

Special Collections of the National Agricultural Library: Deborah Griscom Passmore Watercolors

The following is an October 2001 transcript of an anonymous, typewritten biography appearing in the preface pages of the Deborah G. Passmore volume, Flowers in Water Color, 1911.

**Deborah Griscom Passmore,
Botanical Artist.
Born, 1840 - Died, 1911.**

In Delaware County, Pennsylvania, on an ancestral homestead called Edgemont, in a big stone house of local quarry, there came on a radiant summer day when the brambles were loaded with fruit and the harvest was golden -- to be exact, on July 17, 1840 -- a daughter with strong, snapping black eyes, the fifth and last child of Everett Griscom and Elizabeth Knight Passmore.

Tradition says that one of her ancestors, an admiral, came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066, and there is a folk-lore story in the family that the name of Passmore originated when a member of his family was cup-bearer to the King, and being a jolly, good fellow was called "Pass more".

Records show that Thomas Passmore, in 1610, had a son, William, who married Margery Bell and whose son, John, came to America in 1715. He married Mary Buxey, and was Miss Passmore's great grandfather.

Augustine Passmore married Hannah Howard, a great granddaughter of John Sharpless of Blackinhal, Cheshire, England; the wife died in 1774. Some of the Howard silver is still in the Passmore family. Their son, Richard, married Deborah Griscom, the grandmother for whom Miss Passmore was named. The Passmores were blonde, fair-haired Normans; it was from the "black Griscoms" that Deborah inherited her keen eyes, raven hair, dark complexion, force of character, and intensity of purpose.

She was much younger than her sisters, two boys coming between. Her brother, Thomas Knight, was her playmate, and, although trained with a boy, she was a most sensitive child. One day, unfortunately, she overheard her sisters discussing the traits and personal appearances of different members of the family and heard them say "Deborah will be the plainest one in the entire family." This so impressed the high-spirited child, that until the day of her death, nothing could make Miss Passmore believe that she was not painfully plain. Again and again have I heard her say it was nothing short of cruel to tell a child that it was ugly, for it left a rigid scar on its memory. As regards her plainness, she was wrong, for her personality had a distinction unusual and more attractive than mere good looks. She admired blondes extravagantly, and never saw rosy cheeks without enthusiasm.

When Deborah was a mere baby, about the time Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her colleagues called that first convention for women's freedom in America, even before

the Fugitive Slave Law had passed, when all was peace and quiet on the Potomac and elsewhere, she pulled over her sister Mary's paint box and getting the brushes, put them into her mouth; this was the beginning of her interest in materials artistic.

Her mother was carried away by typhoid fever when Deborah was a tiny tot, and blue-eyed, gentle, artistic, and poetic sister Mary gave up her career and took the place of mother to the little highstrung Deborah, who often sat in the very wide window sills of the old stone house trying to draw and paint flowers with their own juices, which she extracted by chewing. Thus she grew into a strong healthy girl in the freedom and sunshine of the country, an asset and not a liability for her family, helping her father gain the reputation of selling the best butter in Philadelphia. She always felt a sort of pity for a girl not born and raised on a farm, who did not know the joy of going to a picturesque springhouse for cold milk.

The family always belonged to the orthodox branch of the Society of Friends, and Deborah's mother was, before her marriage, a teacher at Weston Boarding School, and later she became a preacher for the orthodox Friends. Deborah was always intensely religious, and was deeply grieved if she saw any woman do so unholy a thing as to sew on Sunday.

Edgemont lay on the road between Philadelphia and Weston, and parents and pupils coming to and from the academy found a welcome resting place with their sometime teacher and preacher; therefore, Deborah's mind turned naturally toward teaching as a profession.

She received much of her education at home with sister Mary as director; was a pupil at the Weston boarding school later, but her art education was the best to be obtained in Philadelphia. There she worked at the School of Design and at the Academy of Fine Arts. Later a year was spent in Europe seeing what the Royal galleries had to offer, but the best director her hand ever had was her own strong and original brain. She was essentially a leader and rarely could follow the ideas of others which did not seem to fit her way of doing and thinking. As soon as she began to paint independently, the repressed color of generations of Quaker ancestry came forth with a power never equaled in America, and, so far as I know, in the entire world. Her genius harmonized and made pleasant and agreeable the most antagonistic shades and tones of colors; and especially did she blend red and yellow until they looked easy and at home with each other; and the great wonder was that every one could not produce her harmonies. She took infinite pains, and, like Whistler, effaced all traces of labor or effort. Her most difficult pieces give one the feeling of having been done so easily that one imagines that if one had a brush in hand that is the very way one would paint.

Her enthusiasm was something splendid. Inspired by the great collections of Mariana North at Kew, England, which she studied carefully, she began painting the "Wild Flowers of America." It was her intention to publish these, but the press of other matters prevented, and it is left a fragment of some one hundred pages. But

these are such perfect portraits that a botanist might identify each one. Infinite pains, unlimited industry, and keen observation enabled her to delineate every mark so perfectly that they may be taken for the work of a trained botanist. Dr. Edward Lee Greene, who owns the most select botanical library in America, and has doubtless seen most of the important books of botany in the world, said: "Never in any book did I see a plate that looked as if the original equaled these; I did not know that they could be painted with such perfection."

She also painted a book, royal size, of lilies and other genera. It contains one hundred plates. The exquisite work is a marvel of technique. She herself said that she had put as many as a hundred washes on some of the petals in order to get the strong and velvety effects of the amaryllis. This great work she never expected to part with. She did it for her own pleasure and satisfaction. It was never signed, nor does it need a signature for anyone acquainted with her work.

While working at the School of Design and the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia she had the advice and criticism of Roberts, who painted Niagara Falls at the Corcoran Art Gallery; his brother F.D.B., not quite so famous; Thomas and Edward Moran; in fact, the criticism of the most noted artists of that time, and under their direction she painted several pictures for the Centennial in 1876.

After this she was for some years a teacher, and Mr. W. W. Corcoran, founder of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, and his family being interested in her work, induced her to come to Washington, but before she was well-established Mr. Corcoran died. After this Dr. George Marx saw her work and induced her to come into the Department of Agriculture. She received her appointment August 1, 1892. She painted many of the exhibits of the Department of Agriculture at the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893; and also placed a few of her own pictures in the Art Department of this Exposition.

She has painted some thousands of portraits of fruits for the Division of Pomology, now considered one of its most valuable assets.

Soon after Miss Passmore became leader of the staff of artists in the Division of Pomology there appeared in the Pomologist's Report for 1892 three colored plates -- the Eldorado blackberry, a Japanese persimmon, Costata (*Diospyros Kaki*) and the Buffalo berry (*Shepherdia argentea*).

In 1894 the leading scientific papers of the Department of Agriculture were segregated and published in a volume called the Yearbook. In 1901 the Yearbook contained the first paper by W. A. Taylor, entitled "Promising New Fruits," which has been continued in every Yearbook since that date. It, like all that follow, was illustrated by Miss Passmore in color. This first paper contained seven plates, the Ingram and McIntosh apples, the Carman peach, the Wickson and Red June plums, the Downing grape, the Mulgoba mango, and the Advance loquat. That altruistic

and greatest of agricultural publications has appeared annually in an edition of half a million, giving to the world some evidence of her greatness.

As a rule, she scorned copying, but the Sistine Madonna so appealed to her religious soul that she did it, and with such great success that J. R. Dodge, who remained in Dresden an extra week in order to visit Raphael's picture each day, said that it was a servile copy and so reproduced the radiant magnificence of the color and caught the mysterious vision so perfectly that it was a joy to see it in America. This picture is at Moorestown, New Jersey, the property of her niece, Mrs. Mary R. Sumner.

While working at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, the janitor, an old man who had been a retainer at Edgemont, asked her why she did not paint the Old Market Woman of Robert Browning, Jr., and offered to get a long ladder and bring it down. A spirit of adventure inspired her to undertake it, and this is the only copy ever made and is now owned by Miss Burley of Haverford, Pa. The Bodenhausen Madonna was copied as an order for Honorable W.E. Fuller, of West Union, Iowa.

She was a most inveterate sketcher and did literally hundreds of little bits of landscape in oil; when riding or walking she was everlastingly composing pictures. She used to carry materials with her when traveling, and if anything happened to delay her, the compensation was an additional picture for her folios. I have a sunset on the Mississippi River from the bridge at Dubuque where a slight accident to her train gave her the opportunity of transferring the picture.

While painting she was quite oblivious to surroundings. She would sit in a greenhouse on an overturned box, her feet in the wet, and paint and neither see nor hear what transpired around her. Well I remember when she was painting the orchids of the White House for the Columbian Exposition; it was in August, 1892, and I went over to the conservatories to see how the picture was coming on; I found her working away in an orchid house, steaming hot as a Turkish bath. "Aren't you smothered, suffocated?" I asked. She never heard a word I said, but, wiping her dripping face and pointing to the half-done picture with a look of affectionate adoration, such as only a mother is supposed to give her baby, she exclaimed: "Beautiful things, are they not?" Commiseration for her hardships when working was wasted energy, because she never knew hot from cold nor dry from wet, neither was she like Taine, who saw more beauty in things artistic when there was something good in his stomach.

She was never handicapped for materials; if she had anything to say she put it on the first scrap that came to hand; some of her choicest bits are painted on old box covers, she just had to get it down while the inspiration was fresh, and nothing escaped her eagle eyes, and her hand was a submissive slave to her commanding brain.

From my first acquaintance, her hands were so affected by palsy that she could not lift a cup to her lips without spilling, but when painting, the marvel of it all was that

the trembling hand braced itself on the board and for the instance of the deposition of color acted with the precision of a hairtrigger gun, and the finest line had the apparent confidence of a carefully adjusted scientific machine. She was like a great general, who determines on victory, and counts not the cost. With her the joy of creation outweighed toil and depravation of every kind. When will other women learn that mental creation brings greatest joy, and that big work is the only thing in the world worth while, outweighing the most refined of creature comforts and so-called luxuries!

Her recreation was conchology, and next to flowers and fruits she loved shells, and by an alertness and perseverance that she brought to bear on everything that interested her, by exchange and buying, she made a collection that will be an acquisition to the college fortunate enough to get it.

Her diversion was yellow cats, and, when exhausted from intense application of mind and body, nothing rested her so much as watching the graceful gambols of kittens. On any Sunday evening one might see her sitting under a lamp shaded by her beloved red, with a large Bible across her knees, Dandy Jim in her arms, and Buttercup, as jealous as a cat can be, ready to spring at the first opportunity.

One is simply amazed at the amount of work she accomplished, and that with a perfection of detail that resembled point lace in the care of doing. She set herself tasks and forced their completion.

She possessed two characters, one imperial and immovable as Gibraltar [sic], imperious and proof against influence of any sort as mailed iron; the other sweetly innocent and trusting to a degree that made her an easy prey to promoters, schemers, and imposters of all sorts. Again and again she lost by trusting a man with a smooth tongue, but no amount of experience or loss ever taught her the marks of a real estate sharper.

That her work will be better known one hundred years hence than now I have no doubt. During her lifetime she had no peer as regards detail painting, nor will she be fully understood until artists paint things as they are rather than as they seem. She knew no average case, every problem was a special one, and whether it was the leathery leaf of a Rhododendron, the airy stem of a grass or the translucent petal of Primula in a pastel shade, the lily to which she carried a full brush of purest scarlet, the manipulation was as nothing compared with the thinking done before she mixed her colors. For her period she stood alone; that part of her fame is history and cannot be changed.

There are limited pencil notations to the above typescript, made by an unknown author at an unknown time. These notes have not been included in this transcript. Below the typewritten portion of the manuscript, the following handwritten note appears in ink:

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It was suggested by many well meaning friends, during the last year of her life, that she give up her work and rest, to all her answer was “I could not” “My work is all there is.” “When I stop work I shall die”. And so she did.

On January 3rd 1911, about eight in the morning, she was dressed and telling a dramatic story. She raised her right-hand for emphasis, the valves of her heart closed, and before the lady in the room could reach her she was gone.

[Signed] Carrie Harrison

Three brief obituaries are pasted onto the page below the handwritten note, with the following notations:

Herald Jan - 5 1911

The Post

The Star

The obituaries from The Post and The Star are identical, and most likely appeared on January 4, 1911.