

MARY GRIDLEY

Sources & Activities

Primary Sources

- Letter from David Davis to Sarah Davis, October 30, 1860.
- “The Union Meeting of Vivian and L’Harmonie Dancing Clubs at the Home of Mr. E. B. Gridley,” *The Pantagraph*, December 21, 1877.
- “At the Gridley Mansion,” *Pantagraph*, December 7, 1883.
- “From Foreign Shores,” *Pantagraph*, October 29, 1889.
- “A Queenly Woman,” *The Daily Bulletin*, January 26, 1899.

Suggested Activities & Discussion Questions

- **Activity 1:** Read David Davis’s letter to Sarah Davis dated October 30, 1860. How was Mary’s (political) actions received by members of the community? Do you think this would have created tension within her marriage? Was this acceptable behavior for a woman living during this time period? Why or why not?
- **Activity 2:** Read the party/travel-related newspaper articles from above. Who came to the parties and what activities occurred? Do you think the average McLean County resident travelled that extensively? Based on this information, what can you conclude about the Mary Gridley’s social status? Why do you think this way?
- **Discussion Question:** What elements of a successful life did Mary Gridley have? Was she happy?



MARY A. GRIDLEY (1818-1900)

There is an old saying; “Life is full of ups and downs.” For Mary Gridley, this seemed to be particularly true. She married a man who became the richest man in town. They lived in the biggest house and moved in the highest circles of local society. She traveled the world and brought home treasures to decorate her home. Yet, her life did not seem to be a happy one and the most important things in life seem to have eluded her.

Mary was born Mary Ann Enos in Onondaga Hollow, New York, on March 18, 1818. Her parents moved their family to Indiana and Louisiana before finally settling in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. When she was eighteen, she met and married Asahel (pronounced Ash-el) Gridley, a man eight years her senior. Asahel had come to Pittsburg to purchase merchandise for his store back in Bloomington.

After the wedding, Asahel and Mary traveled to Bloomington where they would make their home for the rest of their lives. Mary brought with her a canary, her cane-bottomed chair, and also her African-American maid, Rebecca Barnes, to serve as a companion and domestic helper in her new home.

Back in Pittsburg, Asahel had so impressed Mary with his stories of Bloomington’s glories, that she **fondly** anticipated coming into a perfect paradise. She was shocked to discover instead a small, undeveloped frontier town. At first the Gridleys stayed at the Caravansary Hotel and then, with James Allin, one of Bloomington’s first settlers. Later Asahel bought Allin’s home and remodeled the log cabin into a comfortable home for Mary and their new daughter, Juliette, who was born in 1837.

The first year was particularly difficult for Mary as she knew absolutely nothing about housekeeping and little more about cooking. Her maid knew little more than she did. They didn’t have a stove and all their food had to be prepared in the fireplace using iron skillets and **reflectors**. However, as Mary became accustomed to her new surroundings, she began to love and appreciate her new home and neighbors.

Asahel was quite successful in his store but particularly, in his ability to buy and sell land. But when the United States suffered a **depression** known as the “Land **Panic** of 1837,” he lost everything and was bankrupt. His clients and tenants were unable to pay money owed to him, and he in turn could not pay his debts. This was a very low time for the Gridleys and many other Bloomington families.

However, due to his **shrewd** business instincts, Asahel was soon able to recover and rebuild his business career. He became a lawyer and rode the **Eighth Judicial Circuit** with Abraham Lincoln and David Davis. Over the years he was involved in **land speculation**, local politics, and town development. He helped bring two railroads (the Chicago and Alton and the Illinois Central) to Bloomington and founded Bloomington's first bank, the McLean County Bank.

By 1859, Asahel was recognized as the first millionaire in McLean County. The Gridleys built a new home at 301 E. Grove Street to showcase their wealth. It was completed in 1860 and was the largest and finest house in the county. They called it "The Oaks." The walls of the house were made of cream-colored bricks imported from Milwaukee and its interior was decorated with fine **tapestries**, sculptures, and paintings brought back by the Gridleys from their many trips to Europe. Later in life, Mary recalled that her new home was full of "show pieces" of furniture including "the first marble topped table, and the first grand piano." There is a story that Asahel invited Abraham Lincoln to see his new home. After seeing the **grandeur** of the **mansion**, Lincoln said, "Gridley, do you want everyone to hate you?"

The Gridley's marriage was not a happy one. Asahel was **ambitious, charismatic**, and highly successful. He also had a terrible temper and a foul mouth which got him in trouble and **antagonized** people. Mary too, had a strong personality. Between them, they alienated many former friends and society members. Lincoln remained a faithful friend but others, such as Sarah and David Davis, became bitter political and social rivals. Whether this was due to Asahel's fiery temper or Mary's **conspicuous** show of wealth, barriers were erected between Mary and many other members of society. Although she appears to have had some friends, she is never mentioned in the **memoirs** of the other society ladies of her period.

There were stormy times within the family circle as well. It is said that Asahel once chased Mary out of their home on a snowy winter evening in only a nightgown after one of their arguments. In addition, the death of six of their ten children undoubtedly put more stress on their already rocky marriage. Five children died in infancy and their son, Charlie, died when he was just nine years old. He accidentally shot himself with a gun that had been a present from Asahel. The shock and guilt associated with this event caused even more anguish between Asahel and Mary. Terrible accusations about who was responsible for the deaths of the children passed between the two.

Mary, a strong-willed woman, had her ways of "getting even" with Asahel. The story is told that in October of 1860, two political rallies were held in town as part of the presidential campaign. One was for Governor Corwin who had come to speak on behalf of Abraham Lincoln, the Republican nominee. One was for Stephen Douglas the Democratic nominee. Gridley, a **staunch** supporter of the Republican Party, escorted Gov. Corwin to his rally. Mary, who was known to actually have preferred Lincoln over Douglas, put a Douglas flag on her husband's carriage and escorted Douglas to the Democratic rally.

In 1881, Asahel died of **complications** caused by fighting a fire at his bank. He died peacefully at "The Oaks" surrounded by his family. Yet all was not at peace. A family story claimed that Mary refused to get more warm clothing for Asahel's chills as he lay dying. She didn't want the extra washing. Asahel's funeral was held in the family home. It was a lavish event with thousands in attendance yet, Mary insisted that his casket be carried out the rear door as her "rugs had already taken enough punishment."

More tragedy lay ahead for Mary. When Asahel's will was read, Juliette, the oldest daughter, discovered she received only a fraction of what other family members received. She

blamed her father and the rest of the family. She contested the will but lost in court. It is said that before leaving town, she visited her father's grave, stomped on it saying "Old Grid! This is just where you ought to be."

In 1895, Mary's son Albert, committed suicide. He too, had a tragic life. He had failed in business several times. He had two children, one who died in infancy and another who died in an accident. Albert became an alcoholic, and one day walked into a pawnshop, picked up a handgun, and shot himself. Six months later, Mary's son Edward was married in a lavish society wedding. But right next to *The Daily Pantagraph* article describing the festivities was another article announcing a pending lawsuit against Edward for "**breach** of promise"...that is the promise to marry another woman.

Both of Mary's daughters had grand weddings at "The Oaks." Both marriages ended in divorce. Her daughter Mary Bell later had a nervous breakdown and spent many years in a **sanitarium**. After a long and **tumultuous** life, Mary Gridley died on November 22, 1900, in Chicago. She had a large but simple funeral at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church where she had long attended services. She is buried at Evergreen Cemetery next to her husband and children.