

IN CELEBRATION OF WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

FROM THE SHELDON
MUSEUM ARCHIVES

HISTORY MAKERS, PART I: THE STATESMAN'S DAUGHTER

This past summer, archivist Eva Garcelon-Hart and I discovered two portrait drawings in the Sheldon archives. Inscriptions reveal the pair to be "Miss Nisba Breckinridge" and "Colonel Breckinridge."

BY **TAYLOR
ROSSINI**

Sophonisba Breckinridge (1866-1948) was a pioneering social reformer and Colonel William C.P. Breckinridge (1837-1904), her father, a celebrated Kentucky congressman. We don't

know how or when these portraits entered the archival collection, but their presence offers a compelling glimpse into how local and national histories are intertwined.

In the late 19th century, the Breckinridge name was well-known and well-loved. A fixture of the Kentucky legislature with a foothold in Washington DC, Breckinridge men held a national reputation for leadership and gentility. An ally of the family lauded the clan as "the only aristocracy possible in our country." Breckinridge children were fed a steady diet of their family heritage and were instilled with a pressing sense of duty to further the family's distinguished legacy.

Sophonisba Breckinridge enjoyed a privileged and loving childhood in Kentucky, encouraged by her doting father W.C.P., a prominent

Kentucky lawyer. Sophonisba's aptitude for learning led her north to the "Adamless Eden" of Wellesley College, with her father's support. When she complained of homesickness during her first months at Wellesley, W.C.P. exhorted her: "Now that you are there my darling girl, you must conquer." Sophonisba flourished at Wellesley, but longed for graduation, when she would finally be able "to go out and fight" for the causes she had debated from the collegiate ivory tower.

Sophonisba came of age in a period of growing dissonance between the domestic female ideal and women's social reality. Although women increasingly spurned marriage in favor of public service, Sophonisba's elite Southern background offered her a more prescribed path. Consequently, upon graduation, she felt pressure to return to her ailing mother in DC, abandoning plans studying law alongside her brother. Sophonisba's dejection led her family to send her on a Grand Tour through Europe with her sister that was cut short by news of their mother's death on July 14, 1892.

Just months later, the Breckinridge family was once again shaken to its core as their patriarch was subjected to public scrutiny. Following a decade-long affair with the congressman, twenty-seven-year-old Madeleine Pollard filed a breach of promise suit against the fifty-

six-year-old W.C.P., accusing him of reneging on his promise to marry her. Still in mourning for her mother, Sophonisba looked on as the scandal gripped the nation and newspapers denounced her father as a "wild beast" and a "rapist."

While Sophonisba's admiration for her father never faltered, the trial was a turning point for her. With the Breckinridge name muddied and the family finances faltering, Sophonisba decided it was time for her to support herself. A trip to Chicago to visit an old Wellesley friend in the spring of 1894 offered Sophonisba an opportunity to do public service which she had always longed for. She met with the University of Chicago's assistant dean of women, Marion Talbott, at whose suggestion she decided to pursue a master's degree in political science. When financial troubles forced Sophonisba to return home to Lexington, she took and passed the bar exam in January 1897, becoming the first woman in Kentucky to do so. She later earned a doctorate in political science in 1901 and a J.D. from the University of Chicago's new law school in 1904.

Sophonisba spent the rest of her life in Chicago, advocating social change through organizations such as the Hull House and the NAACP, and writing treatises on social welfare that continued to shape public policy for years after her death in 1948. Her father's trial had served as a catalyzing moment in Sophonisba's life and career, jarring an increasingly world-weary woman into public service.

Next week, we will look at the parallel life of Madeleine Pollard and her connection to the local Bread Loaf Inn. Pollard's longstanding affair with the Breckinridge patriarch offered her some semblance of the advantages into which Sophonisba was born, while relegating her to the annals of notoriety.

Contributed by Taylor Rossini, Archives Assistant at the Henry Sheldon Museum and graduate of Middlebury College in art history.



Sophonisba Breckinridge, ink sketch, c. 1900 (left) and Col. W.C.P. Breckinridge, ink sketch, c. 1900 (right).

Last year The Sheldon Museum published several articles about remarkable local women in recognition of the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, which granted most American women the right to vote. In this two-part series, The Sheldon Museum will focus on two amazing women who challenged the status quo of late 19th-century life. Their stories offer just a glimpse of what is hidden in the Sheldon's archives.