

Sabre Anne McNeese White - Grandmother of Dr. D.B. Johnson

By Eleanor Winn Foxworth
Special to *The News*

For girls who graduated from Winthrop College and for others interested in "Debe," as Dr. Johnson was known, a profile of his grandmother, Sabra Anne McNeese White is newsworthy.

Sabra Anne, with her husband John and their teenage daughter Margaret lived on the White plantation near Memphis, Tennessee. On this particular day the father was getting ready to drive Margaret on a long journey. Margaret was leaving for Holly Springs, Mississippi, where she would become a student at the woman's college there.

As she was left on the steps of their home, watching her husband and daughter drive down the long avenue, Sabra Anne had mixed emotions. She knew it was imperative that Margaret get a college education.

Through her growing-up years Margaret had been a lively child. She had underscored to John: "Our Margaret is smart; she must have a college education. Just because she's a girl she must not be deprived of this higher learning. As a future wife and mother, she will need as much education as possible." But oh how she would miss her Margaret!

Both parents often reminisced about their daughter's abilities. She was trained in music, artistic handiwork, good manners, and womanly graces...But as the mother saw the carriage pulled by the horses leaving the long avenue for the main road, she knew that in those days it was truly a rarity for a young woman to be going to college.

As Sabra Anne walked through her home, she would stop at the things, which reminded her of Margaret.

Her eyes rested on the piece of petit point, which she had taught Margaret to make when she was 14. Margaret had signed her handiwork: "Miss Margaret E. White, 1847."

Sabra Anne recalled Margaret's screams on the day Margaret had called out: Panther, Panther! Margaret, on horseback, coming home from visiting friends, had heard a sound behind her. Possibly a baby crying, then the wailing got louder, she looked around to see the animal leaping toward her. And her screams.

Her father had gotten his shotgun and had killed the beast. Later Margaret realized the panther must have been smelling the fresh meat that her friends had given her and which she had stored in her

saddlebag. With the panther dead, the father then saved the skin which later served as a rug in their home...Sabra Anne shuddered when she looked at the rug and thought of Margaret's narrow escape.

Little did Sabra Anne know that generations later her Margaret would marry, then become the mother of the educator who would mean so much to the young women of her native state of South Carolina.

For Margaret would eventually marry an academy professor named D. B. Johnson.

Later, Margaret's son, David Bancroft Johnson, the founder and first president of Winthrop College, would be dedicated to providing an education to the young women of South Carolina. These young women were trained to become teachers throughout South Carolina.

Now Sabra Anne was a native of Laurens. Her birth date is sometime between 1790 and 1800. Her parents were Robert McNeese and Mary Henderson McNeese. Her father had been a soldier in the American Revolutionary War. He had become a lieutenant in 1777. Sabra Anne was so proud that he was a patriot.

She was also proud of her family's dedication to Presbyterianism. In fact the McNeese family was well known for its Scotch-Irish lineage. Her grandfather, John McNeese and others had settled in Pennsylvania, then South Carolina. He was a member of the First Provincial Congress, which had been held in Charleston on January 11, 1775.

Her father died in 1840; she was notified she had been left a share of his large estate in Laurens County. But the Laurens she knew and loved was so far away.

For prior to news of her heritage, in 1822, Sabra Anne had married

Colonel John D. White, a rich planter. Afterwards she and her husband traveled to their plantation located near Memphis, Tennessee. Never again would Sabra Anne live in her native state of South Carolina.

However, Margaret's marriage to D. B. Johnson of Dresden, Maine, a

educational) are still worth remembering.

Before Margaret's wedding to Johnson, Sabra Anne was busily preparing for the nuptials. First, however, the bridal portrait had to be painted. She was wearing a red satin dress trimmed in

black lace with short sleeves. Her neckline was covered in part by a white lace shawl. She wore jet beads, an ebony cross, and bracelet and several rings.

As Sabra Anne looked at the completed portrait of her Margaret, she smiled...She knew her daughter was a bit vain.

The artist had captured Margaret's broad face, high forehead, and firm, wide mouth. He had also caught Margaret's personality. She recalled Margaret's desire to play the harp..." It will give me a chance to show off my arms and hands..."

Many years later Margaret's son, David Bancroft Johnson was looking at the portrait of his mother. He noticed the high forehead, deep blue, wide-set eyes, the firm, wide mouth. Such features—just like his own!

As he stared at his mother's bridal portrait, he recalled her sweet gentleness and her strength of character shown in her firm mouth; the proud tilt of her head, the direct gaze, and the erect carriage. He remembered his mother's admonition: "Even your grandmother was a college-bred woman; you must follow in her footsteps."

As David Bancroft Johnson grew to manhood and discovered his mission in life, he often said: "The women in my family had a tremendous influence on my life." He was just a youngster when his father died. He and his mother moved to Nashville, Tennessee to live with his mother's sister. At age seven he lost his left arm in a train wreck. He was thankful he survived.

After his graduation from the University of Tennessee, he taught there before becoming principal of the Knoxville schools. Then the call to be principal in Abbeville, he felt he was really coming home. His grandmother, Sabra Anne, the native of Laurens, had made an impact on his life.

His next move was to come to Columbia to become superintendent

of the city schools. It was then that Johnson realized his vision: to provide a college to train women teachers.

Before going to talk with the wealthy Robert Winthrop, to solicit funds from him to begin his college for women, he had already gotten okay from the president of Columbia (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in Columbia to hold classes in the seminary's chapel, provided he could get the college established.

Years later, at his death, "Debe" was buried in that little chapel, which by then had been moved to the Rock Hill campus. This, the first home of Winthrop!

"Debe" encouraged his "girls" to go out into the South Carolina communities to serve others. As a result, even in 2008, there is scarcely a family or community in South Carolina which did not know the influence of Dr. David Bancroft Johnson, the grandson of Laurens County native, Sabra Anne McNeese.

Certainly this grandmother of "Debe" would be so proud of him and his accomplishments for others in her native state of South Carolina!



PICTURED ABOVE DR. David Bancroft Johnson, (1886-1928) was founder and first president of Winthrop College. As superintendent of schools in Columbia, he was aware of the lack of professionally trained school teachers in the state of SC and felt a training school was the answer. He was instrumental in securing the monies needed to open Winthrop Training School for teachers in 1886.

Photo Provided

MARGARET EMILY WHITE Johnson stands in the place of her mother, Sabra Anne McNeese White, the Laurens County grandmother of Dr. D.B. Johnson, founder and first president of Winthrop College. No picture of Sabre Anne White could be found.

Photo Provided

young professor, resulted in a son, David Bancroft Johnson.

He would have a tremendous impact on the young women of South Carolina who would be trained by him, "Debe," and his faculty. "Debe's" influence on the towns and cities where his graduates would teach would have a unique impact. ...Results which even in 2008 (and after Winthrop had become a university and coed-

black lace with short sleeves. Her neckline was covered in part by a white lace shawl. She wore jet beads, an ebony cross, and bracelet and several rings.

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Did You Know

In spite of government intervention efforts aimed at helping homeowners in bankruptcy, recently proposed legislation will likely run into several stumbling blocks, a telltale sign that foreclosures could once again be on the rise in 2008. Due to adjustable rate mortgage loans secured by homeowners during the recent real estate boom, many homeowners are now facing rising interest rates they cannot afford. Financial experts and those in the real estate profession are widely predicting

foreclosures to increase as a result, with estimates as high as 1.8 million homeowners losing their homes to foreclosure in 2008. Even those who aren't facing foreclosure could be negatively affected. At the U.S. Conference of Mayors in late 2007, the sentiment that property values would sink as 2008 wore on was unanimous. Furthermore, as more and more properties go into foreclosure, local governments will continue to lose money, since property tax collection will be greatly reduced.

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