

# EPITAPH

THE FRIENDS OF MOUNT HOPE CEMETERY

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## *BECOME WHAT THOU ART* **THE LEGACY OF HARRIET BENTLEY (1885-1918), FOUNDER OF THE HARLEY SCHOOL**

by Patricia Corcoran

Life appeared very promising for the handsome young Bentley couple as they strolled together down Newcastle Road in the fall of 1918. In July their new home had been finished, and the family had moved in. The house, a gift from Harriet's parents, was one of the first houses on Newcastle Road, a rural area on the border of the city of Rochester. Harriet had worked closely with architect Hugh Crisp as he designed the home. The house was large and comfortable, filled with nooks and crannies waiting to be discovered by the three Bentley girls—Harriet, age 8, Barbara, age 6, and Dorothea, age 4. Off each bedroom there were open porches, providing fresh air to promote good health and prevent tuberculosis and a myriad of other diseases. There was plenty of room for the children and the servants, as well as the new baby expected in December. The woods surrounding their home in the prestigious new Browncroft development were a paradise to Harriet and her husband Cogswell. They planned to build a tennis court on the property behind their house, as they were both avid tennis players.

Harriet Jackson Benton was born on December 8, 1885, the only surviving child of Charles E. Benton and Harriet Maria Drown in Sharon, Litchfield County, Connecticut, where her father had a dairy farm. Both of her parents traced their ancestry back to the Mayflower. Her father, Charles E. Benton, had served in the "Dutchess County Regiment," the 150th

New York State Volunteers, Company A, during the Civil War. Years later, in 1902, he published a book entitled *As Seen from the Ranks, A Boy in the Civil War*, in which he described his war experiences.

In the fall of 1891, when Harriet was five years old, her maternal grandfather, William F. Drown, died, and her family



*Harriet J. Benton, circa 1906, before her marriage to Cogswell Bentley in 1909.*

moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, to care for her grandmother and the family estate. The Drown family had been successful merchants in New Bedford, selling food to ship companies. Harriet spent her childhood and attended the Friends School there. As a young woman, she joined the North Congregational Church in New Bedford.

Harriet graduated from Vassar in 1907 with a A.B. degree following in the footsteps

of her mother, who was in the class of 1871. Vassar was the first college to offer a full university program for women. Harriet's mother had enrolled in the fall of 1866, just one year after the college opened.

Harriet met Cogswell Bentley the summer after her graduation from Vassar. While visiting classmates in Rochester, she was introduced to the distinguished young Yale graduate just starting a law practice in his hometown. Their courtship included many train rides between New Bedford and Rochester.

Cogswell, the son of Sardius DeLancey Bentley and Martha Burr Cogswell Bentley, came from a prominent Rochester family. Both Sardius Bentley and his father-in-law, Thomas F. Cogswell, were noted local attorneys. The family home at 7 Prince Street was a center of social life for Cogswell and his five brothers.

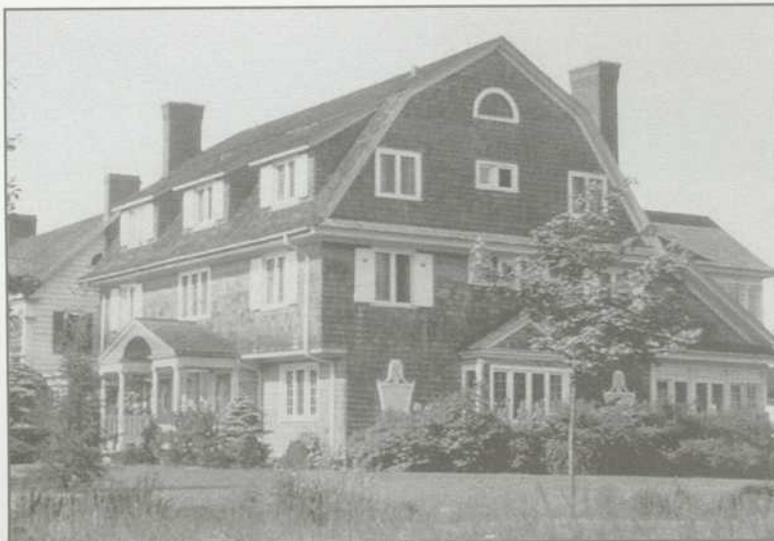
Cogswell and Harriet were married on August 7, 1909, at Harriet's home in New Bedford. Cogswell was the first of the six Bentley brothers to be married, and the wedding was an elegant occasion, witnessed by the immediate family and intimate friends of the couple.

The Bentley Family was very active in the Third Presbyterian Church on the corner of East Avenue and Meigs Street. When Harriet married, she brought a letter from her church in New Bedford and officially joined the Third Presbyterian Church. Cogswell was a church trustee at the time.

Harriet and Cogswell were a loving couple who shared many interests. They enjoyed music, both classical and opera. Harriet's two oldest daughters, Harriet and Barbara, recall their mother sitting at the piano bench with a daughter on each side while she played the piano and sang.

Harriet and Cogswell both shared a love of nature and the outdoors. They enjoyed taking long walks in the woods. "We must run glittering like a brook in the open sunshine, or we are unblessed" was a line from a William Wordsworth poem chosen by Harriet while at Vassar for the calendar date of December 8, 1907. That was her twenty-second birthday. In winter they could be found sledding and romping in the snow.

They loved camping and even went camping on their honeymoon. They would take week-long canoe-camping trips into Canada with their friends, portaging from lake to lake. Cogswell was an experienced camper, and had learned canoeing from Indian guides. They enjoyed the self-sufficiency of carrying everything that they needed on their shoulders, living in a tent, building a campfire, and cooking freshly-caught fish.



*The home of Cogswell and Harriet Bentley and their daughters at 330 Newcastle Road in Rochester's Browncroft neighborhood.*

result of her work in the slums of Rome, Montessori had observed how children learn. She had prepared an environment for children using special instructional materials. Without direct instruction the children learned to read and write at an early age. Maria Montessori wrote in *The Absorbent Mind*:

"We discovered that education was not something that the teacher does, but that it is a natural process that develops spontaneously in the human being. It is not acquired by listening to words, but in virtue of experience in which the child acts on his environment. The teacher's task is not to talk, but to prepare and arrange a series of motives for cultural activity in a special environment for the child."

Maria Montessori first visited the United States in 1913, supported by Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, and Helen Keller. In 1915, she attracted world attention with her "glass house" classroom exhibit in San Francisco.

In the Spring of 1917, Harriet Bentley gathered together a group of mothers from different social circles to discuss setting up a school experience for four-year-olds. At that time many people were thinking about "progressive education," and these parents were very serious about investigating the best of

various methods in their children's education. The mothers consulted Mary Jane Miller of the City Normal School and under her guidance decided to start a Montessori School. They hired a teacher from New York City who had studied under Maria Montessori in Rome. They called their school "The Children's University School of Rochester." Its purpose was "to interpret and meet the needs of the individual child so that he

may fit in with and serve his fellow beings to the height of his power. The school surrounds the child with conditions which free his potentialities for full growth and development and seriously takes into account not only his outward achievement but the kind of individual developed through the achievement."

The school was to be democratic with scholarships for less privileged children. It was cooperative, with the parents and teachers operating the school together. It opened in the summer of 1917 with ten students in the front rooms of a house on Oxford Street. In the winter of 1918, it moved to a tailor shop on Park Avenue. The tuition was \$8 per month. Mothers were responsible for paying the bills, furnishing the school, preparing lunch, transporting the students, and in some cases even teaching. Harriet Bentley became the first president of the board of mothers.

### **The influenza that forever altered the lives of the Bentley family**

Gardening was another interest that Harriet and Cogswell shared. They had a large vegetable garden in an adjacent lot behind their home. In addition to vegetables, they planted apple and peach trees and had currants and gooseberries. A cherished family photograph depicts Harriet and Cogswell with their four-year-old daughter Dorothea in the vegetable garden in the summer of 1918.

Harriet, having had the advantage of a fine education, was interested in providing her daughters and other children in the community with the best educational opportunities. She was fascinated with the innovative work of Maria Montessori, the Italian physician-turned-educator, who had become a pioneer in early childhood education. As a

### **EPITAPH**

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So it was that three years before women were given the right to vote, Harriet Bentley and a group of Rochester women had the initiative to start a school. Their efforts were not universally endorsed, and these women were criticized for shirking their responsibilities as mothers. To start a school using the ideas of Maria Montessori was a revolutionary concept in 1917. It was only a year later, however, that tragedy struck the Rochester community as well as the young, idealistic founder of the innovative new school.

The influenza that forever altered the lives of the Bentley family on Newcastle Road was part of a worldwide pandemic. The Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 has been called the greatest tragedy of the 20th century. It killed between 20 and 40 million people worldwide. In the United States, it killed more people than all the wars in the twentieth century put together—20 million became ill with influenza and 675,000 died—all within ten months. Of the American soldiers who died in World War I, 85 out of 100 were killed not in battles but by the flu.

The initial wave affected soldiers and spread rapidly because the soldiers were crowded into barracks or ships. Because influenza is a respiratory disease, it is contracted by breathing. A person who was infected could cough, sneeze, and breath out millions of flu germs into the air before knowing that he was sick. In a crowded area, a person could infect hundreds of people in a few minutes. As our troops were sent to Europe, huge numbers became ill. Within a few months, however, the virus mutated, and when the troops returned to the United States, they brought with them a much more lethal form of the influenza virus. This second wave quickly entered the civilian population and spread across the country. The influenza epidemic affected all parts of the country and the world. Even the remotest parts of Alaska were decimated by the flu.

It was the second wave that devastated the civilian population in Rochester. Although Monroe County suffered less than many communities, nearly 1,100 people died within four months. First mention of the influenza epidemic in Massachusetts appeared in the *Rochester Times-Union* on September 21, 1918, and four days later a group of nurses and doctors left Rochester to



*Cogswell and Harriet Bentley on their wedding day, August 7, 1909*

volunteer their services in Boston. On September 28, two soldiers home on furlough became seriously ill with influenza, and the epidemic began. By October 7, 400 cases were reported. Two days later schools and all places of amusement were closed. On October 12, all churches, Sunday schools, soda fountains, ice cream parlors, meetings of lodges and civic associations, social clubs, saloons and bars closed. Florists were unable to get enough flowers for funeral displays. Cemeteries were overwhelmed as well. Graves could not be dug rapidly enough by hand, so a trench digger was put into service. On November 5, schools, churches, theaters, and other places of assembly were allowed to reopen, and the number of cases rose sharply.

George W. Goler, the City Public Health Officer, expressed his frustration in his November 1918, report: "We were not prepared; we were not equipped; and by the time we were prepared and equipped, the wave of the epidemic was nearly over. We had lost hundreds of lives. Sorrow and suffering have been the lot of those left behind, the cup of grief of those in sorrow has been a large and brimming one, because of the age periods 20 to 40, the most energetic and productive of all periods of life, in which most of the decedents died."

While the military was able to closely monitor soldiers and put them to bed if they had a temperature, in Rochester the civilian population was not so fortunate. People continued to work even though they were sick. Rochesterians as well as Americans everywhere wore gauze face masks hoping that they could avoid being infected. Children were aware of the terrible flu and devised a jump-rope rhyme:

"I had a little bird,  
Its name was Enza.  
I opened the window  
And in-flu-enza."

There was a severe shortage of nurses and doctors – 25 percent of local physicians were enlisted in the war. Because the hospitals were shorthanded, nursing students handled most of the care in the hospitals. Fifty of these students contracted the disease. The health authorities enrolled 200 volunteers as nurses and attendants. The city's one municipal and four private hospitals were filled. Local attorneys volunteered to wash dishes in hospitals. There was a shortage of hospital beds, especially for children, and there were no provisions for convalescence for people who had survived the flu in a weakened state.

Emergency hospitals were set up in the armory, the convention hall, the Gannett House, three church halls, and two settlement houses. The Red Cross enlisted hundreds of "amateur" nurses to staff these temporary hospitals.

The Red Cross organized a volunteer nursing service, a women's motor corps, and a food corps. The Medical Motor Service of

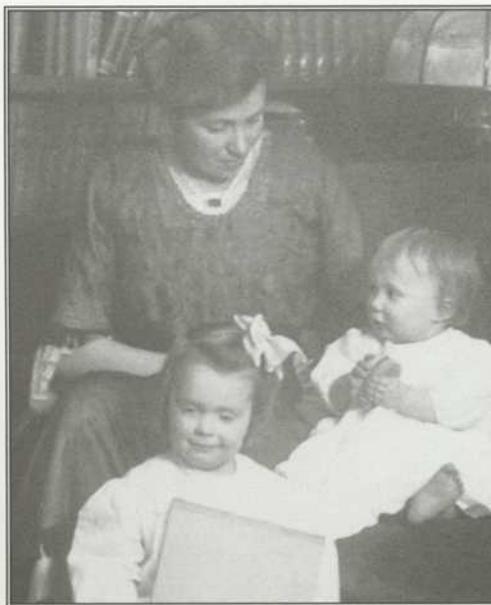
Rochester and Monroe County was begun to transport nurses of the newly formed Public Health Nursing Association to homes. At Rochester General Hospital, volunteers worked long hours and proved indispensable.

The entire medical community was humbled by this epidemic. Until this event, there was euphoria and a feeling that Americans were invincible. We could help Europe win the war; we could develop vaccines for any disease. This strain of influenza, however, was unlike any other. The medical profession did not know its cause, and many myths arose as to how to treat the disease.

The flu epidemic of 1918 was mysterious because it selectively killed young healthy adults. While influenza is usually only fatal to babies, the elderly, and the sick, the people most likely to die in the 1918 epidemic were between 20 and 40 years old. Doctors were helpless against this powerful form of influenza. Antibiotics were unknown in 1918, so there was no way to treat secondary infections, such as bacterial pneumonia.

During these tragic months from September to December 1918, while health officials were encouraging people to stay away from crowds, parades were held and there were numerous gatherings downtown to sell war bonds. These were the final months of World War I. Patriotism was high, and the government encouraged such demonstrations of support for the war effort. Unfortunately, these gatherings allowed the flu to spread and claim many more lives. There was no law, no facial covering, no reprimand, that could halt the spread of Spanish influenza. No one could prevent it; no one could cure it.

In late November, Harriet's eight-year-old daughter was sent home from school with a temperature. Along with many of her classmates at School #23, she had contracted the flu. There were few nurses available and local hospitals were overwhelmed with flu victims, so there was a severe shortage of facilities for children. Harriet took care of little Harriet herself, sending her other school-aged daughter, Barbara, to stay with her grandparents on Prince Street. Harriet's



*Harriet Bentley with her two oldest daughters, Harriet and Barbara, in November 1912.*



*Harriet and Cogswell Bentley with their daughter, Dorothea, in October 1918, a month before Harriet's tragic death.*

third daughter, Dorothea, remained at home but was isolated in a separate part of the house with a nanny.

On November 29, 1918, Harriet became ill herself, a victim of the deadly second wave of Spanish flu. Her family doctor, Dr. Charles R. Witherspoon, was summoned to the house and immediately diagnosed her illness as the flu. On December 4th, Harriet's fourth daughter, Martha Cogswell, was born. She was named after her paternal grandmother, whose maiden name was Cogswell. Harriet developed pneumonia and tragically died three days later on December 7, a little more than a week after the initial diagnosis of the disease. On December 8, Harriet would have been 33 years old.

Harriet's second daughter, Barbara, recalls the shock of being six years old, returning home from her grandparents' home, and finding out that her dear mother had passed away. She vividly recalls her mother's funeral in the parlor of their home. She remembers the procession of cars to Mount Hope Cemetery. The service was conducted by the Rev. Paul Strayer of Third Presbyterian Church.

Harriet's father, overwhelmed with grief, wrote a four-page tribute to his beloved daughter entitled "Mrs. Harriet Benton Bentley, by her Father." It begins with the following lines: "In the full, rich June of her womanhood, the personification of health, buoyant vitality, good cheer, and friendship, our daughter was taken away, and the grief and confusion left in the household was indescribable, but I am writing a few lines for the information of those who may come after.

Charles Benton described his daughter's attributes. He found this a difficult task because "she was so near to me, for no closer attachment ever was known between father and daughter than there was betwixt us." He discussed several traits that personified Harriet's character. First of all, she had a keen sense of justice, recognizing the rights of others as well as standing up for her own rights. Secondly, she was cheerful and optimistic. Even as a child when she went anywhere, she would always expect to have a good time. When she returned, she

would always say, "I never had such a good time before!" Thirdly, she had a joy of life, even to the day of her death. According to her father, she had "joy in her friendships, joy in her school days, joy in her married life and home-making, and especially did she have joy in her motherhood."

Her father discussed Harriet's patriotism with pride. When the first World War started, she was caught up in the war effort. She had come to understand why her father had volunteered to serve in the Civil War in spite of his mild temperament. She told her father that if she had been a man, she would have enlisted in the armed forces. If she had not had family obligations, she would have devoted herself in some way to the service of her country.

The last paragraph of this touching eulogy concludes: "And so after all is said and done, it is a very happy life which has closed so suddenly, and a rarely beautiful and attractive personality which has gone from us, and though we are overwhelmed by sorrow, and especially by the suddenness of our loss, yet we comfort ourselves by reflecting that this happy life, this attractive personality, was ours for nearly a third of a century, enriching our experience and leaving as a heritage a memory fragrant with cheerfulness, friendship, kindness, and just every-day goodness. Few there are who have their sorrow tempered by such rich memories." – Charles E. Benton.

The vision of Harriet Bentley and her friends in 1917 lives on in Rochester today. In January 1924, five years after her death, the Children's University School of Rochester was incorporated by the State of New York under the name "Harley" – combining the first three letters and the last three letters of Harriet Bentley's name and com-



*Cogswell Bentley, now a widower in 1919, with his four daughters, Harriet, Barbara, Dorothea, and Martha, who was born three days before her mother's (Harriet Bentley) tragic death.*

memorating her as the school's founder. It was her dedication and inspiration, as well as her executive abilities and vision, which gave permanence and influence to the school.

How incredibly proud Harriet would be to see her legacy! Today's Harley School is located on Clover Street on a 25-acre modern campus. It has 500 students from nursery school through grade 12. It is one of the foremost college preparatory schools in the Rochester area. What is unique about Harley, however, is not the list of prestigious colleges that seek its graduates. It is instead

the love that the children have for their school – students from the age of three through high school. Students cherish their days at this school and retain their friendships with classmates and teachers throughout their lives. The devotion of the faculty to their students is legendary. The traditions that Harley has established since its founding in 1917 have enriched the lives of so many Rochester children and families.

Today's Head of School, Paul Schiffman, writes: "The seeds for 'Joy in Learning' were planted by a diverse group of courageous mothers in the spring of 1917. They came together to create an educational environment that would allow each child to meet his or her full potential socially and academically. Their vision for a progressive educational program is in full bloom at our school today."

The motto of the Harley School is "Become what thou art." While Harriet Bentley's life was cut short by the terrible influenza epidemic of 1918, her legacy continues in the lives of her four daughters and their families, as well as the school that bears her name and dreams her dreams.

Harriet Bentley is buried in Section G, Lot 7, in the William F. Cogswell family plot. Her stone reads "Harriet J. Benton, wife of Cogswell Bentley, 1885-1918."

*Special thanks to Harriet Bentley's daughters – Harriet, Barbara, Dorothea, and Martha; her granddaughter, Dolly Bunting, and her grandson, Jeffery Lane; as well as to Paul Schiffman, Kelly Steamer, and Devon Van Houten of the Harley School; Ruth and Bud Ewell; Jackie Hoffman and Dean M. Rogers of Vassar College, and Helen Meyer of Third Presbyterian Church.*