

## **Alice Burnside Paret Dorsey**

**1885-1952**

### **Baltimore Chapter 2002MD, National # 161494**

In 1885, the nation's capital witnessed the call for women's equality during the movement's earliest days. Into this world, on April 21, Alice Burnside Paret was born, so named for both her mother's and father's prominent family legacies. As the twentieth century dawned, she enjoyed the upbringing of respectable social status and education in Washington, DC.

Alice B. Paret's father, John Francis, was the son of Rev. William Paret, the highest-ranking Bishop of the Maryland Episcopal Diocese. Despite having impeccable associates throughout Maryland and the District, success in business eluded John F. Paret. After a series of financial failures, he was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1902 – the year of Alice's high school graduation. A bright young woman of social standing might have otherwise matriculated to a liberal arts institution. However, Alice's schooling was instead continued at a two-year program at the co-educational McKinley Manual Training School in the District of Columbia. She graduated in 1904 with a reputation as an excellent student who had chaired numerous committees and offices for her class.

John F. Paret left the East Coast to resurrect a career in real estate as a land agent for the Kansas, Mexico, and Orient Railroad, where he was assigned the territory of West Texas. Prior to following her family to Texas, Alice B. Paret developed a trade that she likely learned at the McKinley School – photography. The progressive influences of Washington took her on a career path of producing photographs for postcards. Archives of Williamsburg, Virginia, have catalogued items credited to “Alice Burnside Paret” and “copyright A.B. Paret, 1908.” Some of these photos were used in a lecture series she conducted on historic towns along the James River in Virginia.

By 1909, Alice had joined her family in Sweetwater, Texas, where she continued her trade of photography and the publication of postcards. Early scenes of Sweetwater are chronicled, as well as events throughout the Abilene region. She was charting a course as a single, professional woman and continued to refer to her occupation as “photographer” for several decades. Many of her commercial photographs are now housed in collections at Southern Methodist University.

The well-being of the Paret family changed drastically in a few short years. All her grandparents were lost between the years of 1906 and 1912. The next year Alice's father died while seeking medical treatment in Salt Lake City, and two years later her mother passed away in Sweetwater. These misfortunes also carried a windfall in the form of assets bequeathed to Alice from her grandparents' estates which granted the young professional woman financial security. It was time to leave Texas and resume her life on the East Coast.

Within months of returning to Washington, DC, the engagement of Alice Burnside Paret to James Hooper Dorsey was announced with the marriage taking place on April 15, 1916. James H. Dorsey, a banker and investor, was well known in Baltimore social circles and the couple

established their home in Roland Park north of the city. Alice Paret Dorsey was thirty-one years old.

Now a wife and soon-to-be mother, the professional career shifted to the background. However, the desire to be independent and accomplished did not fade. Alice Dorsey's passion for the environment, specifically forestry and conservation, was an endeavor to which she turned while raising her young family. In the early 1920s her volunteer efforts led to the Maryland Forestry Association where she became a member of the executive board. She spearheaded one re-forestation project after another from the University of Maryland to a World War I Memorial Park in Baltimore. She remained an officer of the Maryland Forestry Association as a lifetime member.

Despite her success as a photographer, a somewhat uncharacteristic career path for a woman in the early twentieth century, forestry and conservation were even more pioneering endeavors for women in that era. Joining women's organizations was a way to open doors to these occupations - acceptable as worthy volunteerism.

In 1926, Alice Paret Dorsey began promoting conservation through the Maryland Federation of Women's Clubs. She constructed an exhibit on conservation designed as a traveling information booth. It was used by over 26 Maryland public schools reaching an estimated 17,000 students. It was also on display at the University of Maryland, the National DAR Congress, Baltimore Civic League, and the Maryland Forestry Association. She used her new-found notoriety for public awareness of conservation issues. In 1928, she proposed measures to stop the construction of a power plant along the Great Falls area of the Potomac River.

During these years Alice P. Dorsey had become interested in a project first developed by her husband's uncle. While in Cambridge, MA, he had taken an interest in a historic tree known as the Washington Elm. The tree had become revered as the noted elm under which George Washington took command of the Continental Army on July 3, 1775. In 1885, the uncle began collecting sprouts from the famed tree and brought them to Maryland for cultivation. Some grew in his yard while others were donated to Mount Vernon, Valley Forge, and the Annapolis Statehouse to name a few of the historic sites where these "children" of the Washington Elm were planted. Once she had settled in Roland Park with her own family, Alice P. Dorsey continued the uncle's tradition by collecting the seedlings from his tree and gifting them to places of historic value.

Women's organizations continued to serve as an outlet for Alice P. Dorsey to promote conservation. She joined the Baltimore Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and became the Chair of both the Maryland State and National Conservation Committees - the only offices she ever held for the DAR. Her membership spanned thirty-two years.

In the 1920s an opportunity arose regarding a reforestation project in the western part of Maryland where the historic Fort Frederick stood. Through the efforts of the DAR, led by

Alice P. Dorsey, Fort Frederick State Park was established with 56 newly forested acres all planted by the Maryland DAR with more than 1000 trees per acre. These efforts pre-date the establishment of the Civilian Corps of Conservation (CCC), traditionally considered the nation's early leader in forestry and conservation. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources recognizes the ground-breaking work of Alice P. Dorsey with the following credit, "Alice Paret Dorsey was among the pioneers in Maryland conservation. She rubbed elbows and held influence with some of the more prominent figures in Maryland conservation history." Further, according to Maryland DNR, the "Maryland Park Service operates one of America's oldest state park systems. That makes Alice one of the earliest *women in conservation* for the United States at large." Fort Frederick State Park was the first DAR Forest in the nation, completed in 1931.

With the success of Fort Frederick under her belt and a solid reputation in forestry throughout Maryland, Alice P. Dorsey turned her attention to her next project; one that would go not just national, but international. Those little trees she kept growing in her yard, those grandchildren of the famed Washington Elm of Cambridge, were about to become a national headline.

The historic Cambridge tree, estimated to be some 200-plus years old, finally succumbed to old age in October 1923. Harvard students had been collecting seeds and attempting to grow trees for years, but the most successful and noted efforts had been undertaken by Alice's uncle in Maryland and a graduate student from Seattle who had grafted a scion which was planted on the campus of the University of Washington. Alice P. Dorsey, a respected conservationist and a "daughter" of American Revolutionary War descent, foresaw an opportunity to create a legacy of environmental historic preservation.

One of the first trees to be donated in honor of George Washington's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday was sent across the Atlantic to Sulgrave Manor in England, the ancestral home of the Washingtons. Other donations to historic sites followed as the bicentennial in 1932 approached. Every state capital, 48 at the time, received a young tree to be planted by a local DAR chapter. Each of these trees was meticulously photographed by Alice P. Dorsey and cataloged with the American Tree Association in Washington, DC.

It is estimated that Alice Paret Dorsey gifted over 150 trees - grandchildren of the original Washington Elm - across the nation in an effort that promoted both conservation and patriotism. The plague of Dutch Elm Disease destroyed many of these trees with the most virulent strain afflicting trees in the 1960s. Few of the Dorsey trees survive today, but those that do receive special care by their DAR chapters and State Forestry services.

Alice P. Dorsey continued to receive and honor requests for trees for the next two decades. World War II curtailed some of her conservation work as did her health. Falling ill, she died in Baltimore on September 22, 1952, just 67 years of age, leaving her husband, three children, and a legacy of lifetime work in the field of conservation and an amazing collection of photographs from the early twentieth century.