

WILLIAMSPORT SUN-GAZETTE

The indomitable Susan Emily Hall



IMAGES PROVIDED An architectural drawing from the collection of the Lycoming County Historical Society shows Oaklands.

“Indomitable,” “legendary” and “formidable” were among the adjectives used to describe Susan Emily Hall, who lived during the 19th century in what is now Halls Station. Susan was instrumental in the founding, construction and support of several Episcopal churches in Lycoming County, including the Church of the Good Shepherd in Fairfield Township and the Church of Our Savior on Loyalsock Avenue in Montoursville. As she pursued her lifelong calling to aid the Episcopal clergy of Lycoming County, she dressed like an Episcopal nun or priestess — all in black with

a simple white collar, long hair parted down the middle. She often spoke of herself in the third person and in the past tense, as if she lived in the past.

Born in 1814, Susan was the 10th of the 11 children of Charles and Elizabeth Hall. She grew up at Muncy Farms, in the house that Samuel Wallis had built in 1769 for his wife, Lydia Hollingsworth. Eventually, the house became the dowry of Elizabeth Coleman, Susan's mother, when she married Charles Hall of Sunbury, a wealthy young lawyer who already owned 4,000 acres in the West Branch Valley.

Episcopal Institute in Vermont

Charles died when Susan was 7 years old, and she was sent to be educated at the Episcopal Institute, a boarding school in Burlington, Vermont. The school had been founded by Rev. John Henry Hopkins, father of John Henry Hopkins Jr., who was rector of Christ Church in Williamsport from 1876 to 1887 (and known locally as the author of the Christmas carol "*We Three Kings of Orient Are*"). Her experience at the school and close friendships with the sons of Rev. Hopkins had a profound impact on her life.

While she was still at school, Susan became engaged to Edward Augustus Hopkins, John Henry's younger son. Edward enrolled at the University of Vermont but left after one year to enlist in the navy. Years went by and, despite their engagement, he never returned to Vermont. Eventually the engagement ended.

Susan then developed a friendship with Edward's younger brother, John Henry Jr., who graduated from the University of Vermont and from the General Theological Seminary in New York City. In 1872, he was ordained an Episcopal priest. And in 1876, Susan was instrumental in his appointment as rector of Christ Church.

Susan never married and never had children. The work of the Episcopal Church became her life. And her friendship with the Hopkins family was the particular inspiration for several projects, including the establishment of a place where Episcopalian missionaries and clergymen could stop and rest during their journeys devoted to evangelizing throughout the valley. One author referred to the relationship of the lady and the rector as "*A Victorian Romance of Heart and Mind*" (Now and Then, April 1992).

St. James Episcopal Church

One of Susan's most interesting projects was the design and construction of St. James Episcopal Church on Main Street in Muncy, a project on which she and Rev. Hopkins collaborated. Susan was adamant that this church, which was to replace one consecrated in June 1832, not be a plain-looking brick church. According to Katherine Yurchak, who wrote about Susan in her book "*Where Wigwams Stood*" (1994), when Susan heard that a brick church was going to be built, she "*stormed*" the next vestry meeting, in her usual determined manner and demanded to know all about it.

On hearing of how modest the plans were, Susan exclaimed, "*Nonsense. I won't hear of it. We will build a proper Episcopal church, gothic and stone.*"

That church is now on the National Registry of Historic Places.

The church vestry cut ties with the architect they had contracted with and, with the help of Rev. Hopkins, hired architect Richard Upjohn. Upjohn was well known for his gothic revival architecture; among the churches he had designed were Trinity

Church in New York City and the Harvard College Chapel in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The congregation in Muncy had another problem: using granite would be much more expensive than using brick.

But Susan found a solution.

First, she arranged to get stone from a farm in Montgomery. Then, she came up with a plan to deal with the toll to bring the stone over the bridge, which would be enough to put the project over budget.

Susan's idea was to have the stone quarried but wait until the Susquehanna was frozen and then work at night to bring it to Muncy. The men of the parish would bring the granite over with ropes and sledges, and the women of the parish would keep them fortified with hot food.

Her plan worked. Although the project was still over the original budget, Susan raised more funds and gave of her own money to build the church she wanted. The cornerstone was laid in August 1858 (Minute book of the St. James Church, Muncy, Penna, 150th Anniversary, July 25, 1947).

Retreat for Episcopal clergy

When Hall estate passed into the hands of her nephews, Susan used her share of the proceeds to acquire another property close by, called "*Oaklands*." Susan then remodeled the property to be a retreat for Episcopal clergy.

Yurchak describes the renovations as very ornate; money does not seem to have been an issue. In one special room on the third floor of the mansion known as the Bishop's Room, "*a cathedral effect was sculptured into the ceiling's plastered design. The large mahogany bed, made especially for the chief cleric of the church, was adorned with angelic carvings on opposite posts of the headboard.*" The room had a beautiful view of the Susquehanna.

Oaklands today is the home of Ashler Manor, part of Families United Network, a social service agency; previously, it was an upscale restaurant called Ashurst Manor.

Susan was also known for the exquisite embroidery she did on altar vestments for her church. The thread she used was special-ordered from Philadelphia. According to Yurchak, once when Susan was in the city, she went to purchase the silk thread in person.

The clerk was having trouble finding it and commented, by way of excuse, *“We don’t sell much of it. Only the old Susan Hall up at Muncy uses it.”*

She replied, *“Well, I’m that old Susan Hall, so hurry up and find it.”*

Later years

Eventually Susan moved from Halls Station to Williamsport, where her generosity to the Episcopalian church continued. She died in 1895 and was buried at Halls Cemetery, on the former Hall estate, near the intersection of the old Lycoming Mall Road and John Brady Drive.

Her funeral was at Oaklands, then the home of Mrs. Henry Ashurst, Susan’s niece. Clergymen from the Episcopalian churches in Williamsport, Montoursville, Muncy, and Fairfield Township officiated. The more than 150 carriages in the cortege to the grave in Hall’s Cemetery were a testament to her passion and generosity.

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