

Donation of the Month

Object: Mary Van Winkle Steele's Traveling Dress
Catalog #: 1987.26.1
Donor: Flora Vanwinkle Steele Galusha



There is something about clothing and fashion which evokes not only an era of long ago, but a sense of the wearer as well. This happenstance can be helpful to historians; although we might have a photo of a person or know a bit about their family's comings and goings, when it comes to having a greater understanding of the individual, we are sometimes left in the dark. This is true to some extent for Mary "Mollie" Van Winkle, who was born in Washington County, Arkansas, in 1844.

Mollie was the second of twelve children of Peter and Temperance (Temy) Van Winkle. In 1851 the family moved from Fayetteville to eastern Benton County where Peter established a lumbering empire. Because he "had grown up with the hardships of frontier life without formal education," Peter Van Winkle valued education highly, engaging a former lawyer to teach Mollie and her siblings. The family lived in a beautiful, isolated area near War Eagle which came to be known as Van Winkle Hollow. They owned cattle, mules, a fancy carriage, and over a dozen enslaved Africans whose labors enabled Peter to operate the home and mill as well as produce food and household goods.

In 1862 the Civil War swept into Northwest Arkansas. Family fortunes seemed to rise as Peter contracted with the Confederate States of America to build temporary barracks and stables for General McCullough's troops and horses at Cross Hollows (southeast of present-day Rogers). But the encroaching war also endangered the Van Winkles. Family stories relate a tale of Mollie shaking her hairbrush at invading Union soldiers and misdirecting them one day as they looked for the menfolk. She also is said to have dissuaded Union soldiers from burning the family home as they came upon her while she rocked her baby brother.



Following these terrifying incidents the family and their slaves moved to Texas to wait out the war. Before they left, Peter buried \$4,000 in gold coin. When the family returned they faced a scene only too common — a son killed in battle, their home and mills destroyed, their buried wealth missing. Northwest Arkansas and the Van Winkles began to rebuild.

Mollie found reason to hope. During the war the dashing Captain John Bell “Jack” Steele of the 1st Arkansas Cavalry courted her, sending her love letters and poems, and at least once visiting her at the family’s war-time home in Texas. Born in 1838 in Shelbyville, Tennessee, Jack moved to Arkansas as a young man and lived with the Van Winkles before the war, working as a turner (lathe operator) and a machinist at the mill. When war broke out he enlisted in the Confederate Army; and over the next four years he fought in a number of battles where he was wounded twice and imprisoned once.

Mollie and Captain Jack were married in 1868. For a time they moved around Northwest Arkansas, living first in Shiloh (present-day Springdale), where Captain Jack established a mercantile business. From there the couple and their three sons went to War Eagle to help with lumbering operations and operate a general store. They then moved to Fayetteville in 1880 to manage the Van Winkle House, a grand multi-story hotel which Mollie’s father built in Fayetteville. The family then settled in the newly formed town of Rogers, where Captain Jack played a prominent role in its development. Over the next 20 years he served three terms as Rogers’ mayor, became a justice of the peace, worked for cannery and grocery businesses, managed a wholesale lumber concern, and was president of the Rogers Academy where his sons attended school. A beautiful house patterned after the Van Winkle homestead was built at 303 Arkansas Street (where it still stands today). After his death in 1903 Mollie sold all of her holdings and moved with son Guy and his family to Oklahoma Territory. She died in 1922 in Whiteagle, Oklahoma.

While we may never know Mollie Steele as well as we would like, we can catch a glimpse of her here and there. One way to get to know Mollie is through her clothing, several pieces of which the Museum is fortunate to have in its collections. The loveliest is her traveling dress, an elegant floral-patterned linen damask accented with pleats, silk satin trim, and delicate mother-of-pearl buttons incised with fern motifs.

Traveling and walking dresses were often simple in design and made of sturdy fabrics like linen and wool. Back in the days of dusty roads and sooty trains, brown and black fabrics were chosen for their ability to mask dirt and stains. As with this garment, a stiff band of woven horse hair was attached along the hemline to give the garment shape and protect it from the rigors of the road.

While family tradition dates the dress to the time of Mollie's marriage in 1868, stylistically the dress harkens to the early 1870s, when the fashion was for a narrow silhouette which clung to the figure. Clues which reinforce this later date include a flattened waist, a double skirt (consisting of a separate under- and overskirt joined at the waist), a standing collar, and a long, snug, jacket-style bodice with a short, natural waistline. Although there is exquisite detailing at the hem and wrists, the visual emphasis is on the back of the garment, which was accentuated with a small train and pleated and gathered draperies for added fullness. To further draw the eye, silk ribbons and shell buttons were added to the bodice's military-style rear pleats. Supporting such a full and exaggerated shape would require a long corset, layers of petticoats, a bustle, and perhaps even a crinoline or hoop skirt.

So what does this dress say about Mollie? We know that its construction is beautiful and highly complicated, requiring the talents of a skilled seamstress. Since Mollie is known to have enjoyed fine needlework, she likely had a hand in the dress's execution. We know as well that although the linen body of the dress is understated, as befitting its role as a travel garment, the satin trim and fancy buttons add a touch of luxury and elegance. Fashion details such as these are what one might expect from the daughter of a well-to-do businessman and the wife of a prominent merchant and community leader.

Finally, we know the dress was special, because garments this old rarely last without tender care. In the early 1920s Mollie took three beloved dresses out of her trunk and presented them to her son Guy's three daughters. Flora Vanwinkle Steele Galusha was given the traveling dress, a gift which she treasured for many years before generously donating it to the Museum. Sad is the fate of the other two dresses. One was lost track of over the years, while the other, Mollie's wedding dress, was stolen many decades ago.

CREDITS

The uncredited research paper, "John Bell Steele of Rogers, Arkansas" (undated); Dorothy Mitchell's article, "Some History of the Van Winkle Place at War Eagle" in an uncredited publication (October 1969); Marilyn Lerner Hick's book, *The Van Winkle Family: Peter Marselis Van Winkle, 1814-1882* (1990); Joan Severa's *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans & Fashion, 1840-1900* (1995); Diane Snyder-Haug's book, *Antique & Vintage Clothing: A Guide to Dating & Valuation of Women's Clothing 1850 to 1940* (1997); Museum director Gaye Bland's article, "The Story of 'Captain Jack' Steele and his Wife Mollie" in the *Rogers Hometown News* (June 24, 1998); and email conversations with Marilyn Lerner Hicks (2003).