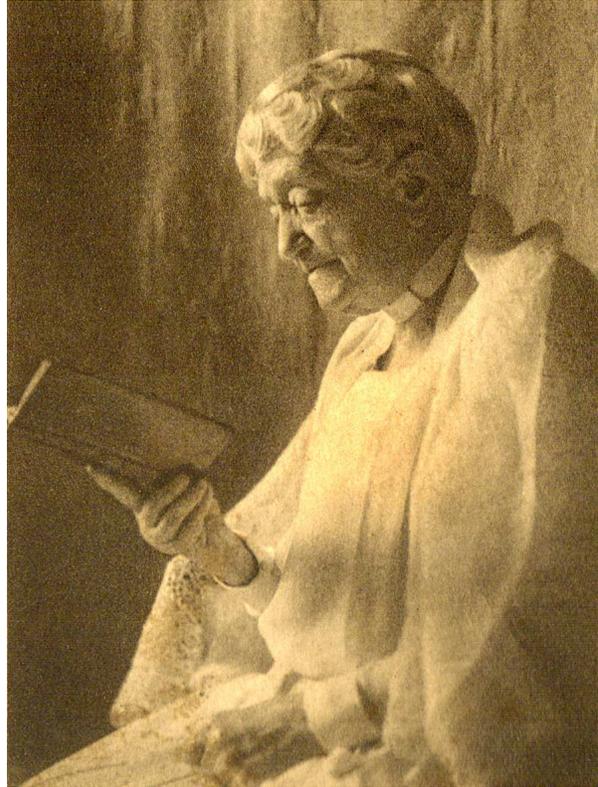


Helen E James, The Benevolent Angel of Williamsburgh

by Ralmon Jon Black, Williamsburgh Historical Society

Helen E. Field was born in 1837, a great-granddaughter of the renowned Capt. Jonathan Warner, among the first residents of the district who led the minutemen out in 1775 and was the master builder of the first Meetinghouse, not only in Williamsburgh but also of the first generation of meeting-houses in Goshen, Chesterfield, Westhampton, Ashfield, and several other towns. Helen claimed another great-grandfather of prominence, Father of the Town, John Nash, who delivered the petition to the Royal Governor at Boston in 1770, a prayer to erect the district of Williamsburgh, partitioned from Hatfield. With such heritage one can readily see how the district came to possess Mrs. James.



Helen (Field) James

c. 1930

Helen was born in Conway, where she spent a very happy childhood. She took an early interest in education and at age seventeen, came to board on Nash Hill with some of her cousins while she taught at that District one-room Schoolhouse. (Built in 1786 and still standing, maintained by the Williamsburgh Historical Society.)

Helen and Lyman D. James were married when she was twenty and lived thirty years next to the Church on North Main Street before building the mansion up the street about 1890. Lyman, a life-long resident of Town inherited the James General Store across from the Church and operated it successfully all his life where for many years he was Postmaster. He represented the town in the Legislature in 1886.

They had four children. Henry Dwight James went by Dwight, was born in 1860, educated at Quincy Academy, married locally, became a merchant and died in 1939. John Howard James went by Howard, was born in 1862, educated at Williams College, married an Ohio girl, became one of the leading officials of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad in which his uncle, Marshall Field, had an interest. Grace Fidelia James was born in 1865, educated at Smith College, married John W. Gillette of Hudson-on-the-Hudson where they lived. Lyman Dwight, Jr., know as Philip Lyman James was born 1873, educated at Williams College became the head of the New York branch of Marshall Field's Department Store, at which he was still engaged in 1946.

The later married life of Helen and Lyman was very interesting, for they made many happy trips to strange lands, as well as many enjoyable experi-

ences as the leading citizens of their town. Lyman died in 1902 and Helen survived him by twenty-eight benevolent years.

As a young married woman, Helen was renowned for kindly deeds to those with needs, and many are the stories told of her modest acts of friendliness, when she gave not only money, but of herself, that which money could not buy, time and sympathy. She was much loved for her sweet simplicity and her democratic spirit, very definite family traits.

Mrs. James always gave freely, but her greatest gifts were made possible by the large funds left in trust to her by her brother, Marshall Field, the 'Merchant Prince of Chicago', who, when he died in 1906, left an estate of 155 million (economic power value of that wealth in 2011 would be in excess of 70 billion). With the income from these funds Mrs. James was able to do much for Williamsburg. Among her gifts for village improvement were to the cemetery, sidewalks, the watering trough, but her largest gifts were the chapel and clock-belfry of the church, the fire house; and the beautiful Helen E James School, which in 1914 opened for all twelve grades. The James School served not only Haydenville and Williamsburgh, but many high school students came from Westhampton, Chesterfield and Goshen. Before it closed its doors as a high school in 1971, well over 2,000 received an exceptional education in the halls of Burgy High.



Helen E. James School, c. 1914

Photo courtesy Williamsburgh Historical Society

Helen's benevolence was wider strewn. Every year she gave hundreds to worthy projects in the Valley, the Red Cross, Visiting Nurses, Foreign Missions, the Children's Home, and one of her gifts was a maternity room in Cooley-Dickinson Hospital with a fund to provide for its perpetual upkeep. Truly her life was in the Valley with roots from the very earliest settlers. But the Valley was very much in her life and she enjoyed every bit of ninety-three years in it.
