Book Review: Amelia Gayle Gorgas, A Biography, by Mary Tabb Johnston with Elizabeth Johnston Lipscomb

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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An affectionate biography of one of the grande dames of the South, well-written, concise and appealing, this book should be a must reading for Alabamians and others interested in Southern history.

Amelia Gayle Gorgas, daughter of a governor of Alabama, lived a very long and rich life, spanning the historical eras of the Old South, Civil War and Reconstruction, and New South. Her life seemingly was one of triumph over whatever obstacles were placed in her path, culminated by long years of service to the University of Alabama as librarian and mother confessor to its students. We can well be proud of this courageous Alabamian.

Born in Greensboro, Alabama, she had been raised as a Southern lady, yet she married a northerner, Josiah Gorgas. He became, however, the chief of ordnance for the Confederacy. Ironically, her eldest son also married a Yankee, before he became famous for his efforts at erradicating yellow fever in the tropics, particularly during the construction of the Panama Canal, where he was chief sanitary officer.

After the Civil War her husband unsuccessfully attempted to manufacture iron products in Alabama, then turned to an academic life. For eleven years he was the vice-chancellor of the University of the South at Sewannee, Tennessee. Gorgas became the president of the University of Alabama in 1878, but a stroke left him incapacitated less than a year later. He then was appointed librarian at the University and Amelia, with the aid of several of her children, actually carried out his duties until his death in 1883. Amelia then officially became the librarian and, later, the postmistress as well. She finally retired at eighty, living on at the university until...
her death there in 1913. Her memory is preserved in the name of the library and the Gorgas home on the campus. After the death of the last of her six children in 1953 the home was restored and opened to the public, and many of the mementos of the family remain on display.

Mrs. Gorgas' biography naturally centers about her two greatest concerns, her husband and children. But throughout her life we are presented with rich glimpses into the society of her day. Some of her correspondence is quoted in detail by the authors, but this adds rather than detracts, for it gives us good insight into her inmost thoughts.

The authors are mother and daughter, for in the preface Mrs. Johnston writes that "my daughter Elizabeth Johnston Lipscomb edited the manuscript and is responsible in large measure for its final form." They have produced what I consider to be an excellent biography of a courageous woman.

Editor