

WHO WAS JOSEPHINE LOUISE NEWCOMB?

Josephine Louise Le Monnier was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 31, 1816. Following the death of her mother in April of 1837, Josephine Louise, then 21 years old, moved to New Orleans with her father and older brother, presumably to be near her older sister, Eleanor (Mrs. William Henderson).

On December 15, 1845, at Christ Church in New Orleans, Josephine Louise married Warren Newcomb, a native of Bernardston, Massachusetts, who often traveled to New Orleans on business from Louisville, Kentucky.

By 1850 the couple was living in Louisville where Warren Newcomb and two of his brothers, Horatio Dalton and Hezekiah, were prosperous wholesale grocers.

The couple apparently moved about, living for a time in New York. It was there that Josephine Louise, at the age of 39, gave birth to daughter Harriott Sophie Newcomb on July 29, 1855. (A son was born two years earlier but lived for only one day.) Subsequently Warren, Josephine Louise, and Sophie returned to Louisville to live.

In 1862, Warren retired from the grocery business, and the family moved back to New York, possibly because Warren's Northern origins made life in Louisville uncomfortable during the Civil War years. The Newcombs took up residence at Hoffman House, a hotel in Manhattan, where Warren died on August 26, 1866, after an illness of several months.

After Warren's death Josephine Louise devoted all her attention to her daughter, and the two were inseparable. Except for one school year that they spent in Baltimore, Josephine Louise and Sophie continued to reside in New York where, tragically, Sophie died of diphtheria at age 15, in 1870.

Alone and grieving the loss of both her husband and her daughter, Josephine Louise began seeking ways to memorialize them through philanthropy. Shortly before he died, Warren Newcomb had given \$10,000 to endow scholarships at Washington College (later renamed Washington & Lee) to honor his Southern friends who sustained losses during the Civil War. In 1881, in her husband's memory, Josephine Louise donated \$20,000 to Washington & Lee University to erect Newcomb Hall, which is now part of the Colonnade on the Lexington, Virginia, campus.

In addition to her own share of Warren's considerable estate, she had inherited Sophie's share, and she was determined to use it toward a lasting memorial to the beloved daughter she had lost. She lived frugally and managed her investments carefully with the goal of building the wealth she had inherited, an estimated \$200,000, and using it to memorialize Sophie. She gave money for a school for poor girls in Charleston, South Carolina, and contributed to other causes related to rebuilding the South that was still recovering from the Civil War, but ultimately she eliminated those as the focus of her benevolence.

A friend from New Orleans encouraged Josephine Louise to consider establishing a college for women connected to the newly founded Tulane University, and the university president, Colonel William Preston Johnston, traveled to New York to further persuade her. Finally settling on the idea of a memorial college, she donated \$100,000 as seed money for its establishment of H.Sophie Newcomb Memorial College at Tulane as the ultimate tribute to her daughter.

From New York, Josephine Louise wrote to the Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund that the money was “to be used in establishing the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College in the Tulane University of Louisiana for the higher education of white girls and young women.”

She further wrote, “In pursuance of a long cherished design to establish an appropriate memorial to my beloved daughter, H. Sophie Newcomb, deceased, I have determined, at the instance of my friend, Col. William Preston Johnston, to entrust to your Board the execution of my design.”

On November 9, 1886, the Tulane Board of Administrators accepted Mrs. Newcomb’s founding gift with a series of resolutions that included these words:

Be it resolved that the gift is accepted under the terms and conditions expressed in the letter of Mrs. Josephine Louise Newcomb, addressed to the Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund on the Eleventh of October, Eighteen Hundred and Eighty-Six.

....

Be it further resolved, that the Administrators of the Tulane Educational Fund will carry out with fidelity and to the best of their ability the wishes and plans of the donor of this sacred and magnificent gift.

With her gift Josephine Louise Newcomb founded the first coordinate women’s college within a U.S. university, setting a model that would be followed three years later by Barnard College at Columbia University, as well as later institutions.

The college opened in the fall of 1887 in a house on Howard Avenue near Lee Circle. Although she did not visit New Orleans at that time—in fact, she had not been to the city for more than 15 years--Josephine Louise was actively involved in every aspect of the college’s development, writing frequently to Brandt V.B. Dixon, president of the college, and Col. Johnston, president of the university. She supplied the necessary money to provide furnishings that met her specifications and to decorate the chapel, and she asked that the college observe her daughter’s birth and death dates with a chapel service.

The young college soon outgrew its original quarters, and in 1889 Josephine Louise donated \$25,000 to buy the Burnside house and three acres of land at 1220 Washington Avenue. The next year the college moved to its new Garden District campus where it remained until 1920.

In following years Josephine Louise provided generous funding for the college’s needs, giving approximately \$1.5 million in her lifetime. She continued to maintain an unpretentious lifestyle, dressing simply, traveling with her few belongings in trunks, living in hotels and boarding

houses in New York in winter and spending summers in northern resorts such as Niagara Falls, Richfield Springs and Saratoga, usually traveling with a secretary.

In 1892, when she was 75 years old, Josephine Louise returned to New Orleans after an absence of more than 20 years and made her first visit to Newcomb College. She and her secretary arrived unannounced during Mardi Gras and had difficulty finding lodging. During her stay, Josephine Louise visited the college daily and took an active interest in its development, agreeing to fund construction of an academic building adjacent to the main house that was needed for the school's expansion.

For the next eight years, Josephine Louise traveled regularly to New Orleans for the winter. When the first student residence, the original Josephine Louise House, was built on Washington Avenue, she lived in an apartment in the dormitory, becoming even more interested in the operation of the college and in the students themselves. She spoke of Newcomb College as her "life's work" and declared that, "in this college my daughter lives again to me. She does not seem to be dead, but lives again in this college and in these girls."

Josephine Louise continued to fund projects for the college, always studying proposals carefully down to the smallest details. Her gifts included an academic building, an art building, property for expansion, and equipment. In 1894 she gave the college a proper freestanding chapel, choosing the architect and approving all details and appointments. She commissioned stained-glass windows by Tiffany & Co., including a set of windows depicting the Resurrection of Christ, in which Sophie's image appears as an angel in the scene.

Josephine Louise was always circumspect about her financial affairs. No one at the college knew the extent of her wealth, only of her total dedication to "Sophie's college." In 1896, she wrote to the Tulane Administrators, "When my beloved daughter was taken from me, I determined to devote that portion of her father's estate which would have been hers, to a memorial that would enshrine her memory in a manner best fitted to render useful and enduring benefit to humanity. ... I believe the act whereby I donated my first gift in subsequent sums for the establishment of H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College was wise, and I rejoice that it has been crowned with abundant success."

In 1897, to establish New Orleans as her domicile, Josephine Louise bought a house at 1224 Fourth Street, one block from the college campus. The following year she consulted a New Orleans attorney, who was a member of the Tulane Board of Administrators, to prepare a will that could not be challenged under Louisiana law. She wrote a will leaving her entire property, after a few minor bequests, to the Tulane Board of Administrators "to use and apply ... for the present and future development of this department of the university known as the 'H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College' which engrosses my thoughts and purposes, and is endeared to me by such hallowed Associations."

By 1899 Josephine Louise was worried about the use of the Newcomb fund by the Board of Administrators, fearing that some of the money might be applied to other departments of the university. She considered demanding the return of her gifts and creating a trust, which would allow her to remove Newcomb College from New Orleans. She even considered abandoning the

New Orleans real estate and building an entirely new Newcomb Memorial College in Thomasville, Georgia, where she was assured that gifts of land and other support awaited the project. Josephine Louise finally discarded this plan when she was persuaded that the goodwill developed in New Orleans to the college and to Sophie's name would be lost if the college relocated.

In the fall of 1900, Josephine Louise began her annual trip south to New Orleans, but was too unwell to continue past New York. Instead, she went to the home of friends on West 145th Street where she stayed in their care through the winter. Josephine Louise Newcomb died there on Easter Sunday, April 7, 1901. She is buried with her husband, daughter, infant son and other relatives in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

Her cautious lifestyle and careful management of her investments enabled Josephine Louise to fulfill her dream of endowing the college she founded. By the time her will was settled in 1911 and the funds applied to Newcomb College, Josephine Louise Newcomb's estate was worth more than \$2 million.