

## Once Upon A Time in Quincy: Sarah Atwater Denman was a passionate philanthropist, humanitarian

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Sarah Denman's portrait hangs in the meeting room of the Governor John Wood Mansion. Denman helped form Friends in Council and establish Blessing Hospital. (Photo Courtesy of Historical Society of Quincy and Adams County)

By IRIS NELSON

What brought settlers such as Mathias and Sarah Atwater Denman, both of prestigious lineage from Philadelphia, Pa., and New Haven, Conn., to a log house dotted outpost of 2,686 people on the Mississippi River in 1842?

Perhaps, French aristocrat and political leader, Marquis de Marie Joseph Paul Lafayette, was indirectly responsible for bringing together two young people who over a period of 40 years left an indelible social, educational and financial legacy on Quincy.

Sarah Atwater and Mathias Denman met at an historic gala ball held in honor of Marquis de Lafayette in Philadelphia in 1825. Sarah, a beautiful 16-year-old, and Mathias, a handsome wealthy man of 19 years, met in this whirlwind of festivity and within a few months the Atwater and Denman marriage took place on April 6, 1826. Royal blood had been part of the Denman lineage through marriage to King James II of England. The surname Atwater in the United States is traced to the county of Kent, England with family connections to King Richard III in the 15th Century.

Sarah and Mathias enjoyed an elegant lifestyle in Philadelphia for a time. However, when the financial crisis peaked in the later 1830s the Denman family and thousands of others lost everything. One way in which Sarah's father, Charles Atwater, could help Mathias and Sarah was to send the couple to Quincy to manage the deeds to the Illinois Military Tract land that Mr. Atwater had recently purchased. After 16

years of marriage they left behind their families and cultured surroundings. Mathias eventually attained great wealth through the land/real estate and lumber business in Quincy. In the census of 1870 the Denmans show a personal estate value of \$100,000.

Their move west was life-changing. Unaccustomed to isolation and the burdens of life in her new environment, Sarah now in her early thirties, had to adapt. She had come to terms with the distress of not being able to have children and nurtured, instead, her nieces and nephews and those who needed assistance.

Journeys back to New England nearly every summer kept her in touch with family and in touch with the latest in the intellectual world. During these travels she bought the most recent publications of important thinkers of the day. Coming from a family that had helped found Yale College in New Haven, Sarah, an independent thinker and devoted reader, sought to keep abreast of the newest books and journals.

Sarah's drive to enhance the intellectual and spiritual development of local women friends led to the formation of Friends in Council, a serious study group that was formalized by charter in 1869. Their earliest meeting was in November 1866 when she invited 11 ladies to her home at 903 Broadway to prepare a study plan that would allow each member to develop a philosophical point of view for herself. Sarah was the guiding force for the study of the great works of the ages primarily in history and philosophy.

In her own words Denman regarded it as the club's "duty to emancipate ourselves from party-spirit, prejudice and passion, cultivate a love of truth, tolerance and patience." Her belief was to awaken the "full power of woman" as a force in the world and gain a broader outlook on life. The group intensely studied Plato for two years before moving onto other areas of interest and enlarging its membership.

Seeking further Platonic studies Sarah along with Samuel H. Emery Jr., the son of the First Congregational Church minister, organized a Plato Club for both men and women. The Plato Club maintained long-term connections with a similar club in Jacksonville and a Hegelian philosophy group in St. Louis. Friends in Council remains of historic interest not only in Quincy but across the country as the oldest continuous women's literary club in America and the only one to have a meeting house of its own, a gift from Sarah in 1878. Formerly the land office of Denman, the small house was moved to the grounds of the John Wood Mansion in 1915.

Sarah's personal intellectual pursuits and travels east with visits to Concord, Mass., and later to the Concord School of Philosophy, established by A. Bronson Alcott in 1879, led her to close friendships with Ralph Waldo Emerson, essayist and lecturer, and philosopher Alcott, writer and father of Louisa May Alcott. Both visited Quincy on several occasions, conversed with the study club, corresponded warmly and held Sarah in high regard. It was reported that Alcott and Emerson both stayed at the Denman home.

About the same time that Friends in Council was chartered in 1869 Sarah also worked to get a national women's suffrage convention in Quincy. According to Paul R. Anderson in *Platonism in the Midwest*, the women's clubs were considered part of the early feminist movement serving to provide organizational support for women. Through this work Sarah gained friendships with significant leaders of the national suffrage movement such as Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others who stayed in her home when they traveled to the West.

Sarah and her husband spearheaded a petition drive at the time of the Illinois Constitutional Convention in 1870 when an ardent push to pass an amendment granting women the right to vote was in motion. The Denmans circulated a petition locally garnering the names of 250 citizens (170 of which were women) who supported the right of women to vote. Denman's name headed the 9-foot-long petition presented in February at the Constitutional Convention in Springfield.

Intertwined in Sarah's middle-aged years were a variety of passions centered on the welfare of individuals and the education of women. After the Civil War she worked for the indigent including former slaves and raised money to provide food and shelter to those in need.

Through work of the Relief Association Sarah learned of the desperate need for medical care for poor people. In time money and land was given in the Denman name to organize a hospital for their care. What came to be Blessing Hospital, for a time named the Sarah Denman Hospital, was built in 1875. In 1878 the hospital was run by a board of women managers with Mrs. Denman as president.

There simply were no civic needs that didn't receive Mrs. Denman's attention. In 1879 through Sarah's efforts the first permanent endowment was given to the Quincy Free Public Library. Of the total endowment of \$20,000, Sarah gave \$5,000. It was one of her last gifts to the city that she so benevolently influenced.

After 50 years of marriage Sarah lost her husband to a heart attack in August 1876. They were visiting family and had planned to attend the first official U. S. World's Fair, the Centennial International Exhibition, in Philadelphia. Mathias Denman died at the age of 71 in Binghamton, Conn., and the funeral was held in New Haven. Six years later when Sarah died in 1882, Quincy mourned that it had lost "an invaluable friend." Her character and her charity, private and public, were gratefully acknowledged in the Quincy Daily Whig that recognized the "debt the city owes to her wise public liberality."

Iris Nelson is reference librarian and archivist at Quincy Public Library, a civic volunteer, and member of the Lincoln-Douglas Debate Interpretive Center Advisory Board and other historical organizations. She is a local historian and author.

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