

Ethel Newcome,

By Susan Foreman • Photos by Andy Ourant unless otherwise noted

Special
Exhibit
at the 2017

National Convention

Presenting Miss Ethel Newcome

A Civil War-era Wax Doll

Donated to the UFDC Museum by Judy Blewis,
Becky Decker, Susan Foreman and Sandy Kralovetz



Ethel Newcome, to quote William Makepeace Thackeray, “is the handsomest woman in England.” Soon another “Ethel Newcome” would prove to be “the handsomest doll in Philadelphia.” The subject of this article, a circa 1860s 26-inch English poured wax doll, was named after the heroine in Thackeray’s 1855 novel, *The Newcomes*. Thackeray was exceedingly popular at the time, in fact his only possible rival was Dickens.

“Ethel,” the doll, was purchased in Paris in about 1863 by Mary Cadwalader, Secretary of the Children’s Division of the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair. In addition to Ethel herself, Miss Cadwalader arranged for fabulous dresses, jewelry and accessories of all kinds to be donated to “Ethel.” All these items were carefully packed in two doll steamer trunks with the monogram “E.N., London” and sent to Philadelphia where she would become the star of the 1864 Philadelphia Sanitary Fair.

the Handsomest Doll in Philadelphia





My reaction when first meeting “Ethel” at Becky and Andy Ourant’s Village Doll Shop in Adamstown, Pennsylvania, was that she literally took my breath away. When I entered the shop, there stood “Ethel.” She is so much more beautiful than I expected and so much taller. Her wardrobe and accessories are beyond words (the pictures say more than words could ever say). Her couturier-designed fashions are lavish. Her jewelry, furs and numerous accessories were still retained in their original boxes, most with the EN monogram. In addition to European-made accoutrements, “Ethel” was also provided with creations by fashionable Philadelphia designers.

One of my favorite items is Ethel’s opera glasses with a Stanhope view of George Washington. This item alone is RARE beyond rare and has been attributed to Rene Dragon who invented the process in 1857 (same time period as Ethel). He called his invention microscopic photo-jewelry. Dagrón became famous when he produced a Stanhope optical viewer that enabled the viewing of a microphotograph one square millimeter (equivalent in size to the head of a pin), that included the portraits of 450 people. The success of his viewers enabled Dagrón to build a factory dedicated to their production. As of June 1859, Dagrón’s factory was manufacturing the Stanhopes, mounted in jewelry and souvenirs. In August 1859 he exhibited them at the International Exhibition in Paris where they met with great success. By 1862 he had 150 employees and was manufacturing 12,000 units a day.





Amazingly “Ethel” and the majority of her exceptional trousseau have remained together since the 1864 Philadelphia Sanitary Fair where she was raffled, raising an astonishing \$1000. As I looked at her I couldn’t help but think about William Makepeace Thackeray’s book, *The Newcomes*. The doll looks just like the description of Ethel in the book. Even Thackeray’s description of heroine Ethel’s clothing seems to be duplicated for “Ethel” the doll.

The story of the *Newcomes* was originally published serially over a two-year period. When combined in novel form it is over 800 pages. However, because of the Ethel connection I read all 800 plus pages. The story is narrated by Arthur Pendenis and tells the story of Colonel Thomas Newcome, a virtuous and upstanding man, and his family. I was, of course, most intrigued to learn more about Ethel. Here are a few pertinent quotes that indeed sound like Thackeray was describing the doll “Ethel”:

Her hair and eyebrows were jet black (these latter may have been too thick according to some physiognomists, giving rather a stern expression to the eyes, and hence causing those guilty ones to tremble who came under her lash), but her complexion was as dazzlingly fair and her cheeks as red as Miss Rosey’s. In Miss Ethel’s black hair there was a slight natural ripple, as when a fresh breeze blows over the melan hudor. Her eyes were gray; her mouth rather large; her voice low and sweet, and her smile when it lighted up her face and eyes, as beautiful as spring sunshine.



“Ethel’s” riding habit is reflected in this paragraph from the novel:

The kindly Colonel loved to spoil the children, especially Ethel. He found a fine occupation in breaking a pretty little horse for her, of which he made her a present, and there was no horse in the Park that was so handsome, and surely no girl who looked more beautiful than Ethel Newcome with her broad hat and red ribbon, with her thick black locks waving round her bright face, galloping along the ride on Bhurtpore.



And upon examining “Ethel’s” exquisite ballgown I was immediately drawn to the comparison of Thackeray’s Ethel as she attended a ball:

On the next night, when there was a ball, Miss Ethel chose to appear in a toilette the very grandest and finest which she had ever assumed, who was ordinarily exceedingly simple in her attire. Her clustering ringlets, her shining white shoulders, her splendid raiment astonished all beholders. None of the countesses, duchesses, princesses, Russ, Spanish, Italian, were so fine or so handsome. There were some New York ladies at Baden as there are everywhere else in Europe now. Not even these were more magnificent than Miss Ethel.



Now that we know Ethel's origins, the question arises, "How did she become such an important part of American history?" The answer begins with the Civil War and the formation of the United States Sanitary Commission.

The Sanitary Commission was formed to assist the army in providing care for the sick and wounded Union soldiers and to aid their dependent families. Through the combined efforts of the Women's Central Association of Relief (A group of New York City ladies concerned about the conditions of the Union soldiers), a Unitarian Minister and the Surgeon General of the U.S. the Commission was established. Because proper ladies were not permitted to travel, the Women's Central Association enlisted the aid of Reverend Henry Bellows to go to Washington, D.C. to persuade the Federal government to help. Hence an order was issued by Secretary of War Stanton and signed by President Lincoln resulting in the formation of the Sanitary Commission in June 1861.

The central office was located in Washington, D.C. More than 7,000 aid societies were formed with main branches in ten of the largest Northern cities. Millions of dollars were raised, supplies donated, railroads built special cars to transport the wounded, hospitals and kitchens were established near battlefields, nurses recruited, and convalescent hospitals erected.

In order to raise funds, Sanitary Fairs were held in large cities, beginning with Chicago in 1863, then New York and Philadelphia in 1864. More than \$1 million was realized at the Philadelphia Fair where the "Ethel Newcome" doll made her appearance and raised \$1000 towards the total realized amount.

The Great Central Fair, as the Philadelphia fair was called, opened on June 7, 1864, at Logan Square in the center of Philadelphia. The fair took place from June 7 until June 28. The main exhibit building was 200,000 square feet in size. Inside the main building were "departments" with different themes, including corn, sewing, weaponry, fine art, curiosities, transportation, and children. And, of course, dolls were sold in the Children's Department. The "Old Woman in the Shoe" was a popular means of promoting doll sales. A young girl portrayed the "old woman" surrounded by dolls with the following motto prominently posted proclaiming:

I hope you all know me, little dears. I bring you some hundreds of volunteers; for their country, they come, not to die, but to be sold; I am willing to give all my children for gold. A mother most tender, a patriot true, I sacrifice all for the red, white and blue.

There was also an enormous restaurant with a seating capacity of nearly a 1000, an art gallery with the largest exhibited collection of art objects in the U.S., and a horticultural display complete with fountains and perfumed air. No expense was spared for this extravaganza.

On June 16, President Abraham Lincoln and his family visited the fair, and it is said the crowds were so large that even the first family found it nearly impossible to visit the various departments. Lincoln





autographed and donated 48 copies of the Emancipation Proclamation to the Fair. They were sold for \$10 each. This puts into perspective just how amazing it was when Ethel raised \$1000! (Note: Only 27 of the original 48 copies are accounted for and in 2016 one of these surviving examples sold at auction for over \$2 million.)

Once Ethel and her exquisite accessories and trousseau were assembled, she was placed on exhibit and raffle tickets were sold. The winner of the raffle was William Chancellor, a most embarrassed bachelor. He would not even look at "Ethel," but merely told the committee to resell her, and they did for another \$500, bringing the total to \$1000. The second lucky purchaser (and lucky for us collectors today) was Mr. Robert Sturgis who bought "Ethel" for his young daughter Henrietta (nickname Rita).

An interesting aside regarding the significance of the Sanitary Commission and what people did to raise funds concerns Reuel Gridley and a sack of flour. And, yes, this bit of trivia was learned because of my love for dolls. Had it not been for a doll event in Reno, Nevada, in April 2017, I would never have heard of Reuel Gridley. The theme of the doll gathering was the Japanese Friendship Doll "Miss Wakayama." Consequently one of the activities was a visit to the Nevada Historical Museum, home to "Miss Wakayama." I attended the first scheduled tour, spending most of the time viewing "Miss Wakayama"

and listening to the ever entertaining and informative Alan Scott Pate. Fortunately for me several people cancelled on the next day's tour so I was able to return to the Museum. I am so, so glad I did. Besides learning more about "Miss Wakayama" I learned about Nevada history and that included Reuel Gridley and his 50-pound sack of flour that raised \$275,000 for the Sanitary Commission! Yes, the actual flour sack was prominently displayed under glass, revealing more history relating to Sanitary Fairs. It is amazing how things overlap.

Briefly this is the story of one man's amazing efforts on behalf of the Sanitary Commission. Reuel Colt Gridley was born on Jan. 23, 1829 in Hannibal, Missouri. By 1862, after numerous ventures, he moved to Austin,



Nevada, built a store and became a merchant. In the spring of 1864, as the Civil War continued to rage in the eastern states, a municipal election for mayor was being held in Austin. Gridley, a Democrat, proposed a friendly wager with the Republican candidate, Dr. H. S. Herrick. Gridley bet that if he won, Herrick would carry a sack of flour and march to the tune of "Dixie" from Clinton to Austin and present the sack to Gridley. If Gridley lost, then he would carry the sack of flour from Austin to Clinton and march to the tune of "John Brown's Body."



Gridley lost the bet and true to his word decorated the 50-pound sack of flour with red, white and blue ribbons and flags and, accompanied by his 13-year-old son and a marching band, headed for Clinton where the flour sack was presented to Herrick. Mayor Herrick didn't want the flour, so the question of what to do with it was raised. Gridley suggested auctioning off the flour and sending the proceeds to the newly formed U. S. Sanitary Commission.



Encouraged by others, Gridley carried his sack of flour over to the silver mining region of Washoe County, Nevada. His campaign, called "The Army of the Lord," gained momentum. He carried and sold and resold the sack of flour over the Sierra Nevada to Sacramento, Stockton and San Francisco. He continued to sell and resell the flour sack as he headed east, eventually arriving at the Sanitary Fair in St. Louis where the flour was used to bake small cakes.

Each cake was sold for \$1.



Gridley's 1864 march with the sack of flour covered 15,000 miles and raised more than \$275,000 for the Commission. He was credited with keeping the Commission financially afloat and was called "one of the greatest unarmed heroes of the war."

Returning to "Ethel" and her life after the Sanitary Fair, "Ethel" continued to contribute to society. In December 1897 Henrietta (who was now Mrs. Charles Edward Ingersoll) displayed "Ethel" at a doll show at Horticultural Hall in Philadelphia for the benefit of Howard Hospital. Howard Hospital was founded in 1853 as a charity hospital providing medical care for factory workers. By 1897 the hospital had expanded but continued to provide charity medical services to the community.

Henrietta died in 1944 and "Ethel" was bequeathed to Mrs. Ingersoll's granddaughter and namesake, Rita Bullitt McClenahan. Upon Rita's death "Ethel" went to the next Rita in the family, great granddaughter of Henrietta. For many years, the family custom was to display "Ethel" and all her finery at their Thanksgiving and Christmas festivities. As the



Great Central Fair in Logan Square, 1864 (Library of Congress)



"Old Woman in the Shoe". This is General Grant's daughter Nellie. She portrayed the Old Woman in the Shoe at the St. Louis Fair (the same Fair where Reuel Gridley's flour was baked into cakes).



American Stereoscopic Co. photo of the Children's Department at the Great Central Fair (Library of Congress)

extended family grew, this custom was discontinued. Because "Ethel" has stayed in the same family for all these years the majority of her belongings and documentation have stayed intact.

Ethel did not make another public appearance until Christmas 1978 when she was prominently displayed at the John Wanamaker Department Store in Philadelphia. Rather than raise funds for charity, this event was used as a means of educating the public about a unique, historical moment in time.

Doll collectors were treated to a glimpse of "Ethel" when she made an appearance at the 1995 and 2005 UFDC Conventions (both in Philadelphia).

"Ethel's" contribution to history continues. Becky and Andy Ourant purchased "Ethel" from the family and through the auspices of several donors "Ethel" has been donated to the UFDC Museum for all to enjoy. Elizabeth Ann Coleman inventoried the 68 items that accompany "Ethel" including three items of particular interest: the raffle ticket book listing names of each purchaser, the original inventory of Ethel's possessions (48 items are missing) and 18 donor identification cards. The UFDC museum will, indeed, have a remarkable piece of American history. 🧸

Sources:

Stockton News Sentinel, Ralph Lea/Christi Kennedy, Reuel Gridley, a sack of flour, & Sanitary Commission, September 30, 2005.

The Incomparable Ethel Newcome, Jennylou Hamilton Schoelwer, Antique Doll Collector, February 2006.



Reuel Gridley and his 50 pound sack of flour. (Vintage postcard)