

[McNeil, Helen Cornelia Barber]

MRS M'NEIL IS DEAD

Was Nearly 82 and Had Lived Her Life in Auburn

FOREMOST IN MANY THINGS

During Her Long Life—An Invalid In Recent Years—Funeral on Friday Afternoon

Helen Cornelia Barber McNeil, widow of Archibald H. McNeil, died this morning at her home, No. 60 Clark Street, corner of James Street, after a long period of illness. She was in her 82d year and in her passing Auburn loses one of its foremost feminine leaders of half a century ago. She was the only daughter of the late Josiah Barber and Elizabeth Coventry. Her father was president of the old Barber Woolen Mills which at one time were one of Auburn's leading industries and contributed much to the development of the community.

Mrs. McNeil was born in Auburn, February 22, 1832. On April 25, 1854, she married Archibald H. McNeil, whom she survived after a little over a year of happy wedded life, Mr. McNeil dying on November 28, 1855. His death caused her very deep grief and she never remarried. In her younger days she was one of a group of delightful women of Auburn who led in what many older residents have declared to have been the most charming period of the city's life.

Mrs. McNeil was of extraordinary talent and enlivened every gathering that was graced by her presence. She cultivated the sweet disposition with which she had been endowed and was held in the most tender affection by countless friends. Her wide sympathy among all classes of people brought her into many activities and among them she was a founder of the Auburn City Hospital and for many years was a member of the Board of Lady Managers.

Mrs. McNeil was also a lifelong member of the First Universalist Church and was one of its strongest supporters. Her active participation in church and hospital matters ceased 10 years ago when she became an invalid. In the earlier days Mrs. McNeil's dramatic talent won her distinction in the group that included Charles Worden, J. Lewis Grant Sr., Thomas Towne, Mrs. Coe, Major W. M. Kirby and Julia C. Ferris, the last two alone surviving. The character of the entertainment they furnished stimulated interest in dramatics through many generations of young people in local society, and their plays were known as the best form of entertainment during that period.

Mrs. McNeil has been confined to her home almost continuously in recent years. In Auburn she leaves Miss Nellie Barber, who lives at the above address, and Mrs. Carrington Avery, both nieces; and George Barber of Buffalo, a nephew. Several other nephews and nieces reside abroad.

The funeral will be held on Friday afternoon at 4 o'clock at her late home in Clark Street. Services will be conducted by Rev. Arnold S. Yantis of the First Universalist Church. Burial will be made in Fort Hill Cemetery where Mrs. McNeil will be buried at the side of her husband.

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Transcribed on 6 Jul 2008 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY

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MRS. MCNEIL

It is a comforting thought to most of us how little our loss will be felt in the world when our time comes to pass behind the curtain that hides the after-life. We cherish the fact that we shall be missed and remembered by the few who love us; but the community at large will not feel our loss. Our work will be done by others; our place will soon be filled; and we know that it is far better that it should be so,—for there is too much work to be done to spend time for vain regrets and mourning.

But once in awhile there comes the death of someone who fills a very distinct and separate place in the community; one whose loss can never be replaced—either because of some peculiar qualities of mind and heart or because of some peculiar circumstances surrounding their relations to the community.

For both reasons the death of Mrs. McNeil constitutes a loss to Auburn that can never be replaced. She was born and lived all her life in Auburn. Eighty-one years, out of the 121 of this community's existence, she had been a resident. Two-thirds of Auburn's whole existence, from the time when Hardenburgh came and settled on what was then the Indian frontier, she has been a part of its life. There can be few, if any, others left of whom this can be said.

Her father, Josiah Barber, was one of Auburn's early manufacturers. He built the large mill on Washington Street which Dunn & McCarthy now occupy and created a woolen industry, which became one of Auburn's largest and most important manufacturing plants. Not far from the mill, on the corner of Clark and James Streets, Josiah Barber made his home; here his daughter, after a brief year of happy married life, came to live again with her parents; and here she had lived ever since.

It was a home which was a really remarkable one. In that period of our history a knowledge of what constituted excellence in literature and art was rare in any community; but in the Barber home could be found good pictures and good books, evidences of a culture and taste as mere wealth can never bring.

These things alone would have made Mrs. McNeil an important factor in the social life in the community; but she was gifted with a personality so lovable and compelling that no one who met her even casually could ever forget her;—and to know her better was but to love her more deeply.

"Faith, Hope, Love—and the greatest of these is Love." Thus run the corrected list of the Christian virtues. No one ever came into contact with Mrs. McNeil without realizing in a greater or less degree in the great love of humankind that dominated her. To her sympathy for grief or misfortune no one ever appealed in vain. Her hand was ever extended to the poor, her tears and her smiles always responded at once to the sorrows or joys of all who knew her.

And as in all truly great souls, next to her love of humanity came the keenest sense of humor. To hear her laugh was not only to share in the joke,

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but somehow or other to feel that the eternal foundations of things had become more firmly settled. Many times her love of fun kept life sane and sweet for her, when otherwise it might have become unbearable. For her path was not always an easy one. Misfortune came to her—the loss of her young and dearly-loved husband;—the death of her parents and her brothers;—the failure of the Barber Mills which left her with much straightened financial resources. But through all losses and misfortunes she was brave and loving and kept her faith and her sunny outlook upon life.

At one time one of the leading figures in the social life of Auburn, of late years her declining health made necessary a withdrawal from any such activities. Moreover the growth of the city has carried us away from the period when there is or can be any such social life as there was in the '60's and '70's. Doubtless there have been many improvements in social conditions, and certainly there are many more effective means of reducing human suffering than there were 40 or 50 years ago; but the simplicity, refinement, gaiety and gracious charm of the society in which Mrs. McNeil was a prominent figure is something far different and far better than anything we have today.

I cannot close without mention of the beautiful friendship which existed for so many years between Mrs. McNeil and my mother. Soon after Eliza Wright as a child moved to Auburn from Aurora, the intimacy began; and through girlhood, youth, maturity to age the close and loving friendship continued, beautiful in its constancy and in its almost daily expression of a depth of love and understanding even rarer among women than among men. And these two women had one rather unusual trait in common—they did not grow old with the years. In them the modern age found no obstructions; they sympathized with every new expression of life and progress as they kept fast hold of what was good and lasting in the old order of things. They fitted into the modern life and the new generation as they had fitted into the life of the older generations.

To Auburn at large, the village which she saw grow to a town and a city the death of Mrs. McNeil will make but little difference; for only a few will realize that another link with the past has been broken; but to those who have been privileged to know Mrs. McNeil intimately her loss will be one of those which can never be replaced. To us Auburn will never—can never—be the same again. That peculiar loving sympathy, that irradiating humor which was hers, was hers alone.

THOMAS M. OSBORNE.

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