

Who is Mrs. Perkins?



Anne Dunbar Potts Perkins (pictured above in her garden at Union College as well as on the verso of this guide) was the wife of Maurice Perkins, Professor of Chemistry at Union from 1865 to 1901. Throughout their years at Union they lived on campus in the faculty residence at the western end of South Colonnade, where they also raised their three children. After Maurice Perkins' death in 1901, their daughter Rose and her husband, Union College Professor Edward Everett Hale Jr., moved in with Mrs. Perkins, who remained a campus resident until her own death in 1922.

Mrs. Perkins is best remembered at Union today for establishing a campus garden behind her home, which still exists in modified form near Old Chapel. But she also played an active role in campus life, chaperoning College and fraternity dances and attending numerous athletic and intellectual events. She was interested in subjects ranging from fine art to the natural sciences, gave occasional lectures on literature, and (being fluent in French) translated manuals and other documents for the College. Opinionated and not one to be intimidated, she earned the nickname "Duchess" from the Union students.

About Mrs. Perkins' Union College

In 2009, Perkins descendent Margaret Bushnell gifted Union College's Schaffer Library with a collection of over 700 letters written by Mrs. Perkins to her children between 1895 and 1904. Some are handwritten, but most were typed by Mrs. Perkins herself on a machine that she nicknamed "The Demon." Although too fragile to be presented online at this time, Mrs. Perkins' letters constitute an incomparably rich source of information about nearly all aspects of College life during the period and offer a unique female perspective on what was then an all-male institution. Mrs. Perkins was a particularly vivid writer and personality, who recorded lively observations of national as well as local and family affairs.

As an initial step in making information from the letters available to the public, Schaffer Library's Special Collections and Digital Projects staff have developed a website, ***Mrs. Perkins' Union College***, which includes an interactive map of the campus at the turn of the 20th century along with excerpts from the letters and profiles of prominent individuals, families, and places mentioned in them. This guide provides access to some of the information on the site; to learn more, visit <http://www.union.edu/library/perkins>.



Union at the Time



The decade during which Mrs. Perkins' letters were written was a time of great challenge and change at Union College. Founded in 1795, the College had established an innovative curriculum and survived the impact of the Civil War, but its financial situation and enrollment numbers grew increasingly bleak in the latter part of the 19th century. The strain on the close-knit Union community at this time is clear from Mrs. Perkins' letters; faculty sometimes went without pay and of necessity taught a range of subjects outside their areas of expertise.

Mrs. Perkins also describes the reversal of these trends, however, starting with the new fiscal policies instituted by College Treasurer and alumnus Frank Bailey in 1901. Although the footprint of the campus shrank when parcels of land were sold to eliminate College debt, enrollments grew and a boom in the construction of fraternity houses and other academic buildings transformed the campus. Under the leadership of President Andrew Van Vranken Raymond, the Union curriculum also expanded to include electrical engineering and new partnerships with General Electric, then flourishing in Schenectady. Mrs. Perkins' letters provide first-hand insights into the personalities and struggles of the Union community throughout this formative period.