

Elizabeth Jane Mitchell Christian (1842-1923)

Elizabeth Jane Mitchell, called Lizzie, was born on July 16, 1842 at Stout's Grove near Danvers in McLean County, Illinois. She was one of seven children of Ebenezer Briggs Mitchell and Rachel Vance Mitchell. When she was 12, her family moved to Bloomington so that the children could have the opportunity of a better education. Thus, Elizabeth realized the importance of education early on in her life.

She was a member of the first graduating class of Illinois State Normal University in 1860 and was eventually the last surviving member. The subjects she studied in the course of earning her degree were many and varied and included english, mathematics, geography, music, sciences, bookkeeping, history, methods of education, etc. She was also a member of the Wrightonian Society (a literary society). At commencement exercises on July 17, she read her thesis "The Worship of the Past" which was later published in the Daily Pantagraph for the whole community to read.

Following graduation, Elizabeth taught school in Bloomington for two years and in Decatur for two and one-half years. An ISNU classmate, Enoch Gastman, was principal of the high school in Decatur from 1862-1870 and probably hired her. Another classmate, Frances Peterson, taught at the high school in 1862 after her marriage to Mr. Gastman so Elizabeth would surely have felt comfortable being on the faculty.

On November 21, 1865 Elizabeth married Matthew Logan Christian, a Springfield store owner. They had two children, Eben and Annie, both of whom grew to adulthood. Matthew later engaged in farming but was forced to leave that occupation because he became physically disabled due to ill health and died on June 2, 1900 at the age of 73. For many years the family lived at 509 East Front Street in the home which Elizabeth's parents built and where she grew up. The pre-Civil War house still stands and is still an attractive private residence.

Throughout her life Elizabeth was an avid reader and maintained contact with her numerous friends and an interest in her community. She especially kept up with what was happening at ISNU through her attendance at Alumni Association meetings, class reunions, Founder's Day celebrations, commencement exercises, and other festivities on campus. She also kept abreast with new trends in the teaching field, believing that students were entitled to the best education possible.

The last few years of her life she was unable to attend events on campus but "she always knew when they occurred." Her daughter May "had always been present to extend her mother's greeting when roll was called for the class of 1860."

By her actions and her exemplary life, Elizabeth was an excellent "salesman" for her Alma Mater ISNU her whole life. She died at her home on November 22, 1923 at the age of 81 and was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, Illinois next to her husband.

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2007