

# Old Maid



# NEW WOMAN

## Quilt Scholarship

### 1. Old Maid, New Woman

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“We are to meet once in two weeks and are to present each member with an album bed quilt with all our names on when they are married. Susie Daggett says she is never going to be married, but we must make her a quilt just the same.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote Caroline Cowles Richards in her diary on December 13, 1859.

That month, the young women of the First Congregational Church of Canandaigua, New York, formed a society. According to Caroline, “We have great fun and fine suppers.”<sup>2</sup> The records of The Young Ladies Sewing Society emphasize a more serious purpose for the group, however: “To cultivate, enrich, and ennoble [sic] our intellectual and moral natures, and to form habits of systematic benevolence in harmony with the divine precept ‘To do good and to communicate - forget not’ is the object contemplated by this organization.”<sup>3</sup> Their projects included organizing fairs, holding a festival to benefit the library, furnishing funds for the Home of the Friendless in New York, sending many valuable boxes to needy ministers and families and, during the Civil War, making items of clothing for the Union soldiers. The group met every two weeks, the members taking turns as hostesses for the meetings. As it evolved, The Young ladies Sewing Society (which was also known as The Young ladies Aid Society) formed the nucleus of its members’ social lives and female friendships.

Susan Elizabeth Daggett, born December 9, 1841, was only eighteen years old when she told her friends that she would never marry. But, as agreed, Susie received her promised album bed quilt when she turned thirty. In 1931, at the age of eighty-nine, Susan Elizabeth Daggett died. True to her word, she had never wed. her choice to remain single was shared by a significant number of the women of her place and time - one in four of her close, personal friends, one in five of her female neighbors.

With the possible exception of the post-World War II baby-boom generation, twentieth-century Americans have generally relegated unwed, older women to be pitied as “spinsters” or “old maids.” Our century has looked down upon unmarried women as creatures to be mocked, even scorned. Yet mid-nineteenth-century American thought was slightly more humane in its attitudes. Indeed, recent research by women historians has uncovered a startling



First Congregational Church, Canandaigua, where Susie's father served as minister. Photograph courtesy of the Ontario County Historical Society, Canandaigua.

fact: a substantial number of mid-nineteenth-century American women chose to remain single. Like Susie Daggett, they boldly announced their intentions at the time when they would be expected to begin the rituals of dating and courtship.

The reasons for remaining single were mixed. The desire for a greater intellectual life, a dedication to a vocation and the search for autonomy could be fulfilled more easily by an unmarried woman. The internalization of a beau ideal and the inability to find its human embodiment, the fear of binding oneself legally, sexually or intellectually for life to a lesser man, the

fear of danger in childbirth and discomfort with the subject of sex were concerns that kept some women from the altar.<sup>4</sup>

And their numbers were large indeed, particularly in New England and pockets of land settled from New England, such as Canandaigua, where Susie and her friends lived. For example, "To the best of our knowledge, the percent of native-born unwed women in Massachusetts was virtually double that of American spinsters in general: 14.6 in Massachusetts as compared to 7.3 percent nationally in the 1830s, 16.9 to 7.7 percent in 1850, 22.6 to 10.9 in 1870."<sup>5</sup>

In both ante-bellum and post-Civil War America, the Northeast was a prosperous, thriving region when compared with the unsettled West and post-bellum devastated South. Many Northeastern women tended to better educated and free from the day-to-day struggles of economic survival. And they embraced the moral-reform movements that spread from Protestant New England to the rest of the nation. In this locale, it was only natural that a large number of the young women should question the institution of marriage.

*The Cult of Single Blessedness upheld the single life as both a socially and personally valuable state. It offered a positive vision of singlehood rooted in Protestant religion and the concepts of woman's particular nature and special sphere. It promoted singlehood as at least as holy, and perhaps more pure, a state than marriage. As developed from 1810 to 1860, the central tenet of single blessedness noted the transitory nature of "domestic bliss" and encouraged the search for eternal happiness through the adoption of a "higher calling" than marriage.<sup>6</sup>*

Susie Daggett was quite likely to be influenced by such thinking. Her father, Dr. Oliver E. Daggett, was the minister of the First Congregational Church of Canandaigua. He and his family had left New England in 1844 and settled in the upstate New York town. Susie's parents nurtured her in an intellectually stimulating home environment. Among the notables of the day invited to speak at the church and visit the parsonage were Henry Ward Beecher and Edward Everett. Dr. Daggett was a very popular minister. "Everything that Dr. Daggett said or did was marked by good taste, and by a cordial and friendly spirit. He was very quick to notice whatever was commendable in others, and was evidently delighted to express his interest and appreciation."<sup>7</sup> And Susie's mother "had a serenity and dignity of manner that were peculiarly beautiful, and, though somewhat naturally reserved, she impressed all who knew here with her sincerity, and with her real friendliness of spirit."<sup>8</sup>

As can be expected, in this stable, open-minded environment, Susie's education was not neglected. She, with many of her friends who would help form The Young Ladies Sewing Society, attended the Ontario Female Seminary in the town, where religion and the Bible were a major part of the curriculum. Caroline Richards wrote about the beginning of a typical school day:

*"I got up this morning at quarter before six o'clock. I then read my three chapters in the Bible, and soon after ate my breakfast, which consisted of ham and eggs and buckwheat cakes. I then took a morning walk in the garden and rolled my hoop. I went to school at quarter before 9 o'clock. Miss Clark has us recite a verse of scripture in response to roll call and my text for the morning was the 8<sup>th</sup> verse of the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew."<sup>9</sup>*

The issue of single blessedness was important in its day. Susie Daggett's "Old Maid" quilt is evidence of the conflict of attitudes which surrounded this

issue. Although eleven of her forty-three friends in the Society remained, like Susie, single throughout their lives, several inscriptions on Susie's quilt reflect the prevalent contrasting opinions about the state of single blessedness. Similarly, in 1850, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts rejected a bill which would have shipped the state's surplus women to Oregon.<sup>10</sup> And, in 1868, *The Nation* published an article entitled "Why Is Single Life Becoming More General?," identifying it as one of the key social issues of the day.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, single women were their own best advocates. Louisa May Alcott, writing advice to young women in 1868, stated that "the loss of liberty, happiness, and self-respect is poorly repaid by the barren honor of being called 'Mrs.' instead of 'Miss.'"<sup>12</sup> Alcott was joined by a large number of mid-nineteenth-century American women who, like Susie, remained single, entering public life, living lives of dedicated service to their fellow beings, profoundly influencing their era. Among their number were workers for public health, such as Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, and Emily and Elizabeth Blackwell, moral reformers Mary Grew, Sarah Pugh and Frances Willard, educators Catharine Beecher and Elizabeth Peabody, social workers Cornelia Hancock and Emily Howland, and artists, writers and intellectuals, such as Emily Dickinson, Harriet Hosmer, Frances Bridges and Margaret Fuller.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, as could be expected, there existed a lingering social stigma against singlehood. Alcott's strong words from 1868 are a testimony to the fact that

single women felt the need to speak out forthrightly in their own defense.



Susan Elizabeth Daggett at approximately 18 years of age. Photo courtesy of the Ontario County Historical Society, Canandaigua.

As more and more young women chose singlehood, they were affected by more than the moral and religious teachings of Protestant belief. Education became available to women. In 1821 the Troy Female Seminary in Troy, New York, became the first institution to grant a high-school education to women, and in 1833 Oberlin College of Ohio became America's first co-educational institution of higher learning. Canandaigua's Ontario Female Seminary, which Susie and her friends attended, exemplified this liberalization.

In addition, American life was changing dramatically. The eighteenth-century dependence upon family and agriculture was lessening with the advent of the industrial age.

For the first time, women, particularly young women, went to work outside the home, in factories, shops and mills. With modern transportation came mobility and a further disruption of old ways. Many young women, if they chose, could leave their homes and struggle to live more independent lives in cities or towns. Indeed, education coupled with social changes

*influenced the way in which [women] thought of themselves, the expectations they held for the future, and the kinds of activities in which they hoped to engage.... Women began to think of themselves as individuals with their own identities, goals, rights, and callings separate from those of kin, church, or community and defined by personal needs and desires, not the prescriptions of gender. Women began to express the very human desire to grow, to accomplish, to succeed - they acknowledged ambition, valued independence, and sought autonomy. They wanted to make their own choices, to be responsible for their own achievements and failures, to establish their own priorities and to enact them.*<sup>14</sup>

And, although singlehood was foisted upon some young women due to economic circumstance or being left to care for sick or aging relatives, many young women like Susie Daggett made a definitive choice to live their lives a different way. Like Susie, many were well-educated and interested in the development of their own individual characters in concert with the teachings of their churches. Susie, as her future achievements would amply evidence, wanted to lead a life of service and fulfillment and must have considered that a single life could better afford her the opportunity to aid the poor and underprivileged.

In 1848, young Susie had been settled with her family in Canandaigua for four years. In that year, Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Convention, just a few miles from Susie's home. At this time, "Women lost their legal individuality in marriage and became wholly subordinate to their husbands. Wives had no rights to sign contracts, initiate suits, establish credit, inherit property of their own, or claim more than one-third of their husbands' estates. Mothers had no rights to control or custody of their children."<sup>15</sup> In 1855, when Susie and many of her friends were attending the Ontario Female Seminary, Susan B. Anthony, the leader of the women's suffrage movement, came to Canandaigua to speak.

On December 20 of that year, Caroline Richards wrote in her diary: "She [Susan B. Anthony] made a special request that all the seminary girls should come to hear her as well as all the women and girls in town. She had a large audience and she talked very plainly about our rights and how we ought to



**Presentation quilt**, by the members of The Young Ladies Sewing (or Aid) Society, Canandaigua, New York, for Susan Elizabeth Daggett, 1871, 68 x 76 inches, pieced and appliquéd cottons. Signed in ink. Collection of the author.

stand up for them, and said the world would never go right until the women had just as much right to vote and rule as the men. She asked us all to come up and sign our names who would promise to do all in our power to bring about that glad day when equal rights should be the law of the land. A whole lot of us went up and signed the paper.”<sup>16</sup> Susie Daggett was fourteen at the time. The Anthony visit to Canandaigua most likely played a role in her decision: four years later, Susie made the forthright announcement that she would never wed.

In addition to women’s suffrage and rights, other movements were active in the Canandaigua area. Within its precincts, the anti-Masonry movement began, the temperance movement gathered strength and Joseph Smith published his Book of Mormon at nearby Palmyra. Established in 1789 as a county seat, and surrounded by extremely fertile acreage, Canandaigua attracted farmers and lawyers for the cultivation and speculation of land. In fact, this upstate area was then the breadbasket of the country. Nearby Rochester was even called the Flour City. Due to its wealth, the area was top-heavy with professional classes. This helped to stimulate the founding of numerous secondary academies and colleges, like the Ontario Female Seminary.

Early settlers, mostly from New England, flocked to the area, bringing their wealth, customs and traditions with them. Good roads, the railroads and the proximity of the Erie Canal gave Canandaigua access to people and ideas. It had such a reputation for being a scenic area that it was part of the tour for European travelers headed for Niagara Falls. This combination of accessibility, early development, a strong economy and a large professional class committed to education fostered an atmosphere that was receptive to new ideas.

Many visitors, like Susan B. Anthony, came to share their ideas and experiences with its citizens. And male friends of The Young Ladies Sewing Society’s members went off to attend Yale, Williams and Princeton. Exotic gifts were sent from faraway places. Caroline Richards’ father, for example, once sent a box of dates, figs, oranges and pomegranates from New Orleans. Abby Clark, a member of the Society, took pride in her father’s election as Governor of New York in 1854, and a neighbor was Francis Granger, the United States Postmaster. At age eleven, the girls read *Gulliver’s Travels* and took music

lessons. As teenagers, many traveled to New York City on a regular basis and knew the latest fashions, fads and styles. It is in this sort of atmosphere that Susie and her friends grew to maturity.

As she reached an important time in any young woman's life, leaving her teenage years, the Civil War began and took her attention from more personal interests. Susie and her friends were intensely patriotic, filled with abolitionist sentiments. Wrote Caroline Richards, "We have flags on our paper and envelopes, and have all our stationery bordered with red, white and blue. We wear little flag pins for badges and tie our hair with red, white and blue ribbon and have pins and earrings made of the buttons the soldiers gave us. We are going to sew for them in our society and get the garments all cut from the older ladies' society...We are going to write notes and enclose them in the garments to cheer up the soldier boys. It does not seem now as though I could give up any one who belonged to me. The girls in our society say that if any of the members do send a soldier to the war they shall have a flag bed quilt, made by the society, and have the girls' names on the stars."<sup>17</sup>

When Lincoln was assassinated in 1865m Susie was twenty-four. Again, the national issues overrode many personal interests. Caroline expressed the views of her friends when she wrote, "We all wear Lincoln badges now, with pin attached. They are pictures of Lincoln upon a tiny flag, bordered with crape. Susie Daggett has just made herself a flag, six feet by four. It was a lot of work."<sup>18</sup>

True to their abolitionist beliefs, Susie and the society worked on a fair for the benefit of the freedmen of the South. Caroline wrote that the praise for its success should go to Susie, "for it belongs to her."<sup>19</sup>

In 1871, just two years after Wyoming became the first state to give women the vote, Susie Daggett turned thirty. She was living with her parents in New London, Connecticut, where her father had recently been chosen minister of a New England congregation, and she received her album bed quilt from her Canandaigua friends. It was the quilt she had been promised years before.

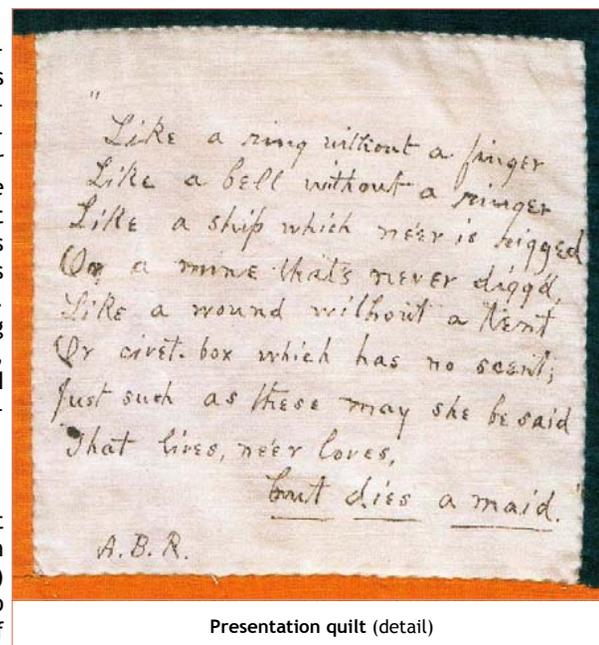
This quilt and its inscriptions record love, long-lasting friendships, reverence for the Lord, knowledge of literature and conflicting views on the states of marriage and singlehood. Although enlightened beliefs abounded in communities like Canandaigua, a decision like Susie's to remain single was often ridiculed. Although much literature of the nineteenth century reflected positive visions of singlehood and single women, derogatory images and negative attitudes were very prevalent. "Popular songs such as 'The Old Maid's Lament,' and 'My Grandmother's Advice' ridiculed the woman who wiled away her courting opportunities and urged women to 'better get married than die

an old maid.'"<sup>20</sup> Aware of such derisions, Susie's friends, some married, some unmarried, planned their quilt for Susie. We are left to guess at their motivations as they picked verses to pen on her quilt. Were they mocking her single status, poking good-natured fun at their determined sister - or both?

Anyone looking at the central figure on the quilt (page 63) who has not also seen a photograph of Susie Daggett (pages 54 and 58) could be excused for believing the reason for Susie's singlehood was obvious. However, the central figure on the quilt was not meant to represent Susie at all. In a booklet published by the First congregational Church upon its centennial in June 1899, an essay n the work of the church's young people discusses Susie's quilt:

*Any member reaching the age of thirty years, being still unmarried, was to receive a quilt. There is, however, a record of only one member, Miss Daggett, being brave enough to acknowledge the attainment of such great age...Each member of the society made a block, containing her autograph, but in all probability the central block was the chief cause of this custom being forever abolished. This block, donated by the pastor, Mr. Allen, consisted of a pen-picture of a spinster with her knitting work, her hair done up in a ridiculous little knot. This, by the way, was not intended to be an exact likeness of any member of the society.<sup>21</sup>*

One can only imagine the emotions this quilt must have aroused for it to be so thoroughly discussed twenty-eight years later. As we study this quilt to-



Presentation quilt (detail)

day, some of the penned inscriptions seem overly mean. But, since Susie's opinions on singlehood were so well-known among her peers, and shared by at least some of their number, it is unlikely that these inscriptions were meant to mock her. In fact, they may have been sly rebukes of old-maid stereotypes, "in jokes" to a sister who would not only appreciate the double, hidden meanings behind the inscriptions but delight in their creativity. That the quilt survives in such pristine condition is testimony that it was held very dear by its recipient.

After receiving her quilt, Susie remained in New London with her family until 1877. While in New London, according to church minutes, she taught Sunday school and served on a special women's committee created to "render aid and assistance in things temporal and spiritual to sisters of the church."<sup>22</sup> In this work, as in her later work for the New Haven, Connecticut, Woman's Board of missions, she had chosen a religion-inspired vocation typical of many single women of her time. For, although they sought independence, both physical and intellectual, single women were often dependent upon their families for financial support. This certainly seems to be the case with Susie who, in her mid-thirties, was living at home with her parents. Paid positions were filled by men and the social order of her century did not allow for women to displace men from the work force. Thus, her creativity had to be confined to work that did not compete directly with that of men. She served this church committee from 1875 to 1877. In September 1877, someone else was chosen to fill a vacancy caused by "the removal of Susan E. Daggett from the city."<sup>23</sup>

A photograph of Susie, taken in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1878, when she was thirty-seven, shows her at a time when she held the position of Assistant Lady Principal of Vassar College (page 54). Teaching was one of the few pro-



Presentation quilt, (detail)

working as a member of the local Woman's Board of Missions, serving for fourteen years as its president. Mission work attracted many single women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Though badly paid, the women in this movement gained great independence and established leadership positions in the absence of men, who regarded the toil as far too great for the meager financial rewards. Single women, however, whose choice of single blessedness was based upon a belief in a "higher calling," sought out mission work as a way to prove their devotion to a life's work.

At some point during her adult life in New Haven, Susie gave her album bed quilt to Clara Willson Coleman, a friend in Canandaigua, who was among the Society members who created it. The quilt passed to Clara's daughter, Susan

fessions which women could enter without fear of recriminations from male workers. The concept of a broad public education and the widespread establishment of public schools provided the need for many teachers. Because they were used to caring for young children, and since the pay scale within the profession was low, it was only natural that women would be sought to work in this field. Susie's position was exalted, at least in title. She held it for a short time, until her father's death in 1880.

Then Susie, along with her mother and sister, moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where her father had been born and where Susie's paternal grandfather, David Daggett, had graduated from Yale in 1783, gone on to serve in the United States Senate and, in 1826, returned to Yale to serve as Kent Professor of Law. Their return to New Haven may have been forced by finances, and Susie's position at Vassar, though a respected one, probably was not lucrative.

Susie lived at 77 Grove Street from 1882 to 1931. During this period she seems to have dedicated herself to

Daggett Coleman, Susie's namesake. It found its way through that family to the Canandaigua First Congregational Church's sesquicentennial in 1949.

Susie was reported in excellent health her entire life and fell ill only three weeks prior to her death in 1931. Her obituary appeared in the Saturday, January 10, 1931, edition of *The New York Times*, which mentioned her lifetime of service to church, mission work and education. She is buried near her house, in the Grove Street Cemetery.

At the time of her death, Susie's estate was valued at \$100,000, no small sum in 1931. True to her lifetime of beliefs, her bequests included money to the Calhoun Colored School of Calhoun, Lowndes County, Alabama, to Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia, to the Ecclesiastical Corporation of the First Congregational Church of Canandaigua for relief of the poor of the church and to the New Haven Y.W.C.A. in memory of her sister, Mary, with the stated preference that the income be used for giving the "privilege of classes to poor girls."<sup>24</sup>

Susie's early resolve to remain single did not lead to a sterile, unproductive, ascetic life. Quite the contrary. In her eighty-nine years she led a remarkably productive life whose hallmark was an early decision to remain single, to embrace the Cult of Single Blessedness and to work for the betterment of the less fortunate. A memory of her deeds remains. And so does an album bed quilt, made to commemorate her early decision - a decision that formed the foundation of a lifetime of dedicated work.

*That you may be beloved be amiable,  
Susan the Matchless!!*

- from an inscription on the quilt

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