

VASSAR HISTORY

The family bible details the history of the Vassars including Mathew Vassar, son of James and Anne Vassar, who immigrated to the United States from England in 1796 at the age of four. Matthew Vassar is best known for founding Vassar College for Young Ladies which is now called Vassar College. He was a great man because of his belief in equality. In a newspaper article dated February of 1926 they quoted the following statement which he made in 1861 explaining why he wanted to open a college for woman. He stated "It occurred to me that woman, having received from her Creator the same intellectual constitution as a man, has the same right as man to intellectual culture and development."

When they immigrated to the United States from England, they settled in Dutchess County buying a farm on Wappingers Creek, NY. There were two children in the family, John Guy and Matthew. Their father, James, opened up a brick manufacturing company on their farm property, he then opened up a brewery called M. Vassar & Co. Brewery. Every building that Vassar created had the cornerstone from Vassar brick. The brewery was a going concern and it grew. Matthew discovered he was to be apprenticed to a tanner and ran away from home with his mother's help. He went to England and returned to the US at the age of 18, in 1810.

In 1811 the brewery was destroyed by fire which was devastating. Matthew's brother John Guy died of carbonic acid poisoning from breathing the fumes of the charred wood Matthew adopted his brother's boys, Matthew Jr. and John Guy. The loss of the brewery and his son, John Guy, crushed their father, James, both mentally & financially and he retired to his farm. Matthew then set up an independent brewery called M. Vassar & Co. from the ashes of his father's business and began his path to fame in 1813.

It is from this Matthew Jr. that all of the family has come. He married Kate Ballard Slate. The bible I have was given to her by her father Isaac. This traces the lineage of the family. They had two boys and three daughters, and I personally remember Helen (Nell), Grace, Uncle Harold and of course Elizabeth Forbes whom we called Great Granny. She was my mother's favorite grandmother.

So the direct descendants are as follows:

Matthew Vassar Jr. and John Guy (sons of John Guy Sr. adopted by Matthew Vassar founder of the Vassar Girls School) are the individuals who carried on the Vassar name through history and were quite the philanthropists that the original Matthew Vassar was. Matthew Jr. bequeathed enough money to have the Vassar Brothers Hospital built after his death (opened on April 11, 1887), and both brothers established the Vassar Home for the Aged in Poughkeepsie NY. In June of 2002, the hospital made the decision to change the name to Vassar Brothers Medical Center because of the expanded services it offered from the 2 Million dollar endowment from the Vassars.

While I grew up, we spent a great deal of time in Saratoga Springs where Uncle Harold lived with his sisters Grace (Hough) and Nell (Helen Warring). Elizabeth Forbes Shoemaker (great granny) lived in Cincinnati Ohio in a huge house with servants. I was a very impressionable child. I do remember the formal dinners in the dining room and servants appearing without being called. My twin and I crawled under the dining room table one day and found the buzzer that would sound in the kitchen and one of the servants would “appear”. Elizabeth Forbes was truly an incredible woman who died far too early at the age of 87 under very mysterious circumstances that were thought to be foul play by members of the household staff. However, up to that point, she would always have her chauffeur drive her to Saratoga (Balston Spa) for the horse races every season where she would stay in the family home. I remember when we lived in Ottawa and she was coming for a visit, but was very late (a week or so) and then showed up out of the blue. There had been a horserace that she had to take in. She was generous to a fault. My fondest memory of my Uncle Harold was in the Saratoga house. As you came in the front door there was a huge staircase that went to the second floor. My twin sister and I would slide down it much to the amusement of the family. Uncle Harold, who was an architect (as is my twin) at cocktail hour, would always don a red velvet smoking jacket with black satin trim. He would go into the living room and stand in front of the fire place with a drink. It was such a majestic sight. The clock in this auction stood on the mantle of the fireplace. The smoking jacket my dad received when Uncle Harold passed away as a memento of the times they shared together over the “happy” hour.

One interesting note was that Elizabeth Forbes Vassar Shoemaker was the 1st in the Vassar family to attend Vassar College. When they celebrated the 100th anniversary my great grandmother was there.

When Aunt Nell passed away, Mom went to Saratoga to help her aunts and uncle deal with the situation. The mahogany furniture came from the Balston Spa house including the Morris chair. When great gran passed away Mom and Uncle John (Stafford) were together in Cincinnati and once more family heirlooms came to our home in Lower 3 Fathom Harbour.

The double headed eagle planter by Ginori was in the front vestibule of the Cincinnati house. It was always there on a highly polished mahogany table. This was purchased by the original Matthew Vassar and his wife while on one of a number of their European trips.

The Irish Ewer came over with the family when they immigrated in 1796.