

Miss Mary (“Polly” to her family) Cheney

Born September 28, 1855 in Manchester, Connecticut. Died March 3, 1934 in New York City

By Susan Barlow for the Manchester Historical Society, June 2014



Sandra Wakeen painted this portrait of Mary Cheney from a photo taken on Miss Mary’s 21st birthday. The painting is located above the door to the Reference Room in the Downtown library on Main Street, named to honor Miss Mary.

Mary Cheney was the daughter of Frank and Susan Cushing Cheney. Her father was one of the original eight Cheney brothers, and one of the founders of the silk business, established in 1838 on the banks of the Hop Brook. The silk mills were successful, and Miss Mary inherited a substantial estate from her parents. She devoted herself to the betterment of Manchester. Her philanthropy included contributions to civic and educational organizations, scholarship funds, and direct financial aid to families experiencing hardships. She served on the school committee and the South Manchester Library board, gave Christmas gifts to kindergarten children and contributed quietly to Manchester Memorial Hospital.

From *The Hartford Courant* obituary, March 4, 1934: “Plans were made Saturday night for simple funeral services [held at her home] for Miss Mary Cheney, one of the town’s wealthiest citizens and its greatest benefactor...Most of Miss Cheney’s philanthropics were unknown to the public but her work at Manchester Memorial Hospital, the public schools and libraries of the town and the parks were well known. She organized the first public health nursing association here and donated Center Park to the town as a memorial to her father.”

The dedication of the library to Mary Cheney: “This library is honored by the name of Mary Cheney. A Friend of the distressed and a comforting listener. A public spirited citizen whose interest and help were given whole heartedly to all civic and cultural activities in Manchester particularly to the work of this library.”

The house where Mary Cheney grew up, at 48 Hartford Road, currently owned by the South United Methodist Church, was formerly rented by the nonprofit New Hope Manor. This three-story mansard-roofed brick house was designed by Hammatt Billings, who was also the architect of nearby Cheney Hall. The mansion was built about 1866 for Frank (1817-1904) and Susan (1827-1914).

Mary Cheney had a large terraced garden south of the mansion and kept it open, like a public park, to all who wished to visit. Miss Mary's garden was designed by Charles Adams Platt, noted artist and architect, and was maintained by a staff of gardeners. She was a diminutive lady – under five feet tall – with very blue eyes.



Mary had four brothers and sisters: Katharine Sedgwick Cheney (1854-1933), Alice Barrett Cheney (1858-1908), Frank Cheney, Jr. (1860-1957), and Paul Howard Cheney (1867-1949).

From a circa 1965 *Manchester Herald* article about Miss Mary Cheney. “The Somanhis yearbook of the Manchester High School class of 1934 was dedicated to Miss Cheney with the following poem:”

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ In Memoriam ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

Friends, let us pause a moment
In silent tribute to a friend
Whom Heaven lent us for a while, and has now
Recalled to continue her work in the vast unknown.
A sweet little lady in somber clothes we remember her.
With kind blue eyes lighting up a tired face.

Going about in her quiet and useful way
Providing happiness for others.
She is gone – First Lady of Manchester –
But her inestimable goodness remains in our hearts.
While our schools, parks, and her own beautiful garden
Live on, as silent testimonies of her thoughtfulness.