



The Legend of M.A. Burwell

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Historic Hillsborough restores a school and remembers a super-woman

Hillsborough will pay its respects to a Virginia lady of legendary ability and achievement on Sunday, October 10, 1976, when the Historic Hillsborough Commission dedicates to community service Margaret Anna Burwell's restored "Burwell School for Young Ladies" (1837 - 1857) at 319 North Churton Street. The Burwell's handsome 150-year-old frame house on its two acres of grounds has been thoroughly restored, inside and out, from foundation to roof-top, under the supervision of the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources Division of Archives and History and will now join Hillsborough's growing number of adaptive restorations.

This was the house and the place where "M.A. Burwell," as she always impersonally signed herself, developed - against staggering odds - her astonishingly successful and influential school for girls from about 8 to 18 years of age. Grass has now grown over the mounded outline of the long gravel path from the front steps to Churton Street; and, the original grove of elms has gone; but, in addition to the dwelling house, a picturesque old brick kitchen still stands across a little courtyard in the rear, as did a square brick necessary built by architect John Berry in 1837.

Poor But Proud

The two young Burwells, Margaret Anna and Robert, had come from the Petersburg vicinity to Hillsborough with their two small children (they were to have ten more!) in the late autumn of 1835. They were from Virginia's oldest and proudest families. Anna was a Spotswood and Robert was descended from the Armisteads and the Burwells - but they had no money. Robert's salary as the new pastor of the Presbyterian church in Hillsborough was to be \$400 a year, and that often in arrears.

Anna was then 25 years old, still young and girlish, still delighting in friendly and amusing gossip (an inclination against which she forever did battle) and eager to take her place in the somewhat formidable social life of her new home. Robert, eight years her senior, was quiet, retiring and extremely well-read, "never passing for his true worth," according to his eldest son, John Bott Burwell.

In no time at all Robert's salary could not possibly pay for the firewood necessary for the fireplaces in the manse (now the south portion of the restored house) and its kitchen, nor for the flour and lard and other staples absolutely necessary for them to purchase at Dr. James Webb's general store. Kindly, perceptive Dr. Webb, who admired Anna, then made a suggestion that is something of a landmark in North Carolina education: Would Mrs. Burwell undertake to teach his daughter Mary in her own home? Mrs. Burwell saw a glimmer of light and said she would indeed, and also accepted two other girls, Annabelle Norwood and Sara Kollock, who came as day students to the four-room manse. And so the experiment began.

Without any formal education of any kind (so far as is known); with a pregnancy every other year and an increasing number of small children to care for; without adequate space; with a minister's wife's duties to attend to in a small town; meals to plan; clothes to mend; a house to supervise; classes to teach; papers to grade; parents to interview; a constant influx of relatives and visitors to cope with -- how did "M.A. Burwell" do it?

Students From Everywhere

Moreover, she was not without professional competition. The superb Mary W. Burke, Governor Thomas Burke's daughter, had closed her small school in 1836 and removed to Alabama; but, there was still the extremely elegant, cosmopolitan Miss Maria Spear at the Episcopal Seminary for Girls on East Tryon Street -- and Miss Maria could use the gloves and a "mineral cabinet" and produce a delicate handwriting every bit as finely slanted and as spidery as Anna Burwell's own. Miss Spear was to haunt Anna's dreams -- and her letters.

But against all kinds of odds, the Burwell School took shape and achieved a resounding success. Girls came via stagecoach from everywhere to be absorbed in the pleasant, well-structured home life of the Burwells and to learn thoroughly the simple basics -- reading, spelling, grammar and neat, acceptable handwriting. Surprisingly enough, French teachers were imported from New York and even from France and Sicily (although Hillsborough might still have been classified as a backwoods town); and, a very considerable range of "ornamentals," music, oil painting, needlework, etc., was offered in the afternoons. Good manners, good grooming, impeccable behavior and a firm self-improvement schedule were expected of each Burwell girl.

The Legend Grows

"M.A. Burwell" was a majestic, imposing woman -- nearly six feet tall -- with a handsome, kindly face; a decided flair (the Spotswood flair) for efficient organization and management; a cultivated knack for round-about diplomacy; and, seemingly boundless vitality and energy. Add to all that the facts that she was affectionate and warm-hearted; industrious to a fault (she died at 61); frugal and clever with money; and, a social lioness at the tea-tables of Hillsborough. No wonder the legend of "Super-Woman" developed swiftly around her.

She could (so her son said) talk to anybody on any subject at any time; she was one of the town's leading gardeners ("everything she stuck in the ground grew"); her twelve children were always perfectly dressed and perfectly behaved; she could recite *Paradise Lost* by heart -- and so the legend grew. Even after a century and more, her ways, her habits, her little sayings ("Young ladies, the best perfume is no perfume at all") filter down in the town.

Walking through the high-ceilinged rooms of the old house (enlarged by Captain John Berry in 1848), one wonders now at the simple logistics of it all. The reinforced steep staircase seems to lead straight up or straight down. There is a little box room at the top of the stairs traditionally called "The Prayer Room," and possibly that was her refuge. But the disposition in the seven-room house

of the fourteen members of the Burwell family plus six to eight resident students remains a perennial puzzle.

A surprising number of Burwell girls -- and this gives added substance to the legend -- started schools of their own on the Burwell pattern. The old Nash and Kollock School on Margaret Lane in Hillsborough was virtually a carbon copy of the Burwell School -- and almost as successful; Susan "Sunie" Webb opened her little "Almeda School" in a log cabin at Oaks where she educated her famous brothers, "Sawney" and John, later of Bell Buckle, Tennessee; Miss Emma Scales, together with her friend Annie L. Hughes, operated the Reidsville Seminary; and the Mitchell sisters began a school in Statesville.

Trio of Educators

The Burwells themselves in 1857 left Hillsborough to go to the Charlotte Female Institute -- now Queens College; and, in 1859 they invited their teacher son, John Bott, to join them as a partner. Thereafter, the three Burwells worked as an educational team or trio. In 1871, they accepted an invitation to go to Peace Institute, now Peace College, in Raleigh; but, Mrs. Burwell died on June 21, 1871, and the Reverend Robert Burwell and his son began the new position alone -- continuing the educational patterns and ideals which had proved so successful in Hillsborough and Charlotte. Reverend Burwell retired from active teaching in 1875; and, in 1882 the University of North Carolina conferred on him the honorary degree of D.D. Robert and Anna Burwell are both buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Charlotte. The Burwell School site in Hillsborough today exists as an [historic house museum](#).

