

The Last Child Born in the White House

Miriam Eyde Bixler

In the year of 1915, during President Wilson's administration, some very proud Lancaster County relatives and friends rejoiced in the birth of a child in the White House. We're referring, of course, to the birth of Dr. Francis Bowes Sayre, Jr., Dean of the Cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul, Washington, D. C.

Old residents know that the baby's fraternal grandmother was a "Lancaster girl". Martha Nevin had married Robert Heysham Sayre, the railroad executive from Bethlehem. He did not live to see his son married in the East Room of the White House in 1913.

No doubt the newborn's great aunts Alice and Blanche Nevin, of Lancaster Ave. and Windsor Forge, respectively, were especially delighted with the news of the birth. Hadn't Blanche brought the parents together, introducing her sister Martha's son, Francis Bowes Sayre, Sr., to Jessie, the daughter of President Woodrow Wilson? Perhaps that and much visiting at Windsor Forge was the cause of the Bridegroom's claiming Lancaster as his residence on his marriage license.

After the marriage the bridegroom left his job as Assistant District Attorney in New York City and taught at Williams College. President Wilson's wife, Ellen Louise Axson died and so his daughter visited with her lonely father at the White House.

In his biography, *Glad Adventure*, Francis Sr. tells of receiving a Washington telephone call at Williamstown at four A.M. on January 17th, 1915. The connection was bad and the relayed message stated only that he should come to Washington. It took him until eight-thirty that night to get there. Jessie had given birth to a son—the first child born in the White House since Andrew Jackson's grandchild.

Lancaster Ties

The superiority of having the President of the United States and his gracious wife as grandparents can hardly be challenged. However, the paternal grandparents of our subject were quite noted and of special interest to us. Grandmother Martha Finley Nevin Sayre, a cousin of Ethelbert Nevin, the composer, had married Robert Heysham Sayre whose grandfather, Dr. Francis Bowes Sayre was born

in Lancaster and died fighting yellow fever in Philadelphia in 1798.

Martha lived in Bethlehem with her well-to-do pioneer railroad-er husband, but after his death in 1907 she often summered at Martha's vineyard helping to look after Francis Jr. and his brother and sister. She died there in 1918. A close companion to her children, it is said that her strong faith in God greatly influenced the same strong faith evidenced by them and her grandchildren.

Martha's parents were the respected Dr. John Williamson Nevin and Mrs. Martha Jenkins Nevin. The latter lived at Windsor Forge before her marriage and also after in 1856-1858. Dr. Nevin, the second President of Franklin and Marshall College, philosopher and theologian and his wife were a couple whose vital, intellectual force was greatly felt in the Lancaster community. They built and lived in Caernarvon which was subsequently the Weber Mansion and now the site of Degel Israel Congregation on Columbia Ave.

Author of perhaps a dozen or more religious books, Dr. Nevin's first, **Biblical Antiquities**, published in 1849, was widely used as a text in seminaries. A window is dedicated to him in the Old College Chapel and the lectern there bears his wife's name.

Dr. Nevin's brother, John W. Nevin, was a Professor of English at Franklin and Marshall, a poet and humorous writer. Dr. Theodore Appel edited a memorial volume of his works entitled **English Literature**.

In addition to Grandmother Martha, Dr. and Mrs. J. W. Nevin raised two more daughters, Blanche and Alice and two sons, Dr. Robert J. Nevin and Wilberforce Nevin, Editor of the **Philadelphia Press**. The Rev. Dr. Robert J. Nevin established and was the rector of the Episcopal Church in Rome. He is the author of **St. Paul's Within the Walls** published in New York in 1878. After his death in 1908 his body lay in state in the room to the left of the main entrance to the St. James Episcopal Parish House here. A painting of Madonna and Child which he brought back from Italy was presented to that church by his sisters, Alice and Blanche, and now hangs in the office of the Rev. Canon Batchelder. It is marked, "By the master of San Miniato Altar piece".

Great aunts Alice and Blanche are remembered well. Alice was organist at the First United Church of Christ, headed the Red Cross in its early days and founded the Cliosophic Society and the Iris Club, being the latter's first president. A portrait of her by Helen Miller Wellen Dubbs hangs in the Nevin Room of the club. She wrote the music to the hymn **The Lord of Life is Risen** (words by Lange translated by the Rev. Henry Harbaugh) and in 1922 published a volume of poetry named simply **Poems**.

Her sister Blanche was a very colorful personality and children loved her lively disposition. She volunteered as an untrained nurse in the Sino-Japanese war and after studying sculpture in Italy

bought Windsor Forge near Churchtown as her residence. Her statue of General Peter Muhlenberg stands in the National Art Gallery in Washington, D. C. There is a lion sculpted by her in our Reservoir Park and a cross at the junction of Columbia Ave. and W. Orange St. Her bust of Miss Sara Hager stands in the upper hall of the Iris Club and her portrait of Harriet Lane is in Wheatland. Blanche wrote poetry too. **Great Grandma's Looking Glass** was published in 1905. So much for the "greats".

Uncle John Nevin Sayre was especially close to his younger brother. He taught at Princeton and strove for the principle that fighting was inconsistent with the teaching of Christ. He owned Windsor Forge from the 1930's.

Aunt Margaret Wilson, who died in 1914, had a lovely trained singing voice and her sister Eleanor, deceased in 1967, married Secretary of the Treasury, William McAdoo. Mrs. McAdoo became a famous Washington hostess and wrote of her father's life and work. The President, worn out from his fervent reaching for world peace, died in 1923.

Father Francis, Sr. taught fourteen years at Harvard Law School, became Assistant Secretary of State and held important posts in the diplomatic world. His wife, Jessie, with a Goucher education and a background of social work, accompanied him on his missions whenever possible. It was from these experiences that he wrote his first book **Experiments in International Administration**.

Life Begins

The christening of our subject, Francis, Jr., took place in Williamstown on May 2, 1915. Grandfather Woodrow Wilson and Grandmother Martha Sayre were among the close friends and godparents gathered at the Park Street Episcopal Church.

The young family spent that first summer with the President at his summer home in Cornish New Hampshire. The First Executive was corresponding with the Germans about the sinking of the Lusitania at the time.

That Christmas season young Francis and his parents were at the White House attending his grandfather's marriage to Mrs. Edith Bolling Galt.

The children, Francis, Jr. and his sister, Eleanor Axson and brother Woodrow Wilson, attended Swiss and French schools as well as a private school near Cambridge. They shared their American home with two Siamese foster brothers. The family had many happy times together—in summer at Martha's Vineyard, in winter by the fireside with their father reading stories and poetry or having family musicals with Francis, Jr. playing the guitar.

There were exciting times in the foreign countries when they were privileged to visit with their parents. A well-remembered oc-

occasion was the ride on the King of Siam's white elephant adorned with all the royal trappings.

Jessie, the mother, died in 1933 and in 1937 Francis, Sr. married an artist, a widow named Elizabeth Evans Graves. There were two stepbrothers now. Ralph later served on the staff of Life Magazine and William chose the United States Foreign Service.

Francis Jr. attended Williams College, married Harriet Taft Hart in 1946 and served as a volunteer chaplain in the Navy from 1942 until that year. After two years at Union Theological Seminary he graduated from the Episcopal Theological Seminary at Cambridge, Mass. in 1940. He served as assistant minister of Christ Church in Cambridge and then moved to Cleveland, Ohio as rector of St. Paul's Church. He became interested in industrial groups while there.

Francis Jr.'s sister Eleanor worked for a time in the Fine Arts Museum of Providence, R. I., then in the print room of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Now she lives in Cambridge where part of her childhood was spent.

Dr. Woodrow Wilson Sayre, the youngest brother, married Edith Chase of Boston and has two daughters, Jenifer and Martha Nevin. He has taught at Pomona College, Tufts University and is Chairman of the Philosophy Department of Springfield College, Springfield, Mass. Noting the title of his best selling book **Four Against Everest** (1962) calls to mind that his mother and father had climbed mountains in Wales on their honeymoon. In 1966 Dr. Sayre spoke in Lyte Auditorium at Millersville State College and showed slides based upon the book.

Last May an audience of four hundred had the privilege of hearing the Rev. Dr. Francis S. Sayre, Jr. speak at the 143rd anniversary commencement of the Lancaster Theological Seminary in Hensel Hall. This eminent personage has been awarded as many as fifteen honors and degrees, if not more, in this country and Europe. As was noted, he is Dean of the cathedral popularly known as the Washington or National. This cathedral follows the tradition of Westminster Abbey in London by having famous Americans buried there. It is fitting that Dr. Sayre presides over the very place where his grandfather, President Woodrow Wilson rests—in peace.