

IN CELEBRATION OF WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

FROM THE SHELDON
MUSEUM ARCHIVES

HISTORY MAKERS, PART II: THE CONGRESSMAN'S MISTRESS

Central to the stories of both Sophonisba and W.C.P. Breckinridge, but absent from our archive, like so many others, is Madeleine Pollard. Born in 1866 — the same year as Sophonisba — Pollard had similar ambitions for public life, but few opportunities. Like Sophonisba, she excelled in school, where she was lauded as a promising writer, but her humble background forced her to rely on the patronage of wealthier men to fund her education and further her career.

BY **TAYLOR
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In 1884, at age 18, Pollard met the soon-to-be elected congressman W.C.P. Breckinridge by chance on a train. Beset by money troubles that threatened her studies at Wesleyan Female College in Cincinnati, Pollard followed up on their chance meeting with a letter to Breckinridge, who was at that time a prominent lawyer. He went to Cincinnati to discuss her predicament and learned that she was on the hook to marry a much older, largely illiterate Lexington farmer

who had funded her education. An affair between Pollard and Breckinridge began days later. Pollard subsequently left school, moved across the country, and bore three of Breckinridge's children as his political career skyrocketed. All the while, he promised that upon his wife's death, he would marry her.

This arrangement, even with its pall of illegitimacy, was satisfactory to Pollard. The congressman provided the entree she desired into the political elite. She relocated to Washington, D.C., in 1887 and, with Breckinridge's patronage, secured positions in the Department of Agriculture and the Census Bureau.

In June of 1892, Pollard arrived at the Bread Loaf Inn in Ripton. She had been invited at the request of the proprietor Joseph Battell, whom she had met in Washington. The other Bread Loaf residents were initially wary of the unescorted young woman, but Pollard quickly charmed them with a wit and intellect that would later be used against her as evidence of her conniving character.

Pollard had much in common with the well-

Last year we 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, we focus on two amazing women who challenged the status quo of late nineteenth-century life. Their stories offer just a glimpse of what is hidden in our archives. This is the second article published in this series. To see more visit addisonindependent.com and search "Sheldon Museum."

heeled New Englanders who summured at Bread Loaf. She was college-educated, a public servant in Washington DC, and a budding writer who travelled in the social circles of novelist Charles Dudley Warner and sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Another Bread Loaf resident described Pollard portentously as "one of the most interesting guests at the Inn, because we are likely to hear of her in the near future."

It was likely at Bread Loaf that Pollard learned about the death of Breckinridge's wife, at which time she began to press her lover to make good on his promise of marriage. However, in July of 1893, while she recovered from a miscarriage in Virginia, Pollard learned that Breckinridge had married another woman. Two weeks later, Pollard sued him for breach of promise of marriage.

Throughout the trial, which became a national past-time as the recession of 1893 hit, two narratives of Madeleine Pollard emerged: the social-climbing adventuress and the wronged schoolgirl. Breckinridge's legal team tapped into a cultural anxiety about "public" women — women who turned their back on hearth and home in order to establish themselves in the world. They cast Pollard's literary aspirations as a ruse, a means to attach herself to powerful men. Even Pollard's own lawyers downplayed her professional ambitions, dismissing her writing as schoolgirl romanticism and often quite literally stifling her outbursts in court. Men from all across the country leapt to Breckinridge's aid, swearing that Pollard had seduced them.

Although Pollard ultimately won her case, she never received a penny of the \$15,000 promised to her by the court (just under \$50,000 in today's money). Once the darling of literary circles, she became a social pariah. For historians, she is a footnote in the collapse of Breckinridge's political career, which sputtered in the aftermath of the scandal.

Pollard went down in Bread Loaf history as one of the Inn's most notorious guests. In a 1932 reminiscence of the Inn and its proprietor Joseph Battell, Clara Curtis noted a certain "Mademoiselle Ixe" who "sought diversion



Miss Pollard by photographer C.M. Bell, c. 1890.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Bread Loaf Inn, 1895.

COLLECTION OF HENRY SHELDON MUSEUM

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wherever it came, finding no difficulty in beguiling members of the opposite sex." Curtis alleges that

Mademoiselle Ixe was asked to depart early from the Inn, before noting Battell's propriety in never so much as referencing the young woman's subsequent suit "against one of Washington's most prominent senators for breach of promise."

Following the trial, Pollard is absent from the historical record. A fixture of the national media for over a year, she disappeared from American newspapers after 1894. Indeed, she is absent from our archives at the Sheldon, where her story was waiting to be found in the margins of the story of the celebrated politician and his impressive reformer daughter.

It was not until recent research by the scholar Elizabeth de Wolfe that Pollard's second act was uncovered. Contrary to longstanding assumption, Pollard did not disappear in notoriety, but flourished, finally securing the literary lifestyle that she had always wanted, this time without any extramarital strings attached. Pollard resurfaces in London, where she took classes, travelled widely, and began a lifelong companionship with an Irish woman

named Violet Hassard. In uncovering Pollard's transatlantic, post-trial life, De Wolfe utilized sources "less mediated by men," like ship passenger lists, boardinghouse records, and British census information. Contrary to the assumption for "ruined" women, Pollard died in neither shame nor financial ruin.

The intersecting stories of Madeleine Pollard and Sophonisba Breckinridge offer a glimpse into how two women negotiated the patriarchal values of their time in order to make their way in the world. Pollard's gross mistreatment by a powerful male public figure and her demonization by the media strike a chord in today's #MeToo world, reminding us how often women's accomplishments are overshadowed by the lurid details of their sex life. While Sophonisba had a prestigious name and therefore a place in public life, Pollard was lost to the margins of history, shamed and forgotten. The discovery of Pollard's rich post-trial life is a resounding call to look for the absences in the archive, to prioritize non-traditional sources, and ultimately to question the historical record. In doing so, we can restore dignity and agency to those silenced by history.

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