeth Hall's first Head of School.

(Quotations taken from *Annie Was a Lady* by Dakie C. Cowan)