



- *Activist*
- *Educator*
- *First Lady*
- *Businesswoman*
- *Postmistress*

Susan Cobb Milton Atkinson

1860–1942

Inducted 1996

Susan Cobb Milton Atkinson saw the need for and worked to establish the first state-supported college for women in Georgia. She managed the campaign that made her husband Governor of Georgia. Then, widowed at forty-one, she went into the insurance business to support her six children.

Susan Atkinson worked the centers of power where important men spoke of her as “a tiny little lady.” Life-portraits, however, reveal an energy and determination that belie such a patronizing description.

She was born in Florida, about 1860, into a family long associated with politics and influence. Her grandfather had been Governor of Florida; her great-grandfather had been in the Continental Congress of 1789, where he received two votes to be the first President of the United States.

Growing up in the poverty of the Civil War and Reconstruction years, she was acutely mindful of the plight of southern women, few of whom could afford tuition at the private colleges, the sole sources of higher education. Without training, heavy farm labor was the only way for them to earn a living.

Susan received her higher education at the Lucy Cobb Institute for Ladies in Athens where she was courted by a young law student, William Yates Atkinson of Coweta County. Soon after he received his Law Degree and passed the Bar, they married and settled in Newnan. He was an energetic young person with political ambitions. He quickly became County Solicitor and then was elected to the General Assembly. In a few more years he was Speaker of the House.

During this speedy rise, Susan Atkinson kept reminding her husband of the plight of Georgia women, pushing him to campaign for a state college for women. The decisive moment came one afternoon when they were riding through the country in a carriage and caught sight of two young women chopping cotton. Embarrassed at

being seen doing such menial work the women pulled their bonnets over their faces and cried. Susan wanted a place for such young women to learn industrial and domestic arts, and to become teachers. The school could be practical, requiring students to prepare their own food and wash their own dishes, but it would be an opportunity to learn.

“Why cannot Georgia girls who need and have to work, and who need and want to go to school, be instructed in some practical training and become proficient in the industrial arts?”

– Susan Cobb Milton Atkinson

She persuaded her husband to present a bill to this effect to the House of Representatives in 1888, but the time was not ripe. Georgia Tech had just opened, and the new State Capitol had just been completed. The bill was defeated. But the Atkinsons

returned the very next year. This time Susan typed copies of a petition and sent at least two to women in every county in the state. When William Atkinson presented his second bill to the House, it was accompanied by sheaves of petitions with thousands of signatures. And it passed.

In the State Senate there was a bitter floor-fight over the site of the new college before Milledgeville was chosen. The cornerstone was laid in 1890; the Governor appointed William Yates Atkinson Chairman of the Board of Trustees, and named Susan Atkinson President of the Board of Visitors, a position she was to hold for many years. A few years later a new dormitory was named for them. Today the Atkinson Building is the School of Business. The college was first called Georgia Normal and Industrial College, then became Georgia State College for Women, and is now Georgia College & State University.

The next challenge undertaken by Susan Atkinson was to get her husband elected Governor of Georgia. He was very young and his opponent was a popular Confederate war-hero. Still William Atkinson won by a landslide and won re-election two years later.

A contemporary writer wrote that the new Governor's wife had never been a "women's rights woman. She...has clamored for no higher or holier right than to be a grand wife and mother." Yet "this retiring woman took the reigns (sic) of her husband's campaign and...directed...the most brilliant political victory in

Georgia since the war...When she goes with her gentle tread across the portals of Georgia's executive mansion, she will carry a sweet and gracious influence that will make her first lady in the hearts of the people..."

Soon after the turn of the century, William Atkinson died an untimely death, leaving Susan with six children to support. She promptly went into the insurance business in Newnan, where she competed successfully. Always ahead of her time, in 1905 she bought a red Maxwell automobile. She coveted the job of Postmaster, so she went to Washington, obtained an interview with President Theodore Roosevelt, and talked him into giving it to her. She held this job until 1928.

Susan Atkinson continued to serve Georgia College for the remainder of her long life. In 1940, at the age of 80, she flew to Milledgeville for the 50th anniversary of the college's founding. She was met at the local airport by a Victorian carriage and rode through the streets where students and townspeople cheered. The horses got nervous and ran away, but it didn't faze her. She went on waving graciously to the crowd as she hurtled past, and later, with unruffled dignity, assumed her seat at the ceremonies.

Additional Resources

Museum and Archives of Georgia Education

Georgia College & State University,
Milledgeville, GA
(478) 445-5004

Male Academy Museum

Newnan, GA
(770) 251-0207