

## A Very Special Lady At 143 York Street

Margaret Hemphill Howell McAngus made sure that her children grew up being familiar with the stories of "Mama Janie" and her house at 143 York Street in Chester, South Carolina. Called "Sissy" by her family and South Carolina friends, Margaret McAngus is the great granddaughter of Janie Gaston Gage of Chester. She is the daughter of Martha Williams Gage Howell, a native of Chester and Madison Peyton Howell of Walterboro. She is steeped in the love of family and friends and always kept us in touch with our "roots" in South Carolina, especially those which ran deep in Chester and Walterboro.

We children, Martha Gage, Mary Ladson, and William Hugh, grew up happily in West Point, Georgia where we had many wonderful friends, but absolutely no kinfolk. Our father, Eli Hugh McAngus, a native of Eldorado, Texas, had brought his family to Georgia where he worked with West Point-Pepperell Manufacturing Company. Our mother missed being in the thick of family doings. She enjoyed many wonderful friendships in Georgia, but no matter how you construe it, Georgia is not South Carolina, and that is where her heart truly resided. So, our childhood years were filled with stories of Walterboro, where our mother grew up, and Chester, where her grandparents lived, and of Blowing Rock, North Carolina where they where summered on "Gage Hill."



Margaret Hemphill Gaston

In our dining room in Georgia hung the Civil War era portrait of Margaret Hemphill Gaston of Chester, as our mother is her namesake. We grew up under the watchful eyes of Margaret Gaston and saw our mother often wear the same gold and coral pin as the lady in the portrait. We knew she was a special link to our heritage, a brave lady who had used her petticoats as bandages for wounded Civil War soldiers in Chester. We felt very important to be related to her.

Our mother told wonderful stories of their trips from Walterboro to Chester to visit Mama Janie in her house at 143 York Street. They visited on their way to Blowing Rock each summer. They would leave behind the heat and mosquitoes of Walterboro as soon as school was out and stop by Chester for a visit on the way up. The cars were much slower then, and the tires subject to punctures, so the trip took two days. Luckily, Chester was about halfway. They were very glad to reach Mama Janie's house where they could rest, sleep and the six children could play. Jim Foster, Mama Janie's servant who had been born in her yard, would be there to help make them comfortable. Mama Janie and her household would join them a few days later on "the hill" in Blowing Rock. It sounded very exiting to us to hear the tales of punctured tires, visits to a grandmother, a privilege we never knew, and traveling up a very winding mountain road to reach the cool air.



In West Point, Georgia, no one had ever heard of Blowing Rock, let alone Chester or Walterboro. Our thrill of visiting these places was lost on our Georgia friends, but they did nothing to dim our excitement. Mama assured us that they were the best places on earth. On our way to Blowing Rock from Georgia, Mama would give a heartfelt sigh of relief when we crossed the South Carolina state line. She would always declare that she could tell blindfolded when we crossed over because the South Carolina roads were so smooth and easy to ride on – and they led to reunions with many aunts, uncles and cousins!

Our mother and father lived in West Point, Georgia for thirty-four years. They were called Margaret, rather than Sissy, and Mc, or “Mrs. Mc” and “Mr. Mc” by the young people there. They were real assets to the community, faithful workers in the West Point Presbyterian Church and friends to many. Our father was an elder and Treasurer of the church, and our mother held just about every office in the Women of the Church, some many times over. She was chairman of the nursery far too many years to count. Our friends would always see her out in times of trouble as she had such a loving, compassionate nature and a willingness to help.

Mama also had many talents, one of which was sewing. She delighted in searching for beautiful fabrics and making draperies and clothes for herself, children and grandchildren. Now, she makes wonderful hand-stitched blankets for her great grandchildren. What we all would have done without her, I do not know.

When we lived in West Point, in our home we had a faithful helper, Mattie Ridgeway, who worked for our family for thirty-two years. Mattie was raising five orphaned grandchildren, three of whom were girls. When the girls reached prom age, Mama graciously made each one a beautiful evening dress. “Miss Margaret” was kind and generous to everyone.

A happy, secure home was made for us in Georgia, but South Carolina was always the preferred state in our hearts. We have all found our way back to the best state whether or not it was planned exactly that way from the beginning.

When I was still the mother of three “at home” children and living in Greenville, South Carolina, I received a phone call from Mama – “Mama Janie’s” house was for sale! Mama’s sister, Harriet Stringfellow, had just called from Chester to report it, and Mama was excited. Harriet and Kirk Stringfellow had been encouraging them to move to Chester after daddy’s retirement, and here was the perfect house – a house filled with loving memories, one which had been out of the family’s ownership since “Mama Janie’s” death in 1935. After much deliberation, they bought the house at 143 York Street to the delight of their South Carolina children and extended family. Their West Point friends were heartbroken to see these very special friends move away. Their going would leave a gaping hole in that community, but Mama’s ties to South Carolina and her children there were too strong to resist.

Our parents moved to Chester in September 1983 and lived with Harriet Stringfellow while renovating the house at 143 York Street. It had been empty for a while and used to house a movie crew, so it needed some cosmetic work. Mama has now lived there for twenty years, lovingly restored the house and made it a welcoming sanctuary once again. Margaret Hemphill Gaston’s massive piano had miraculously remained in the house all these years, and over it now hangs her portrait, at home again. Mama’s children, grandchildren and great grandchildren love to visit “Gran’s” house. She has always felt at home in the house and in Chester, the town of loving friends and family, and so have we.

Soon after moving to Chester, a wonderful reunion was held at “Mama Janie’s” house. It included five of her six grandchildren who had visited there from Walterboro on the trip to Blowing



Rock and many of their descendants. There was an enormous turnout and all enjoyed wandering around the house and yard, reminiscing and listening to wonderful family stories.

Mama has come full circle in a remarkable chain of events, but then, everything about her is remarkable. She now enjoys being a member of The Up-to-Date Club and the Sunshine Club to which her grandmother belonged. She is also a member of the Chester Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church where her great grandmother, Margaret Gaston, was a charter member. Her grandchildren, one of whom is a Margaret, and her great grandchildren, which includes a Janie, now enjoy playing in the family home place and the tree-shaded yard. They listen to the trains whistle by and soak up their family's history.

Mama's many wonderful friends in Chester are of all ages. Children seek her company, and they always know true kindness when they meet it. Mama keeps a cabinet filled with toys, mostly wonderfully old-fashioned ones, and over the years Chester children, her dear little neighbors, the Marion's and the McElwee's grandchildren also visit next door, come to enjoy her company and she, theirs. The enormous upstairs hall has teddy bears and a monkey sitting in tiny chairs waiting for young visitors to play.

One year, 143 York became Santa's elves' workshop. Doug Marion, her neighbor and dear friend, spent many busy evenings in the downstairs guest room (previously the library) while building a remarkable dollhouse for his daughter, Sarah. Mama enjoyed his company and being part of the adventure.

Mama has so many wonderful friends in Chester, some linked by family, and others linked by the heart. It is now our hometown, too, although we didn't spend our youth there. I have spent more years visiting in Chester than I spent in West Point.

Some things are meant to be and Margaret Hemphill Howell McAngus was meant to come to 143 York Street, a home of love, warmth, family and friends. Several family members who have visited there have experienced visits from those of past ages, ghosts, if you prefer. Her grandson, Jess, said that a lady, definitely from another age, appeared to him one night in what used to be the library, and he was not afraid at all. Our family's history is there.

Numerous family members seem to pass through Chester or make special trips, so our mother has many visitors coming to reminisce and introduce next generations. As her son-in-law, Jesse Belcher says, "Miss Margaret is the loveliest lady I've ever known". We all think how fortunate we are to have her and what a very special lady lives at 143 York Street.

*Martha Gage McAngus Belcher*

#### About The Author

Martha Gage McAngus Belcher is the daughter of Eli Hugh McAngus a native of Eldorado, Texas and Margaret Hemphill Howell McAngus a native of Walterboro, South Carolina and a present resident of Chester, South Carolina. Martha grew up in West Point, Georgia, graduated from Converse College, Spartanburg, South Carolina and is married to Jesse Belcher, an attorney with Haynsworth Sinkler Boyd. The Belchers live in Greenville South Carolina.



## Finding Chester, South Carolina

Dr. Phelps assured me that it would be a couple of hours before my Mother would be out of the operating room and able to talk to me. So I decided to drive around this place where I only knew how to find the hospital.

It was an adventure; I found the Courthouse and City Hall. I discovered the Summit, where I made an imaginary note to take my Mother to lunch when she was well. I parked the car and read the sign describing the Cistern. I stood before the Confederate Monument and looked down the hill. If you can imagine seeing that view for the first time, you will appreciate my joy in just looking. If I could have taken away the modern cars and looked only at the facades of the buildings, it would have been possible to have seen this place in another time. I knew my Mother would have enjoyed imagining the way the women had been dressed and the way horses waited to carry burdens or ladies home from weekly shopping. We whetted our imaginations with grand tales that only we understood.

In the fall of 1978, I made it a point of taking my Mother for a drive every afternoon. We, in those drives, discovered landmarks that now are parts of my life but then, they were newfound treasures.

We had enjoyed the area around Chester and especially the old house that stood on route 72. In the soft warm air of spring, we parked, shaded by the limb of the huge old oak that stood regally near the driveway. It was at that house that I told stories about teas and visits, where Mary Chestnuts and Varina Davis graced the sitting rooms. They were stories, which we told one another, a thing we had been doing for years. When I was a little girl, who led a very solitary life, my Mother introduced the gift of storytelling, she to me and then, me to her. Each one in a set time period and most all of them started with the once upon a time, when I visited Paris or once upon a time, when the president came to visit, that was always the beginning and the story went on from there.

When I learned to read, I made my stories more authentic. I read about Paris and told the story of meeting Modigliani there on the streets of the Monmartre. When the story was over, we asked questions and made up more stories. I lived in a world of make-believe a few hours every week. It served a wonderful purpose, it taught me the gift of conjuring and it inspired me to read and learn. I was an inquisitive child who had a mother who understood and respected the delight of creative thought.

She made it very clear to me that boredom was a ridiculous state and a word that was not to be tolerated in our house. It was a condition that was brought on by mental lethargy, where people without mental agility and interest floundered socially and intellectually. "Feel sorry for them", she lectured, "for they are without insight and intellect."

When I went away to school, the first time in Parkersburg, West Virginia, we had to write our parents every week and tell them about boarding school happenings. I told them all the standard things, how much I liked the "nuns" and then I launched into a tale about the grotto that stood at the back of the campus. In my story the nice lady, who stood with her arms held out to the supplicants, was a granter of wishes. I called her Sister Mary Genie, and to get your wish fulfilled all you had to do was touch her hand. In those days, Sister Mary Helen, the nun in charge of the mailroom, read all mail. The next week, when letter-writing time came, I was asked to help in the library. I was in the seventh grade and in a lot of trouble. My parents were called and they made the trip to Parkersburg to hear from the Directress, that I was a child that told untruths and should



be punished. My Mother laughed and my Father did his best to explain the stories. He pointed out that I had been a very lonely child and that was the primary reason for sending me to a boarding school. When they left, I learned years later that he very curtly said to my Mother, "This is all your fault, you should have just encouraged her to read."

I was enrolled the next year at school in Asheville, N.C.; Saint Genevieve of the Pines and the directress encouraged me to join a creative writing class where I flourished.

From there, I went to Sacred Heart Academy in Belmont and it was there I discovered Rock Hill, Winthrop College for Women and the delight of hearing the San Carlo Opera performing Faust. We later heard Madame Butterfly and I sobbed; Sister Mary Stephen grabbed my arm and said with terrible authority, "That is enough Shirley".

Rock Hill stayed in my mind for years and years and when I knew that I had to move my Mother from the bitter winters of Pennsylvania, I remembered that lovely little town and it was there that I moved bag and baggage in June of 1978.

We, in our afternoon rides, discovered Chester County and it changed my life. I felt I was home.

It was here that we were offered the greatest opportunity for stories that were backed by historical fact. Somehow, the magic of this place captured our hearts. We walked through Landsford Canal State Park, we saw the lilies for the first time and it was amazing. We found Old Catholic Presbyterian; we walked and read for days on end in the cemeteries of Evergreen and Purity. The tomb of the De Graffenreid child was a torch that set imaginations zooming.

Fishing Creek and the Manetta Mill were places where nothing short of novels bloomed. We talked though wars, we outsmarted Indians and we learned to appreciate the history of the Great Wagon Road and the stories flew. We found Great Falls and learned a little about the town but it was when we saw the mighty Catawba and the celebrated dam, where birds flew over huge gates that controlled the strength of the river and then rested, while foaming plumes slashed at their sides.

But the best and the most exciting ones were the ones told around the old house that was eventually moved and restored by Selina and Don Swofford. We had ladies of the revolution and daughters and wives of Confederate warriors parading around trading recipes and telling yarns of their youth. We fed off one another in our story telling years. I remember when my Mother named a dog that howled every night, Gabriel. You can just imagine the story that produced.



Wherry House

Or when I told about Varina visiting and talking to the cat that slept on the roof. I, without knowing it, made room for a story that would later explain the missing house, the fire in the back part of the house and then the removal of the structure.

We pulled into the Wherry land and the first thing I noticed, the big oak was gone. And then I looked up and the house was missing, the beautiful old building, some sections that dated back to Pre-Revolutionary times was gone. The sturdy walls and the beautiful heart pine floors, which were put together with pegs, were not there and when we saw the house for the first time I had envisioned the hems



of beautiful skirts as they rustled across the surface of the gleaming old wide boards.

I looked at my Mother and for the first time I realized that the surgery and years were taking a terrible toll but undaunted I said, "The house is gone, that cat did it". "Which cat?" she questioned. "Why the very one that slept on the roof and talked to Mrs. Jefferson." "Oh, him" she said, "He was always a trouble maker. Once upon a time in Richmond, when our dear President moved from the capital to a smaller house, that cat was making trouble then. He started fires and he had a friend, a girl cat named "Aldora" that talked to Yankees. She traded his secrets for milk and a few dead mice; they by the way had died from starvation. He was an egocentric feline and his children all inherited many of his immoral traits. It is said that he was related to the General's cat, Tom, who went to war with the General you know. Yes, he did, he rode on the front of the saddle, purring in Travelers ear. Once upon a time it was said that he cured the horses earache, but that is another story that you can tell me later. I just gave you a marvelous idea darling, use it well."

I was delighted with the quick response and I thought she was fine, it was tiredness that made her seem removed. I was wrong and I started the grand story of the house that disappeared and then re-appeared further out in the county. But this time I was telling the story to myself; my Mother was no longer there to goad me on to greater imaginative heights.

But if she is watching and hearing, I know she is aware that her invented story of the cat, the bothersome sociopath, that tried to trick history and the imaginary lives that marched through it, gave me a literary shot in the arm. I hope she knows that this is the first time I have ever told of our storytelling years. Those tales are always there, yearning to be told to an audience that will understand that my Mother and I were writers, we just didn't have pens.

My daughter Leighton too, at a tender age, was a storyteller. Her tales were about the cats that lived in our house. There was Papa, who was a confirmed hypochondriac and enjoyed one illness after another. Miss Mer, the elegant Calico, who attended a camp in upstate New York called, the Camp Poke a Nose. There was another cat that lived across the street from Leighton in Stonington, Connecticut, her name, Miss Harriet Strifington. She was owned by wealthy family that dressed her in magnificent clothes all from smart New York and Paris shops. Leighton's cat, Heavena, always wore the same old blazer and saddle shoes that clumped when she walked. Harriet was always an irritation to her and the once upon a time story was about when Heavena discovered that clothes do not make the cat. Leighton has grown up now and deals with the real life situations and I truly doubt that her company would like to hear, Once upon a time Miss Mer, a lovely calico cat was invited to be the sports director at the Camp Cat A long in Montana. It was there, that she rode bucking broncos, bulls and won her first blue ribbon in the goat-riding contest. No, I think Leighton's storytelling days are over, but since I write for a paper, sometimes I can slip one of those imaginary adventures into print, witness the story of Abraham the mule that knew a tornado was coming.

Mother' stories were better then mine and someday I shall write a book, calling it *Once Upon a Time in Chester There Was a Wonderful House*. Its hospitality was known from Virginia to Mississippi and its doors were opened to some of the most famous. The most charming and the most elegant women of the south, it was the Wherry House and it was there that I met the cat, who was directly related to Tom, the major domo in the home of General Robert E. Lee.

*Shirley Gleicher*