

Martha Keeney A Student At Vassar

by Lynne Belluscio

Martha Keeney was born at the family homestead on West Main Road in LeRoy on August 14, 1847. She was the only daughter of Nicholas Keeney and the sister of Calvin Keeney (of the stringless bean fame).

In the fall of 1868, when she was twenty one, she was enrolled at Vassar College in Poughkeepsie. It was founded only seven years earlier as a women's college for training school teachers. Recently we discovered a small collection of letters that she wrote home to her mother from school. September 24 - "... it was not till five minutes ago that I found out what I could study. The delay has not been pleasant, but now it is settled, there is a great sense of relief, even if it is not what I wanted to do. Prof. Harth, who was teacher in Geology has gone since I came, for I saw him last week, to Cornell College and there is no one to teach that branch. I feel very much disappointed, but I have obtained permission from Miss Lyman to take that when there is a class. In the meantime, I am obliged to review Algebra. I did not tell you I was examined in that and Latin and Rhetoric. It was a great surprise to me as well as many others, for it has not been done before. Miss Whitney heard that such an examination was to take place and pleading illness she came to her room and reviewed them ... What I want now is to have you send me your Robinson's University Algebra and cousin Jopseph's Rhetoric or buy me one for the books are very high. The girls say you can get books at home and express them for less than they can be bought here ...

Miss Maria Michell's father is the pet of the place. The girls kiss him. Walk taking hold of his hand and call on him often. His and his daughter's rooms are at



the Observatory. He is more than eighty." The observatory was the first building on the Vassar campus. Maria Mitchell was the first teacher hired to the Vassar faculty and she agreed only if she could be accompanied by her father. Maria continued to teach at Vassar until her death in 1889.

The observatory, which today is named for Maria Mitchell, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Her letter continued "I think some times it is not worth all the sacrifice that is made for me to go to Vassar, but time will show." October 5 - "I think I am about over being homesick, but it will come back to me again once in a while ... Two or three times we have had dishes on the table which did not seem to agree with us and last Sabbath half of the persons in the college were

sick from the eating of corned beef for dinner. I learned since that the meat was boiled in brass kettles and left all night. We were actually poisoned.

Our gymnastic suits came last night and when they are completed it will be a pleasant to exercise 20 minutes after tea every night ..." November 4 - "We are all wearing 'red, white and blue' today was Elections ..." Martha and many of the students were sick much of the time. And apparently

Martha's mother wrote a note to the school. Martha had to present the letter to one of the teachers, who was very angry. "It was just the wrong thing to do. I got a genuine scolding for it. I never knew what it was to have one before. For fear you will think I am excited now and will make it worse that it is I will not write what she said except that I should take the note to delivery and have her make an examination and see if I was sick and then have her take that report to Faculty meeting. Now I am not going to do any such thing. But instead send the note back to you for fear they will ask me for it."

In one of the last letters, it appears that Martha had decided to leave Vassar. In 1870, she is listed as a student at Ingham University in LeRoy. She also attended in 1886 through 1888 but is not listed as a graduate. In 1894, when she was 47 she married John Robinson who died in 1907. Martha married Edwin Harmon in 1910 who died in January 1918. Martha died three months later. She was survived by a step son, Fred Robinson and a step daughter, Mrs. W.A. Macpherson. In 2009, we received objects from the Elinor Townsend estate and one of the portraits was Martha Keeney Robinson Harmon.



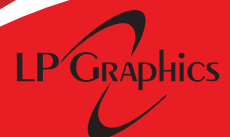
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