



- *Activist*
- *Conservationist*
- *Postmistress*

Helen Dortch Longstreet

1863–1962

Inducted 2004

Known as the “Fighting Lady,” Helen Dortch was a champion of causes ranging from the environment to civil rights. She put her heart, financial resources, persuasive words and spirit into righting the wrongs of the world and altered the lives of Georgia citizens through her efforts.

Born in Carnesville in Northeast Georgia, Helen attended Georgia Baptist Female Seminary, now known as Brenau College, and the Notre Dame Convent in Maryland. In 1894 she was appointed Assistant State Librarian, making her the first woman to hold office under Georgia’s state government. She used her gender-breaking position by authoring the “Dortch Bill,” passed by the Georgia General Assembly in 1896, making it possible for women to hold the office of State Librarian.

While at college, Helen became acquainted with the granddaughter of General James Longstreet, second in command to General Robert E. Lee in the Civil War. On Sept. 8, 1897, they married at the Georgia Governor’s mansion despite their significant age difference – Helen was 34 and the General was 76. Defending her husband’s role in the Civil War became another of Helen’s causes and she fought diligently to ensure her husband’s place in history was accurately portrayed. Her efforts changed historians’ perceptions and she aggressively fought accusations that he was responsible for the Confederate defeat during the Battle of Gettysburg. In 1905, she published the book “Lee and Longstreet at High Tide,” documenting her husband’s account of the war. When the General died in 1904, Helen embraced public affairs, yet fulfilled her promise to her husband that “in the future, so long as I shall live, whenever your war record is attacked, I will make answer.” She also founded the Longstreet

“I’ve been an assembler and riveter for about two years and have never lost a day from work, or been a single minute late. I will quit only when the last battle flag has been furled on land and sea.”

– Helen Dortch Longstreet
quoted in The Atlanta Journal, Oct. 12, 1943

Memorial Association to place a statue in her late husband's memory at Gettysburg.

Second to defending her husband's name was Helen's passion for environmental preservation, leading her to take on one of the state's biggest corporations, the Georgia Power and Railroad Company. The company was planning to build a dam at Tallulah Gorge, a then thriving tourist town, and the electric power source would divert the river's flow away from the famous waterfalls, affecting the area's environmental and economic future. Helen traveled the state gain support but in 1913 she lost her battle but received recognition for the organization she founded to protect the area, the Tallulah Falls Conservation Association. Despite her calling Georgia Power and Railroad Company "commercial pirates and buccaneers," the company leased 3,000 acres in 1992 to the State of Georgia to create the Tallulah Gorge State Park and returned the natural flows through the canyon. "She was a woman way ahead of her time," said John Sell, a Georgia Power spokesman. "It's appropriate to honor her."

In 1898, Helen was appointed postmaster in Gainesville, reportedly the first woman to hold this position in the state. Shortly after her battle over the Tallulah Falls dam, Helen returned to Brenau where she studied speech, lectured and worked as a freelance author. Helen's other causes throughout her life included women's suffrage, advocating civil rights for African-Americans, and promoting the establishment of the Georgia State College for Women in Milledgeville.

At the age of 80, Helen's fighting spirit gained national publicity for the effort to employ women in the defense industry when, during World War II, she went to work as a riveter at the Bell Bomber Plant in Marietta. When controversy erupted over unionism, her employers became aware of her age and asked her to quit. Helen refused, stating she had the eyesight of a 20-year-old and was in otherwise perfect health. In 1947, Helen became the first woman to have her portrait placed in the State Capitol and, wanting to go even further into state politics, she ran an unsuccessful but active write-in campaign for governor against Herman Talmadge in 1950.

Helen's legacy as a Georgia woman of achievement continues in North Georgia as her passion for environmental preservation was awarded in 1999 when the trails at Tallulah Gorge State Park were named the "Helen Dortch Longstreet Trail System."

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Additional Resources

James & Helen Longstreet

The Longstreet Chronicles

**Tennessee Division, Sons of Confederate
Veterans**

Brenau University

- Alumni
- Hall of Fame
- Hall of Fame 2002
- Helen Dortch Longstreet

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