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Sarah Berrien Casey Morgan

by
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Dr. Roger K. Warlick
History 300
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Sarah Berrien Casey Morgan

Sarah Berrien Casey Morgan was born in Augusta, Georgia in 1846. Her parents were Henry R. Casey and Caroline Rebecca Harriss Casey. Sarah is sixth in descent from William Moore who was a member of the Assembly, 1733-1739. He was also a Colonel of Militia in the French and Indian Wars.

Sarah was married to Capt. Thomas S. Morgan and they had four sons. She was active in civic affairs and became an alderman of Savannah under Mayor Murray M. Stewart. Sarah died June 28, 1931 of pneumonia. She was buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Augusta.

Sarah Berrien Casey Morgan

Sarah Morgan is like a Magnolia in the old south. A southern belle who was born and raised in Augusta in the mid 1850's. Sarah, like the magnolia blossom, is sweet, delicate, stately, graceful and has a will to match the strength of the blossom's stem. Her life is like the bloom of the flower opening budlike to heritage and early years, full grown maturity in marriage and civic pioneer, and final flower with petals falling from age.

Everyone knows a magnolia comes from a big, strong tree and Sarah was no exception. She was sixth in descent from William Moore of Pennsylvania who was a member of the Assembly, 1733-1739. He was a Colonel of Militia in the French and Indian Wars. For forty years he was Judge of the Court of Common Pleas and of the Orphan's Court. He was born in 1699 and died in 1782.

From the house of Moore came Williamina Sarah Elza Moore who married John Berrien² of New Jersey. He was born at the family home in Rocky Hill where Washington visited in 1783. John Berrien married the second time to Margaret MacPherson. This union produced John MacPherson Berrien who later became the first president of the Georgia Historical Society in 1839.

John Berrien, (1760-1815) and Williamina Moore had a daughter named Sarah Lowndes Berrien. She married Dr. John Aloysius Casey³ of Edgeworthtown, Ireland. John's father was a doctor in Ireland. He sent his son to Maryland for an education in medicine. When he finished his education he moved to Washington, Georgia and then to Augusta. He married Sarah Berrien and came to

practice in Savannah. He had great ability and personality and was interested in social work and causes. In 1817 he raised funds for a hospital for Negroes. This hospital became the Georgia Infirmary.

From the Casey-Berrien union came a son, Henry Rozier Casey. He married Caroline Rebecca Harriss who was the daughter of Rev. and Mrs. Juriah Harriss.⁴ Henry and Caroline Casey were Sarah Morgan's parents. According to the 1850 census Sarah was listed as four years old with two brothers and a sister. Their family home was comfortable and had a value of \$2,500.00. They lived in Columbia County, Georgia with the nearest town being Augusta.

Georgia's second oldest city, Augusta was founded in 1737 as an outpost for trade with the Indians. British occupation during the Revolution and the attack by colonial forces left a bare countryside, but the rebuilt town served as state capital from 1785 to 1795.

The immigration of tobacco planters from Virginia during the last part of the 18th century increased Augusta's importance to Georgia's economy. Sarah's father was listed as a doctor and a planter during the 1860 census. Everybody was growing tobacco.

Although it lay in Sherman's path from Atlanta to Savannah and was the site of the main Confederate powder works, Augusta was spared the Union general's torch. The city was one of the main proponents of the New South during Reconstruction, but the resources of the area's leading families were seriously depleted. Many opened their homes to paying guests from the North attracted by the area's mild winters. By the 1890's Augusta had become a major resort area.

Sarah's father was a doctor and the family was well known in Augusta. Another sister was born in 1862. She was Frances Pamela Casey. Sarah was quite a belle⁵ and I'm sure her sisters followed suit.

In 1881 Frances Casey married Judge Peter Meldrim. They lived in the gothic styled Green house⁶ on Madison Square. The house cost \$93,000.00 to build in the 1850's. It was used by General Sherman as his headquarters in 1864. In 1881, Charles Green died and the house was sold to Judge Peter Meldrim. The house remained in the family for two generations. In 1942 Sophie Meldrim, the daughter of Peter and Frances Meldrim, sold the Green-Meldrim House to St. John's Episcopal Church for \$42,000.00. It was used as a parish house. Today it is a big tourist attraction in Savannah. It was from this house that General Sherman sent a Christmas telegram to President Lincoln on December 24, 1864. General Sherman presented the city of Savannah as a Christmas gift.

Sarah Casey came from a family of women noted for their charm. It was said that Sarah carried herself with beautiful grace. She would have been noticed in any gathering.⁷ She was noticed by Capt. Thomas S. Morgan, of Augusta. They were married and had four sons. The sons were Casey B., B. Tyrrel, Thomas S., Jr., and Louis D. Morgan.

Thomas S. Morgan, who was named for his father, was a gifted member of the Savannah bar. Casey B. Morgan was an admiral in the United States Navy. He later retired to New York. B. Tyrrel was a district passenger agent for the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad in Savannah. Louis D. Morgan, a clerk, single, died of acute gastritis in Montgomery, Alabama when he was thirty years old.⁸

Sarah was devoted to her sons and they to her, but marriage and motherhood did not fill her wide range of talents. She was a gifted conversationalist and a persuasive speaker. She became involved in many civic affairs. "She radiated a personal charm that few women attain, and together with an alert intellect and some very original ideas in planning for worthy work among women, she was a leader in many prominent such organizations in Georgia."⁹

Many factors contributed to the growth of organizations, especially among middle-class women. From 1865 on, a veritable domestic revolution was under way, which freed those able to take advantage of it for pursuits other than housework. The development of gas lighting, municipal water systems, domestic plumbing, canning, the commercial production of ice, the improvement of furnaces, stoves, and washtubs, and the popularization of the sewing-machine aided growing numbers of women to escape from the domestic treadmill.¹⁰ Increasing immigration threw large numbers of unskilled women on the labor market as cooks and nursemaids, thereby giving women with means, education, and imagination more leisure than had been the lot of young mothers tied to home and children in the 1840's. Yet some women were still "all dressed up and no place to go." Not Sarah Morgan!

"With a force of character and a wealth of gifts she was active in the years before women came into public affairs so generally as participants. Her activity, constructive and varied in its scope, has been felt for good in the city, in the state, even in remote sections of Georgia, and in the South. In D. A. R. work she was a pioneer here; in the work of the Women's Federation she was a leader; and in the educational work for the benefit of underprivileged Georgia children as done through the society for the Georgia mountaineers, she was the moving spirit."¹¹

Sarah was a prominent member of the Savannah Federation of Women. She became president of the state organization. In 1894 State Federations were started, whose programs were educational in the broadest sense of the word. "The State Federations have in each case adopted, immediately on their formation, a special line or work, always educational in character, and embracing education from the kindergarden to the university, as represented in the state systems—public and traveling libraries, art interchanges, village and town improvement

associations and constructive legislation."¹² Sarah was a forerunner in the work toward co-education at the University of Georgia. She was also honorary president of the trustees of Tallulah Falls Industrial School.

Sarah Morgan was very proud of her family's background. She is listed in the National Society Colonial Dames of America in the State of Georgia Register. She held several offices in the Savannah Colonial Dames as did her sister, Mrs. Peter W. Meldrim. They were both charter members. Sarah was first vice-president in 1896, registrar in 1894, second vice-president in 1895 and genealogist from 1900 to 1904. Mrs. Caroline Wright, Sarah's great niece, said the family's background papers are in the "Colonial Dames Collection" in the Georgia Historical Society. The Georgia Historical Society is closed for repairs at this time so I don't have access to these papers.

Sarah Morgan was a civic pioneer. She was the first lady alderman¹³ for the city of Savannah. She filled the vacancy caused by the resignation of Dr. George White, who moved from Savannah. In 1922, Mrs. Morgan ran for alderman on Murray Stewart's slate and polled 4,264 votes. Two ladies on the opposite side, Mrs. John Howkins and Mrs. Frank McIntire were defeated also.

Even with the gains which had been made, women leaders still lacked the independent power to force equal recognition with men. Although it was likely that the mass of women became more politically conscious during the Depression, there was no evidence that they voted together or shared a distinctive approach to government. The nineteenth Amendment was a reform, not a revolution.¹⁴

The appointment of Rebecca Felton as the first woman senator highlighted the disparity between the shadow and substance of female power. Mrs. Felton, an octogenarian from Georgia, was named in 1922 to fill a temporary vacancy. Suspending the rules, she served for 1 hour before the swearing in of Walter George,

the regularly elected senator. For a few short minutes, one commentator wrote, "the woman senator held court. . . on the Senate floor in the midst of flowers and congratulations while national affairs awaited her exit."¹⁵ Once the honorary ritual was concluded, however, the male legislators returned to their seats and Mrs. Felton returned to Georgia. Womanhood had been acknowledged.

The same scenario took place in the city council chambers of City Hall on January 18, 1923.¹⁶ Mrs. S. B. C. Morgan was sworn in as Alderman to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Dr. George R. White. "After taking the oath of office she was escorted to her flower-covered desk. She was then given the privilege of the floor and made a graceful little speech of acceptance, in which she reiterated her loyalty to the administration for which she has worked, and promised the mayor that, though her time was brief, 'I will serve you, sir, with all my heart for three days!' This position in office was like Mrs. Felton's appointment—a flower laden, token female role for a first in the record books.

Sarah was outstanding in this political arena. Not so much for being the first woman alderman as being politically involved in this time and at her age. Sarah did not discuss her age and left it blank on records left behind. Her son, B. Tyrrel, who gave the information for her death certificate listed her age as "about 80 years" in 1931. She is listed on the 1850 census record as being four years old. This meant she was 85 years old when she died. She was about 77 years old when she was sworn in as alderman. Quite an achievement for someone in their golden years.

Sarah, like the magnolia blossom, is beginning to droop from the weight of the bloom. Her life has been full of achievements and full of sadness. Her husband died March 22, 1877 of consumption when he was 39 years old.¹⁷ She was left with four boys to raise and Sarah was only 31 years old. She

never remarried. How did Sarah support the family? What did her husband do for a living? When did they move to Savannah? These are unanswered questions. The 1907 city directory showed Sarah living with her son B. Tyrrel at 915 Abercorn Street in Savannah. This is the first year she is mentioned.

Sarah's son Louis died in 1905 and Thomas Jr. died in 1910. Thomas S. Morgan, Jr. was a lawyer, single, living in New York City, New York when he died of diabetes.¹⁸ Sarah continued making her home with Berrien Tyrrel who never married. According to the 1910 and 1915 city directory they lived at 816 Drayton Street. In 1922 and 1923 they lived at the Savannah Hotel. Sarah bought a lot in Twickenham Terrace¹⁹ in 1919 but the city directory never showed her living there. In 1930²⁰ Sarah and her son B. Tyrrel lived at 84 DeRenne Apartments in Savannah. She was living at this address when she died in 1931.

Sarah died June 28, 1931 at Telfair Hospital²¹ in Savannah of pneumonia and a fractured hip. She was buried the next day in Augusta at Magnolia Cemetery.²² The "magnolia in the old south" had come to her final resting place among the magnolias and the cedars. She is buried in the Casey Section E. 795-South side of 9th Street, East of deL'Aigle. She is on the south side of Dr. Casey's grave where a large monument stands. She shares a stone with her father. Dr. Henry R. Casey²³ died in 1884 when he was 68 years old. He had remarried to Ida May Hill Casey²⁴ who died in 1919. What happened to his first wife, Caroline, Sarah's mother? Where is she buried? More unanswered questions! There is another tombstone in the Casey section with the inscription: "Our beloved Dead." No other information given. It is in the north-west corner of the section. Another mystery.

Berrien Tyrrel Morgan, who was devoted to his mother for so many years, died February 10, 1956 at the age of 80. He is buried in Augusta²⁵ in the

same section as his mother. His brother, Rear Admiral Casey B. Morgan, U.S.N., retired, of New York, is not there. If he married, the other three sons did not, his descendants must be up north.

The Magnolia tree still stands but the blooms are gone. It is an evergreen tree so it is beautiful year round. Sarah is gone and there isn't any little Sarahs to carry on the family name. A tree, though, has many branches. Sarah's sister, Frances Casey Meldrim, has grandchildren living in Savannah. Peter Coy and Caroline Wright. Mrs. Wright, a youthful 76, does not remember too much about her great aunt. In talking with her, though, you know that charm still runs in the family.

The adjourned meeting of Council was held this afternoon at 4 o'clock.

Present: Hon. Murray Stewart, Mayor, presiding; Alderman John L. Cabell, Chairman of Council; Aldermen Davis, Garfunkel, Gibson, Greene, Jackson, McCarthy, McNamara and Saussy.

Mrs. S. B. C. Mergan sworn in as Alderman to fill the vacancy caused by the resignation of Dr. George R. White.

When Council convened Mayor Stewart read a telegram from Dr. White presenting his resignation to Council, as follows:

El Paso, Texas.

Jan. 17, 1923 5:08 P. M.

"Hon Murray Stewart,
Savannah, Ga.

I hereby tender my resignation as Alderman and assure you of my grateful appreciation of your many courtesies.

Geo. R. White."

Upon its acceptance Alderman Gordon Saussy nominated Mrs. S. B. C. Mergan for the vacancy, paying her a very high tribute in his address of nomination.

"We have no grand old women in Savannah," he said. "All of our women are young at heart. But there is one whose life accomplishments best typified the highest idea of service, whose long record has been one of achievement for Georgia. I have known her a long time, and consider that, personally, mentally and socially, she is a distinct ornament to the city of Savannah. I take especial delight in nominating her for alderwoman of the City of Savannah, Mrs. S. B. C. Mergan."

The announcement was greeted with a storm of applause, as was the second made by Alderman John L. Cabell, who said that it has been his privilege to work with Mrs. Mergan during the last few weeks in a close association which has given her opportunity to prove her zeal as a worker and her capacity as a leader, and that he considered that in offering her the nomination they were not conferring an honor, but were honored in having her serve.

After Mrs. Mergan's name was unanimously voted upon, Mayor Stewart appointed Alderman Saussy, Cabell, and Gibson to escort the new alderman into the room, and her entrance was the signal for tremendous applause and cheering.

After taking the oath of office she was escorted to her flower-covered desk. She was then given the privilege of the floor and made a graceful little speech of acceptance, in which she reiterated her loyalty to the administration for which she has worked, and promised the mayor that, though her time was brief, "I will serve you, sir, with all my heart for three days."

"You have had judges aplenty," she told Mayor Stewart, "but as yet you have no women judges. But I, as President of the Stewart Club, say that we women judge you to have been lawfully elected Mayor under the Democratic primary of Georgia and we salute you as such. We have done nothing to destroy the principles of the Democratic Club, and we will continue to work to uphold all that they stand for in our community."

Mayor Stewart responded to Mrs. Mergan's talk with a few words, expressing his pleasure in having the honor of making her the first woman alderman of the city, and his appreciation of her service, and declared in closing that "she had made a splendid alderman for a few minutes."

Council then retired into the Committee of the Whole. At the conclusion of this, Council proceeded into the Council Chambers where an open session was held.

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ENDNOTES

¹William Moore listed in National Society Colonial Dames of America in the State of Georgia Register. (1937), page 266.

²John Berrien found in Early Georgia Portraits 1715-1870. National Society of the Colonial Dames of Georgia, 12.

³Dr. John Aleysius Casey found in Early Georgia Portraits 1715-1870. National Society of the Colonial Dames of Georgia, 275.

⁴Rev. and Mrs. Juriah Harriss being Caroline Casey's parents were identified in interview with Mrs. Caroline Wright. Elizabeth Harriss was from the D'Antignac family.

⁵Obituary in Savannah Morning News. June 29, 1931, page 10, col. 4.

⁶Green-Meldrim House information from notes taken from Dr. Duncan's class at Armstrong College, History 470 of Savannah.

⁷Obituary in Savannah Morning News. June 29, 1931, page 10, col. 4.

⁸Louis Morgan information from Magnolia Cemetery burial record book D121.

⁹Obituary in Savannah Morning News. June 29, 1931, page 10, col. 4.

¹⁰Elizabeth M. Bacon, "The Growth of Household Conveniences in the United States from 1865 to 1900." Radcliff Ph. D. thesis, 1942.

¹¹Editorial on S. B. C. Morgan, Savannah Morning News. June 29, 1931, page 6, col. 1.

¹²Jennie C. Croly, History of the Woman's Club Movement in America. (New York, 1898), and Mary I. Wood, History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. (New York, 1912). Quote by Mrs. Ellen M. Henrotin.

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¹⁴William H. Chafe, The American Woman. (New York, 1974), Chapter I, "Women and Politics."

¹⁵William H. Chafe, The American Woman. (New York, 1974), Chapter I, "Women and Politics." page 39.

¹⁶City Council minutes of January 18, 1923.

¹⁷Magnolia Cemetery burial record book B361.

¹⁸Magnolia Cemetery burial record book D176.

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