

ONE OF THE WONDERWOMEN INTERRED IN OUR HISTORIC CEMETERY:

[The essay here continues a series on people whose lives brightened our world and who are buried in our Cemetery.]

MARY KING FULFORD

My Country calls and I obey,
And shortly I'll be on my way,
Removed from home, far in the west,
Yet you with home and friends are blest.

Kindly remember me,
(I'll also often think of thee)
Nor forget the soldier story
Gone to gain the field of glory.

St. John's Historic Cemetery has been the final resting place for a number of Thibodaux's most interesting citizens, and if the "graves could talk" – what stories would be told. Mary King Fulford has one of the most interesting stories to tell.

Having one's name, especially a woman, associated with Ulysses S. Grant after the Civil War would have raised eyebrows and provided fodder for gossip in the bayou town of Thibodaux. Mary King Fulford became Thibodaux's first postmistress in 1870 when then President Grant appointed her to the position. Grant came to her aid after the death of her husband, when she was left with little means of support.

Relinquishing the job five months later, Fulford's reason was that it was unladylike to accept such an offer. Had she been hounded and scorned for taking a position from the despised former leader of the Union Army in the recent war and one who directed Radical Reconstruction in her community? According to postal records, she was officially postmistress only from December 16, 1870, to April 11, 1870.

Mary King was born in 1822 in the village of Georgetown, Ohio, alongside the Ohio River. As a young girl growing up in Georgetown, she knew and became the sweetheart of Grant. Their relationship ended when he departed for the U. S. Military Academy at West Point and for future fame in the nation's military and as its President. His sweet good by was sent in the form of the poem recited here.

Biographers of Grant say that there is some question whether Mary King was his girlfriend or simply a close friend. Grant was noted better for his skills with horses than for his social graces.

Mary and her husband John Fulford migrated south and ended up in Thibodaux in 1847, residing not far up Jackson Street from St. John's Episcopal Church and its cemetery containing burials of the deceased of many faiths. They attended services in the original local Presbyterian Church which faced West Fourth Street at St. Louis Street and which was founded the year the Fulfords arrived. Their seven children, most of whom died early, and her husband John also are buried at St. John's Historic Cemetery.

Beginning his career here as a clerk in the general store/hotel owned by his brother-in-law B. F. Holden, John Fulford prospered before the Civil War, and he and his brother James opened a carriage shop. Because of almost constant Union occupation of and guerrilla warfare in the region around Thibodaux, the town's economy was in shambles, as were the businesses in which Fulford was involved. After a long illness, he died in 1870.

Mary King Fulford was responsible for keeping the weekly Sunday school classes going during the very difficult years following the Civil War and through many years when the church pulpit was empty. To commemorate her sacrifice, Mary's name was carved in stone in 1954 on what was originally known as the Sunday School Building of the current First Presbyterian Church. At her death in 1903 the *Lafourche Comet* lamented her passing, calling her "a lady kind and gentle; of dignified bearing yet humble in manner; a lady devoted to her family, faithful to her friends and true and reverential to her God."

Mary King Fulford's grandchildren also donated a large stained glass window in her honor. It was installed in the First Presbyterian Church which in 1907 replaced the original and was constructed on the corner of Canal Boulevard and East 11th Street. Although the building was damaged and the window destroyed by hurricane in August 1926, Mary King Fulford's name lives on in the history of Thibodaux as a stalwart supporter of the Sunday school program continuing at the present church at 522 Green Street. But few remember her as General Grant's first sweetheart.

[Betsy Magee wrote this story. Much information came from an article in the Lafourche Comet, February 14, 1997, by Bush Bernard. We have not found a photo of Mary King Fulford. Some of her descendants unknown to us may live nearby and have an image of her. We will appreciate any assistance in locating them and her photograph. Editor]

photos courtesy of Susan Shaffer



Old oak tree ready for a trim



Crumbling and cracked 19th century old brick tomb