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For Summer Guests, History Beyond the Headlines

No Talent for Subordination

Annis Boudinot Stockton was the wife of Richard Stockton, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. She lived in Morven, the historic estate that is just a stone's throw from my house in Princeton. In her time, she was a *rara avis*, an outspoken and independent woman with an intense passion for the written word and poetry. She corresponded and flirted with George Washington and other heroes of the American Revolution. Her modern ideas about gender and politics were ahead of their time in a period when expressing strong opinions was a privilege reserved mostly for men, as well as the writing of literature.

Her beautiful home later became the Governor's Mansion of New Jersey and is now Morven, the museum. I receive a tour given by a nice older lady who mostly talks about the important men who lived here. As I walk through the halls, filled with the atmospherics of the 18th century, my thoughts turn to Annis. It is not difficult to imagine her here, walking to the slave quarters in the backyard. When one of the black women died in childbirth, she nursed the motherless baby herself. I can see her going upstairs to the bedrooms of their children to kiss them goodnight. But mostly I see her sitting by the fireplace lined with Delft Blue tiles of mythical beasts while she writes her poems.

Annis' life was no bed of roses. Her husband was arrested in the Revolution by the British and forced to renounce the patriots' cause. Their home was ransacked, her carefully landscaped garden destroyed, and her library burned. She lived there alone as Richard Stockton's widow but continued to write and rebuild Morven. In the museum hangs a portrait of Annis as an older woman. Her face shows the traces of her struggles.

Only some of her writings were published during her lifetime. Most of her poems were written out by hand, distributed in literary salons, and that was it. It was long believed that she had only written 40 poems. After her death 120 more poems were discovered, including many personal letters.

Annis is a mirror-image of another bold writer I have admired for years. She is the aristocratic Dutch-born free spirit Belle van Zuylen. Annis and Belle led parallel lives on opposite sides of the ocean, two early feminist women of letters. Belle was born in 1740; Annis in 1736. Both survived revolutions. Both carried on flirtatious correspondences with many men, married and unmarried. Both struggled with a misogynistic zeitgeist, but courageously followed their own literary paths. When the British writer James Boswell proposed marriage to Belle but required her not to see other men or correspond with them, she replied, "I have little talent for subordination."

If they could have actually met, what would they have spoken of? About the many interesting men in their lives whom they admired and who admired them in turn? About their romantic relationships, always on the basis of equality, and their affairs that defied the limits of decency? Or would they focus primarily on how women could work and write as equals to men?

Belle would have told Annis about how she wrote her first satirical novel, *Le Noble*, when she was 21, only to have her father withdraw the book from the market. Annis would tell Belle about the dismissive reactions of men in her life. In one of her poems, Annis suggests her plight by asking a seemingly simple question: "Is it possible for a woman to find an audience?"

— Pia de Jong

Pia de Jong is a Dutch writer who lives in Princeton. She can be contacted at piadejong.com.

Annis Boudinot Stockton is well known as the stalwart wife who kept Morven together while her husband, Richard Stockton, the first signer of the Declaration of Independence, languished in a British prison. She was known in her lifetime as a poet, with "modern ideas about gender and politics," as Pia de Jong notes above. One of her poems, written in 1783 following the announcement of peace, drew an acknowledgment from General Washington to whom it was addressed:

With all thy country's blessings on thy head,
 And all the glory that encircles man,
 Thy deathless fame to distant nations spread,
 And realms unblest by Freedom's genial plan;
 Addressed by statesmen, legislators, kings,

Revered by thousands as you pass along,
 While every muse with ardour spreads her wings
 To our hero in immortal song;
 Say, can a woman's voice an audience gain;
 And stop a moment thy triumphal car?
 And wilt thou listen to a peaceful strain,
 Unskilled to paint the horrid wrack of war?
 For what is glory — what are martial deeds —
 Unpurified at Virtue's awful shrine?
 Full oft remorse a glorious day succeeds,
 The motive only stamps the deed divine.
 But thy last legacy, renowned chief,
 Hath decked thy brow with honours more sublime,
 Twined in thy wreath the Christian's firm belief,
 And nobly owned thy faith to future time.

Stockton's letter to Washington, sent along with the poem, has been lost. But Washington's reply, written from Rocky Hill on September 24, 1783, remains:

You apply to me, my dear madam, for absolution, as though you had committed a crime, great in itself yet of the venial class. You have reasoned good, for I find myself strongly disposed to be a very indulgent ghostly adviser on this occasion, and notwithstanding you are the most offending soul alive (that is if it is a crime to write elegant poetry), yet if you will come and dine with me on Thursday, and go through the proper course of penitence which shall be prescribed, I will strive hard to assist you in expiating these poetical trespasses on this side of purgatory. Nay, more, if it rests with me to direct your future lucubrations, I shall certainly urge you to a repetition of the same conduct — on purpose to show what an admirable knack you have at confession and reformation; and so without more hesitation I shall venture to recommend the muse not to be restrained by ill-grounded timidity, but to go on and prosper.

You see, madam, when once the woman has tempted us and we have tasted the forbidden fruit, there is no such thing as checking our appetite, whatever the consequences may be. You will, I dare say, recognise our being genuine descendants of those who are reputed to be our progenitors.

Before I come to a more serious conclusion of my letter I must beg leave to say a word or two about these fine things you have been telling in such harmonious and beautiful numbers. Fiction is to be sure the very life and soul of poetry. All poets and poetesses have been indulged in the free and indisputable use of it — time out of mind, and to oblige you to make such an excellent poem on such a subject without any materials but those of simple reality would be as cruel as the edicts of Pharaoh, which compelled the Children of Israel to manufacture bricks without the necessary ingredients.

Thus are you sheltered under the authority of prescription, and I will not dare to charge you with an intentional breach of the rules of the decalogue in giving so bright a colouring to the service I have been enabled to render my country, though I am not conscious of deserving more at your hands than what the poorest and most disinterested friendship has a right to claim: actuated by which you will permit me to thank you in a most affectionate manner for the kind wishes you have so happily expressed for me and the partner of all my domestic enjoyments.

Be assured we can never forget our friend at Morven and that I am, my dear madam, your most obedient and obliged servant, GO. WASHINGTON.

Source: *Wives of the Signers: The Women Behind the Declaration of Independence*, by Harry Clinton Green and Mary Wolcott Green. Originally Published in 1912 as volume 3 of *The Pioneer Mothers of America*.

Literary Lights: Scott Fitzgerald

That F. Scott Fitzgerald went to Princeton and that he used his college experience as fodder for his first novel, "This Side of Paradise," is hardly hidden history in Princeton.

But some people may be surprised to discover that the very spot where Fitzgerald began writing that novel is still intact, largely unchanged from 1915, when Fitzgerald began his draft. That place is the library in Cottage Club, shown at left, the undergraduate eating club on Prospect Avenue, where Fitzgerald was a member.

While Cottage Club was once open several days a year for public tours, that is no longer the case. But a polite visitor might drop in, express an interest in Fitzgerald, and ask if one could take a quick glimpse into the library on the second floor, modeled on the 14th century library in Merton College, Oxford University.

A visitor in 2010 described the Fitzgerald memorabilia in the library as “just a waist-high glass case,” containing “two Princeton fight songs, and three books, one a softcover study and two 1990s reading copies of Fitzgerald’s first and third novels. But best of all — finally — there it was: the signed letter, from 1929, 12 years after Fitzgerald left the university. Ironically the letter recommended a young acquaintance who hardly needed heavy endorsement: Whitney Darrow Jr., later one of the New Yorker’s best and most enduring cover and cartoon artists.”

Fitzgerald, Class of 1917, was a prolific writer for three consecutive years at Triangle, the annual undergraduate theatrical show, and was also immersed in club life. In “Paradise” he characterizes Cottage as “an impressive melange of brilliant adventurers and well-dressed philanderers.” He was less immersed in academics, and never did graduate.

In 1920, with his first novel finally in print, he and his bride, Zelda, returned to Princeton to chaperone Houseparties weekend at Cottage Club. The chaperones may have needed a chaperone of their own. Afterward club members reportedly suspended Fitzgerald’s membership, though his name eventually reappeared on the club roster.

An even more illuminating look into Fitzgerald’s Princeton days and the turbulent literary career that followed can be viewed in a 28-minute video titled “F. Scott Fitzgerald: One Fine Morning.” Produced by Patrick H. Ryan of Princeton’s Class of 1968, the video features script and commentary by A. Walton Litz, a 1951 Princeton alumnus who earned his Ph.D. at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and served as an English professor at Princeton from 1956 to 1993, and was chairman of the department from 1974 to 1981.

Litz provides a scholarly overview of Fitzgerald’s work, insight into his resentment of Ernest Hemingway and his standing in the pantheon of 20th century American writers. (Interestingly, the English department at Princeton looked down at its literary son for many years. John T. Osander, Class of 1957, recalls hoping to write his senior thesis on Fitzgerald, with information drawn from contemporaries of the author at Princeton. “But the English department ruled, ‘You cannot waste a full year on a minor American author.’”

The narration and voice-over readings are by Ethan Hawke, the actor. And the video includes an interview with Eleanor Lanahan, the granddaughter of Scott and his wife, Zelda.

The video may be shown to small groups by appointment. Ryan is proprietor of Gallery 353 at 353 Nassau Street, Princeton. Phone: 803-334-8838. twolockhart@hotmail.com.

Cottage Club, 51 Prospect Avenue, 609-921-6137. <http://cottageclub.net>.

Peacock Inn: Arts & Letters

The Peacock Inn at 20 Bayard Lane has a secret recipe that takes fine art beyond dining and onto the walls.

While the historic inn is known in part for the F. Scott Fitzgeralds and the Albert Einsteins who have wined and dined there, its current owners have a subtle feel for art. And the result is something historic — regionally and artistic.

One of the first things to notice is that there is a series of prints by prominent American artist Ben Shahn. In addition to advancing social realism and politically charged graphic images, Shahn helped put the arts in New Jersey on the map when he moved to nearby Roosevelt in the 1930s.

Shahn’s simple black and white style sets up a visual pattern in the dining room and bar that is continued by another important Roosevelt-based artist, Stefan Martin. His images — including a portrait of Shahn and cameo-like sets of famous writers — extend down the stairs and unexpectedly into the restrooms.

Peacock manager Scott Sussman says the collection comes from his father, Peacock’s owner Barry Sussman. As part of a longtime area family, the Sussmans have been collecting the works of Roosevelt artists for years.

Sussman says the use of the collection has a simple goal: to provide a personal and homey touch for visitors as well as connect the inn to the art of the region.

Another artistic layer runs deeper in time and space. Sussman says when his family removed the drywall in the downstairs area that was a 1920s speakeasy called Peacock Alley, they discovered three drawings on the room’s plaster walls. “The artist, we believe, was John Held Jr., a famous artist from the New Yorker” — also famous for visually stylizing the era and created the cover for F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Tales from the Jazz Age.”

The murals — including one of Princeton mathematician John von Neumann driving a car while reading a book — were cut from the wall, moved upstairs, and hung over the fireplaces. “They each weigh 150 pounds,” says Sussman.

Their historic presence and artistry were a surprise to the Sussmans. Now combined with the work of the Roosevelt artists, Held’s jazz age works provide a surprise for the observant visitor.

Isabel (Izzy) Kasdin, executive director of the Historical Society of Princeton, offers another reason to appreciate the Sussmans’ efforts to preserve the Speakeasy-era murals at the Peacock Inn: “Not only is this such a captivating story about history in Princeton that was, quite literally, hidden from view, but it is also a model for how local businesses can engage with their own past and create a culture of place-based historical reflection in Princeton.”

— Dan Aubrey

Princeton Tours

When it comes to “hidden history” in Princeton, one significant source is a woman who is a relative newcomer to town. Mimi Omiecinski, founder and operator of the Princeton Tour Company, moved to Princeton a decade ago as a “trailing spouse” — her husband had taken a job at Johnson & Johnson headquarters. Omiecinski immediately fell in love with the town and its sometimes quirky past, and created a tour company that takes visitors to all the established historic sites as well as many that are not part of any guidebook (at least not yet).

Omiecinski soon created the now annual event known as Pi Day, commemorating Albert Einstein’s March 14 birthday and the value of the mathematical constant known as pi — 3.14.

And now she is adding another town-wide celebration to her calendar — a day to remember or learn about for the first time. The event will commemorate the fact that Princeton was home to the first capitol of the United States. Omiecinski’s Princeton Tour Company will guide visitors to the historically significant spots on the anniversary of the Treaty of Paris — Saturday, September 3, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. She anticipates that the event will be held the first Saturday of every September.

Her website, www.firstcapitalprinceton.com, explains some of the history in a series of eye-opening questions and answers:

“Did you know Princeton is home to the first White House? You read that right. The first president wasn’t George Washington. Mimi will break it down on the tour.

“Did you know Princeton was home to the first capitol? True. In 1783 the Continental Congress fled to Princeton. Simply put, we didn’t have taxation yet and hadn’t paid our soldiers. Rumors spread in Philadelphia that an angry mob might attack congressmen in Independence Hall. The Continental Congress convened in secret inside Nassau Hall from June until November.

“Did you know Princeton was the first legitimate capital of the United States? True again. The first week of September of 1783, George Washington rode to Nassau Hall to receive news that the Treaty of Paris had been signed, which officially recognized America’s independence. Princeton, thereby, became the first capital of the new nation.”

The First Capital Princeton website notes that “Princeton had its own celebrations during the repeal of the Stamp Act, Boston Tea Party, and, of course, pivotal revolutionary battles. We’ll show you the Stamp Act trees on campus that were planted to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act and the spot on campus where the students burned all their tea and burned the ‘King’ to the stake after the Boston Tea Party.”

“Ever wonder if the rumor about the cannon ball and Nassau Hall is true? The proof of what really happened surrounds this famous painting by Charles Willson Peale at the Princeton University Art Museum. We’ll break it down on the tour.

“Ever wonder why the Norman Rockwell painting inside the Yankee Doodle Tap Room at the Nassau Inn has a Paul Revere theme? We did too and we will tell you on the day of the tour when we end at the Yankee Doodle Tap Room and toast the revolution.”

Registration is free but mandatory. To register E-mail Omiecinski at firstcapitalprinceton@gmail.com. You will receive an E-mail confirmation with more information about the September 3 event, which is being sponsored by Morven Museum & Gardens, the Yankee Doodle Tap Room, the Princeton University Art Museum, the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution — Princeton Chapter, as well as the Princeton Tour Company.

Princeton Tour Company, 1-855-743-1415. www.princeton-tourcompany.com.

185 Nassau Street

Isabel (Izzy) Kasdin, executive director of the Historical Society of Princeton, puts the former elementary school at 185 Nassau Street, now home of the university’s Lewis Center for the Arts, on her short list of off-the-beaten-path places that represent important times in Princeton’s history.

“My attachment to this historic place in Princeton is multi-faceted,” Kasdin writes in an e-mail. “On the surface, I spent a good deal of time at the Lewis Center during my undergraduate years as a result of my deep involvement in the theater scene at Princeton. Broader than that, I think the Lewis Center represents such a creative adaptive reuse of a space (the gymnasium-turned-black box theater as a prime example).

“School buildings are particularly difficult to reuse (Detroit as an extreme case) and I love the way this one has been so nicely repurposed.

“On top of that, the Nassau Street School, or Princeton Elementary School, represents a period in Princeton’s past that residents need to recognize, that of segregation. Princeton was a deeply segregated place into the mid-20th century, and Princeton’s segregated elementary schools — both still standing — provide a physical reminder of this story, and its continuing impact on our present. Cause for reflection indeed. Plus I just have such a soft spot in my heart for the history of schools!”

Civil War Memorial

Another little-known historic site on Izzy Kasdin's list is the Princeton University Civil War Memorial, located inside the main entrance to Nassau Hall.

Kasdin calls it "not only an aesthetically beautiful place, with its floor-to-ceiling marble and its gilt inscriptions, but it is also the home to a remarkably advanced piece of public memorialization.

"The years following the Civil War were fraught with debates about memory and memorialization — as a result, some scholars credit the late 19th and early 20th century with the birth of American public memory. As we have seen with the flying of the Confederate flag into the 21st century, Civil War wounds are deeply cut into the American conscience.

"However, not long after Appomattox Courthouse, Princeton added the list of alumni who perished in the war — the bloodiest in American history — to Nassau Hall's memorialscape and, unlike any other Civil War memorial across the country, included both Union and Confederate dead, listed alphabetically, not even identified by sides. It would take decades for other memorials to achieve the same level of reconciliation."

Cleveland Tower

Grover Cleveland was a big man in stature and size. The former U.S. president, Princeton resident, and Princeton University trustee was nearly six feet tall and weighed 260 pounds. So it isn't a surprise that one of Princeton University's biggest towers is named in his honor.

But what may surprise some about Cleveland Tower is what is inside: a large memorial chamber where a bust of the only president who served two non-consecutive terms — making him the 22nd and 24th president.

Designed by Gothic Collegiate architect Ralph Cram and funded by a public subscription, the 173-foot tower reminiscent of Oxford University's Magdalena tower was dedicated to Cleveland in 1913 for his retirement from public life and service to the university.

While it may seem surprising that there was such evident outpouring of good will for Cleveland to create such a large structure, it is not as surprising as an annual event that takes place on April 30 in the memorial chamber.

Since 2007 Hawaiian Restoration Day has remembered President Grover Cleveland's support for the government of the Hawaiian Republic and his advocacy of Queen Lili'uokalani.

As Princeton University materials note, "When the Hawaiian queen was overthrown in 1893, President Cleveland denounced the coup d'état and supported the restoration of the queen as head of state of the Kingdom of Hawaii. Cleveland withdrew his opposition when it became clear that the overthrow was an indigenous affair. Nonetheless, each year in April, a delegation of Hawaiians from the Pacific Justice and Reconciliation Center in Honolulu comes to Princeton to pay tribute to the former president and his support of Hawaiian sovereign rights. They decorate his gravestone and the bust of Grover Cleveland in Cleveland Tower with beads, shells, and coins, as is Hawaiian custom."

It's a solemn event hidden in one of the most visible structures in Princeton.

— Dan Aubrey

'Colored' School

The Colonial Revival-style apartment building at 35 Quarry Street, shown at left, houses a surprising amount of Princeton history. It was, from 1909 until 1966, the Witherspoon Street School for Colored Children — so-named for the school's original location at 184 Witherspoon Street.

The school, whose Quarry Street location was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2005, had its origins in a small wooden house adjacent to the Witherspoon Street building. It was there in the 1830s that Betsey Stockton (no relation to Annis Boudinot and Richard) began teaching Princeton's African American children.

Stockton, born into slavery in Princeton in the 1790s, grew up to become a servant for Ashbel Green, then the president of Princeton University. Through Green she met Charles Stewart, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary who arranged for her to come on a mission trip to the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii), where she taught at the first mission school open to the common people there. She started teaching in Princeton in 1835 and continued until her death in 1865.

"The school has been well conducted by a female teacher (colored) and is thought to exert a healthful influence among the colored population," wrote Princeton superintendent H.M. Blodgett in 1860. "Average daily attendance thirty-five."

In 1872 the school board paid for the construction of the facility at 184 Witherspoon Street, and continued to monitor and maintain the school. This included the hiring and firing of teachers, among them the Rev. William Robeson — Paul's father.

By 1907 the school had outgrown its Witherspoon Street location, and architect Walter B. Harris, a member of the university's engineering faculty for 50 years, was selected to design the school's new home on Quarry Street. The two buildings on Witherspoon Street were sold for a total of \$10,410, and construction of the new facility cost \$22,996. The building was expanded again in 1939.

In 1948 a state constitutional mandate forced Princeton to desegregate its schools, resulting in the "Princeton Plan," which involved pairing predominantly white schools with predominantly black schools. The Nassau Street School (now the Lewis Center at 185 Nassau Street), which had traditionally served white students, became an integrated K to 5 school for Princeton Borough residents. Black students from the township attended Valley Road. The Witherspoon Street School served grades 6 to 8.

With the construction of John Witherspoon Middle School in 1966, the Witherspoon Street School was converted to a nursing home. The J. Robert Hillier-owned apartment building there now is called the Waxwood — named for Howard Waxwood, the school's principal from 1936 to 1948.

— Sara Hastings

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