



• *Author*

## *Mary Ann Harris Gay*

1829–1918

### ***Inducted 1997***

A woman of conviction and determination, Mary Gay was born in Milledgeville in 1829. Her father died when she was very young so she and her mother moved to Decatur. Her mother married a second time, had two more children and was widowed again. Although the family was fairly well do to before the Civil War, as enthusiastic supporters of the Southern cause, they invested all their cash in Confederate bonds which left them in straightened circumstances after the war. They were also in mourning; a brother died in battle and her mother succumbed soon afterwards.

“Miss Mary,” as she had come to be known, soldiered on. With her brother's widow, child, and half sister to support, she decided to republish her 1858 book, *Prose and poetry by a Southern Lady*, selling it herself, door to door, to earn their living. Newly titled *The Pastor's Story*, it was, according to her biographer, “a hodge-podge of melancholy, girlish poetry and ‘morally uplifting’ essays” that she had collected over more than a decade. Portions of it were lampooned by Mark Twain in *Tom Sawyer*. But the indignant Miss Gay, who called him a “literary humbug” in the preface to a later edition, saw her book go through eleven editions, at least in part due to her perseverance and tenacity in marketing it. It financially provided for her small family during the difficult years of Reconstruction.

Her efforts were directed at providing for more than her own relatives however. In addition to helping the women and children of Decatur survive, she undertook to secure funds for several major projects. A devout Baptist, Miss Gay raised the money to build a postwar building for the Baptist congregation of Decatur by soliciting friends in Kentucky and Maryland, areas less ravaged by the war. That success led to her commissioning as a fundraising agent by the Baptist church; as such she traveled the South for thirty years. On one trip she was appalled to see cows trampling unmarked graves on the field where her brother and others had died in service to the Confederacy, and immediately set about raising the money necessary to mark the graves and fence the field. She also raised funds for numerous Confederate memorials and helped to organize a local chapter of the

***"The long tramp to the Stone Mountain was very lonely. Not a living thing overtook or passed us, and we soon crossed over the line and entered a war-stricken section of country where stood chimneys only, where lately were pretty homes and prosperity, now departed. Ah, those chimneys standing amid smouldering ruins! No wonder they were called 'Sherman's sentinels,' as they seemed to be keeping guard over those scenes of desolation."***

– from *Life in Dixie During the War*

United Daughters of the Confederacy.

But it was the book she wrote for her nephew, that he might appreciate the father he never knew, which brought her the most renown. One of only a few

such histories penned by a woman, *Life in Dixie During the War* tells how, after her refusal to leave her home when Union cavalry set up camp outside for three months and commandeered her parlor for Union Headquarters, a federal officer declared, "I glory in your spunk and am proud of you as my countrywoman." There are many good stories in the book and Margaret Mitchell drew upon some of them when she wrote *Gone With the Wind* forty years later.

The end of Mary Gay's life was marred by a multi-year struggle with failing health. She died at eight-nine and is buried in Decatur. For her faith, courage, energy and accomplishments, we take pride in naming Mary Ann Harris Gay a Georgia Woman of Achievement.

### **Additional Resources**

#### **DeKalb Historical Society**

Decatur, GA  
(404) 373-1088

#### **The Mary Gay House in Decatur**

Send us an e-mail for a list of special events

#### ***Life in Dixie During the War***

By Mary A. H. Gay

#### **Junior League of DeKalb County**

(404) 378-4536