



Margaret Augusta Peterson

by Shirley R. Stephens

Found in the Perkins Scrapbook, p. 61, is a newspaper article published on August 12, 1918, on the 80th anniversary of the first burial in Mt. Hope Cemetery. It tells the story of Margaret Augusta Peterson and Henry Polley Foote. They are buried side-by-side in Section E, military tombstones at each grave.

There is another grave near the old entrance to the cemetery above which the G.A.R. has placed a marker. It is that of Margaret A. Peterson, the young Rochester nurse who died in 1864 at the age of 23 years. Miss Peterson's story is well known. She gave her services in nursing the soldiers of the Civil War, and at the time when small-pox (sic) was prevalent, was vaccinated as a preventive measure. Some infection in the vaccine caused gangrene to set in and death resulted.

The vaccination was performed by a young physician to whom Miss Peterson became engaged, and although no blame was attached to him, the shock and grief caused by her death so affected his health that he soon died and was also buried in Mt. Hope.

Margaret lived at 24 Caledonia Avenue, near Spring Street, in the One Hundred Acre Tract. The avenue ran from Buffalo Street (West Main Street) to Plymouth Avenue South.

Margaret was twenty-three years old when she met Henry (Harvey) Polley Foote, also age twenty-three. They were both dark haired, dark complexioned, and had dark eyes. They were both above average height for the time.

Margaret wrote letters, read to, and changed dressings for many of the over 3,000 soldiers who were hospitalized in Rochester during the years 1863-1865. St. Mary's Hospital signed a contract with the federal government on March 10, 1863. The hospital would receive \$5.50 per week for each patient. St. Mary's Hospital was a military base with a captain as a commandant, and all military staff would be under military jurisdiction.

St. Mary's was founded in 1857 by the Daughters of Charity (Sisters of Charity), an order based in Emmitsburg, Maryland. This is the order that arrived in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, three days after the battle to bring order to the chaos and carnage left by the battle. Sister Hieronymo O'Brien was the first Sister Superior and remained so for the Civil War period.

Robert T. McNamara states in his *St. Mary's and the Civil War*: "Laywomen often helped the sisters to care for the needs and revive the spirits of the soldier patients. One to whom Sister Hieronymo remained particularly grateful was a Miss Peters (Peterson). She devoted her whole time to the sick soldiers."





Henry P. Foote was an acting hospital steward with Co. L, 4th NY Heavy Artillery. He was mustered out of the service on December 2, 1863. The Rochester directory of 1863-1864 lists him as a medical student boarding at 11 Gibbs Street.

Margaret's obituary in the *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, September 1, 1864, reads: "Passed within the Veil relying with unshaken faith on the merits of her Great Redeemer, Sept. 1, Margaret Augusta Petersen, youngest daughter of Jesse Peterson."

Henry died of typhoid fever at St. Mary's Hospital on October 8, 1864.

Phoebe Yates Pember, nee Phoebe Levey, was matron of Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond, Virginia. It had 150 wards and 76,000 patients. She states in her diary, *A Southern Women's Story*, that improperly vaccinated patients suffered severely and that both Confederate and Federal soldiers were vaccinated with the same contaminated serum. This was still the dark ages of medicine. It wasn't until 1865, at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary, that a surgeon, Joseph Lister, treated a wound with carbolic acid. The subsequent use of antiseptics in surgery and environmental sanitation turned hospitals from "houses of torture and death" to "places of healing and cure."

Rossiter Johnson immortalized Margaret and Henry in a twenty-three stanza poem entitled, "A Woman of the War," published in 1910.

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