

# Some Notes About Mary Lesley Ames Co-Founder of the Ames Clan

**(Gathered from materials sent by Leila D. J. Poullada,  
and from the Ames Family Historical Collection)**

In 1891, when Mary Lesley Ames was 37 years old, she had been married to Charles W. Ames for eight years and was the mother of four children, with two more still to come. (The number of descendants added down the generations would have surprised even Mary.)

In that year, she gave a talk to the St. Paul New Century Club, a women's group in which she was an active participant since its inception and many years thereafter. The title of her talk was "The Education of Middle Life."

To us in the 21st century, always striving to think ourselves young as long as possible, it seems premature for a person 37 years old to write of "middle life." Mary Ames had no foreknowledge, but it turns out that she delivered the talk at nearly the exact middle of her life--she lived to the age of 75.

## **A Busy, Useful Life**

By this time, Mary, in tandem with her husband, had become deeply immersed in a great variety of civic enterprises. During her lifetime, she worked in support of classical music organizations, the Unity Church, the Loomis School (later called the Summit School), the Saint Paul School of Fine Arts, the Neighborhood House, the New Century Club, the commission on design of the grounds for the new Minnesota State Capitol, and other groups. She and her husband opened their home at 501 Grand Avenue for scores of planning and fund-raising meetings.

In the years of World War I, she was a leader of the St. Paul effort in behalf of the American Fund for French Wounded and the Fatherless Children of France. She turned large areas of her home into a workshop that prepared more than 100,000 bandages and other items for shipment to French hospitals to help in the care of many thousands of wounded French soldiers

At the time of her talk, she and her husband were among the leaders of St. Paul society, widely respected and admired, even though they had lived in St. Paul less than eight years. One might imagine that her talk would, in subtle ways, be aimed at preserving traditional values and solidifying the St. Paul social structure through which she and her family had risen.

## **Dare to Live by Principle**

The focus of her talk was no such thing. Instead, her central message urged her listeners, among the most blue-blooded of St. Paul citizens, to seek a broader and more liberal approach to the possibilities of life, to search out compelling adventures rather than comfortable routines.

Looking at the next three decades, she told her audience, “The education of middle life should be to the perfecting of human character in all its parts. I wish I could paint vividly the complete and full life which should be possible in this period: The fearlessness, the freedom, the strength of will, the sympathy with all sorts and conditions of men, the compassion for sin and suffering, the joy in all good things great and small, the faith in man and God, the immovable peace of a soul fixed in righteousness....”

The emphasis was on the continuing molding of character through a breadth of contact with people of all kinds:

“What do we need to cultivate in ourselves for this study [of life]...? All of the cardinal virtues, and first sympathy, for without it there cannot be any real understanding. We must give up any vestiges of class prejudices which have crept even into our democratic land; we must cease to say or think, ‘this person or that person is not of our kind.’ We must not limit ourselves so narrowly.

“Our kind, indeed! And who are we? And by sympathy I do not in the least mean charitable feeling downward, ...but an affectionate understanding of that which is real in the neighbor, by that which is real in us....

“We need courage and self-reliance. We must meet each other truly and fearlessly, setting aside all conventional forms as unnecessary except where good taste and the heart dictate them. We must dare to live by principle and not by rules. To live by rules is to live imprisoned by intangible but very real and cramping bonds. To live by principle is to be free--directors of our own actions, capable of infinite strength.”

## **How She Got That Way**

Given her unusual family background, it is not surprising that Mary Ames would be more of a free thinker than most of her social contemporaries. She was born into a Philadelphia family deeply involved in science and in Unitarianism, one of the most liberal religious traditions of the age.

Her father, J. Peter Lesley, raised as a Presbyterian, was a world-renowned geologist. In the process of his work, he was able to transcend the boundaries of his original creed. He was the first president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and long-term Secretary of the American Philosophical Society. Her mother, Susan Lyman Lesley, came from a New England family that was

part of an intellectual movement that advocated political reform, the new sciences, and the abolition of slavery. In the Philadelphia of the 1870's, Susan Lesley had been involved in the creation of the Children's Aid Society, the Harvard Examinations for Women, and, with her husband, the Spring Garden Unitarian Church.

The two daughters, Mary and her sister Margaret, a professional painter, were given a private, home-centered education in literature, history, mathematics, science, arts and music. They traveled extensively with their family in America and in Europe.

During her twenties, Mary became the librarian for the American Philosophical Society, assisting her father in the preparation of many of his papers. Her assistance was so crucial that when she married and moved to Minnesota, the then sixty-ish Secretary retired from his post.

She spoke and read French and Italian. She was a voracious reader; one of the favorite family pastimes was reading aloud to each other. Her intellectual curiosity was her lifetime hallmark. In addition to several thousand family letters she wrote and received (and carefully preserved), she left behind the two-volume "Peter and Susan Lesley, Life and Letters," an indispensable part of family history and reflection of their times. She also co-edited "The Letters of James Murray, Loyalist," an ancestor who came to America in the 1740's and was deeply involved, on the British side, in the American Revolution.

### **Her Many Papers**

In the Ames Family Historical Collection are a score of other manuscripts, most of them talks delivered before various St. Paul civic organizations. There is a broad range of subjects--"Literature for Children," "The Spirit of Hospitality," "The Education of Instinct," "Helps to the Spiritual Life," "Dante, the Man," "Silent Influences of Art," "The Picturesque Days of Geology," and others.

When she died, in 1929, a front-page article in the *St. Paul Pioneer Dispatch* reported that "in the 46 years of her life here, she became prominently identified with various cultural movements and activities." To say the least.

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