

Emily Sibley Watson

Emily Sibley Watson's quiet but continuous generosity as a patron of art and music lies at the heart of Rochester's cultural and civic life. She died February 8, 1945 at her home at 11 Prince Street (now 9 Prince Street) and lies at Mount Hope with her husband, her parents, and two of her three children.

Born in Rochester, Mrs. Watson was the daughter of Hiram and Elizabeth Tinker Sibley, who came to New York State from Western Massachusetts in the early part of the nineteenth century and quickly rose in prominence. Her father, Hiram, was best known for his role in the founding of Western Union. Her mother, Elizabeth, was a model of beneficence. She played important philanthropic roles in the founding of Genesee Hospital, the support of St. Andrew's Church, and the sustenance of the Episcopal Church Home. Emily was one of four children born to the Watsons: Giles (who died as a toddler), Louise (who married Hobart Atkinson and died in 1868), Hiram Watson Sibley, and Emily. Emily's early schooling took place in Rochester and Europe, and was completed in New York City. From 1864 to 1866, she lived with her family in Europe, where she studied in Paris and Germany. During this period, her father traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, to negotiate with the Czar about running telegraph cable from Alaska across the Bering Strait to Russia. This was planned as the final leg in the race to create a global communication system. The project was abandoned with the completion of the Atlantic Cable.

Mrs. Watson's first marriage to Ogdensburg native Isaac Averell ended in divorce, after the couple's two children were born: Elizabeth Louise Averell (1877-1886) and James George Averell (1877-1904). Her second marriage to childhood friend James Sibley Watson, the son of her father's partner, was successful and marked by great happiness. They had one son, James Sibley Watson, Jr., whose achievements in the field of medicine, filmmaking, and publishing were prodigious.

After the death of her oldest son, James G. Averell, from typhoid, Mrs. Watson determined that an art museum would be the most appropriate commemoration of her son's love of art and architecture. The original building, which opened to great local enthusiasm in 1913, was designed by John Gade, Mrs. Watson's nephew-in-law, the husband of her niece, Ruth Sibley Gade. Gade based the façade on a sketch by young Averell of the Malatesta Temple in Rimini, Italy. Originally called the James G. Averell Memorial Art Gallery, today's MAG holds an encyclopedic collection of nearly 13,000 objects and is regarded as one of the finest museums in New York State. It offers a year-round schedule of temporary exhibitions, lectures, concerts, tours, and family activities, and has recently (in 2013) opened Centennial Sculpture Park on its grounds.

Mrs. Watson and her husband James were generous in their donation of many important works to the collection, beginning with *Memory* by William Ordway

Partridge. Commissioned for MAG's opening in 1913, and given to honor her son James Averell, its pedestal includes a profile bas-relief of the young man as well as the quote "He loved life, beauty and honor. His mother dedicates this building to his memory." It can be seen in its original location, on the second floor facing the 1913 entry.

The Gallery's outstanding print collection began with a gift from Mrs. Watson of Old Master prints that James Averell purchased in Rome the summer before his death. Two paintings by Monet, a portrait by Matisse, tapestries, and hundreds of other works of art are among the treasures that were given to the community by Mr. and Mrs. Watson.

In 1913, MAG was part of the University of Rochester campus, which was located on Prince St. near Mrs. Watson's home. The students would later move to a new campus by the Genesee River, but MAG continued in its original location. By 1926, the Gallery's growth necessitated an addition, also donated by the Watsons, giving additional spaces for exhibiting the collection and creating the majestic Fountain Court, which now houses one of the Eastman School's organs and where regular organ concerts are performed by visiting musicians and Eastman School students.

Mrs. Watson was a generous donor to the Genesee Hospital, where with other women in the Sibley and Watson families, she supported the building of the Watson wing. Her generous acts of support of St. Andrews Church (now Calvary St. Andrews) and its embattled pastor, Algernon Crapsey, continued a family tradition established by her mother, Elizabeth Sibley. Mrs. Watson also supported salaries of professors and tuition of students at the University of Rochester, often anonymously.

Among those who benefited from her counsel and financial support was David Hochstein. He was born in Rochester, New York, to Russian immigrants Helena and Jacob Hochstein, and was the nephew of political activist Emma Goldman. Young Hochstein was brought to Mrs. Watson's attention in the early 1900s, and she became his benefactor, along with her friend George Eastman. They ensured that he receive the finest training available. With her support, he studied under the renowned violinist and teacher Ottakar Sevcik in Vienna, and graduated from the Imperial Academy's Meisterschule with highest honors. He was the first American to win triple prizes from this institution, and the first student to win both the One Thousand Crown and First State Prize. In 1913, Hochstein studied in St. Petersburg, Russia, with Leopold Auer, considered to be the finest violinist of his time. His stay in Russia was financed by George Eastman, as was the loan of a rare Stradivarius violin.

In October 1917, David Hochstein joined the army to fight in World War I and was assigned to the Infantry Division. In October 1918, Second Lieutenant David Hochstein was killed in the Battle of the Argonne Forest. His body was never

recovered. "In him, America has lost one of her finest artists," wrote Leopold Auer.

On April 5, 1919, musicians in the Rochester community rallied together for the Hochstein Memorial Concert, attended by an audience of thousands. The funds raised by this concert were augmented by Emily Sibley Watson and George Eastman, and in 1920, the David Hochstein Music School Settlement opened in the Hochstein family home on Joseph Avenue. Since then, the school, now called the Hochstein School of Music and Dance, has served many thousands of students in the Rochester community. From the beginning, enrollment has been open to the entire community, welcoming and nurturing students of all ages, all levels of skill, and all backgrounds, regardless of ability to pay.

In her last years, Mrs. Watson was said to have sat at the window of her Prince Street home, where she watched the outside world go by. Her generosity did not abate. At the end of World War II, Army Air Force students were quartered in the converted Rochester Theological Seminary building around the corner on Alexander Street. Every day, they would march by Mrs. Watson's home on their way to the Armory on East Main Street. Perhaps motivated by fond memories of others who had died too young, Mrs. Watson asked if there was anything she could do to improve their living conditions. When the soldiers learned that she had made a gifts to improve their comfort while in training, they saluted her as they marched by her house every day.

Mrs. Watson was survived by her husband, James Sibley Watson, Sr., and her son, Dr. James Sibley Watson Jr. In tribute to her memory, the Memorial Art Gallery was closed for a day and the flags of the University were flown at half staff.

Her burial place is near the north entrance to Mount Hope Cemetery. The lovely flat stone on her grave was the work of the notable Rochester architect and designer, Claude Bragdon. He also designed the Watson family monument, an elaborately carved granite Celtic cross. The endless knot motif on the cross is a symbol of reincarnation.

On the day following Mrs. Watson's funeral, the following editorial appeared in the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*:

An indication of the spirit in which Mrs. James Sibley Watson made her contributions to Rochester opportunities for cultural enjoyment is contained in the fact that when she established the Memorial Art Gallery she was particularly interested in making it a place for living art rather than a dead storehouse of treasures. The children's classes and others that have helped carry out this purpose have given the Rochester gallery a reputation and standing among galleries of the country which is respected and recognized by directors of more famous institutions. This interest was backed by generous gifts to the Gallery's

collection as well as the initial building and with her husband, the large addition which doubled its capacity. Her interest in the Genesee Hospital, in the Rochester Civic Music Association, her special interest in David Hochstein and the establishment of the school in his memory, revealed her genuine desire to use her wealth for the enrichment of the life of all her Rochester neighbors and for the alleviation of their distress. Neither advanced age nor illness dimmed her interest in others or her helpfulness. The boys of the Army Air Corps who trained here and marched past her window daily through several months had reason for their daily salutes beyond the material contributions she made to their comfort and recreation. She was a Rochesterian whose name and personality will be recalled for many years as the cultural inspiration of her benefactions persists.

References:

Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, February 9, 1945 and February 10, 1945
Hochstein School of Music and Dance
Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester
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