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**A Victorian woman's material world: The life and legacy of  
Mary Cowgill Corbit Warner**

**Rich, Kimberly Anne, M.A.**

**University of Delaware (Winterthur Program), 1989**

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**A VICTORIAN WOMAN'S MATERIAL WORLD:  
THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF MARY COWGILL CORBIT WARNER**

by  
Kimberly A. Rich

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University  
of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts in Early American Culture

May 1989

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**A VICTORIAN WOMAN'S MATERIAL WORLD:  
THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF MARY COWGILL CORBIT WARNER**

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Lavinia Tease Paul (1900-1988), whom I miss dearly. Her effervescent personality often made me forget that she had lived through almost a century; only upon her death did I begin to understand the shape of time.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

LIST OF FIGURES . . . . . vi

INTRODUCTION . . . . . 1

Chapter

1 "REMEMBER THEM": ODESSA FOREBEARS . . . . . 9

2 MRS. WARNER IN WILMINGTON . . . . . 22

3 THE COLLECTOR . . . . . 34

4 THE DAVID WILSON MANSION . . . . . 44

AFTERWORD . . . . . 57

CHRONOLOGY OF FAMILY EVENTS . . . . . 58

SELECTED GENEALOGY . . . . . 60

BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . . 61

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Front view of the David Wilson Mansion, now the Wilson-Warner House, in Odessa, Delaware . . .	3
Figure 2	Back view of the Wilson-Warner House . . .	4
Figure 3	An assemblage of MCW's collections . . . .	7
Figure 1.1	Family-based artifacts that MCW collected to display in the Wilson-Warner House . . . . .	16
Figure 1.2	The so-called "William Penn Chair" . . . .	19
Figure 2.1	Mrs. Mary Corbit Warner in her library at 903 Delaware Avenue . . . . .	26
Figure 4.1	MCW commissioned this Windsor armchair, fashioned after one that her father used in his office. . . . .	52

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines the meanings of objects preserved for posterity by one Delaware woman: Mary Cowgill Corbit Warner (1848-1923).<sup>1</sup> Objects, like diaries, are autobiographical. Mrs. Warner recorded her history not in a private journal, but in a public exhibition of personal artifacts acquired throughout a lifetime.<sup>2</sup> To recount MCW's story, I have relied on some documentary evidence such as correspondence and probate records, but, as a student of material culture, I believe her objects are central to the construction of an historical biography.<sup>3</sup> I have focussed my study on those objects which she collected and selected for display in the David Wilson Mansion, an eighteenth-century house

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter M. C. C. Warner will be referred to as Mollie, or Mrs. Warner, or MCW.

<sup>2</sup> No journal or diary has yet come to light. Although she may have kept such a record as a girl, her poor eyesight may have discouraged both reading and writing in her adult years.

<sup>3</sup> Museum accession numbers are found in parentheses next to those Winterthur objects cited in the text.

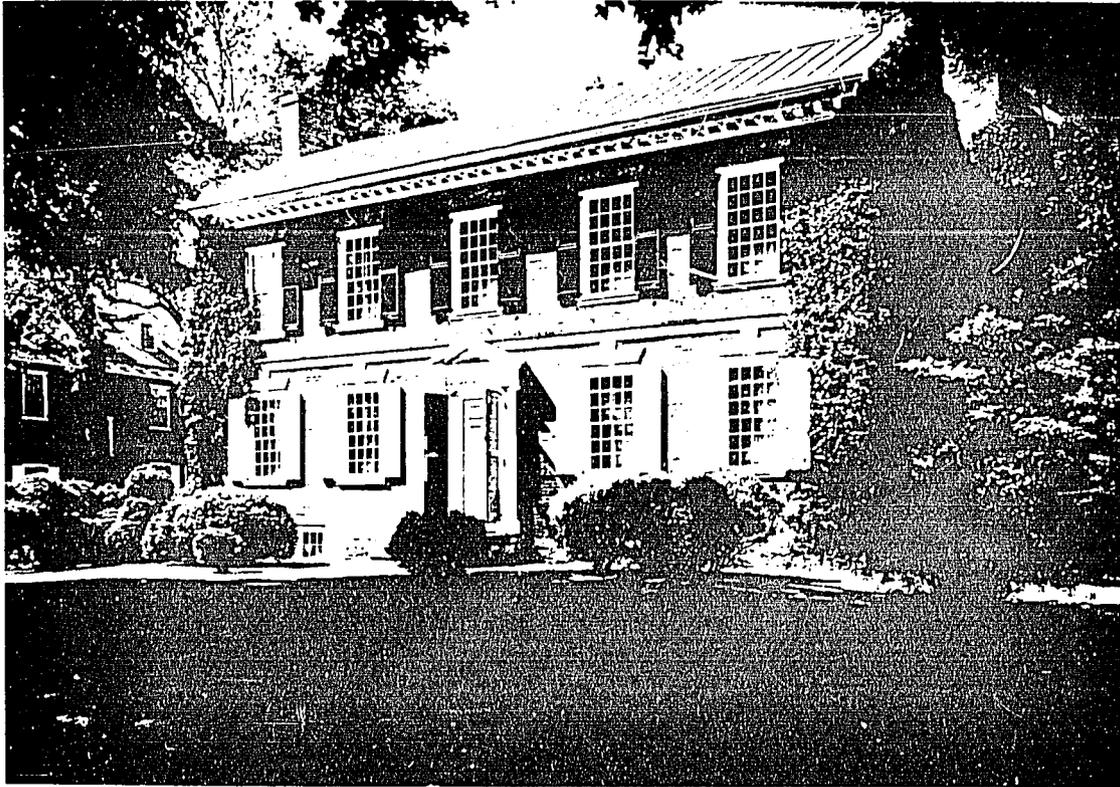
museum now called the Wilson-Warner House (figures 1 and 2).

Mrs. Warner recorded through objects her sentiments about family and community, past and present. Most Victorian Americans who collected relics were professional people: doctors, lawyers, teachers, and businessmen, who pursued collecting as a hobby or artistic pastime sanctioned by the Aesthetic Movement, in vogue during the 1870s and '80s.<sup>4</sup> The creation of a museum "reliquary" was an accepted practice among male antiquarians around the turn of the century, but it was an unusual act of self-assertion for a woman.

A pioneer in historic preservation in Delaware, MCW was one of the first people--male or female--to purchase a colonial house for the purpose of creating a museum. She was motivated, in large part, by a sense of familial duty. She purchased the eighteenth-century homestead of her maternal grandfather, David Wilson, Jr., in 1901. From the 1890s until her death in 1923, she acquired family heirlooms and appropriate antiques, from relatives or dealers, with which to outfit the mansion. These acquisitions reveal a cogent personal and historical

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<sup>4</sup> Saunders, "American Decorative Arts Collecting," p.8.



**Figure 1 Front view of the David Wilson Mansion, now the Wilson-Warner House, in Odessa, Delaware. Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.**



**Figure 2 Back view of the Wilson-Warner House. Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.**

mission. MCW wanted to assemble her ancestors' possessions in their colonial mansion in Odessa, Delaware, as a statement of the family's worth and status in the community and over time.

When I first looked at Mollie's family-based collections on exhibition at the Wilson-Warner House, as well as her souvenir spoon collection stored at The Henry Francis Du Pont Winterthur Museum and other personal curios in storage in Odessa, I wanted to learn more about the woman associated with these seemingly disparate objects. What was the connection, if any, between amassing souvenirs and restoring a genteel eighteenth-century house? I was more interested in understanding MCW's objects in the context of her life than in making aesthetic judgments about their quality. By examining the material evidence, I hoped to learn about her motivations for acquiring and preserving objects. In my analysis, then, I suggest what Mollie's material world signified to her.

Although Victorian women were avid readers, and literacy grew apace with the improved quality of women's education, most nineteenth-century women left no written record of their daily actions. It was common for a woman who kept a journal as a young girl to discontinue this

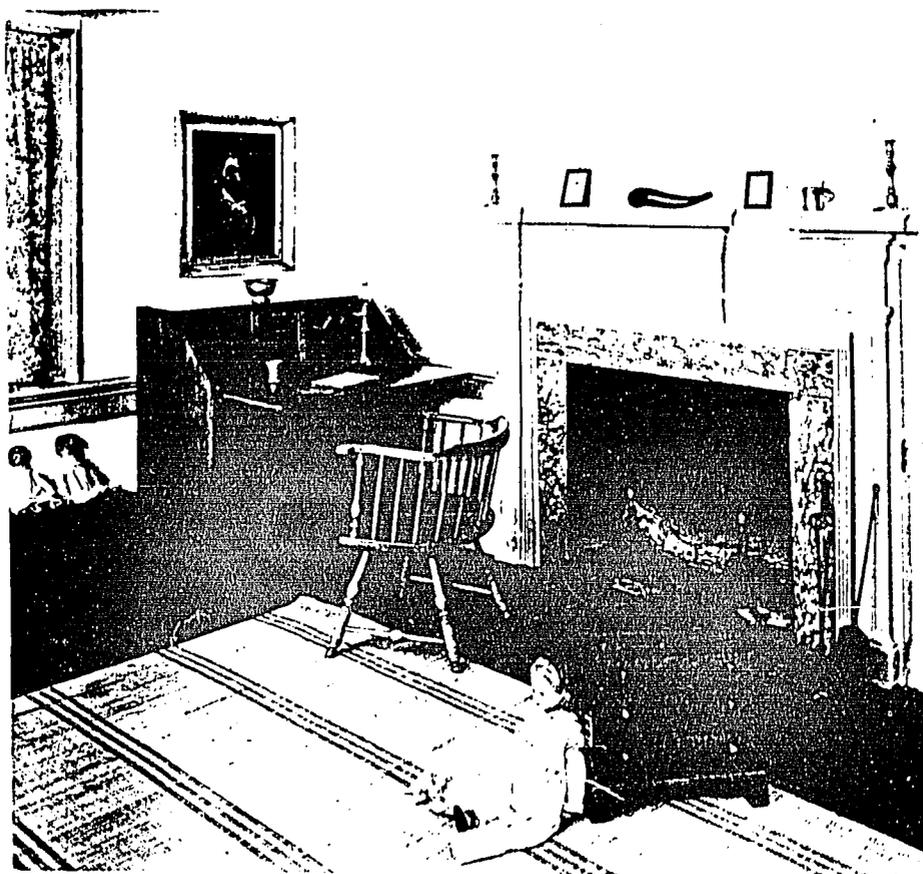
practice after marriage because matrimony often marked the end of a woman's personal life and the beginning of a public and family-oriented one. Mollie wrote home quite often from boarding school and college; however, after her marriage, at age twenty-eight, her correspondence and written accounts dwindled. Despite the paucity of written accounts, I was able to note various rites of passage in her life through the objects that she collected. Collecting was a fashionable hobby for men and women, but it may have served as more than a leisure activity for many women--it recorded female history.

For example, in 1894 Mollie purchased a student's writing desk (71.629, figure 3) from her former secondary school, Westtown, a Quaker boarding school in Westtown, Pennsylvania.<sup>5</sup> She attended Westtown from 1864 to 1866; her mother, grandfather, and other relatives had also received an education there. Mollie purchased the desk, therefore, as a symbolic record both of her family and cultural history and of her life.

As I set about studying MCW, genealogy was my

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<sup>5</sup> The walnut, maple, and pine fall-front desk bears a brass tag reading, "WESTTOWN SCHOOL 1794." A handwritten paper note, attached inside of the prospect door, states: "Rec'd Westtown, Pa. 5 mo. 31st 1894/ of Rhebe N. Votaw twelve & 50/100 dol-- in full for an old fashioned desk/ and the packing and taking to/ sta-- H. Haines Farmer."



**Figure 3** An assemblage of MCW's collections. Her student's desk (71.629) stands in the corner. Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.

first impediment. There were five Marys in the Corbit family tree from the early seventeenth century to the time MCW was born, not including those Marys who married into the family.<sup>6</sup> To help the reader understand Mollie's lineage, I describe her ancestry in Chapter One (see also Selected Genealogy, p.60). Chapter Two sketches MCW's married life and collecting activities in Wilmington, Delaware. Chapter Three takes a closer look at MCW's collections, notably the souvenir spoons. Chapter Four focuses on the intersection of personal and societal agenda that brought about the rehabilitation and the reinterpretation of the David Wilson Mansion as a museum.

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<sup>6</sup> In a letter to her father, MCW states her preference for the nickname "Mollie": "Father thee called me Mary in thy letter, thee must not do it it belongs to Westtown! Mollie here sounds just as harshly here as Mary at home. Contrary ain't I but Marys are always contrary! Except Mother." (Warner correspondence, August 29, 1865)

## CHAPTER ONE

### "REMEMBER THEM:" ODESSA FOREBEARS

Mary Cowgill Corbit (1848-1923) was born into a family with strong roots intertwined with the colonial history of Odessa, Delaware. A fifth generation Corbit, she was named for her paternal grandmother Mary Cowgill (1761-1845), the fourth and last wife of William Corbit (1746-1818). Mollie's birthright included wealth, status, education, and leadership.

Founded in the seventeenth century by Dutch and Swedish immigrants, Odessa had subsequently attracted British colonists such as Richard Cantwell, who built a toll bridge over the town's Appoquinimink Creek in 1731. The town was known as Cantwell's Bridge until 1855. In that year the name changed to Odessa, a reference to the Russian harbor town, which, like Odessa in Delaware, was a successful grain port.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For information and illustrations relating to historic Odessa and the Wilson and Corbit families see: Bushman, "Wilson Family," Hotchkiss, "The Wilson-Warner House," Pulinka, "Success and Failure," Sweeney, Grandeur on the Appoquinimink.

By the late 1760s Cantwell's Bridge was flourishing: Mollie's paternal grandfather, William Corbit, was running a tannery on the edge of the creek and David Wilson, Sr., Mollie's maternal great-grandfather, operated a dry-goods store. The Corbit patriarch, a Scotch Quaker named Daniel, arrived in Odessa in the early eighteenth century, while David Wilson, Sr., the Wilson patriarch, came to Odessa about 1768, "virtually from nowhere, apparently with some cash in hand, and entrenched himself as a leading member" of the town.<sup>2</sup> The Corbits grew rich from trade and farming as well as tanning; David Wilson, Sr., amassed a fortune working as a merchant, storekeeper, and farmer.

The first intermarriage between these two prominent families of Odessa occurred in 1769. David Wilson, Sr. (1743-1845), after losing his first wife and two children soon after arriving in Odessa, eloped with Mary Corbit (1749-1803), William's sister. Their secret marriage was apparently motivated by Wilson's fear that the staunchly Quaker Corbits would react negatively to his Episcopalian faith. As an appeasement to the Quaker community, he later built a meeting house for area Friends

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<sup>2</sup> Bushman, "The Wilson Family," p.28.

and was eventually accepted into the fold. In secular life the Wilsons and the Corbits shared the same practice of displaying their status through fine goods. Shortly after David Wilson, Sr., built his substantial brick mansion in 1769, his brother-in-law, William Corbit, built an even grander house next to it. Thus, the two families prospered side-by-side on Main Street, Odessa.

David Wilson, Jr. (1787-1870), one of nine children, inhabited the family homestead in the early nineteenth century. In 1808 he married Ann Jefferis, who was from an affluent Quaker family. Her father, Captain James Jefferis, was a successful merchant who carried goods from the Far East and Europe in his brig "Brothers." Ann bore five children including Mary Corbit Wilson (1811-1880), Mollie's mother. Shortly after Ann's death in 1822, David married again, this time to the Quaker Mary Poole of Christiana Village. David, Jr., carried on his father's mercantile business and managed a large farm until 1828 when, ". . . owing to the general business depression at that time, reverses overcame him; he became discouraged, and against the judgement of his friends, turned his ninety-three acres and his mansion over to his creditors."<sup>3</sup> The family's possessions were sold at

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<sup>3</sup> Pulinka, "Success and Failure," p.65.

auction on May 24, 1829.

David Wilson, Jr., took his wife and seven children to Philadelphia, where he went into the brushmaking business and began a new life. After several years of learning the trade, he moved west with his family to the Quaker settlement of Richmond, Indiana. The family farmed and made brushes on the side, but they never again enjoyed the comfortable lifestyle they had known in Cantwell's Bridge. In 1842 Wilson wrote to a relative in Odessa, "Though the family is 'very poor indeed,' . . . yet I do not believe there ever was a family more uniformly content than we are although some of us grumble when we find we have but one shirt or shift to our backs and not a decent pair of shoes . . . yet we endeavor to keep a light heart."<sup>4</sup>

Mary C. Wilson lived in Richmond for only a short while before taking up residence in Wilmington, Delaware, with her Aunt Elizabeth Shipley, the wealthy semi-invalid sister of Ann Jefferis Wilson. Mary was living "on the fringes of her rich and powerful friends" when, at age thirty-six, her fortunes took a remarkable turn. She received a proposal of marriage in 1846 from a well-to-do

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<sup>4</sup> Bushman, "The Wilson Family," p. 38.

cousin and recent widower, Daniel Corbit (1796-1877). He wrote to her during their courtship, "Thee is no stranger to me, but belonging to a near branch of my own family--native of the same village,--brought up much like myself."<sup>5</sup>

In the person of daughter Mary, David Wilson, Jr.'s prosperous past in Delaware was rejuvenated. She often sent money, food, and clothing to her family; she saved all the letters she received from them. Certainly, the former Wilson mansion, next door to her home in Odessa, bore silent but constant witness to her lineage. Evidently, she passed on her familial devotion to her only child Mollie, who would later memorialize the link between the Wilsons and colonial Odessa by restoring the ancestral manse.<sup>6</sup>

In her adult life, Mollie was interested in both the Wilson and Corbit genealogies of the eighteenth century. She rarely saw her Wilson relations; the social,

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<sup>5</sup> Bushman, "The Wilson Family," p.34.

<sup>6</sup> Mollie was the only child of the union between Daniel Corbit and Mary Corbit Wilson. Daniel, however, had five children from his first marriage to Eliza Naudain (1810-1844), four of whom were alive when Mollie was born. MCW's four half-siblings were John Cowgill Corbit (1834-1907), Louisa A. Corbit (1838-1901), William Brinton Corbit (1840-1882), and Daniel Wheeler Corbit (1843-1922).

as well as geographical, distance between the Wilsons and the Corbits was great. The Wilson grandchildren in Indiana became hotel clerks, blacksmiths, and mechanics; whereas Mollie became a lady.<sup>7</sup> Although MCW showed little interest in maintaining ties with these cousins, she bolstered her family pride and identity by collecting colonial relics that were substitutes, or place holders, for illustrious kin.

Mollie's "apprenticeship" in artifactual genealogy began with objects acquired as gifts or through inheritance. These family antiquities, esteemed for their associational value, also functioned as Victorian sentimental tokens.<sup>8</sup> Quaker inheritance practices in the Delaware Valley differed from the more prevalent primogeniture tradition among Episcopalians in that

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<sup>7</sup> Bushman, "The Wilson Family," p.46.

<sup>8</sup> Winterthur's Registrarial records note Mollie's objects in two ways: 1.) "this object was part of the family furnishings and memorabilia reassembled by Mrs. E. Tatnall Warner. . . In 1901, Mrs. Warner purchased the Wilson-Warner House, . . . after her death in 1923, it became a museum to house her collections and family furnishings, 2.) "Ex Coll. Mrs. E. Tatnall Warner. Transferred in merger with the David Wilson Mansion, Inc., 1969." These accession notes imply that some objects were deliberately collected while others were simply part of Mollie's estate. Some object records bear both notes, as yet, I have been unable to determine the significance of when only one note is recorded or when both notes appear on the registrar's object record.

parents usually divided an estate equally among male and female children, with the oldest sons sometimes receiving more.<sup>9</sup> MCW's collections indicate that she, like many women, received most of her share in moveable furniture, silver, and linens while her brothers inherited family land and business assets. In this respect, Mollie's experience was congruent with that of colonial women, who acquired linens, textiles, and household equipment as dowry items.

MCW's collections of family-related artifacts were varied, neither gender-specific nor media-specific, ranging from her great-grandfather's ledgers to one of her mother's lace cuffs (figure 1.1). It is, however, the objects belonging to female members of the clan that Mollie most assiduously documented. MCW owned several pieces of furniture relating to her female ancestors, all of which bear her handwritten labels documenting their provenance. For example, a card table (71.625) carries this message: "Property of my Grandmother Mary Cowgill Corbit and from the Corbit House, Odessa. M. C. Warner." An upholstered ladies' parlor chair and a mahogany washstand (71.644 & 71.646) bear brass tags reading "Mary C. Wilson 1846", as well as paper label messages,

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<sup>9</sup> Levy, Quakers.

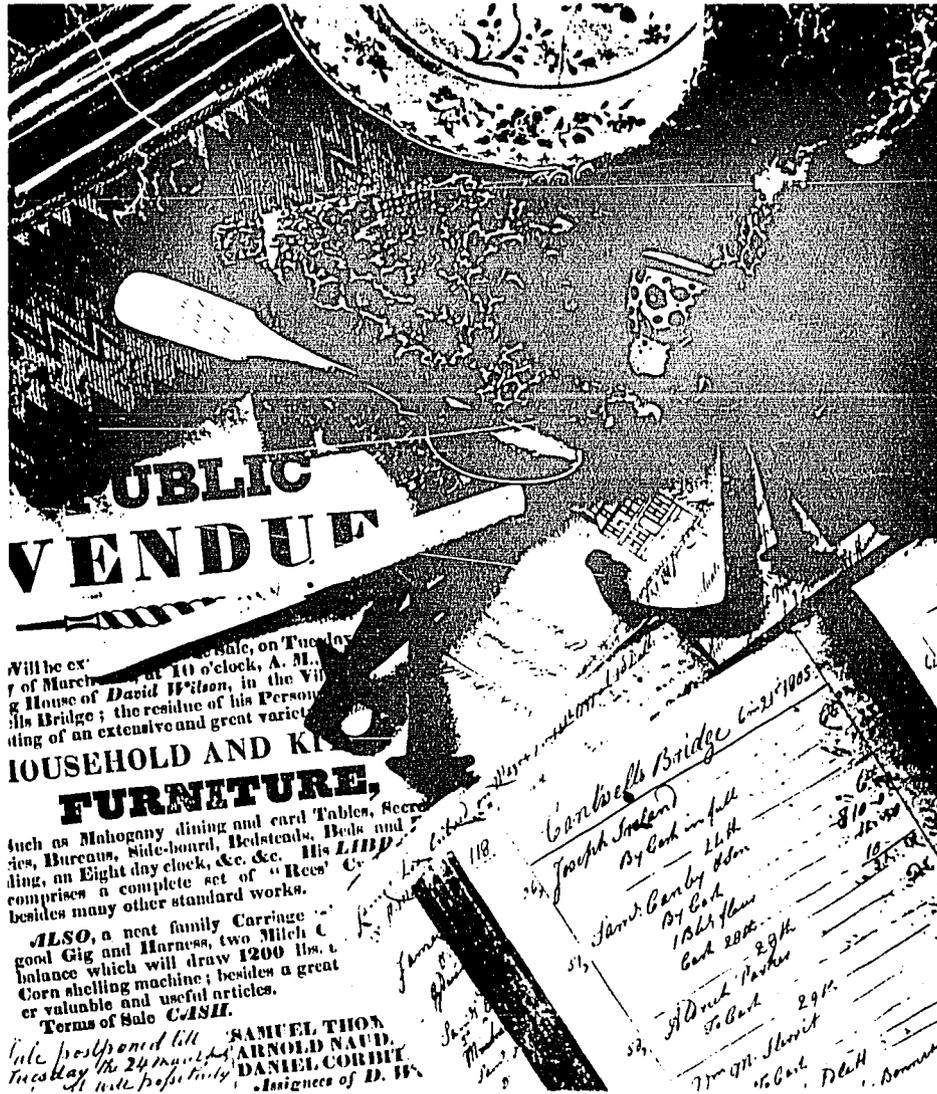


Figure 1.1 Family-based artifacts that MCW collected to display in the Wilson-Warner House. James Jefferis's snuff box, Wilson ledgers and letter opener, and a silver dessert spoon inscribed: "DAW/1806/MWC/1847/MCC/1876." Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.

"Property of my mother Mary Wilson Corbit Wedding gift 1847." A mahogany and oak chest of drawers labeled "J. Jefferis 1780 - M.W. Corbit 1847 -/ M.C. Warner 1876 - J. Warner 1902" (71.637), documents a rare instance of descent among both males and females.

Possessions passed through the generations marked rites of passage of which the most important was marriage. A linen tablecloth is marked in ink with the wedding dates of each of its owners--"AJ 1811/ to/ MCW 1847/ to/ MCW 1876"--as are a book entitled Pilgrims of the Rhine (71.852), and an ivory and silver memorandum book (71.990) engraved on the front cover: "M.C. Wilson,/ 1840/ M.C. Warner,/ 1876."<sup>10</sup> The family Bible, however, is inscribed with "Mary Corbit Wilson/ 1834/ M.C.W./ 1880/ 2 be placed in the Wilson House;" Mollie received this Bible upon her mother's death in 1880.

In the case of some objects Mollie added comments to explicate their context, such as the bone china vase (71.997) with an inscribed paper label reading: "A favorite vase/ of Mothers/ Mary C. Warner." A blue silk calash (71.1337) is labeled "Mary C. Wilson 1840/ Calash

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<sup>10</sup> Ink stamping began to replace embroidery, the traditional method women used to mark textiles, by the end of the eighteenth century. See Nicoll, Quilted for Friends.

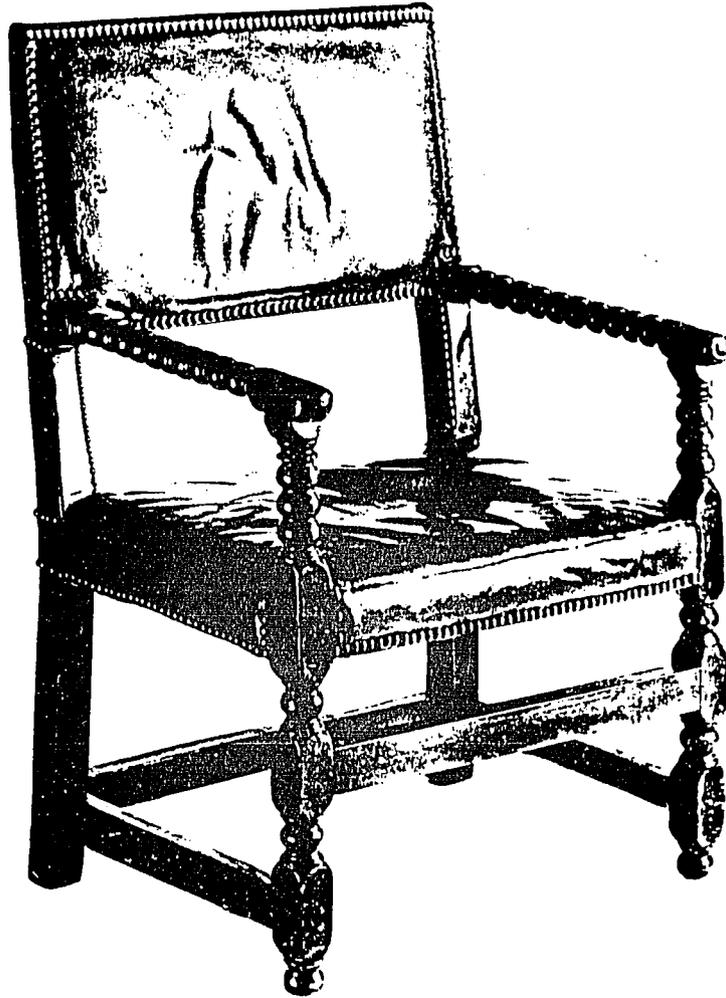
worn over front of bonnet to keep the sun out;" while a tan and yellow velvet dress (71.1495a,b) is described thus: "Paris dress & bonnet brought to Mary Corbit Warner by her daughter Anna E. Warner 1887."<sup>11</sup> As well, a horn-and-gold brooch bears a handwritten, paper label reading: "Top of side comb of/ Ann Jefferis Wilson/ about 1811" (71.975). Mary Wilson, Mollie's mother, converted the comb fragment into a brooch around the middle of the nineteenth century. Mary Wilson also saved many family letters and other heirlooms, a testament to her respect for family continuity.

Mollie's father, too, was a devotee of artifactual genealogy. Daniel Corbit attempted to keep his family furniture intact in the Corbit mansion when he inherited it. John Sweeney states that Daniel "bought from his sister, Sarah Corbit Spruance, most of her share, and bought in from his brother Pennell's heirs the clock, desk, and bookcase, and books that had been willed to them."<sup>12</sup> Not surprisingly, Daniel showed enthusiasm for male-associated items. The brass plaque on the back of a colonial turned chair (76.133, figure 1.2) bears the

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<sup>11</sup> Anna E. Warner, Mollie's step-daughter, was Edward T. Warner's daughter by a previous marriage.

<sup>12</sup> Sweeney, Grandeur, p.77.



**Figure 1.2** The so-called "William Penn Chair" (76.133).  
Courtesy of the Winterthur Museum.

inscription, "William Penn Chair, Cousin John Cowgill claims a certain ancient armchair, in which formally sat our common ancestor, The Venerable Joshua Clayton, an eminent and distinguished member of the Society of Friends, who died about 1740. Daniel Corbit 1843." A paper card accompanying a windsor chair (71.633) states that "This old chair was bought at the sale of Jno. Starr--an old batchelor [sic] proverbial for his honesty and other Christian virtues/ D. Corbit."<sup>13</sup>

Mollie's genealogical bent, then, was shaped by family custom, itself influenced by a larger sectarian Quaker culture noted for meticulous record keeping and a certain tribal insularity.<sup>14</sup> A sermon entitled "Remember Them", glued into MCW's scrapbook (71.996), succinctly describes sentiments and values shared by the parents and the child:

How precious that faculty which perpetuates the past! It is not merely in the present hour we live . . . Our former experience is not annihilated . . . The companions of our pilgrimage, although we no longer grasp their hands, or listen to their voices, are not lost to us. Their tones, their greetings, their

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<sup>13</sup> The author thanks Nancy Goyme Evans for offering information about this and another windsor chair related to Daniel Corbit.

<sup>14</sup> Zuckerman, Friends.

smiles, their deeds of kindness, their words of love survive the mortal hour.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mollie's scrapbook (71.996) contains poetry, homemaking advice, and inspirational verses that are affixed to its pre-glued pages. The front page notes, in a handwritten message, "Mary Corbit Warner 1880;" however, another date of February 1, 1886, is pencilled along the edge of a page which is one-third of the way into the book. The dates suggest that MCW assembled this scrapbook during her early married life.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MRS. WARNER IN WILMINGTON

On November 1, 1876, twenty-eight-year-old Mary Cowgill Corbit married Edward Tatnall Warner (1835-1904) in a ceremony held at the Corbit homestead in Odessa. The sixty-one witnesses who signed their marriage certificate were mainly relatives with surnames like Tatnall, Warner, Corbit, Spruance, Cowgill, Lea, and Woodall.<sup>1</sup> Like her mother, Mollie married an older widower: Edward, who was thirteen years her senior, had been widowed twice. Also, MCW became a mother when she took her wedding vows.<sup>2</sup> Mollie married well, for Edward Tatnall Warner's lineage was a match for the Corbit pedigree.

Mr. Edward Tatnall Warner had been educated in Wilmington and had apprenticed in the machine shop of J. Morton Poole before entering his family's shipping and

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<sup>1</sup> Marriage Certificate. (DMMC 69x224.451)

<sup>2</sup> Mollie became a step-mother to Anna E. Warner. Her mother, Mary Wilson, had "inherited" four children upon her marriage to Daniel Corbit: John, Louisa, William, and Dannie.

merchandising business. At age twenty-five, he began working for his uncle at the Charles Warner Company, which had been a family-owned-and-operated business since the late eighteenth century. The company established an electric steamship line to New York from Wilmington and later became involved in the railroad lines. The C. Warner Company first brought anthracite coal into the city, shortly after central Pennsylvania's Schuylkill mines opened in 1830. Other ventures included hydraulic cement, sand, coke, and lime.<sup>3</sup>

By 1870 Wilmington was an industrialized city, with carriage-making, leather manufacturing, shipbuilding, and railroad equipment production among its leading businesses. The Centennial Exposition held in Philadelphia in 1876, the year Mollie and Edward married, provided a showcase for these industries. Special trains were scheduled to transport excursion groups from Wilmington to Philadelphia; perhaps Mollie and Edward made the journey during their courtship. It was an auspicious year to be married. Americans looked forward to industrial progress and success and looked back on their first one hundred years as a nation with reverence and nostalgia.

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<sup>3</sup> Scharf, History of Delaware, pp.755-759.

Edward T. Warner epitomized the successful businessman. During his lifetime he served in the following positions: president of the Diamond Ice Company and the Guarantee Warehouse and Storage Company, vice-president and director of the Delaware Railroad Company, director of the Garrett Company Coal & Mine Company, manager of the Farmers Mutual Fire Insurance Company, senior warden of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, and president of the Church Club of Delaware.<sup>4</sup> Edward's workplace was on the site of the landing once used by Mollie's great-grandfather, Captain Jefferis. MCW took pride in discovering and recounting such intersections of family and community history, of persons, places, and things: "The landing used by him [Jefferis] was where the Charles Warner Store houses & office are at the foot of Market Street and the Christiana River. I was happy to have my husband & my son John have that interesting knowledge."<sup>5</sup>

Upon her marriage, Mollie left her hometown of Odessa, never to reside there again, in order to join her husband at 903 Delaware Avenue in Wilmington, Delaware

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<sup>4</sup> The Star, Sunday paper, Wilmington, Delaware, January 17, 1904. (University of Delaware microfilm S-37)

<sup>5</sup> Warner, "Annals," p.37.

(figure 2.1). Matrimony entailed not only a physical removal from her father's house, but also a spiritual one. Having left the Quaker religion years before, Mollie officially embraced Edward's Episcopalianism within six months of their marriage.<sup>6</sup> Beginning in the late eighteenth century, American Episcopalians had constituted a powerful and growing elite that came to include such adherents as the Duponts, the Roosevelts, the Vanderbilts, and the Mellons to name a few.<sup>7</sup> The "Epistocrats" enjoyed a life style to which Mrs. Warner aspired and to which she was well suited. MCW was confirmed as a member of her husband's church, St. Andrew's (8th and Shipley Streets, Wilmington), on April 29, 1877, along with seventeen other adults.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Mollie participated in the church's adult baptisms on April 1, 1877.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It appears that Mollie officially declared her resignation from the Quaker religion while at Westtown. She wrote to her mother on November 21, 1865, that, "I sent my resignation in to the society and explained the best I could my reasons for doing so. I think they all understood as they were very kind and sympathetic afterward. . . I think I feel reconciled now." (Warner correspondence).

<sup>7</sup> Konolige, The Power of Their Glory. The authors use the term "Epistocrats" to refer to this religious elite.

<sup>8</sup> "St. Andrew's Church - Parish Register, No. 2," p.22.

<sup>9</sup> "St. Andrew's Church - Parish Register, No. 2," p.184.

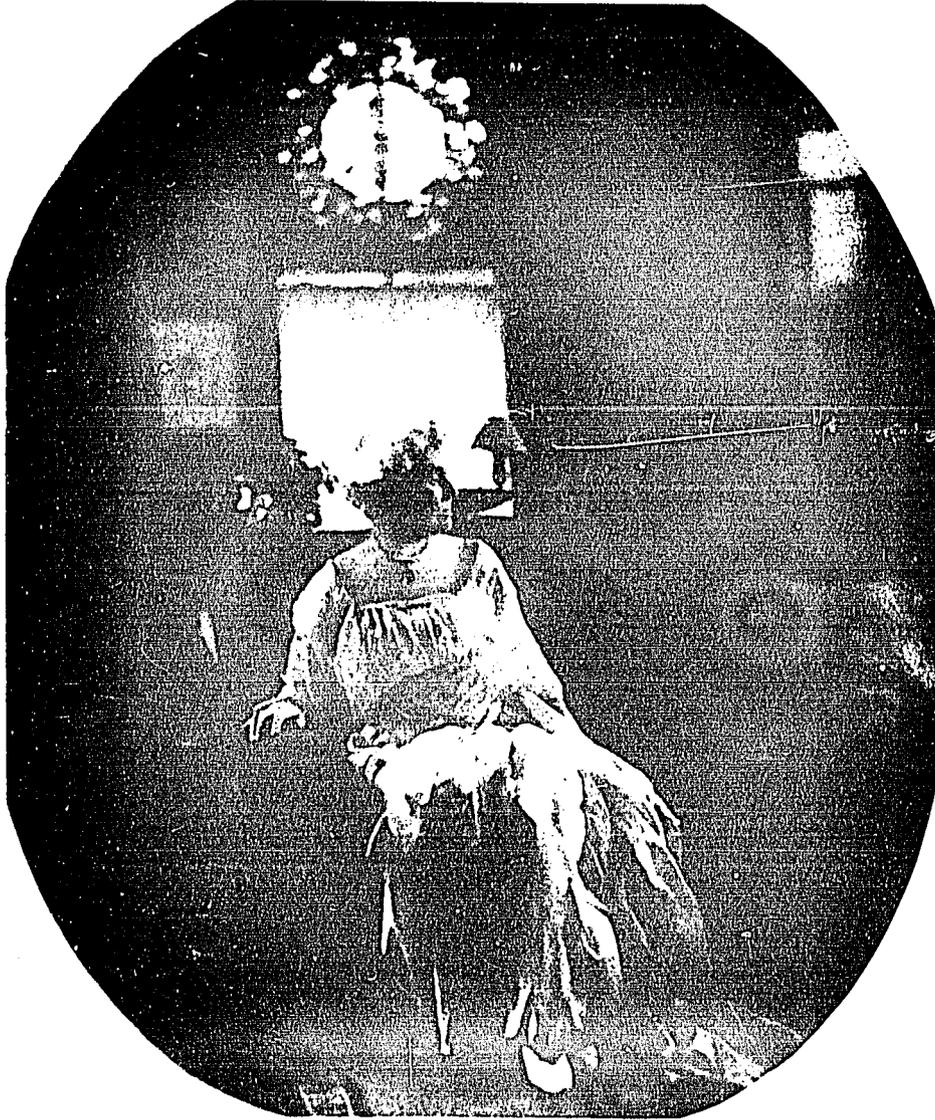


Figure 2.1 Mrs. Mary Corbit Warner in her library at 903 Delaware Avenue. Courtesy of Mrs. D. Meredith Reese.

The St. Andrew's parish registers document the births and deaths of Mollie's first two children, Daniel (1878-1895) and John (1884-1911). Her third and last child, Edward, Jr., (b. 1889), is not mentioned; he lived only thirteen months. According to church records, MCW's eldest son Daniel died of typhoid fever at age seventeen, just five years after the Warners' loss of the infant Edward. In death, Daniel and, sixteen years later, his brother John, too, were reunited with Quaker forbearers in Odessa.

Although Mollie had renounced the practice of Quakerism, she retained the Quakers' unshakable belief in family unity.<sup>10</sup> A great-niece described how the walled family plot behind the Friends' Meeting House in Odessa came about:

. . . our cemetery is down beside the little Quaker meeting house in Odessa and she [Mollie], to show you . . . pictures of her character. . . how she sort of liked to plan and dominate . . . The Quakers . . . split into the Orthodox and the Hicksite faction, well, when they did that the church in Odessa decided to be Hicksite and so Aunt Mollie flew in, bought adjoining land, moved all the early graves out of the Hicksite half of the graveyard, and put them all in the other one . . . that's all separated from the original now, it looks a little out of patience

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<sup>10</sup> Barry Levy discusses the Quakers' role in the creation of the modern nuclear family, a small familial unit bound by ties of mutual love, in Quakers.

with that place. Anyway, I have made plans that I'm going to have my funeral there and be buried there.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently, Mollie made this move for several reasons: it not only insured that her family would share eternity together but also symbolized her rejection of the Hicksite faction of the Friends, who advocated a return to a simpler, pre-modern lifestyle.<sup>12</sup>

Mrs. Warner's lifestyle in Wilmington was anything but simple or pre-modern. The four-story Warner residence on Delaware Avenue was "quite a big city house."<sup>13</sup> MCW herself was a "gracious and charming grande dame . . . who dispensed constant hospitality at her home . . . in what was known as 'Chimney Pot Row.'"<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Louise Nowland

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<sup>11</sup> Reese interview, August, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> The Hicksites, named after Elias Hicks, who divided the Friends into two factions around 1827, believed that Quaker dress should be plain and manners should be moderate. Although Mollie's grandmother Ann Jefferis was a staunch Hicksite, the rest of the family was not disposed to such conservatism.

Mollie probably turned her attention to the creation of a distinct family burial ground in Odessa as a result of a letter she received from cousin L. C. Alston after October 7, 1893 (Warner correspondence). Evidently some of the ancestral graves were on ill-tended private land, and Alston asked if Mollie would "have it taken care of for the respect of those that were laid there [sic] thy grandmother is there [sic]."

<sup>13</sup> Reese interview, August, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Mrs. Louise L. Nowland further explains in "Mrs. Edward Tatnall Warner," (p. 4) that MCW's "neighbors, the Howard Pyles, the Leas, the Bannards, the Ramseys and the

reminisced about the domestic scene:

her house was over full of furniture, as was the custom in those days. I remember so well her drawing room, mostly rose colored. In one corner was her tea table . . . She had a 'Day' (Tuesday) on which she officially received but one could always on any day be sure of a warm welcome and a cheerful cup of the best tea and the very thin bread and butter and slices of delicious cake that accompanied it. Near the tea table was a round glass-topped table which contained her fine collection of the souvenir silver spoons . . . The library, just behind the drawing room, was also overfull. Books everywhere, a large collection of yellow paperback French books, travel books, memoirs and of course, all the popular classics and old and new novels. It was there that I first discovered F. Marion Crawford and the Roman novels and many others that have remained favorites . . . The dining room with its heavy mahogany furniture . . . an extra place was always laid . . . for the unexpected and eagerly anticipated guest . . .<sup>15</sup>

With two maids and a cook to carry out much of the routine management of the household, MCW had the time to pursue collecting--be it souvenir spoons, books, or miniature ceramic and glass objects--as both avocation and vocation.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary advice literature, like the

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Victor du Ponts were all congenial and convivial."

<sup>15</sup> Crowe, "Reminiscences," p.4.

<sup>16</sup> Several miniature glass items exist in MCW's collections: an English compote (71.1022); a European covered dish (71.1023a,b); a European jug (71.1024). These were probably displayed in either of two diminutive cases in the form of sedan chairs (71.1522, 71.1523) also among her things. Several miniature tea sets from Aunt Mollie's collections, stored at the Wilson House, were given to young relatives before Winterthur acquired the

Appleton Home Book series selected and explained appropriate domestic projects that leisured upper-middle-class women in Victorian America might cultivate.<sup>17</sup> For example, chapter titles in Home Occupations list these pursuits: "The Possibilities of Tissue-Paper," "Spatter-Work," "Making Scrap-Books," and "Collecting."<sup>18</sup>

Collecting antiques and souvenirs--even preserving historic properties--were cultured and culturally acceptable ways for a woman of Mollie's standing to work.<sup>19</sup> And work, she did, at making her family's material mark on the past, present, and future. With the death of husband Edward in 1904, MCW "retired" from the occupation of wife. Her role as "mother" was truncated since only son John lived to majority, and he died, not

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property.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of American and British prescriptive literature dealing with interior decorating see: Jean Gordon and Jan McArthur's "Interior Decorating Advice as Popular Culture: Women's Views Concerning Wall and Window Treatments, 1870-1920" (Making the American Home, 1988); Asa Brigg's chapter six, "Hearth and Home," in Victorian Things (1988).

<sup>18</sup> Ruutz-Rees, Home Occupations, pp.5-6.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of women's preservation work in the nineteenth century see: Hosmer, Presence of the Past; Marling, George Washington.

just childless but unmarried, at age twenty-eight.<sup>20</sup> In her long widowhood, MCW worked to create a family of objects functioning on the levels of "memory," "memorabilia," and "memorial."

Mrs. Warner tried, with partial success, to memorialize her husband in a public arena, specifically that sanctuary of the elite St. Andrew's Church. MCW's great-niece recalled:

A number of years after her [Mollie] death, I met Reverend Hubert W. Wells who had been the Rector of St. Andrew's Church in Wilmington at the time of her husband's death. Reminiscing about Aunt Mollie, he spoke of her charm, her dominant position in the social life of Wilmington and her regal manner. She had offered a marble altar for the church in memory of Uncle 'Tat' and when it was installed came to view it. Mr. Wells described her as dressed in a long handsome white gown, large hat, her gloved hand carried a white parasol. She swept in, he said, and after voicing her satisfaction with the altar, raised the tip of her parasol, pointed it at the lower right hand corner of the altar, and told him she wished that area to be marked with the words: 'In memory of Edward Tatnall Warner II.' Mr. Wells relished telling me his answer: 'Mrs. Warner, while I am rector here, no name but the Lord's will be marked on His altar!'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Mollie helped raise Anna, Edward's daughter by an earlier marriage. However, Anna had married Dr. Frank H. Edsall and was living in Madison, Wisconsin, with their daughter and son, by the time that Edward passed away. In her will, Mollie left Anna and her daughter shares of stock in the New Century Club; she left to Dr. Edsall and his son stocks in the Wilmington Country Club.

<sup>21</sup> Crowe, "Reminiscences," p.10.

The indomitable Mrs. Warner achieved remarkable results, however, when she remembered her place; that is, when she utilized the home--woman's "separate sphere" in the Victorian era--as the means to the end of remembrance.<sup>22</sup> MCW, in Odessa, publicized the private by creating a museum of her own, and of her ancestors', in the home that her great-grandfather built. In her Wilmington home, Mrs. Warner privatized the public by using socially-sanctioned "fads," such as compiling scrapbooks and collecting antiques, to tell a personal tale of achievement. MCW's zeal was akin to the passion for genealogy that a distant relative, Sophie S. Rogers, confessed in a letter to MCW: "I have collected so much data in my efforts . . . I feel as if a history of the family could not be written without my assistance . . .

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<sup>22</sup> As mercantile capitalism flourished, women turned from producing domestic goods to purchasing them. Women's work became less central to the family's economic well-being and less central to the management of a home. The hearth and home, then, became symbolic of "true womanhood"--the roles of wife and mother--whereas they had earlier been a woman's workplace. Most of Mollie's collections related to the home: they were intended for use or display in the house; their formal or associational qualities bore the stamp of the cult of domesticity. See Nancy Cott's Conclusion, "On 'Women's Sphere' and Feminism," in The Bonds of Womanhood (1977); pp.197-207, and Amy Osaki's "A 'Truly Feminine Employment'".

Mr. Rogers says I live more in the past than the present,  
but I do so enjoy my work."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> To Mollie, April 17, 1900. (Warner correspondence)

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE COLLECTOR

Accumulating props to stimulate memory was a social preoccupation of the late Victorian era. The term "souvenir" describes, in the aggregate, nineteenth-century artifactual culture rooted in the past. Cultural memory was bound up in a host of domestic objects from revival furniture to reproduction "colonial" flatware: "the evocative power of these objects focused memory on personal, cultural, and national levels."<sup>1</sup>

Several discrete collections make up the material "data" that Mrs. Warner consciously assembled for posterity. Although these artifacts can be grouped by form, medium, place of origin, or style, what all of them have in common is a symbolic function as souvenirs; these items reminded the owner of, or initiated the viewer into, a mythic world of special places, persons, or events.

Mollie's assemblages of autographs--a people-

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<sup>1</sup> Federhen, Accumulation, p.127.

related collection--were souvenirs of the famous. Although few of the autographs survive, a number of lively letters relating to them do.<sup>2</sup> The letters sent to Mrs. Warner, between 1898 and 1918, by noted Civil War veteran General J. H. Wilson show Mollie's interest in current events and her understanding of them as the raw material from which history is made. Writing from Peking, China, after the "Boxer War" in 1900, General Wilson mentions two "autograph notes" enclosed in the hopes that they will be worthy of inclusion in her collection. On the news of the day, the Boxer Revolution, General Wilson comments: "The newspapers will doubtless give you full accounts."<sup>3</sup> In subsequent letters General Wilson includes more "autograph letters" from his files. The autograph collection was arranged like a carte-de-visite album. Appleton's Home Occupations of 1883, in a chapter on "Collecting," recommended such an autograph collection, for ". . . if well arranged, [it] is of great value to everyone. It is often very amusing, on looking over a book of autographs, to gauge the relative estimation in which the celebrities

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in the collection of the Historical Society of Delaware is a letter from General William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-1891) [MS7001.1] and a letter to Senator Higgins from Goldwin Smith [MS7001.6].

<sup>3</sup> The Historical Society of Delaware: MS7001.4, .6, .7, .9, .11.

are held."<sup>4</sup>

The purposes of, and audiences for, Mollie's pewter collection are less clear-cut. She collected almost thirty pewter objects, mainly from England, ranging in date from 1710 to 1815. Perhaps she purchased these antiques while abroad as travel souvenirs. More likely MCW purchased them as mementos of the country from which her ancestors came.

Mollie's interests in travel, genealogy, and tangible relics recalling the past were, in fact, mutually reinforcing. MCW's half-brother, Daniel Wheeler Corbit, recounted the following story recorded by his granddaughter Harriet C. Reese:

He used to tell about one of her trips to London whose purpose was to discover the background of the emigre Daniel Corbit, 1682-1756, who settled in Appoquinimink Hundred. She brought home with her the conviction that Daniel Corbit, a Quaker, was the second son of a knighted Corbett who was cast off because he was a dissenter, and who fled to the new world to avoid persecution. Tracing the English Corbetts, she discovered the crest . . . it contained two ravens and the motto "Deus Pascit Corvos" (God Feeds the Ravens), and the story behind it was of one of William the Conqueror's Norman Knights who,

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<sup>4</sup> Ruutz-Rees, Home Occupations, p. 93. MCW's autograph collection should also include her signed photographs which were prominent in the library, ". . . on every available surface of walls, desk, tables, and window sills were framed photographs, mostly autographed, of Aunt Mollie's host of friends from near and far." ("Reminiscences," p. 5)

wounded on the battlefield at Hastings in 1066, was kept alive by a raven (corbeau, in French) who, perched on his open visor, fed him berries. Aunt Mollie used the crest on her stationery, and had it stamped into a lapis lazuli stone made into a ring. No verifiable connection between the dissenter Corbett and our forebear has ever been found. Grandfather, a tolerant man, would say 'Let Mollie have her folly,' and smile.<sup>5</sup>

"Dannie," as MCW called her half-brother, had accompanied Mollie on some of her earliest travels to visit school friends who lived in Baltimore or Sandy Springs, Maryland, or Washington, D.C. She enjoyed vacations away from home. In a letter to Dannie dated August 8, 1865, she mentioned having dreamt of being at the popular beach resort at Cape may, New Jersey, ". . . I think I would go into raptures if I could just be transported there now. Come Dannie let's go!"<sup>6</sup>

Mrs. Warner kept on the go as a matron and a widow. She went south to fashionable watering holes and abroad, especially in later years when she sought treatment for her failing eyesight from a specialist in Germany. The largest concentration of her travel-related souvenirs, though, date from the early 1890s to around 1910. Mollie had the leisure to travel during her mid-

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<sup>5</sup> Crowe, "Reminiscences," p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> To Dannie Corbit from MCW, August 8, 1865.

life years; her child-bearing ended in 1889, and Mr. Warner's wealth provided the means both to employ servants to run the Wilmington household in MCW's absence and to cover expenses incurred in her journeys.

Mollie's fondness for travel and her taste for fashionable pastimes made her a devotee of souvenir spoons when they became popular in the early 1890s. Two 1891 publications testified to the spoon mania--George B. James, Jr.'s Souvenir Spoons and the Jewelers' Circular Publishing Company's Souvenir Spoons of America.<sup>7</sup> The latter proclaimed:

The breath of another fad pervades the atmosphere. The active and unsatiated American public, ever seeking for variety, have something new to chatter about and interest or bore their intimates. The panorama of novelty has been turned, and the fad of souvenir spoons is now reigning. From Maine to California, from Minnesota to Florida, the cry is for souvenir spoons. People visiting a locality, people who have visited a locality, people who would like to visit a locality, people who want to say they have visited a locality, people who think it is the proper thing, the recherche thing to have been a traveler, people who want others to remember that they have traveled, people who really believe they have traveled, people generally of a self-conscious or sentimental disposition, in fact, almost every one wants souvenir spoons.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Both publications were reprinted privately by Anton Hardt in Souvenir Spoons.

<sup>8</sup> Hardt, Souvenir Spoons, p. 3.

M.W. Galt, Bro. & Co. had launched the souvenir spoon craze with their copyrighted design of a Washington spoon in 1889. However, the first important commercial success was the Salem "witch" spoon designed by Daniel Low. Mollie owned two "Salem" coffee spoons (71.1128, 71.1145), one depicting a witch with her accoutrements (Low's design) and one representing Salem's "old witch house."

MCW's spoon collecting centered on celebrated places more than historic personages or occasions.<sup>9</sup> Almost half of the more than two hundred specimens are from Europe or Canada. Of the remaining one hundred or so American spoons, approximately 40% depict cities or states; 30% illustrate an historical monument or event; 18% relate to resorts or vacation spots; and 12% commemorate current events and expositions.<sup>10</sup> What makes

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<sup>9</sup> Five categories of souvenir spoons are discussed and illustrated in the catalog, Accumulation & Display: "piece" of place, "shrine" of place, view of place, history of place, and participation with place (Federhen, p. 127).

<sup>10</sup> The spoons related to the theme of historic monument or event include those depicting the Washington Monument (71.1178), Old Swedes Church, De. (71.1041), the Boston Tea Party (71.1214), and Gettysburg (71.1094). The literal messages on those spoons associated with current events read like newspaper headlines: "Sound Money, Protection, Prosperity" (71.1070) or "St. Paul Long Branch N.J., Stranded Jan. 25 - 1896 (71.1212)." Exposition committees often patented a design for the official souvenir spoon commemorating their event. A typical example is the 1907 Alaska, Yukon, Pacific Exposition spoon (71.1042) bearing the message, "Official souvenir/

this collection autobiographical is that Mollie visited many of the places depicted on her spoons; these spoons served as Mrs. Warner's travel journal. This interpretation is supported by Mollie's ownership of spoons that are redundant but not identical. Spoons depicting the same place, but fabricated at different times, imply that MCW did not purchase them concurrently. While much of her collection dates from the 1890s, at least one third of the spoons bear patterns which were produced as late as the 1920s. Hence, the evidence suggests that Mollie continued to collect spoons into the twentieth century, well after the vogue had subsided.

MCW's "place holder" spoons held a public place in the parlor of her home. She showed them in a glass-topped wooden table painted white except for the delicate polychromic floral design on the viewing surface and the raised gilded brass moldings enframing the beveled glass panels.<sup>11</sup> Presentation of self was bound up with the

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Alaska Yukon Pacific/ Expo./ Approved:/ J.E. Chilberg/  
President/ J.A. Nadean/ Director General."

<sup>11</sup> The display table (71.643) has not be located; this description comes from registrarial records. The Woman's Book suggested that a proper parlor be outfitted with, "a cabinet or two [to] hold its smaller curios, the tables low for books of agreeable and entertaining character . . . French cabinets are better adapted for European curios and those modern objects of art, Venetian glass, and the small grotesqueries to which the present fashion runs. These cabinets should be simple in line

display of the spoons, some of which bore personal monograms. The initialed spoons might represent specimens purchased in situ by Mollie; however, souvenir spoons could be purchased from a local jeweler's shop at any time. Anton Hardt explained, in Souvenir Spoons of the 90's. While most of the spoons were undoubtedly bought during the actual trip, many others were purchased at a later date when the traveller had returned home. Then he went to his local jeweler and asked, 'What souvenir spoons do you have for Philadelphia?'" The dearth of studies on souvenir spoon collections makes it difficult to assess whether the monogramming of spoons was a common practice. For the consumer, engraving may well have added not only expense but amplified memory, too, since family crests or initials "privatized" a mass-produced souvenir.

Several resort spoons bear Mrs. Warner's monogram and are dated, such as the two depicting the Kennilworth Inn, Asheville, N.C. (71.1223) and Niagara Falls (71.1224). Asheville's attraction was "Biltmore," the \$4,000,000 chateau commissioned by George Vanderbilt. Mollie also acquired spoons from such fashionable leisure spots as Atlantic City, New Jersey (71.1059), the Blue

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with but little ornament, since they require only a framework to hold the glass which is to screen the contents from dust (pp.113-120)."

Mountain House, Maryland (71.1131), Cape May, New Jersey (71.1125), and Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania (71.1179).

In all, twenty-three spoons, from Europe and America, have family monograms. Sometimes MCW combined the commemoration of people and events with remembrance of the places inherent in the souvenir spoons. Six foreign spoons have family initials and dates: one is marked "E.T.W./ 1889" (71.1225), probably to celebrate the birth of Edward Tatnall Warner, Jr.; four are engraved "DCW/ 1894" (71.1047, 71.1051, 71.1056, 71.1149), probably in honor of son Daniel's sixteenth birthday; one is engraved "1904/ MCW" (71.1066), perhaps in witness of Mrs. Warner's entry into her final life stage as a widow.<sup>12</sup>

Mollie's two largest collections were the souvenir spoons and the ancestral artifacts she assembled and

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<sup>12</sup> The European spoons bearing the engraved "DCW/1894," either purchased by Daniel or received by him as a gift, are important in their associations with European culture, William Shakespeare, and classical devices. Perhaps Daniel was singularly honored with these personalized spoons because he was the oldest Warner son. Several spoons bear Edward Warner, Jr.'s initials: a teaspoon whose baroque-style handle is engraved with "ETW Jr" on the obverse and "1889" on the reverse (this spoon, 71.1102, probably represents a commemorative birthday sterling spoon and is related to salt spoon 71.1080), and a souvenir coffee spoon marked "Berne" is also engraved with "E.T.W./ 1889" (71.1225). John Warner's monogram does not appear on a single spoon.

catalogued for enshrinement in the David Wilson House at Odessa. There is a connection between them in that the former attested to MCW's nineteenth-century Grand Tour and ancillary journeys; whereas, the latter constituted a "grand tour" of the past--personalized to be sure, yet put on public view. Late in her life, the two became congruent:

Aunt Mollie managed to travel a lot at home and abroad, taking with her the faithful but rather dour maid, Ella . . . When Aunt Mollie's many trips to the famous eye doctor at Weisbaden, Germany, failed to stop her increasing blindness, she depended more and more on her many contacts at home and abroad. Her possessions also loomed large in her mind and she marked almost all of her things with the history of each article . . . brass tags were affixed to the backs of most of the furniture.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Crowe, "Reminiscences," pp.7-8.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE DAVID WILSON MANSION**

Just as Mollie's collecting enthusiasm represented both conventional conduct in accord with etiquette and homemaking manuals and an unusual sensitivity to artifacts as the "stuff" of autobiography, her interest in family documentation bore the stamp of both conformist and idiosyncratic impulses. As patriotic and nativist sentiments came to the fore in late nineteenth-century America, elite status became associated with illustrious colonial forbearers. MCW's interest in genealogy went hand-in-hand with a desire to join the prestigious Colonial Dames Society, to which she was admitted in 1892.<sup>1</sup> During her search for the appropriate ancestral credentials, Mollie corresponded with a professional genealogist, and distant relative, Gilbert Cope, who mused about faddish genealogical zeal in a letter of 1892:

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<sup>1</sup> The certificate of membership states: "Certificate of Membership to Colonial Dames of America . . . in right of her ancestor William Brinton . . . 11 Nov. 1892." (DMMC, no accession number) The society was incorporated May, 1892, and according to this certificate Mary was the sixteenth Delaware woman to receive membership.

Now when some social standing is to be gained by looking up ancestry it [is] quite a fad. I am glad to see it because it makes people more careful of their records. The 'Colonial Dames' keep me busy hunting up their pedigrees and I was in Wilmington yesterday on that account...So far as I know none of thy Jefferis ancestors occupied positions which would give thee standing in the 'Colonial Dames,'...Since commencing this the postman brought me a letter from a lady in Chicago expressing regrets at not answering my inquiries years ago...I am glad to see the penitents coming in.<sup>2</sup>

The note of sarcasm in Mr. Cope's remarks was due, perhaps, to repeated experiences of the sort reported by S.W. Herdic, one of MCW's cousins, in a letter of 1900:

The [genealogical] chart [is] not satisfactory because no one was sufficiently interested to pay Mr. Cope . . . By the way there is no doubt about finding ourselves in England - but my dear Mother always used to say to me - 'Your Grandfather Jefferis - was one of the best of men - no need of looking for anything better.'<sup>3</sup>

In the end, MCW gained her "standing" with the Dames through her Brinton ancestors, with or without Cope's assistance.

In addition to genealogy, Victorians pursued relics, and the creation of reliquaries, as an act of patriotism and of pedagogy directed to an immigrant

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<sup>2</sup> To MCW from Gilbert Cope, West Chester, Pennsylvania, October, 26, 1892. (Warner Correspondence)

<sup>3</sup> To MCW from S.W. Herdic, September 30, 1900. (Warner correspondence)

audience.<sup>4</sup> The old-time "New England Kitchen," redolent of family unity and Revolutionary solidarity, made its first appearance at the Civil War Sanitation fairs.<sup>5</sup> MCW's father, according to family tradition, lent his "William Penn" chair (76.133) to a Philadelphia Sanitation Fair for inclusion in a display of "colonial antiques." Mollie herself contributed to a "colonial" exhibition, as evidenced by a label secured inside a wallet (71.1264) which had belonged to her great-grandfather. "1776" is the date embroidered on the flame-stitched surface of this wallet; inside a handwritten card states: "James Jefferis/1776/Wilmington; Loaned by/Mary Corbit Warner/Wilmington Delaware." The wallet may have been shown at a local Colonial Dames exhibition or it may have traveled to Chicago for display at the 1893 world's fair.

There is strong artifactual evidence that MCW attended Chicago's Great Fair, "The World's Columbian Exposition"--several Columbian Exposition souvenir spoons; a set of Russian furniture (71.648, .649) of the sort sold to Exposition visitors; an embroidered pillow (71.1432) labeled, ". . . Prize at World's Fair by Mrs. C. Warner;" a needlework scarf (71.1451) embroidered with "Prize

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<sup>4</sup> Rhoads, "The Colonial Revival," pp.239-254.

<sup>5</sup> Axelrod, Colonial Revival, pp.159-184.

taken/World's Fair/1893;" and a souvenir World's Fair bronze medal (71.1010) bearing a rectangular plaque inscribed--"To Mrs. E. T. Warner."<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, MCW's involvement in genealogy and the display of artifacts for public enjoyment and edification was conditioned by the national pastime of searching out roots and celebrating America's material success, past and present. However, Mollie's commitment to linking history and objects was also a personal mission born of filial piety. Her devotion to family was manifested in such activities as the erection of a stone marker to identify forbearers interred on the Corbit farm in Odessa. MCW corresponded with many family members and placed advertisements to locate Wilson relations in the Chestertown, Maryland, area from whence David Wilson, Sr., may have hailed. One respondent gave an account of his Wilson ancestors who, he said, were very strict English Quakers. He mentioned a Chestertown farm which he believed to be the "old homestead" because "very close to the house the old man [Wilson] had a family burying ground and its stone walls are today in good preservation."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mrs. Charles Warner, a relation by marriage, may have accompanied MCW to the fair.

<sup>7</sup> To Mary Warner from Olivia A. Laing, December, 4, 1892. (Warner correspondence)

This letter may have influenced MCW's decision to create a walled family cemetery behind the Friends' Meeting House in Odessa.

Mollie explored both Wilson and Corbit progenitors, but the former received greater attention. The Wilson clan lost status after MCW's grandfather, David, Jr., moved to an Indiana farm. Mollie showed little inclination to maintain ties with the younger Wilsons in the west, but she was deeply interested in reviving the family's halcyon days in eighteenth-century Odessa.

During his "exile" in the midwest, David Wilson, Jr., had written to MCW's mother that he dearly missed his former life style and dreamed about going back to "where I spent all first youth in comfortable circumstances both pecuniarily [sic] and socially with the inhabitants and playmates of my native old Cantwell's Bridge."<sup>8</sup> In 1901, when Mollie was both "pecuniarily and socially" comfortable, she bought the Wilson homestead, thereby symbolically squaring all accounts and restoring David, Jr.'s lost fortune and place in the community. With this purchase, MCW offered a tribute to the memory of her

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<sup>8</sup> Pulinka, "Success and Failure," p.70.

mother and grandfather, and to the fellowship once enjoyed by the Corbits and the Wilsons. The David Wilson Mansion served to enshrine family heirlooms and to resurrect the Wilson name and patrimony in Delaware.

Like her grandfather, Mollie was articulate and well bred, with genteel tastes. Each expressed self through possessions; both demonstrated a fondness for the best that money could buy. A recent study of David Wilson, Jr.'s furnishings and personal belongings indicates that he and his family were living in a manner comparable to the most influential and wealthy members of their Odessa community before his financial ruin in 1828. In fact, for certain types of objects, the Wilsons' equipage far exceeded their neighbors' in quantity and in value. For example, their silver plate was the most valuable in town.<sup>9</sup> MCW made provisions for this silver in her will almost a century later: the "old Jefferis silver service and small silver (which includes the Wilson silver)" was to descend through the family, but, in the absence of heirs, it should "be placed in the 'David Wilson Mansion', in Odessa, in a safe and secure place." Also, the will specified that a large photograph be made of the silver--"framed; properly inscribed and hung in the

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<sup>9</sup> Pulinka, "Success and Failure," p.59.

Wilson house."<sup>10</sup>

MCW described David Wilson, Jr., as ". . . the Grandfather I loved," and in whom she found "a broad thinker, wonderful in his progressive ideas."<sup>11</sup> Such free-thinking infused a letter sent to MCW in 1865:

. . . my dear do not for a moment conclude that thee has finished thy Education for I can assure that thee has only laid the foundation and that thy Education ought to continue Along Life, I find old as I am that I am educating myself every day or in other words am gaining new ideas every day + I find old prejudices (which I took for truths) done away + I say to thee examine all things for thy self + do not agree to any thing as true from heresay [sic] or because others in whom thee has confidence says so. The true principle to guide us is to examine for ourselves if this is not Reason + Common Sense is given to man in vain + Surely we are not bound to beleve [sic] what we neither know or understand, because others beleve [sic] they know or understand, it may be knowledge to them but not to us + it is unwise in us to take any thing for granted without investigation."<sup>12</sup>

Investigation was one of Mollie's strengths. In fact, a decade before she acquired the Wilson homestead, MCW began to investigate the whereabouts of antiques with a Wilson or Corbit provenance. Cousin S. W. Herdic

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<sup>10</sup> 1919 last will and testament of Mary Corbit Warner, p.4. (DMMC, not accessioned)

<sup>11</sup> Warner, "Annals of Odessa," p.37.

<sup>12</sup> To Mollie from David Wilson, Jr., September 3, 1865. (Warner correspondence)

responded, in 1900, that he would soon send the Jefferis family portraits. Also, he remarked on a family textile, ". . . the bed spread is very curious & handsome & I use it for a piano cover."<sup>13</sup> Another cousin, sent genealogical information but concluded, ". . . I have no old furniture or China."<sup>14</sup> When old furniture could not be located MCW was not opposed to a reproduction, as in the case of a Windsor armchair (71.630, figure 4.1) her father had used in his office.<sup>15</sup> Since Mollie's furnishings plan for the Wilson House museum stressed associational value above all, the modern chair was neither an imitation nor an imposter; rather it symbolized an authentic experience and a real person.

MCW did collect and label many examples of her female ancestors' handiwork, a testimony to their industry. For example, there is a baby's bonnet (71.1278) "Made by Deborah Hunt Jefferis 1770;" two white gloves (71.1304.1,.2) "knit by Debbie Hunt Jefferis my great Grandmother;" several pairs (71.1303.1-.7) of "Under

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<sup>13</sup> To Mary C. Warner from S.W. Herdic, September 30, 1900. (Warner correspondence)

<sup>14</sup> To Mary C. Warner from Sarah E. Clarke, September 7, 1900. (Warner correspondence)

<sup>15</sup> The author thanks Nancy Goynes Evans for sharing information and photocopies of the object which she acquired some years ago.



Figure 4.1 MCW commissioned this Windsor armchair, fashioned after one that her father used in his office. Photograph courtesy of Nancy Goyne Evans.

Sleeves" owned or made by "Ann Jefferis Wilson/ my grandmother/ M. C. Warner 1900;" and a "Watch guard" (71.1310) "made by Mary C. Wilson (my Mother) 1840," with MCW's description, "Black beads with white flowers in beads."

The early advocates of historic preservation in the nineteenth century were generally amateur historians who sought to create and perpetuate shrines to patriotic heroes. Although MCW's house museum was a family shrine, it had a different character than did a national shrine such as Mount Vernon. MCW's efforts were akin to those of the second generation of preservationists, mainly New England male antiquarians working in the early twentieth century. Their impetus was more often family tradition than patriotic inspiration.<sup>16</sup> MCW's museum, then, presaged the historic houses these gentlemen would outfit. She, like them, attached the greatest import to the male players in the colonial drama; yet one woman was assigned a starring role--Mary Cowgill Corbit Warner.

MCW wanted her numerous collections to be exhibited alongside the colonial relics in the Wilson

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<sup>16</sup> For brief biographies of such men and their activities see: Hosmer, Presence of Past; Saunders, "Collecting;" Stillinger, The Antiquers.

House. In this way, she inserted herself into the "generation of the grandfathers and grandmothers," while retaining her Victorian status as a cultured citizen of the world.<sup>17</sup> Such diverse artifacts as ornate priests' vestments (71.1397.1,.2), a piece of a cathedral curtain "where the remains of Christopher Columbus now rest," Chinese ceremonial silks (71.1432, .1438), a 2000-year-old Egyptian miniature mummy, or "ushabti," (71.1429) were to be included in the "front part of said mansion [which] shall be used as a museum in which may be placed any curios or articles of interest for the study and inspection of the public . . ."<sup>18</sup> MCW further suggested that ". . . if practicable the said [David Wilson Mansion] corporation shall charge a very modest sum to the public desiring to inspect [the] curios or articles of interest," her only purpose in so doing "being that the same shall not be used by persons not having a real interest therein, any sum or sums so received to be used . . . for the poor of Odessa . . ."<sup>19</sup> Her instructions for the future museum

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<sup>17</sup> Axelrod, Colonial Revival, pp.246-248.

<sup>18</sup> The cloth remnant, in the DMMC (not accessioned), bears a message in Mollie's handwriting: "It is several hundred years old and was given to me in San Domingo. May 22, 1891. Compliments of Nathaniel M. Kay." Mollie declared her intentions for the "David Wilson Mansion, Inc." in her will. (DMMC, not accessioned)

<sup>19</sup> MCW will. (DMMC, not accessioned)

reveal two prevalent Victorian attitudes or practices: an exhibition aesthetic based on the Renaissance notion of the "curiosity cabinet," where disparate artifacts are displayed as novelties, exotica, or emblemata, as well as a nineteenth-century feminine philanthropic attitude whereby the "poor" should profit from the museum's proceeds while the public was enlightened by the institution.

The David Wilson Mansion symbolizes something of MCW's assertiveness, intelligence, and refined tastes. Mollie sought not to revive a specific colonial legacy but to remember and memorialized the past in a generic, atmospheric way. This sentimental impulse is expressed in Charles Swain's poem, "The Old Evenings," included in MCW's Scrapbook (71.996):

I wander'd by the old house,  
 But others now live there;  
 I thought about the old times,  
 And all we used to share.  
 . . . But what though we'd the old house,  
 We still would lack old cheer;  
 The old friends in the old house  
 Were all that made it dear!  
 And these are fled, or changed, or dead,  
 And never more may we  
 Revive the music of their tread--  
 The joys that used to be  
 In those old friendly evenings,  
 Those long departed evenings . . .

By securing the Wilson homestead as a public trust, and outfitting it with genteel colonial furnishings, Mollie

evoked the presence of the past for herself and for future generations. As well, by merging her personal artifactual history with that of the eighteenth-century house she made her museum an embodiment of the enduring cultural principle of family unity. Decorative arts displayed in the house museum mediated the time-linked considerations of history and the timeless qualities of art. Mollie's scrapbook contained a verse that encapsulates her museological motivation:

Art is long.  
All passes. Art alone  
Enduring stays to us;  
The bust outlasts the throne,  
The coin Tiberius.

## AFTERWORD

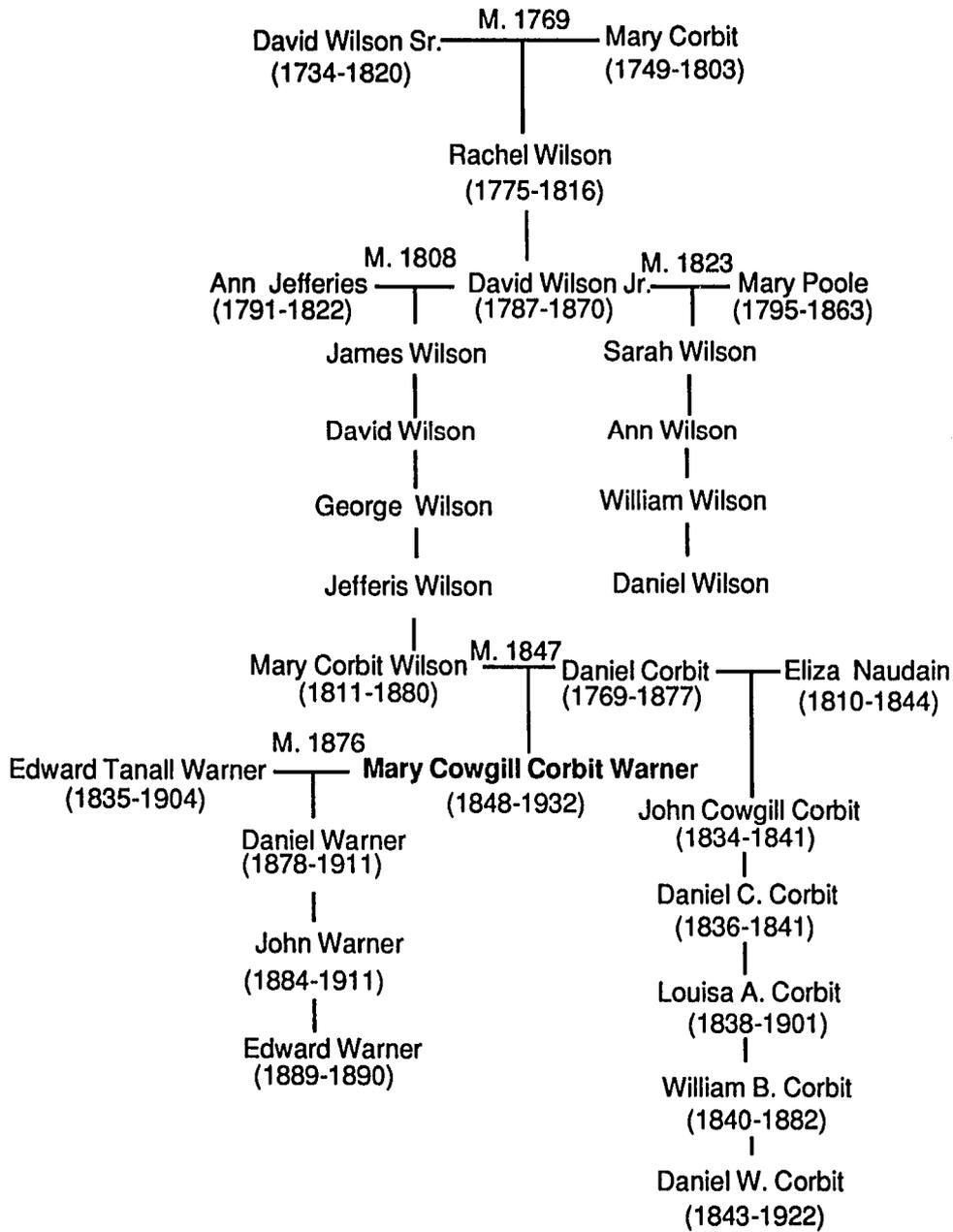
In 1969, Winterthur Museum acquired the David Wilson House and renamed it the Wilson-Warner House, in honor of the original builder and the woman who preserved the property. While the new name gives equal billing to the eighteenth-century owner and the nineteenth-century preserver, the current displays do not. One reason that MCW is a shadowy figure is the paucity of written information concerning her biography as well as her reasons for preserving a portion of eighteenth-century Odessa. Perhaps, another explanation is that twentieth-century tastes have favored colonial history over Victorian; most of MCW's nineteenth-century curios are in storage at Winterthur Museum. As stated previously, Mollie's will specified that the David Wilson Mansion museum was to house any curios or articles of interest for the public to inspect and study. It is ironic that the Wilson family home, saved largely through MCW's efforts, remains a paradigm of eighteenth-century life in rural Delaware, while eclipsing her life accomplishments and collections.

### CHRONOLOGY OF FAMILY EVENTS

- 1769 - David Wilson, Sr., builds a large house, now the Wilson-Warner House, on main street in Odessa.
- 1787 - David Wilson, Jr., Mollie's grandfather, is born.
- 1808 - David Wilson, Jr., marries Ann Jefferis.
- 1820 - David Wilson, Sr., dies leaving his house to his sole surviving heir, David Wilson, Jr.
- 1822 - Ann Jefferis, Mollie's great-grandmother, dies.
- 1823 - David Wilson, Jr., marries Mary Poole.
- 1828 - David Wilson, Jr., experiencing financial difficulty, agrees to assignment of his property.
- 1829 - Sale of Wilson's real estate to William Polk. Wilson family moves to Philadelphia.
- 1836 - Wilson family leaves Philadelphia for Indiana.
- 1847 - Mary Corbit Wilson, Mollie's mother, marries Daniel Corbit, in Odessa, Delaware.
- 1848 - Mary Cowgill Corbit (Mollie), their daughter, is born.
- 1863 - Mary Poole, wife of David Wilson, Jr., dies in Richmond, Indiana.
- 1870 - David Wilson, Jr., dies in Richmond, Indiana.
- 1876 - Mary Cowgill Corbit marries Edward Tatnall Warner. She is twenty-eight and he is forty-one years old. It is his third marriage.

- 1877 - Mary's father, Daniel Corbit, dies. Also her mother-in-law, Williamina Y. Warner, dies.
- 1878 - Daniel Corbit Warner, MCW's first child, is born. Mrs. Warner is thirty years old.
- 1880 - Mary Corbit Wilson Corbit, MCW's mother, dies.
- 1882 - William Brinton Corbit, MCW's half-brother, dies.
- 1884 - John Warner, MCW's second child, is born. Mrs. Warner is thirty-six years old.
- 1889 - Edward Tatnall Warner, Jr., MCW's third child, is born, but dies thirteen months later (1890). Mrs. Warner is forty-two when he dies.
- 1892 - MCW admitted to the Delaware branch of the Colonial Dames Society.
- 1893 - Most of MCW's souvenir spoons are dated to this year.
- 1895 - Daniel C. Warner, MCW's eldest son, dies. She is forty-seven years old.
- 1901 - Mary Corbit Warner purchases the Wilson mansion from the Polks.
- 1901 - Louisa A. Corbit, MCW's half-sister, dies.
- 1904 - Edward Tatnall Warner, MCW's husband, dies. She is fifty-six years old.
- 1907 - John Cowgill Corbit, MCW's half-brother, dies.
- 1911 - John Warner, MCW's only son to live to majority, dies.
- 1919 - Mrs. Warner begins her "Annals of Odessa", a family-based history of Cantwell's Bridge, now Odessa. It is never completed.
- 1922 - Daniel Wheeler Corbit, MCW's youngest half-brother, dies.
- 1923 - Mary Corbit Warner dies at age seventy-five, leaving the David Wilson Mansion to the public.

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