

Bethinking of Old Orleans

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ELIZABETH HARRIET DENIO, Ph. D 1842-1922



*For wisdom shall enter into thy heart, and
knowledge shall be pleasant to thy soul.*
-- Proverbs

Elizabeth H. Denio was the eldest daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Denio of Albion. John Denio was a prominent local citizen who was involved in banking, insurance, stone quarrying, milling and real estate. He was also one of the organizers of the Republican Party in this county and held the position of county treasurer from 1848-1850. The Denio family home was located just west of Albion and eventually became the superintendent's house at what is now the Albion Correctional Facility. Before prison expansion, the Denio home was located on a corner lot bordering what was known as Denio Road, a short road from Route 31, north to the canal on the Albion-Eagle Harbor Road. In the 1930's the road was appropriated by the State and encompassed into the prison grounds.

Elizabeth Denio was a liberated woman! This is her story: Obviously she came from a well-to-do and educated family. She was a graduate of the Phipps Union Seminary in Albion which was comparable to a high school at the time. She later graduated from Mt.

Holyoke Seminary and taught at Vassar for one year. From 1876 to 1896 Miss Denio was a professor of German and Art History at Wellesley College. Subsequently, she studied abroad for several years in Leipzig, Berlin, and Heidelberg Universities, taking her degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Heidelberg in 1898. It is believed that she was the first woman student to graduate from Heidelberg. While there, she was a member of the Kaiser's Army but was excused from drill.

Upon her return to this country, she accepted a position at the University of Rochester in 1902 where she taught the History of Art until her retirement in 1917. At that time, she was made Emeritus Professor. While in Rochester, Dr. Denio helped in the organization of Memorial Art Gallery and served on its board of directors from its inception. She was chairperson of its Library and Print committee, having a particularly great knowledge of prints.

Dr. Denio is perhaps, best remembered as an author and lecturer in the fine arts. In 1898 she wrote a book entitled "Nicholas Poussin, His Life and Work" which was first published in German at Leipzig. In 1899 both Charles Scribner & Sons of New York and Richard Clay & Sons of London published the same book in English.

Nicholas Poussin was one of the great painters of the first half of the 17th Century who executed 240 known paintings. Dr. Denio traveled in France, Normandy, Italy and England to study his work. In her book on him she portrays his early life, friends and followers to show the development of his genius as a painter. His paintings which hang in the Louvre, Hermitage, Prado and in galleries in Vienna, Rome, Florence and London are prized possessions. Poussin's works are largely Bible figures but do include mythological, poetical and allegorical subjects.

Dr. Denio was known to be a stimulating conversationalist who had a broad spectrum of friends. Local lore conjectures that she became accustomed to men's clothing while studying in Germany, for upon her return to this country, she was seen to appear in pants and supposedly enjoyed cigars.

On December 23, 1922 she stepped in front of a car at the corner of East Avenue and Meigs Street in Rochester where she was fatally injured. Dr. Rush Rhees, President of the University of Rochester officiated at her funeral. He stated in part: "Her influence, like her circle of friends, was far broader than the college community. Multitudes of citizens have sat at her feet as students of art and she has stimulated a great interest in that side of life among great numbers of our citizens. In fact, the growing interest in the value of fine arts for the enrichment of life in no small measure is due to her quiet, persistent and intellectual effort.

"Here was a noble life, well lived, which leaves a fragrant memory."

Elizabeth H. Denio was buried on her family lot in Mt. Albion Cemetery.