



HETTY GREEN (1834-1916)

A hundred years ago she was often called "the pride and pain" of Bellows Falls. In New York City she was known as the "Witch of Wall Street" and the world's richest woman. Her simple Quaker dress, frugal lifestyle and great wealth inevitably made her a unique and conspicuous person wherever she lived.



Hetty Howland Robinson, born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the daughter of Abby Howland (of the Mayflower Howlands) and Edward Mott Robinson. Her father and grandfather, Gideon

Howland, were millionaire owners of a large whaling fleet. By the age of two she was living with her grandfather Howland and his daughter, Sylvia, due to Abby's frail health.

Regardless of their wealth, both the Howland and Robinson families lived frugal lives. Their homes were heated with grate fires and the simple meals were prepared in a colonial kitchen. Summers were spent at Round Hill Farm in nearby country Dartmouth. Here, Hetty learned to ride and drive the horses.

Hetty's "angelic blue eyes", fair skin and light brown hair helped make her a family favorite. By age six she could read the daily financial papers to her father and grandfather, both of failing eyesight. With her keen mind she became familiar with the world of finance and investment. At the age of eight she opened her own savings account with the nickels family members sometimes gave her as rewards.

Since she had always had her own way, it was difficult for her to conform to changes when she went to school in Sandwich at age ten. She tasted the very first meal and refused to eat it. The next meal was the same plate. At the third meal, when again the same plate was put in front of her, she made herself eat it. In telling the story years later, she said it was the best thing that could have happened to her.

At fifteen she went to an exclusive school in Boston but could never fit into such a formal and rigid place. It seemed to be difficult for her to make friends. Even in her later years her dog, Dewey, seemed to be her closest companion.

At age 21 she inherited seven and a half million dollars. She became familiar with Wall Street and her natural astuteness enabled her to multiply this inheritance many times.

In New York she lived frugally, often eating in "Pie Alley" where the main meal of the day was just fifteen cents. She moved from

place to place in New York City and New Jersey. She was cautious, sure that whenever a young man wanted to be friendly, all he really wanted was her money.

In her early thirties Hetty met Edward Henry Green: tall, large and handsome. He had made his money during twenty years in the Orient trading in silk, tobacco and tea. On July 11, 1867, Hetty and Edward were married. They had two children, Ned and Sylvia.

Around 1879, Edward brought Hetty, Ned and Sylvia to his family home in Bellows Falls, a beautiful old house at the corner of Westminster and Church Streets, overlooking the Connecticut River. A landmark in the village, it had been built in 1806 by Captain Hall and was owned by Edward's grandfather, Nathaniel Tucker, who owned the toll bridge between Bellows Falls and Walpole, New Hampshire. He greatly enjoyed this home and died there on March 19, 1902, at the age of 81.

Hetty always lived as she wanted: frugally and independently. She would walk to the grocery store at the south end of Atkinson Street where she bought broken cookies in bulk, considerably less expensive. She returned her berry boxes for a nickel. She carried a small milk can to get the best price on milk for her cat. She would get a free bone for her dog with her purchases. She is said to have once spent hours searching for a two-cent stamp she had lost.

Much of her behavior could be seen as harmless eccentricity. Such was not always the case, however. Her unwillingness to pay for a doctor to treat an injury to Ned's leg resulted in amputation.

Children ran when she walked down the street because they had seen long black skirts such as she always wore only in pictures of witches. When the bottom of the skirt needed to be washed from all the dust and dirt it swept through, she went to Wheeler's Laundry in the Square, where she instructed them to "wash only the bottom". She waited in her ample petticoats until her skirt was ready for her.

On her 78th birthday she said her good health and long life were possible because of her habit of chewing baked onions.

Hetty's last years were spent in New York. She had had several strokes and was confined to a wheelchair. She died at Ned's unpretentious house on West 90th Street. Always an ardent Quaker, Hetty wanted to be buried with her family in the Immanuel Church's cemetery in Bellows Falls. In 1910 she was baptized at the Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Jersey city so she could be buried as she wished.

Hetty on rare occasions gave a nickel tip when someone in Bellows Falls had been kind to her. Except for a special gift, her money and all her property were left to Ned and Sylvia: one hundred million dollars in "liquid assets" .

Ned enjoyed his money. In 1922 he became interested in the miracle of radio and gave Dartmouth College money to erect an experimental station, the most complete station in the country at the time. Ned and Sylvia gave the Hetty Green Hall at Wellesley College in 1930.

Sylvia married Matthew Wilks, great-grandson of John Jacob Astor: she was in her late thirties, he was 63. In many ways she was like her mother, but she gave the Green family home in Bellows Falls to the Town. The house was in such need of repair that it was taken down. Money was left to Immanuel Church and she also gave funds for a million dollar hospital in Bellows Falls.

Notes

There is moderate confusion over the name of Hetty's dog. Some insist Dewey's name was actually "Money" (of course, it could be two different dogs).

The site of the Green home at the corner of Church and Westminster Streets in Bellows Falls is now occupied by the

Bellows Falls branch of First Vermont Bank, a municipal parking lot and Hetty Green Park.

Directly across School Street from the Park is Immanuel Church, with its adjacent cemetery, where Hetty is buried. The church's bell is Revere Bell No. 215, presented to the church in 1819.

The first bridge across the Connecticut River, known as Tucker's Toll Bridge, was owned by Nathaniel Tucker, Hetty's grandfather-in-law. An historic site marker can be found on Route 12 in Walpole, New Hampshire.

The Rockingham Memorial Hospital, built with money donated by Hetty's daughter Sylvia, became the Health Center at Bellows Falls.

In the cover story of the October, 1998 edition of *American Heritage Magazine*, Hetty is ranked #36 of the 40 richest Americans in history. Expressed in today's dollars, her fortune is estimated at having been worth \$17.3 Billion. She is the only female on the list.

Sources

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