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Silent Doorway to the Past: “Vigil” Painting in Weidensall Hall

Description

Every object has a story waiting to be told. There is one such artifact that hangs boldly on the mantle of the fireplace in Weidensall Hall its presence large and demanding. The plaque reads “‘The Vigil’ Presented in honor of Mrs. H.W.A. Hanson by the Altoona League.” The artist’s signature is absent from the painting. The painting acts as a window into the history of Gettysburg College. One cannot understand the history of “The Vigil” without knowing the story of the Woman’s League of Gettysburg College, or of Robert Weidensall and the Young Men’s Christian Association. “The Vigil” that hangs conspicuously in Weidensall lobby manages to be discreet in its presence. In other words, it is hidden in plain sight.¹ Once researched however, this painting tells a colorful and intriguing story about the history of Gettysburg College. The painting “The Vigil” is symbolic of the College’s historical progression through the aid of religious and service organizations.
[excerpt]

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- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

Hidden in Plain Sight is a collection of student papers on objects that are "hidden in plain sight" around the Gettysburg College campus. Topics range from the Glatfelter Hall gargoyles to the statue of Eisenhower and from historical markers to athletic accomplishments. You can download the paper in pdf format and click "View Photo" to see the image in greater detail.

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Hidden in Plain Sight:

Silent Doorway to the Past: “Vigil” Painting in Weidensall Hall

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Elizabeth Appenzeller

Spring 2006

Every object has a story waiting to be told. There is one such artifact that hangs boldly on the mantle of the fireplace in Weidensall Hall its presence large and demanding. The plaque reads “‘The Vigil’ Presented in honor of Mrs. H.W.A. Hanson by the Altoona League.” The artist’s signature is absent from the painting. The painting acts as a window into the history of Gettysburg College. One cannot understand the history of “The Vigil” without knowing the story of the Woman’s League of Gettysburg College, or of Robert Weidensall and the Young Men’s Christian Association. “The Vigil” that hangs conspicuously in Weidensall lobby manages to be discreet in its presence. In other words, it is hidden in plain sight.¹ Once researched however, this painting tells a colorful and intriguing story about the history of Gettysburg College. The painting “The Vigil” is symbolic of the College’s historical progression through the aid of religious and service organizations.

Without delving into sub-categories of research the painting presents an interesting and mysterious history itself. It is an oil painting spanning 102 centimeters by 194 centimeters. Painted in 1930 by Percy W. Muncy, it is a reproduction of an original done by John Pettie.² In the November 1934 edition of *The Gettysburgian* an article titled “Pres. Hanson Will Address Group Sunday” discusses the newly hung painting in Weidensall lobby. President Dr. W.A. Hanson’s speech “Will I Be Crusader for Christ?,” at the student Y.M.C.A conference, was delivered in Weidensall lobby on December 9, 1934 and was made in front of the new painting.³ The artist Percy Muncy from New York was commissioned by the Altoona chapter of the Woman’s League of Gettysburg College to paint a reproduction of the original “Vigil” by John Pettie. The article reports that the original done in 1884 was

¹ Michael Birkner (Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, January 31,2006).

² “Gettysburg College Art Inventory-Basic Data” (January, 24, 1995) s.v. “Vigil.”

³ “Pres. Hanson Will Address Group Sunday,” *The Gettysburgian*, vol. 38, No. 11, November 28,1934, 3.

exhibited at the time in the National Art Gallery in London.⁴ The author of the article in describing the painting says, “It is historical, dramatic, and characterized by a rich glow of color.”⁵ Recording secretary of the Woman’s League E. Grace Gramly reported in the minutes of the Board of Directors on March 13, 1930 that the Altoona chapter planned on having Muncy paint a copy of “The Vigil” from the original that was located in the Tate Gallery in London.⁶ Mr. Percy W. Muncy is the mystery in the story. There is no record of his background in any of the minutes of the League’s meetings. Where Percy Muncy came from or how the League knew of him remains a mystery. John Pettie, the original painter of “The Vigil” however, is not so mysterious.

John Pettie was born in 1839 in Edinburgh Scotland. At the age of 16 he attended the Trustees Academy in Edinburgh to study art. His work was exhibited in the Royal Scottish Academy and “in 1866 he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy.”⁷ Among dozens of his other paintings, “The Vigil” was painted in 1884. He died in Hastings England on February 21, 1893.⁸ E. Grace Gramly was correct when she recorded that the original was kept in the Tate Gallery in London. According to the Information Officer at the National Gallery, Nicola Waghorn, “The Virgil” is indeed exhibited even today in the Tate Gallery in Millbank London. It is interesting to note that Information Officer misspelled the title of the painting. The Tate Gallery was founded in 1897 by Sir Henry Tate. Originally the gallery was called the “National Gallery of British Art” but the name became Tate after the

⁴ “Pres. Hanson Will Address Group Sunday,” *The Gettysburgian*, vol. 38, No. 11 November 28, 1934, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Woman’s General League of Gettysburg College, recording sec., E Grace Gramly, Harrisburg, PA (March 13, 1930). Found in Gettysburg College Archives

⁷ ‘Disbanded’ Web Site, Dreambox Design, 2005, http://www.disbanded.co.uk/John_Pettie.html. Site recommended by Nicola Waghorn, info officer at National Gallery in London.

⁸ *Ibid.*

founder who also donated the pieces within the gallery.⁹ The original is an oil on canvas with dimensions of 115.8x170.3x3.3 centimeters. The painting was presented to the Tate gallery by the Trustees of the Chantrey. According to the Helen Brett of the gallery, “The canvas has been painted using traditional techniques—impasto, glazing and scumbling. The oil medium may contain additives to impart extra transparency.”¹⁰ Brett also noted that the base paint layers are unstable and the canvas lining is of poor quality.¹¹ The fact that Pettie worked with cheaper materials may lend some information to the financial status of the artist himself. “The Vigil” is a painting of a knight kneeling in prayer in front of an altar with his sword in his hands. His helmet and armor are lying in front of the alter leaving the knight dressed in a plain white robe and a red cape. The Altoona League wanted this painting reproduced to adorn Gettysburg campus in honor of Mrs. Hanson. What is more, they wanted it to hang in Weidensall Hall. Their reasons for the circumstances surrounding the painting require a deeper look at the history of the Gettysburg campus.

The Altoona Sub-League leads into a much larger part of the Gettysburg story—The Woman’s League. The Woman’s League is an extremely important part of the College’s history because this organization was crucial in the development of Gettysburg College. One can travel into almost any building on campus and see the influence of the League. The organization has its roots in a luncheon was provided in 1905 for the graduating class at Pennsylvania College. Recognizing their success, the group of ladies that hosted it formed the College Ladies Aid Society and made their luncheon an annual event.¹² Three years later

⁹ Nicola Waghorn to Liz Appenzeller, Information Officer, The National Gallery in London, e-mail received February, 13, 2006.

¹⁰ Helen Brett, “Tate Collection,” visited February 22,2006, Tate Online Website. <http://www.tate.org.uk/servlet/ViewWork?cgroupid=999999961&workid=11526&searchid=10840>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Christine M. Amadure, “Women’s General League of Gettysburg College 1911-1995” (Gettysburg College MS-040, 2002). Gettysburg College Archives

the president of the college, Dr. Samuel G. Hefelbower, asked Mrs. Mary G. Stuckenberg to organize Lutheran women, “for the purpose of raising funds to support various religious programs and activities on campus.”¹³ The first convention of the Woman’s League of Gettysburg College was held on November 3, 1911 in Brua Chapel. It was the first time the Sub-Leagues met together into one General League. There were six sub-leagues in 1911: Gettysburg, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Shippensburg, and York.¹⁴

The first president of the General League was the widow Mary G. Stuckenberg. Her husband Henry Wilburn Stuckenberg had been a Lutheran Theologian. The League essentially was a gathering of Lutheran women interested in the well-being of Pennsylvania College. They devoted themselves officially to the financial and spiritual support of the College.¹⁵ The November 7, 1935 edition of *The Gettysburgian* credits Mrs. Stuckenberg with the idea behind the League: “The history of the League began in the spring of 1908, when Mrs. Mary G. Stuckenberg evolved upon the idea of organizing the Lutheran women in the interests of colleges.”¹⁶ Regardless of who had the idea of the Woman’s League, Mrs. Mary Stuckenberg was devoted to the advancement of Lutheran ideals and carried them through in the League’s mission. During the League’s 65th anniversary Louise Bream recorded the speeches made at the gala on campus. Before the Woman’s League, Mary Stuckenberg had already founded the Women’s Missionary Society of the Lutheran Church of America. According to Bream’s recordings, Stuckenberg founded the Woman’s League because “she [was] convinced that here more than anywhere else among church colleges

¹³ Christine M. Amadure, “Women’s General League of Gettysburg College 1911-1995” (Gettysburg College MS-040, 2002). Gettysburg College Archives.

¹⁴ G.N. Lauffer, *General Secretary 1911-1920*, “Minutes of the First General Convention,” 1.

¹⁵ Anna Jane Moyer, “75 Years...and Forward! A Salute to the Woman’s General League” (August 1986). Found in Gettysburg College Archives.

¹⁶ “History of Women’s League Reveals Unique Organization,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. 39, No. 8, November 7, 1935, 1.

dynamic Lutheranism is fostered.”¹⁷ And Gettysburg was founded as a church college: it was “the backing of the seminary that made Pennsylvania College a reality.”¹⁸ The Board of Directors of the General Woman’s League held two meetings a year, the first on the first Thursday of March and the second on the last Thursday in September. The meetings were held in Harrisburg or on campus and Conventions were held on campus in the Weidensall Y.M.C.A building.¹⁹ Their first contribution to the college was to hire a religious worker for the students but their first major project was the construction of Weidensall Y.M.C.A building. It was in 1915 that they Sub-Leagues decided to work together to build a Y.M.C.A building on campus: “Financial developments, the war, and later financial trouble prevented the building from being erected as quickly as possible.”²⁰ It wasn’t until 1919 when the women of the League broke the ground themselves and 1921 when excavation began. The students themselves participated in the building of the Hall. The League named the building after “Mr. Robert Weidensall, of the class of ’60, because of the distinguished services in the various fields of Y.M.C.A activity that were rendered by him.”²¹

The Altoona chapter was not organized until October 1, 1915, but the idea of a chapter in Altoona emerged shortly after the General Leagues creation. In the minutes of the first years of the Leagues organization there is a list of all the Sub-Leagues and their leaders and contributions and there is a blank list with the heading Altoona. The first president of the Altoona chapter was Mrs. F.B. Schonberg. This sub-league’s main objective, immediately

¹⁷ “A Decade of Achievement 1976-1986: (Continuing a tribute to the Women’s League of Gettysburg College),” recorded by Louise Dougherty Bream, November 6, 1986. Found in Gettysburg College Archives.

¹⁸ Gregory J. Landrey. *A History of the Gettysburg Campus*. May 27, 1977. For Dr. Charles Glatfelter January Term-90. page 12.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Woman’s General League of Gettysburg College, recording sec. Mary W. Christ, Harrisburg, PA (March 6, 1947).

²⁰ “History of Women’s League Reveals Unique Organization,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. 39, No. 8, November 7, 1935, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*

after its creation, was to raise funds for the Y.M.C.A building. It held between four and five meetings a year and devoted most of their efforts to the Y.M.C.A building.²² The President of the Altoona chapter in 1934, the year “The Vigil” was hung in the “Y” building was Mrs. R.C Shindler.²³ There is no printed reason why they Altoona chapter gave the painting in honor of Mrs. Hanson. One can only assume it was because of Mrs. Hanson’s long history with the League.

The year the General League convened in 1911, Mrs. Henry W. A. Hanson was present and named Vice President of the League. She also held the position of Corresponding Secretary for the Pittsburgh League which was founded in 1908.²⁴ In 1913 her name appears yet again under the title ‘Executive Committee’ this time representing Harrisburg, where her husband was a Lutheran pastor. In 1914 she was President of the Harrisburg Sub-League, and remained closely tied to the Woman’s League up through the 1930s when her husband was President of the College.²⁵ On June, 23 1922 it was Mrs. Hanson who handed over the keys to the newly erected Weidensall Y.M.C.A building.²⁶ Her husband Dr. W.A Hanson was well connected with the Lutheran Church. A pastor in Lutheran churches in Pennsylvania and a receiver of the Doctorate of Divinity from Gettysburg as well as a graduate of the Gettysburg Theological Seminary, he was closely tied with Gettysburg College and the Lutheran community.²⁷ The Hansons were influential without a doubt both to the college and to the Woman’s League.

²² G.N. Lauffer, General Secretary 1911-1920, “Minutes of the First General Convention,” 103.

²³ “The Gettysburg College Bulletin: Woman League Number” in *Woman’s League Conventions 1934-1951*, Vol. XXIV, No. 8 (Gettysburg PA: Gettysburg College 1933-34), 18.

²⁴ G.N. Lauffer, General Secretary 1911-1920, “Minutes of the First General Convention,” 13.

²⁵ G.N. Lauffer, General Secretary 1911-1920, “Minutes of the First General Convention.”

²⁶ Anna Jane Moyer, “75 Years...and Forward! A Salute to the Woman’s General League” (August 1986). Found in Gettysburg College Archives.

²⁷ “Pres. Hanson Will Address Group Sunday,” *The Gettysburgian*, vol. 38, No. 11 November 28, 1934, 3.

The dissolution of the Woman's League occurred on November 2, 1995; it was the League's 84th anniversary. At the Executive Board Meeting on April 13, 1995, Ellen D. Rosenberger recorded that "After much deliberation, the general feel of the Board was that the Woman's League should be proud of their spiritual support, financial contributions, and place in the history of Gettysburg College. It was agreed, however, that the Woman's League of Gettysburg College come to a definite end rather than a further reduction in size and activity."²⁸ They agreed to break apart the League at the 84th anniversary.²⁹ Cathy Zarrella was president of the League in 1995 and she continues working for the school today as the scheduling coordinator. In an interview conducted on February 21, 2006 she answered many questions about the League in its dying years.

Cathy Zarrella was President of the General League from 1993 to 1995. She became involved with the League in 1989 when she was working in a fabric shop in Hanover. Vivian Otto, President of the General League at the time, invited her to a meeting. After the first meeting she was elected to the Board as statistical secretary. When asked why she was elected to a position so quickly she replied that while she was not a Lutheran it did not matter at the time. The League was in need of new young recruits, the current members being older women. They needed someone fresh to take the League forward. The role of statistical secretary essentially had become obsolete by the time Zarrella was named to the position. She became president of the Hanover Sub-League and later President of the General League. Her husband is an alumnus to the school and she dated him while he attended the college. When asked why she was a part of the Woman's Leagues she said that she was connected to Gettysburg College and the women were "a neat group of people. They were friendly. It just

²⁸ Minutes of the Executive Board Meeting, recording sec. Ellen D. Rosenberger (April 13, 1995).
Gettysburg College Archives.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

felt right.”³⁰ Gettysburg’s campus became multi-denominational over the years and, when asked how this phenomenon affected the League, Zarrella said that each year the League decided where its money would go. There was always a part that went to a CPS scholarship as well as chapel based funds. To keep with tradition it also opened and closed meetings with a prayer. Since Weidensall became an academic hall, the Woman’s Leagues meetings were held either in Pennsylvania Hall or Kline Theater. The League also kept up another tradition until its last year—the Golden Book fundraiser. The Golden Books were the League’s biggest fundraiser. A person could buy an entry in a book for some special occasion and put their names in the archives of the college. When asked why the League ended, Zarrella began a long and sad explanation about the struggle for new members. Originally many Lutheran churches assigned members to the League but over time Lutheran affiliation with the school became less strong. There was growing participation with groups like the Parents’ Association that was taking over the role of the League. The members that were still active were literally dying off faster than the League could recruit new members. Funds were depleting and members gathered for friendship and didn’t want to bother with taking minutes. Zarrella had to make a choice—“did they want to fade out or go with a flourish?”³¹ There were some members like Louise Bream who were upset about the disbanding. The League is not entirely gone Zarrella reported; there is still a Philadelphia Sub-League in existence that sponsors an annual fashion show and luncheon.³² It is interesting to note that the league began its work with a luncheon and ended it with a luncheon. After the League disbanded Zarrella went to work for the school as scheduling coordinator. She continues to contribute her time and efforts to the advancement of the college. When asked why there

³⁰ Cathy Zarrella, personal interview, February 21, 2006.

³¹ Cathy Zarrella, personal interview, February 21, 2006.

³² *Ibid.*

were minutes in existence from most Sub-League meetings but nothing from the Altoona chapter Zarrella guessed that someone had the minutes tucked away in a closet somewhere.³³

Needless to say, the exact circumstances surrounding “The Vigil” and its donation to the school will continue to be a mystery until the minutes are unearthed. There are certain inferences one can make about the painting, such as why it was placed in Weidensall Hall.

Weidensall Hall was built in 1922 and paid almost solely by the Woman’s League. The League wanted a Y.M.C.A building to help promote Christian ideals on campus. When building was complete the League also paid the salary of a Y.M.C.A secretary.³⁴ The first Y.M.C.A secretary was Arthur Johnson. When the school turned co-ed in 1935 the Y.M.C.A became the Student Christian Association with Professor Donald Heiges as its secretary.³⁵ In 1946 there was a terrible fire in Weidensall that nearly destroyed the whole interior of the building. The fire that began on the third floor was caused by “defective wiring.”³⁶ Several students heroically ran into the burning building and managed to save many articles that would have burned.³⁷ The fire did make it to the second floor where “The Vigil” hung. Either the fire did not make it to the lobby or someone saved it from the burning building. Either way the painting survived the fire and adorns the same spot in the lobby it did in 1934.

It is appropriate that the Y.M.C.A building was dedicated and named Weidensall Hall because of the work Robert Weidensall did for the Y.M.C.A. Robert Weidensall graduated Pennsylvania College in 1860 and enrolled in the Gettysburg Theological Seminary. Unable to continue due to bad health he still received his LLD from Gettysburg in

³³ Cathy Zarrella, personal interview, February 21, 2006.

³⁴ Henry W. Snyder, “Newest Structures Mark Third Construction Period,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. 38, No. 6, October, 25, 1934, 3.

³⁵ Al Bauer, “Weidensall Halls Sees 24 Years of Campus Service,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. XLIX, No. 12, November 27, 1946, 3.

³⁶ “Fire Destroys Weidensall Hall,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. XLIX, No. 12, November 27, 1946, 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

1912.³⁸ In 1868, “Uncle Robert” became the first secretary of the International Committee of the Y.M.C.A. He held that title for 50 years.³⁹ Strong integrity aside, the real reason that the Woman’s League honored Robert Weidensall by using his name for the “Y” building was because “a member of the International Committee promised them financial aid in erecting the building provided it was named in honor of eWidensall [*sic*].”⁴⁰ They donated 5,000 dollars.⁴¹

The Y.M.C.A had a long standing tradition on Pennsylvania College’s campus. It was created in 1867 by Henry Eyster Jacobs who was a tutor in the preparatory department on campus. The Y.M.C.A was originally founded in England in 1844 and came to the United States in 1851. The Y.M.C.A sponsored Sunday evening addresses, bible studies, prayer meetings and gave financial support to foreign missionaries.⁴² Its work was very similar to the work that the League promoted.

“The Vigil” is a religious painting, commissioned by the Altoona Sub-League of the Woman’s League of Gettysburg College, a religious service organization devoted to the progress and advancement of Gettysburg College. It was donated in honor of one of its long time and loyal members Mrs. W.A. Hanson and placed in Weidensall Hall—a building devoted to the advancement of Christian ideals on campus. The painting is not just a canvas with artfully placed lines of paint, but a window into the past and history of Gettysburg College. It stands as a symbol for the devotion of certain people and organizations who were

³⁸ “Gettysburg Alumnus Aided Founding of Student ‘Y’,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. 38, No. 11, November 28, 1934, 3.

³⁹ R.P. Kaighn, address in “Fiftieth Anniversary of Robert Weidensall: The First Secretary of the International Committee 1868-1918,” International Committee of Y.M.C.A, (New York, October 18, 1918).

⁴⁰ “Gettysburg Alumnus Aided Founding of Student ‘Y’,” *The Gettysburgian*, Vol. 38, No. 11, November 28, 1934, 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence – Gettysburg College 1832-1985*, Vol. 1, (Gettysburg PA: Gettysburg College), 334-335.

genuinely interested in the well-being of Gettysburg College. If this one painting can tell this much about the history of this college, there must be thousands of other stories waiting to be told from the silent and priceless artifacts that remain motionless day after day hidden in plain sight on campus.

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