



Laura Spelman Rockefeller 1839-1915

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Her dark hair parted neatly down the center and waved softly over her ears, Miss Laura Celestia Spelman took her place on the stage of the Cleveland, Ohio, Central High School and delivered the valedictory address. In her speech titled “I Can Paddle My Own Canoe,” the not-quite-15-year-old daughter of one of Cleveland’s most prosperous businessmen made a strong case for the right of women to pursue cultural and independent thought. Among the members of the senior class present and listening attentively that day was her friend John D. Rockefeller.

Cettie Spelman—as she was called by family and friends—was the daughter of Harvey Buel Spelman and Lucy Henry Spelman, who had come to Ohio from Massachusetts. The second of their two daughters, Cettie, was born in Wadsworth, Ohio, on September 9, 1839. The Spelmans later moved to Akron, where Harvey prospered in the dry-goods business, and eventually settled in Cleveland. There Mr. Spelman pursued his interests in religion, politics, and the abolition movement. He helped to establish a Congregational church, was a member of the state legislature, and did what he could to help slaves fleeing to Canada. His wife was devoted to church work and the cause of temperance. His daughters, Lucy and Cettie, shared their mother’s interests.

“Cettie” Spelman
as a young woman.



Cettie was deeply religious and had a strong sense of propriety. She was also a young woman with a mind and will of her own—indeed, quite capable of paddling her own canoe.

Cettie and her sister wanted to be teachers. In 1857, their parents sent them east to finish school in Worcester, Massachusetts. When they returned to Cleveland in May of 1859, Cettie tried, without success, to form music classes. Meanwhile, Lucy had taken a teaching job in the public schools. Cettie began to substitute teach in early 1860, and found a permanent job teaching at the Hudson Street School, where her superiors found her a “splendid disciplinarian and a perfect teacher.” Two years later, the 22-year-old Miss Spelman was appointed assistant principal. She loved her work and enjoyed her freedom. “I shall not stop until I find something better to do,” she said. It was in that same year

that her former classmate began to call at the Spelman residence.

John D. Rockefeller was born on July 8, 1839, in Richford, New York, the second of six children born to William Avery Rockefeller, a medicine peddler and trader, and the former Eliza Davison, who had married the handsome and flamboyant “Big Bill” against her father’s wishes. William’s work thrived best in new towns without physicians, and so the family moved often and lived in a precarious balance between poverty and relative comfort.

John was quiet, serious, and industrious, with an instinct for thoroughness, all inherited from his mother. From his father he acquired an ambition for greatness, and as a boy he often said, “When I grow up I want to be worth \$100,000. And I’m going to be, too.” The family eventually came to live in a hamlet outside of Cleveland, and John was sent to stay in a boarding house while he attended Central High School.

John’s father saw no use in sending his eldest son to college—he wanted him to be a practical success—and so John enrolled in a business course. It took him weeks of intensive searching to find his first job. On September 26, 1855, a day that later came to be celebrated with the same enthusiasm accorded birthdays and anniversaries, John found a job as an assistant bookkeeper. His wages were about 50 cents a day, but on that he managed to meet expenses, save some money, and give some to the Baptist Church, in which he was already active. For three years his salary increased nominally, but his knowledge increased enormously.

Then in 1859 he formed a partnership and became a commission merchant in grain, hay, and meat. Meanwhile, oil had been discovered in western Pennsylvania and John added crude oil to his commodities, eventually deciding to go into the oil refining business. He was beginning to make money. During these years of hard work, John had neither time nor the inclination for romance. But in 1862 he began calling on Miss Cettie Spelman, the pretty, serious school teacher who devoted her free time to the church and to practicing the piano.

Theirs was a simple courtship, as attested by the detailed ledgers in which John entered literally every penny he spent. There were entries for bouquets and for lectures, and finally, in April of 1864, for a diamond ring. The young couple never attended the theater, and Cettie considered dancing “unworthy and sinful.” Although John did not particularly enjoy books, they read novels and poetry together and played piano duets.

John and Laura, as he began to call her, were married on September 8, 1864, a day before her 25th birthday, and left on a wedding trip to Niagara Falls (where, the ledger notes, they purchased a souvenir pillow for \$1.57), Canada, and New England. Back in Cleveland they bought a modest house next door to John’s parents, who had moved into town not long before. Their first child, Elizabeth, was born on August 23, 1866. The young Rockefellers were happy, healthy, and rapidly growing wealthy.

From the beginning of her marriage, Laura Rockefeller centered her life around her home, her family, and her church. Those interests never altered. She became a Baptist, like her husband, and the church provided the substance of their

social life. The family increased: A second child, Alice, lived but 13 months; another daughter, Alta, was born in 1871, and a fourth, Edith, arrived a year later, and in January 1874, Laura gave birth to a son, whom they named John D. Rockefeller Jr.

A growing family required larger quarters, and in 1868 the Rockefellers moved to a larger brick house on Cleveland's Euclid Avenue, which came to be known as "Millionaire's Row." Five years later, John acquired suburban property with a fine view of Lake Erie. He intended to establish a sanitarium there, but when this and subsequent plans to turn the huge white building into a club and hotel were both unsuccessful, the Rockefellers converted it into a summer home. They called it Forest Hill, and beginning in 1880, it became the center of their lives.

Growing up under Laura's watchful eye were four lively children, all of whom were expected to work. Each had a small plot in the vegetable garden. All pulled weeds from the lawn at the rate of a penny for ten weeds. When John Jr. grew older, he was paid 15 cents an hour to chop wood. Once Laura totaled the gas bills for a year and promised Bessie that she could have as spending money anything that could be saved on each month's bill by seeing that no unnecessary lights were left burning. When the children were old enough to ride bicycles, John proposed to buy one for each. "No," said Laura firmly, "we will get only one. That will teach them to give up to one another."

Life with the Rockefellers was simple, almost Spartan. The day began at 7:30 with family prayers, followed by readings at breakfast. Food was plain and wholesome. In addition to their studies and household chores, the children had

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to practice music. Outdoor activities and indoor games constituted their recreation. The church remained the focus of their family’s social life, and the children were taught to give from their own earnings. As children, they joined a temperance society and as youth, they signed pledges of abstinence.

During these years, John Rockefeller was in New York a great deal, often unable to spend important holidays with his family. But they kept in close touch through letters—his, brief and casual in spelling and punctuation but warm and affectionate; hers, longer, less hurried records of family events. Laura’s husband didn’t like being away from home—“Oh! for a home dinner, good cream and the quiet and peace of our table,” he once wrote—and eventually he solved the problem by taking Laura and the children to New York with him.

At first they lived in hotels during the winter months, but in 1884 the Rockefellers bought a tall, narrow brownstone surrounded by large lawns at 4 West 54th Street. Laura and the children generally came east from Cleveland in mid-October and remained in New York through the winter and spring. Late in May she packed them up again for a stay of several weeks at the

Euclid Avenue house. Summers were spent at Forest Hill, always Laura's favorite home, for she loved to be outdoors. Before returning to New York in the fall, the family spent another two weeks in Cleveland.

During the 1880s, the Rockefellers also began to travel widely, taking trips as a family out West and to Europe. Wherever they went, they always managed to find a church where they attended Sunday services. Laura's devotion to the church never flagged. She continued to teach a Sunday school class of young children and to stay with them until they left for college or for work; then she started over with a new group. Many young people came to look on her as a confidante, almost a foster parent, and spent a great deal of time in her home.

Laura's ties to her parents and sister remained close. Her sister Lucy had given up teaching and had come to live with them when they first moved to Euclid Avenue. When Laura's father died in 1881, her mother—a vigorous, well-read, and hard-working champion of temperance causes—joined the young family and stayed with them until her death in 1897.

Although John Jr. attended several schools, Laura's daughters received their early educations at home. But eventually the children grew up and began to make lives of their own. Bessie graduated from Vassar College and in 1889 married Charles A. Strong, a philosophy professor. The Strongs spent a great deal of time in Europe, where he continued his studies. In 1895, Edith, the most artistic and unconventional of the children, married Harold Fowler McCormick, son of Cyrus McCormick, the inventor of the mechanized reaper.



Laura Spelman Rockefeller with her daughter, Edith Rockefeller McCormick, and Edith's sons, John Rockefeller McCormick and Harold Fowler McCormick.

There were two Rockefeller weddings in 1901. Alta had combined her father's gift for organization and her mother's interest in charitable work to found a settlement house in Cleveland and a sewing school in New York, and that year she married E. Parmalee Prentice, a lawyer who later turned to scientific agriculture. The same year, John D. Rockefeller Jr. married Abby Greene Aldrich, the talented and attractive daughter of Senator Nelson W. Aldrich, at a large wedding attended by a thousand guests at the Aldrich home in Warwick, Rhode Island.

Then the grandchildren began to arrive. Two of the Rockefeller children lived close enough for Laura to enjoy the babies as they grew—John Jr. and Abby, who lived next door to the house on West 54th Street, the Prentices a block to the south. There were 15 grandchildren in all.

During this time, the Rockefellers acquired a fourth home, this one in Pocantico Hills, New York, a few miles north of Manhattan. It was a rather homely house with splendid views of the Hudson River. When the house burned in 1902, John and Laura planned another, built large enough to accommodate visiting children, grandchildren, and friends, and marked by elegant simplicity. It became a favorite retreat of Laura's, almost as dear to her as Forest Hill.

Unfortunately, Laura's health had begun to fail. From the beginning of the century she was a semi-invalid, and by 1910 she was forced to spend most of her days in bed. Through her hours of pain, John was her faithful and thoughtful companion.

On September 8, 1914, John and Laura celebrated their golden wedding anniversary at Pocantico. The children—all but Bessie Strong, who had died in France in 1906—and

grandchildren gathered for the anniversary dinner. “I have had but one sweetheart,” John said, “and I am thankful to say that I still have her.” The next day was Laura’s seventh-fifth birthday.

Laura Spelman Rockefeller died the following spring. John was in Florida with his son and daughter-in-law when the telegram arrived on March 12, 1915, informing him that Mrs. Rockefeller had died that morning of a heart attack. The funeral held three days later at Pocantico Hills was a simple one, attended only by the family and a few dear friends.

John D. Rockefeller lived on for 22 years, leaning more and more on his capable and devoted son, but remaining vigorous and active to the very end of his days. He died on May 23, 1937, two months short of his 98th birthday.

In 1929, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial was merged into the Rockefeller Foundation. Before the merger, the Memorial established the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund in The New York Community Trust to support some of Mrs. Rockefeller’s charitable interests in New York City.

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