

Bethlehem Moment: Lucy and Mary Packer, Asa Packer's Daughters

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Bethlehem Moment: January 1873

January 1873, 147 years ago. Lucy Evelyn Packer Linderman is recovering from a serious horse and carriage accident on the ice-covered what is now Packer Avenue – just down the hill from Lehigh University, founded by her father Asa.

She, at 41, and her sister Mary Hannah Packer, at 34, are the two



surviving female adults of Asa Packer's seven children.

Lucy is considered beautiful and an image of her, with her stylish clothes and carefully coiffed and braided hair, show a handsome woman, a leader of Bethlehem society, married to a doctor, Garrett Linderman, who showed up in the cholera epidemic some years before – and is now a Lieutenant in her father's businesses

An image of young Mary, on the other hand, shows her as short, plump,



with coke bottle glasses and plainly dressed. At 34 she would be considered a spinster, dedicated to serving her family's needs. A contemporary narrative says: "There were suitors . . . who were anxious for the hand of Miss Packer, but she stubbornly avoided all advances in that direction." Mary was known as somewhat of a recluse, as result of an accident and subsequent eye ailments that had led to her being blind in one eye, and with limited vision in the other.

Lucy survived the accident but dies later that year, in July, of pneumonia – contracted as she attempted rehabilitation in a spa in mountains to the north.

Asa, grief-stricken, builds Linderman Library in Lucy's honor in 1875, and dies in 1879.

Within five years, by 1884, all the remaining members of the Packer family – two brothers and Asa's wife – also pass – and Mary Hannah Packer is the only surviving member of the family.

Mary may be reclusive and nearly blind, but she is not stupid. A woman ahead of her time, she recognizes that she cannot inherit the fabulous Packer fortune – built on canal boats and what would become the Pennsylvania Railroad and Bethlehem Steel – in her chosen unmarried status.

In order to take advantage of the then recently passed Women's Marriage Act – which guaranteed married women the right to inheritance – she enlists Charles Cummings, a former conductor on the railroad and a loyal family friend – to marry her.

She pays him 100,000 dollars – worth about 2 and a half million today – and has him sign one of the first pre-nuptial agreements in the state.

Charles and Mary never live together and are divorced in 1893.

Upon her marriage, Mary Hannah Packer Cummings, as the sole heir to the Packer fortune, inherits 54 and a half million dollars – worth about 1.5 billion today. She becomes the most wealthy woman in the country and second in wealth in the world – to only Queen Victoria.

She travels around the world 17 times.

She becomes a philanthropist and is considered a bit of a Bohemian, a patron of the arts, literature, and music.



She builds Packer Church at Lehigh, and supports the university well and repeatedly over the years.

She also builds All Saints Episcopal Church down the hill from her house in Mauch Chaunk (now Jim Thorpe) in 1906.

Mary Hannah Packer Cummings died in 1912, the only member of her immediate family to see the 20th century.

There are many accounts of sightings of her ghost, still short and plump, plainly dressed and with coke-bottle glasses — as she wanders about — checking on the properties she built.