

## Almira S. Burnham (1840-1932)

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the public reception of visual arts in Bloomington, Illinois could be characterized as “tepid,” or indeed, “positively cold,” and “comparatively few people ... [knew] to what extent genuine and meritorious works of art” were produced in the city, there remained a commitment on the part of local artists—largely women—and the media to elevate the appreciation and patronage of painting to levels achieved by music and literature.<sup>1</sup> One such artist, **Almira S. Burnham (1840-1932)** helped shape the figurative landscape for local working painters with her very own prolific and profitable, oil-painted landscapes and still lifes.

Almira Sarah Ives was born on November 2, 1840 in Oswego, Kendall County, Illinois to parents Almon and Sarah (Ervin) Ives.<sup>2</sup> Almon, Almira’s father, was born in Chautauqua County, New York and was one of the early settlers of Kendall County. He and his family moved to that county around 1834, where and when he engaged in farming.<sup>3</sup> However, owing to ill health, Almon gave up farming and turned instead to a career in law. He was one of the first students to attend the Chicago Law School in 1847, and went on to make part of his living a real estate attorney.<sup>4</sup>

In June 1853, Almon, Sarah, and their nine children moved from Kendall County to Bloomington, where Almira resided for the rest of her life.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the family arrived, Almira’s mother, Sarah, died in 1854. In 1857, Almira’s father married Lucindia Barker.<sup>6</sup> It is said, on the account of the early death of their mother, that Almira’s oldest sister Mary “became like a mother to her [eight] brothers and sisters.”<sup>7</sup> Almon passed away in 1887 at the age of 72.<sup>8</sup>

Little else is known about Almira’s youthful experience in Bloomington prior to marrying Captain John H. Burnham in 1866. The couple wed on January 23 of that year and remained together for 51 years, until Mr. Burnham’s death in 1917.<sup>9</sup> The couple shared a passion for knowledge and self-edification that is evident in each of their professional pursuits.

Born on October 31, 1834 in Essex, Massachusetts, John Burnham came to Cook County, Illinois in 1855 to teach.<sup>10</sup> After saving enough, Burnham moved to Bloomington in 1858 to

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<sup>1</sup> “An Art Loan Exhibit, Bloomington Ladies Arranging a Display of Minatures,” *Daily Bulletin* (April 9, 1899); *Daily Leader* (December 16, 1896).

<sup>2</sup> Daughters of the American Revolution Lineage Book (McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives), 255; “Another Pioneer Gone,” *Pantagraph* (December 12, 1887).

<sup>3</sup> John Burnham, George Davis, and Ezra Prince. *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I War Record of McLean County with other papers*. (Bloomington: Pantagraph Printing and Stationery Co., 1899), 521; “Another Pioneer Gone.”

<sup>4</sup> Burnham, Davis, and Prince, 521.

<sup>5</sup> “Mrs. Burnham, Artist, Dies,” *Pantagraph* (December 6, 1932).

<sup>6</sup> “Another Pioneer Gone.”

<sup>7</sup> “Mrs. Mary P. Gage Dies Tuesday Morning,” *Pantagraph* (January 8, 1919). Ives siblings included brothers A.T. Ives, E. L. Ives, Charles B. Ives, I.N. Ives, Frank W. Ives, Windsor Ives, and sisters Mary Gage, Nellie Ives, and Almira Burnham.

<sup>8</sup> “Another Pioneer Gone.”

<sup>9</sup> “The McLean County Museum of History Presents *For the Front Parlor: The Paintings of Mrs. A. S. Burnham*,” (1987).

<sup>10</sup> Laurie Peterson, “John Howard Burnham (1834-1917),” 2008, [www.mchistory.org](http://www.mchistory.org)

enroll at the new Illinois State Normal University (ISNU), becoming the first student from Cook County to graduate from the school.

In August 1861, Burnham enlisted in the United States' Union Army as a member of Company A of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Illinois Volunteer Infantry—known as the “Teacher’s Regiment” because most members of the company were students and faculty of ISNU. Following his Civil War service, cut short by ill health, Burnham returned to Bloomington in 1863 and was elected for a two-year term as Superintendent of Bloomington Public Schools.<sup>11</sup> Halfway through his term, however, he resigned to become editor of Bloomington’s *Pantagraph* newspaper, a position he maintained for three years.<sup>12</sup> In 1867, Burnham founded the bridge construction firm, Burnham and Ives whose principle supplier was the King Bridge Company of Cleveland, Ohio—a relationship which lasted for 35 years. He identified the needed projects and contracted with hundreds of townships which needed iron bridges.<sup>13</sup>

In part due to his work, Burnham became familiar with the state’s history and geography. He dedicated his personal time to help found the McLean County Historical Society, as well as the Illinois State Historical Society.<sup>14</sup> He served on the board of directors of both societies until his death. Burnham wrote and edited a number of prized works of local history, including the *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume I: War Records of the County* and the *Transactions of the McLean County Historical Society, Volume II: School Records of McLean County*.<sup>15</sup>

One year prior her husband’s death in 1917, Almira and John Burnham celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The occasion was marked with two receptions at the Burnham’s home on Washington Street in the company of friends, family, fresh flowers, and gifts galore.<sup>16</sup> As noted meticulously by a review of the event in the *Pantagraph*, the Burnhams were gifted everything from bouquets of roses from the Women’s Club and President Theodore Kemp of Illinois Wesleyan University faculty, to a cameo pin set with 168 pearls and an engraved, gold-headed cane from the Letitia Green Stevenson chapter of the DAR, a table lamp from ISNU faculty, gold-trimmed cups, china, and clocks, and more from various relations.<sup>17</sup> The band of the Illinois Soldiers’ Orphans’ Home (later renamed the Illinois Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Children’s School) treated the couple and their partygoers to an outdoor concert.<sup>18</sup>

Like her husband, Almira too sought education at every opportunity—though without the same propensity to teach. Having taken up art work for the “pure love it,” Burnham was a lifelong student of her craft, studying under the tutelage of fellow artists near and far, and making frequent, prolonged trips with her husband to New England to visit family and hone her

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Capt. J.H. Burnham, Dead,’ *The Pantagraph* (January 22, 1917).

<sup>13</sup> “The McLean County Museum of History Presents *For the Front Parlor: The Paintings of Mrs. A. S. Burnham*,” (1987). Almira’s brothers Charles B. Ives and Frank W. Ives were in partnership with John in this business. *Bloomington City Directory* (1907).

<sup>14</sup> Peterson, “J.H. Burnham, Dead.”

<sup>15</sup> Burnham, Davis, Prince, 509.

<sup>16</sup> “The Burnham Golden Wedding,” *Pantagraph* (January 24, 1916).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

skills sketching and painting the coastlines.<sup>19</sup> At times in Boston, Massachusetts, Almira learned at the hands of still life artist François B. De Blois.

Canadian or American by birth, De Blois spent most of his life in Boston and is known for his rural landscapes, snowscapes, and coastal views.<sup>20</sup> De Blois visited the Burnhams in Bloomington in April 1889, at which time an exhibition of his works was hosted at O'Brien's Art Galleries in Chicago.<sup>21</sup> The Burnhams hosted the visiting artist and twenty or so friends for an evening of food and conversation at the Phoenix Hotel in Bloomington.<sup>22</sup> At the time of his death, DeBlois willed Almira a decorative platter depicting an animal scene, which she prominently displayed in her home.<sup>23</sup>

When not frequenting the east coast, Almira Burnham created from her studio on the second floor of her home at 507 E. Mulberry Street and engaged in study with other regional talents, including Mr. Albert W. Kenney and Daniel F. Bigelow.<sup>24</sup> Kenney lived and worked in Elgin, Illinois, but regularly traveled to Bloomington and elsewhere to instruct and exhibit the works of the area's elite.<sup>25</sup> One such exhibition at Kenney's studio in 1886 featured 73 paintings almost all done by local women, 10 of which were Burnham's.<sup>26</sup> In addition to full-sized canvases, Burnham's brushstrokes graced the likes of china and works in miniature, as well.<sup>27</sup>

In April 1899, Burnham, along with fellow women A.B. Funk and Miss Adah De Conville, co-organized an exhibit of miniatures with the hope to "renew interest in art," and to "sow the seed for a little permanent collection of works...for the artistic development and delectation of the citizens of the city."<sup>28</sup> Those who contributed original and collectible items to the exhibit

<sup>19</sup> "In Bloomington, The City Boasts of Some Excellent Talent," *Daily Bulletin* (April 16, 1899); *Pantagraph* (July 25, 1883); *Daily Leader* (October 4, 1886); *Weekly Leader* (June 21, 1894), 9; *Daily Leader* (September 28, 1894); *Daily Leader* (1899); *Weekly Pantagraph* (August 4, 1905).

<sup>20</sup> "Francois De Blois (1829-1913),"

[www.askart.com/artist/Francois\\_B\\_De\\_Blois/10493/Francois\\_B\\_De\\_Blois.aspx](http://www.askart.com/artist/Francois_B_De_Blois/10493/Francois_B_De_Blois.aspx) (Date accessed August 25, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> *Daily Leader* (April 15, 1889).

Chicago's first art gallery, and one of the oldest family-owned and operated galleries in the United States. O'Brien's opened in 1855 as a frame shop. It was called by several names, including O'Brien's Art Emporium, O'Brien Art Galleries, O'Brien Galleries, House of O'Brien, and M. O'Brien & Sons. The gallery remained in Chicago until 1941, when it closed during World War II, and resumed operation in Scottsdale, Arizona in the 1950s. Three generations of O'Briens ran the gallery before it moved to Arizona. "O'Brien Galleries records, 1811-1970," Smithsonian Archives of American Art, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/obrien-galleries-records-6159> (Date accessed August 29, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> "An Evening of Pleasure," *Daily Leader* (April 16, 1889).

<sup>23</sup> "Mrs. Burnham's Home Full of Art Treasures," *Pantagraph* (April 18, 1914).

<sup>24</sup> Bill Kemp, "Painter Almira Burnham embodied refined society of Victorian era," *Pantagraph* (September 12, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> "Kane County History: Museum Lands Painting by Elgin Artist Albert Kenney," Beth Nawara (January 25, 2019), <https://kanecountyconnects.com/2019/01/kane-county-history-museum-lands-painting-by-elgin-artist-albert-kenney/> (Date accessed August 25, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> "Art Amateurs," *Weekly Leader* (April 22, 1886).

<sup>27</sup> "In Bloomington, The City Boasts of Some Excellent Talent," *Daily Bulletin* (April 16, 1899).

<sup>28</sup> "An Art Loan Exhibit," *Daily Bulletin* (April 9, 1899).

included, Mesdmes Clara Humphreys, Helen Little, Miss Nettie Bell Smith, Dr. Herman and Maria Schroeder, Mrs. De Blumenthal, Mrs. Julia Scott, the Harry Spencer family, and more.<sup>29</sup>

Burnham regularly exhibited her works throughout the region. In Bloomington, her art could be seen at impromptu storefront exhibitions like those at Hawley's repository on Front Street, A.T. Fagerburg's at 514 N. Main Street, J.E. Gregg's framing studio at 625 N. Main Street, in the parlors of the Eddy Building at the corner of Main and Market streets, and at Marian Ives's piano studio over Herrick's clothing store at the corner of Center and Jefferson streets, or in shows alongside her aforementioned fellow Kenney apprentices.<sup>30</sup>

Burnham also showed outside of Bloomington, usually without incident and often even with a sale or two. However, once upon returning a collection of works from exhibit at the 1892 Illinois State Fair in Peoria by way of rail, the train car on which the paintings were loaded caught fire near Pekin and the entire collection (an estimated value of \$1,500 or roughly \$45,000 in 2017 dollars) was either completely destroyed or damaged by smoke and water.<sup>31</sup> Following the loss of her works, it was eight years before Burnham again showed at the state fair.<sup>32</sup> But, it was less than two weeks before Burnham's art faced another fiery blaze.

At midnight on October 14, 1892, smoke billowed and shouts of fire sounded as the homes and barns of multiple Bloomington residents between Douglas and Mulberry streets, west of Evans Street—including the Burnhams'—went up in flames.<sup>33</sup> The genesis of the fire is unknown, but was reported to have begun in the barn of General George F. Dick.<sup>34</sup> *The Daily Leader* reported that Almira's sister was the first to note the fire and act to alert the inhabitants of the houses.<sup>35</sup> Firefighters arrived quickly to the scene once notified, but by that time, the outbuildings were all ablaze.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the firefighters were impeded in their efforts due to the fact that the water main on Mulberry Street was small and could not carry enough water to address the scale of the fires. After the first barn caught, the fire quickly spread to the barns of J.G. Miller and the Burnhams, before eventually engulfing the homes of Dick and Burnham. When it became apparent that the largest of the flames could not be quelled, every effort was made to remove as many possessions from the homes as possible before the houses burned

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Home Talent," *Daily Leader* (May 16, 1883), 4 col. 5; "See the Window," *Daily Leader* (April 13, 1895); *Pantagraph* (December 13, 1910); "Mrs. Burnham's Art Exhibit," *Sunday Leader* (January 10, 1899); "Mrs. Burnham's Paintings," *Pantagraph* (December 22, 1911).

<sup>31</sup> Burnham was not the only local artist to incur damages as a result of the train car fire. Of the losses that Burnham suffered, only a percentage of the pieces were her own. Other artists' works included Colby, Lou Burke, A.W. Kenney, and Elkins. "Fine Art in a Blaze," *Pantagraph* (October 4, 1892); Consumer Price Index Conversion, <https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2017.pdf> (Date accessed September 14, 2020).

<sup>32</sup> "Exhibit Paintings at State Fair," *Weekly Pantagraph* (September 21, 1900).

<sup>33</sup> "A Red Hot Blaze," *Pantagraph* (October 14, 1892), 1 col. 6; "Fury of the Flames," *Daily Leader* (October 14, 1892).

<sup>34</sup> "A Red Hot Blaze."

<sup>35</sup> "Fury of the Flames."

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

entirely.<sup>37</sup> John Burnham was out of town and not present for the fire, but Almira and her sister successfully saved several hundred dollars worth of paintings from the artist's upstairs studio.<sup>38</sup>

Like a phoenix from the ashes, however—a phrase that could as easily be applied to Almira as to the Burnham's home—rebuilding efforts commenced almost immediately, with the *Pantagraph* reporting that, “Capt. Burnham has utilized the lower part of the front portion of his house and is rebuilding it into a much more handsome structure than it was before.”<sup>39</sup> The interior of the home was promised to also be “greatly improved” with new features, including a completely lighted studio for Almira.<sup>40</sup>

It is unknown whether this or another studio is the creative space that Burnham briefly shared with friend and fellow local artist Emily Howard. But, in 1896 the *Daily Leader* made note of the “rare beauty and merit” of the works on display in these two artists' studio, as it also made the promise to its readers to “lend its influence in bringing this important factor of civilization [i.e. visual art]...more prominently before the people.”<sup>41</sup> Howard was a contemporary of Burnham's, who unlike Almira, was a teacher at heart and in profession. In addition to producing her own art, Howard taught lessons in oil painting, crayon drawing, piano, voice, melodeon, organ, and guitar.<sup>42</sup> A testament to their friendship, John H. and Almira Burnham were the first locals of Bloomington to be notified when Howard passed away while living in Kentucky.<sup>43</sup> John Burnham served as one six pallbearers at Howard's funeral, and the couple offered to host Howard's relatives who had traveled for the funeral for the duration of their stay in Bloomington.<sup>44</sup>

Around 1905, the Burnhams moved to 1321 E. Washington Street, where Almira's paintings “hung from floor to ceiling on every wall.”<sup>45</sup> Described as a “veritable art gallery,” the Burnhams' home showcased not only Almira's own works, but a curated collection of other known artists and antiques.<sup>46</sup> The Washington Street home was also outfitted with a second floor studio, in which hung a collection of several hundred paintings by Burnham.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to exercising her own artistic capacity, Burnham was also a patron of the arts and a promoter of the larger local art scene.<sup>48</sup> At a meeting of the Blooming Sketch Club on February 27, 1888 at Withers Public Library, Burnham was one of four members appointed to initiate the organization of an art association.<sup>49</sup> Formed with the object to “encourage and promote the study, cultivation and practice of art in the city of Bloomington, and vicinity,” the society lasted four

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> “Building Going On,” *Pantagraph* (November 9, 1892).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Leader* (December 16, 1896).

<sup>42</sup> “Miss Howard,” *Pantagraph* (March 14, 1859); “Miss E. A. Howard, Music, Painting and Drawing,” *Pantagraph* (October 15, 1866).

<sup>43</sup> “Former Local Artist Dead,” *Daily Bulletin* (June 11, 1914).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Kemp.

<sup>46</sup> “Mrs. Burnham's Home Full of Art Treasures,” *Pantagraph* (April 18, 1914).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Art Association Announces Patrons,” *Pantagraph* (October 17, 1925).

<sup>49</sup> *A Brief History of the Bloomington-Normal Art Association 1888-1948* (July 1, 1948).

years until 1892 when the treasury was in debt.<sup>50</sup> From 1892 to 1922 there was no formal art association in Bloomington, though the Women’s Club had an active art department. From that department, with the aid and enthusiasm of Women’s Club president Mrs. Helen McCurdy, the Bloomington Art Association was formed on March 14, 1922 at a meeting in the Russel Art Gallery at Withers Public Library.<sup>51</sup> Burnham, already a member of the art committee of the Woman’s Club, was elected an honorary director.<sup>52</sup>

The Bloomington Art Association offered its dues paying members and the larger community a full calendar of classes, lectures, exhibitions, and other events.<sup>53</sup> Membership costs ranged from \$1.00 for general members, to \$5.00 for patrons, and \$100.00 for lifetime membership (roughly \$14.50, \$72.00, and \$1,450 in 2017 dollars).<sup>54</sup> In the early years of the association, programs were not “confined to art alone in the true sense,” but included nature talks, garden tours, music presentations, and photographic exhibits.”<sup>55</sup> Over the years, these committees withdrew from the association to form independent organizations, including the Garden Club in 1940 and the camera division in 1941.<sup>56</sup> Through the early 1940s, the Bloomington Art Association was a part of the Central Illinois Federation of Art Associations, which at times included the art associations of Champaign-Urbana, Decatur, Galesburg, Jacksonville, and Springfield.<sup>57</sup> In 1948, the name of the association was changed to the Bloomington-Normal Arts Association in “recognition of the close working relationship of [the] two communities.”<sup>58</sup> The McLean County Arts Center in Bloomington is the current iteration of the Bloomington Arts Association.

Outside of her artistic endeavors, Burnham was active in a number of clubs and societies—often in roles that relied on her creativity and aesthetic inclinations for planning gatherings and serving on decoration committees. Burnham participated in activities put on by the Ladies’ Aid Society, the Ladies’ Building Society, a veterans’ graves decoration committee, the Illinois Social Science Association, a women’s astronomers club, the Illinois State Conference of Charities, the Woman’s Club, the Old People’s Picnic Association, and the local Letitia Green Stevenson chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution from 1916 until her death in 1932.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Bloomington Art Association Program for the Season 1925-1926,” (McLean County Museum of History Library and Archives).

<sup>54</sup> *A Brief History of the Bloomington-Normal Art Association 1888-1948*; Consumer Price Index Conversion,

<https://liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/sites/liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/files/polisci/faculty-research/sahr/inflation-conversion/pdf/cv2017.pdf> (Date accessed September 23, 2020).

<sup>55</sup> *A Brief History of the Bloomington-Normal Art Association 1888-1948*.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> “Report,” *Pantagraph* (December 7, 1864); “The Ladies’ Bazaar—A Grand Success,” *Pantagraph* (December 22, 1874); “The Meeting of the Ladies’ Association Yesterday,” *Pantagraph* (October 29, 1879); “Lady Astronomers,” *Daily Leader* (November 18, 1890); “The Day We Celebrate,” *Daily Leader* (May 17, 1880); “The State Conference,” *Pantagraph*

Burnham occupied a specific, and not uncommon, role as a working female artist amongst members of local elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Benefitting from her husband's steady income, no children to mind, and an increase in public interest in the decorative and visual arts, Burnham and other women like her were able to enjoy local artistic celebrity without the risk of resembling too much the "starving artist" trope. This does not deny Burnham recognition for her prolificacy and proficiency, nor does it lessen her listing as an "artist" in local city directories as early as 1902. However, it merits positing that Burnham's craft—if not art—was largely the means by which she engaged with her fellow society men and women through exhibitions, receptions, and committees, rather than evidence of a deeper artistic calling. That said, Burnham's true credit inarguably lies in her unwavering commitment to the study and technical refinement of her aforementioned craft. And, it cannot be unsaid that, "there is perhaps no other woman in the city who is better known than is Mrs. Burnham thru her lifelong interest in art."<sup>60</sup> Nor, can it be claimed that she and her fellow female artists did not actively endeavor to warm the "cold as clay" feeling toward the visual arts in Bloomington.<sup>61</sup>

Almira Burnham died on December 6, 1932 at Brokaw hospital from complications of pneumonia.<sup>62</sup> From July to December 1931, Burnham resided in the hospital after suffering a broken hip in a fall at her home. She shortly returned to the hospital in May 1932 until her death in December.<sup>63</sup> Burnham's funeral was held on December 8 at her residence on Washington Street in Bloomington. Reverend Father Arthur B. Cope of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church (of which Burnham was a longtime member) and Reverend Forest L. Fraser of First Baptist Church officiated.<sup>64</sup> Pallbearers were her brothers Frank W. Ives, Charles B. Ives, and E.L. Ives, nephew Almon B. Ives, cousin Fred Barber, and A.B. McKee. Burnham's estate included some 400 paintings, many of which we dispersed locally to family and friends.<sup>65</sup> Burnham was buried in Bloomington Cemetery, now Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.

The McLean County Museum of History holds three Burnham oil paintings in its art collection, including a still life of four pink roses, painted circa 1890. Donated by Timothy Ives in 1996, the painting hung in the Franklin Park home of U.S. Vice President Adlai E. Stevenson I and his wife Letitia Green Stevenson. The painting features Burnham's renowned dewdrops.<sup>66</sup>

From October 11 through November 22, 1987, the Museum showcased an exhibit, *For the Parlor: The Paintings of Mrs. A.S. Burnham*. Included in the exhibit were select works of Burnham's oil paintings, watercolors, and miniatures, as well as the only known portrait painted by Burnham (of her brother-in-law Albert Gage, which the Museum now holds in its collection)

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(October 19, 1899); "Woman's Club Takes Up Settlement Work," *Pantagraph* (December 12, 1907); "Date of Old People's Picnic Changed," *Weekly Pantagraph* (August 8, 1913); *Daughters of the American Revolution Yearbooks* (1916-1932).

<sup>60</sup> "Golden Wedding of Capt. And Mrs. Burnham," *Pantagraph* (January 22, 1916).

<sup>61</sup> "An Art Loan Exhibit," *Pantagraph* (April 9, 1899).

<sup>62</sup> "Mrs. Burnham, Artist, Dies."

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> "Many Attend Rites for Mrs. Burnham," *Pantagraph* (December 8, 1932); "Mrs. Burnham Tells St. Matthew's Church Fifty Years Ago," *Pantagraph* (June 26, 1926).

<sup>65</sup> "Painter Almira Burnham embodied refined society of Victorian era," Bill Kemp, *Pantagraph* (September 12, 2010).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



and a shawl Burnham wore while accompanying her niece, famed solo soprano opera singer Marie Litta, on one of her European tours.<sup>67</sup>

Marie Litta (pronounced Maria), born Marie von Elsner, traveled the world as a renowned, classically trained, opera singer before her premature death in 1883 at the age of 27. The Burnhams were ardent supporters of the young artist, with Almira accompanying her cousin at numerous engagements both locally and abroad. The Burnhams often hosted Litta when the singer returned to her native city, with one such reception referred to as “the most brilliant social event of years.”<sup>68</sup> Almira Burnham’s close acquaintance with Litta is evidenced by the singer’s last words on her deathbed, when she asked for a last kiss from her cousin “Allie,” who was present at the time of her passing.<sup>69</sup>

Illinois State University professor of music Lloyd Farlee curated the Museum’s exhibit after a serendipitous series of purchases at local antique sales peaked his interest in Burnham’s career.<sup>70</sup> Farlee unknowingly purchased his first work of Burnham’s only to purchase a similar work ten years later and discover that the two paintings were by the same artist. Inspired by his research into the “artistic heights” achieved by Burnham, Farlee connected with Barbara Dunbar—then recently retired director of the McLean County Historical Society—to plan the exhibit. Farlee successfully secured ten paintings from Richard Hosto of Arlington, Virginia; Burnham’s shawl from Isabelle Coolidge in Pasadena, California, and photographs and other items of note from Jean Forr in St. Petersburg, Florida and Almon Ives in Hanover, New Hampshire.<sup>71</sup>

By: Hannah E. Johnson, 2020

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<sup>67</sup> “The McLean County Museum of History Presents *For the Front Parlor: The Paintings of Mrs. A. S. Burnham*,” (1987); “Art exhibit spots work of noted area artist,” *Pantagraph* (October 11, 1987), A6.

<sup>68</sup> “Reception to Miss Von Elsner,” *Daily Pantagraph* (October 25, 1878).

<sup>69</sup> “The Dead Singer,” *Pantagraph* (July 9, 1883). For more information on the life and career of Maria Litta, reference <https://www.mchistory.org/research/biographies/litta-marie>.

<sup>70</sup> “Art exhibit spots work of noted area artist.”

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*