

Civil War Prisoner: The Mysterious Mrs. Mason alias Augusta Heath Morris

By Carolyn Gamble, August 2018

The Official Records

Imprisoned in the Old Capitol Prison in 1862, alongside Confederate spy Rose O'Neal Greenhow, was the mysterious "Parisian widow" Mrs. Augusta Heath Morris. Her case is reported in "The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies," pages 1346-1351, available online. She was charged with being a spy in the employ of the rebels.

If you peruse her case in the Official Records, you will quickly discover the Huntley connection. She claims to have married Thomson F. and Betsey's son, John Francis "Frank" Mason, in 1854 in Paris, France. Excerpts from an intercepted letter to Dr. J.F. Mason, written while imprisoned, are included in the Official Records. This includes a reference to Huntley. The letter is signed "your wife, A Mason."

'Huntly' has not been touched. All this goes to prove your mother's position is very well understood here by the Lincoln Government.

In this letter she displays an angry tone directed squarely at Betsey for trying to have her exiled from the South. She boasts that she wasn't exiled, but actually was sent north by generals Johnston and Beauregard with President Davis' consent in order to gather information. She promises to fight Dr. J.F. Mason and his mother "from a fortress." She also lays out an argument that Betsey is in fact the one with questionable loyalty to the South since Betsey's properties, including Huntley, were secure and untouched. Lastly, she writes that a conversation that she had with Secretary of State Seward "places it beyond a doubt that it is your mother that is the traitor and not I."

Intriguing implications! One thing is clear, there was no love lost between Betsey Mason and our imprisoned leading lady. Other letters confiscated at the Old Capitol Prison and printed in the Official Records include one to Col. Thomas Jordan, ringleader of the Confederate spy network, and another to Col. B.T. Johnson.

A New York Herald newspaper article is included as well in which she is described as a gay, dashing and sprightly widow who offered to share the Confederate Army signals for \$100,000!

We learn that she buried her one year-old child just days before her arrest. Imprisoned with her was another child, a toddler named Frank. She claimed both children were Dr. J.F. Mason's. "You know I have only his children to remember him by," she wrote to Col. Johnson.

How much of this is true? What was her real name? Augusta Morris, A. Mason or yet another name she claimed -- Ada Hewitt? Why was Betsey trying to expel her from the South? Why would someone from Paris, France engage in espionage for the Confederacy? Was she spying for the South or just trying to get to her alleged husband at Chestnut Hill in Leesburg? What became of her?

“Not a Model of Virtue”

In May 1862, after 4 months of imprisonment, Greenhow and Morris were released together from Old Capitol Prison. They had to sign a document promising to not return north of the Potomac River during the present hostilities. They travelled first to Fort Monroe and then to Richmond where they were received by Lt. Col. Edward Porter Alexander.



Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library,
The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

A small, 2 ½” by 4” albumen print, called a carte de visite was found among the Edward Porter Alexander Papers in the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (<https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/civilwar/index.php/tag/augusta-morris/>). Labelled “Mrs. Morris,” it was likely taken by the famed Civil War photographer Mathew Brady. These small photographs were used as trading or calling cards at that time.

Why did this Confederate officer have a carte de visite of Mrs. Morris? In late 1861, Alexander was active in signal work and intelligence gathering in Centreville, Virginia, dealing with spies operating around Washington, D.C. (*Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*. Edited by Gary W. Gallagher. 1989. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press). Perhaps Mrs. Morris gave it to him as she was assigned her intelligence gathering duties.

Alexander mentions Mrs. Morris in a letter to his wife on June 13, 1862 sent from the Ordnance Office in Richmond.

Mrs. Morris & Mrs. Greenhow have arrived here at last from their Wash’n Prison, & Mrs. M., I think is not a model of virtue however patriotic she may be. I am going to give her a few hundred dollars of the Secret Service money & send her off to the South.

Mrs. Hewitt Mason Case 747B

Mrs. Morris did go further south, presumably with a few hundred dollars from the Confederate Secret Service. Three years later, February 27, 1865, while residing in Charleston, South Carolina, she wrote to Secretary of State William H. Seward requesting that the “attaint of treason” be removed from her. At this point she was using the name Mrs. Mason. This request opened up Civil War Subversion Investigation case number 747B. The paperwork can be found at the historic document website fold3.com.

Case 747B provides a gold mine of information. Mrs. Mason’s letter to Seward included an explanation for why she was living at Brown’s Hotel in Washington D.C. in late 1861 to early 62. In it, she claims that Betsey Mason used her considerable influence to convince General Johnston that she was a Northern spy. “I was at once notified to leave and was sent forth from the South – a political position thrust upon me, whilst I was but a fragile woman striving to reach the dead soul of him who had sworn to protect me,” she wrote in her letter to Seward. That “dead soul” was Frank Mason.

Another letter included in the case is from the superintendent of the Old Capitol Prison, William P. Wood. This letter resolves some of the mystery around Mrs. Mason’s identity:

Old Capitol Prison, Washington D.C. March 29th 1865

Honorable C. A. Dana, Assistant Secretary of War

Sir

I have the honor to inform you in the case of Mrs. Mason, the lady who was formerly in my custody as a prisoner, that I believe she is a native of Alexandria Va. She is a very pretty and intelligent lady. She has a child (a boy).—the father of her child is Dr. Mason.—the Mrs. Mason of whom she writes is the mother of the man she claims as her husband.—she is very vindictive to the old lady because Mrs. Mason would not recognize her as a daughter in-law. The old lady says she is Ada Hewitt, and that her son never married her.

Mrs. Hewitt Mason as I will designate her by way of distinction—was very smart. She did ring in with General Marcy and had quite a nice time with the old gentleman. This is what brought her to the Old Capitol. She did plead before the commission as she stated in her letter to the Hon Secretary of State. And was sent to Richmond, previous to which she gave me important information in relation to the arrangement for a Western Confederacy—and also gave me a letter (a copy of which was taken by Hon. P. H. Watson) which I handed to Judge Hughes (of the Court of Claims) in relation to matters which were understood to be important to the Rebels. Mrs. Greenhow then confined in the prison found this out through some sympathizing secessionists, and afterwards had her banished from Richmond when they arrived there (Mrs Greenhow Mrs Baxley and Mrs Morris alias Mrs Mason). I knew she was on intimate terms with Col Jordan of General Beauregard’s staff.—I do not believe it in her power to do this government harm were she disposed. I am satisfied she could be of service to the Government if she would so promise. I believe she has no sympathy with the Rebels, and only desires to bring vengeance on the Virginia Mason family (who are all rebels) whom she believes have wronged her. She has given me

much information serviceable and reliable. I respectfully recommend a favorable consideration of her case.

I have the honor to be

Your Obed Servant

William P. Wood

Superintendent of the Old Capitol Prison

Betsey Mason revealed our mysterious woman's true identity to Wood. She was Ada Hewitt of Alexandria, Virginia. The 1850 Federal Census lists a Peter Hewitt family living in Alexandria with five children, including Ada, born in 1834. Her father's occupation is identified as "Baker" on the census. Hewitt served on the Alexandria Common Council for a number of years, most likely overlapping with Thomson F. Mason when he too served on the council and as mayor. Evidence that Ada and Frank knew each other can be found in an 1851 letter to Frank from his younger sister Jennie. Jennie shares news about a mutual friend named Ada, who has a flare for the dramatic and an inability to tell the truth. (Duke University, Thomson Francis Mason Papers).

William P. Wood, the Old Capitol Prison Superintendent stated unequivocally that Dr. Mason was the father of Ada's son, but he was less definitive regarding their marital status. He may have been deferring to Betsey Mason. In any event it is likely that Betsey would not have approved of a marriage between her eldest and favorite son and the daughter of a baker. If we believe Wood, and assume he was not making up facts to help a "very pretty and intelligent lady," then we must conclude that Ada gave him useful information and was playing both sides during her imprisonment.

Having "quite a nice time" with General Marcy prior to her arrest implies she was at least leading him on in Wood's opinion. Perhaps Wood had firsthand knowledge of Ada's flirtatiousness. In contrast, her letter to Seward describes an innocent "#MeToo" moment in which she refused General Marcy's advance which then led to her arrest.

You gave me a letter to General McClellan but 'was to see General Marcy his Chief of Staff.' I saw him and laid before him what he admitted to be true and valuable and to use his own words 'Madame you have given into our hands, what we paid thousands to get.' He then asked permission to see me at my Hotel.

But when after frequent visits I asked him to sustain me in my application to you for employment, his answer showed me from a personal bad motive, he intended to think it. Our acquaintance thus ended.

Had I been a spy for the South would I not have cajoled & used an apparent interest that man had for me for the purpose of gaining information?

A short time afterward I was arrested...

Another Union officer, Captain Jos. T. Pratt, wrote to defend Ada. On May 16, 1865 he writes from Charleston: "There is a mystery connected with this lady's history which I am unable to solve." Indeed! He doesn't understand how she can be close friends with General Beauregard yet write articles for

southern journals that are critical of the Confederacy. But he does feel she is a “woman of extraordinary intellect & culture.....She sympathized with the South but was too familiar with the selfish villainy of the traitors to believe that they ever could succeed.”

Captain Jos T. Pratt adds:

Mrs. A. H. Mason has been residing in Charleston since the early part of 1862. She took the oath of allegiance to the US on the 6th of March 1865. She left for N York about the 1st of April and I am informed that she is now in the city of Washington DC.

After the War

Pratt was correct. The 1870 census for Washington DC lists Ada Mason, age 35, occupation keeping house, living with her son Francis, age 11. The D.C. directory listings are particularly interesting. From 1868-1890 she is listed as “Mason, Ada H. wid. John F.” The widow of John F. Mason! During these same years, Frank Mason was alive and well and living a mere 40 miles away in Leesburg, with his wife and four children. The last directory listing found for Ada had her residing in Baltimore, Maryland in 1896. A record of her death has not been found to date.

Ada never “remarried” and she kept the Mason name for the rest of her life. Perhaps this was her revenge.

Mrs. Mason Back in the News

Our story might have ended with the Civil War Subversion Investigation if it weren’t for Ada’s propensity for drawing scandal to herself. In 1872 she is in the national news again. This headline appeared in the Evening Star, April 15, 1872: The Sales of Arms Investigation. THE MYSTERIOUS “MRS. MASON” BEFORE THE COMMITTEE.

In 1872, the US Senate undertook an investigation into sales of US Department of Ordnance arms. Arms sales were allegedly made to the French government in violation of President Grant’s order forbidding any sale of arms to France or Prussia during the Franco-Prussian War. A Senate investigation into one attempt to circumvent the order brought up multiple references to a Mrs. Mason who was acting as a broker and had “influence” with the Chief of Ordnance of the Army. After hearing her name come up in testimony from several witnesses, the Senate committee finally decided to locate her and summon her to testify. They found her in the DC Directory, and she appeared before the Senate committee on April 15, 1872.

The entire testimony of Ada H. Mason is available online (e-book; Reports of the Committees of the Senate of the United States for the Second Session of the Forty-Second Congress, 1871-1872. Washington Government Printing Office, pp 609-621).

She created quite a stir as reported in the Evening Star. All eyes were on the “mysterious” Mrs. Mason, handsomely attired in black silk. “She is of decidedly French appearance, and appeared to be a little excited, and at times drew forth a smelling-bottle, from which she frequently took inhalations.” She read a prepared statement “in a subdued voice” and then answered the committee’s questions.

She testified that an acquaintance shared with her a way she could make some money. “Some parties wished to buy arms from the Ordnance Department, and if I could make the purchase, it would pay me handsomely. I answered, ‘I could but try.’”

All the influence I had with General Dyer was the faith I had in my own capacity to accomplish the same that others had done. I have made money in legitimate speculations, and I did not see why I could not in the speculation of buying arms.

She claimed that General Dyer, Chief of Ordnance, treated her the same “as he would any other trader who come into his office – with the natural consideration a soldier and a gentleman would extend to any woman.”

Here is some sample testimony:

Q. It was represented here by Mr. Peck that you had satisfied him that you could get the arms. What were the representations you made to him?

A. Nothing at all except that I thought I could get them; that I could negotiate the sale just the same as a man would have done.

Q. Did you say anything about the sum of \$25,000?

A. I told him the margin which was required by law would have to be put up before I could secure the delivery of arms, which I supposed amounted to \$25,000.

Q. It is testified also that you required \$25,000 to be put into your hands. Was that so?

A. I required it to be put into my hands?

Mr. Schurz. Yes.

The Witness. In who else’s hands should it have been, as I was the person who was negotiating the sale?

Her answers were quite bold. She reported that she did not succeed in making the sale. Mr. Peck would not pay the up-front \$25,000 margin. He didn’t trust her for some reason.

“Rendered Herself Peculiarly Attractive to Gentlemen”

Her appearance before the Senate investigatory committee caused some excitement in her hometown of Alexandria. An anonymous letter to the Alexandria Gazette was printed on April 20, 1872:

Mrs. Mason. – The lady whose name heads this article, an Alexandrian by birth, as has been stated in the Gazette, has been of late brought into considerable notoriety in connexion with the sale of arms to the French, by certain parties in this country, an investigation into which matter has been going on before a committee of Congress, and discriptions of her personal appearance, acquirements, style of dress, etc., have been given to the public. Miss Ada Hewitt (for such was her name) was a daughter of the late Peter Hewitt; a well-known and respected citizen of this place, proprietor of a large cracker bakery, and a prominent local democratic politician, who occupied positions of trust in the community.

The lady in question is about forty-one or two years of age; was educated at the “Alexandria Female

Institute" (the principal of which was James S. Hollowell) and was noted for her beauty and intelligence, and by her sprightliness and manner, from her childhood, rendered herself peculiarly attractive to gentlemen.

Prior to the late war she removed with her parents from this city to Washington—and afterwards visited Paris, where she remained a short time, and returned to this country subscribing herself "Mrs. Mason." During her imprisonment in the Old Capitol, in the early part of the war, with her child, a handsome boy of four or five years, she was addressed as "Mrs. Morris," and recognized by her fellow prisoners as a heroine worthy of admiration. Of her adventures and hair breadth escapes during the war, and her subsequent connexion with the prime movers in the Cuban insurrection, the public have been fully advised.

Of her powers of fascination there can be no question, statesmen and warriors having surrendered at discretion to her charms of form and intellect. Years have passed lightly over her head, and the hand of time has touched gently the features that in earlier days marked her as one of the most beautiful of nature's daughters. She is of medium height, black hair, and eyes of sparkling depth and blackness, rich brunette complexion, figure slightly inclined to embonpoint, and strikingly attractive, and possessing great piquancy of manner and self-possession. Many of the now middle aged men of this city will remember the vivacious and charming petite belle of their youthful days, and among them, who have observed well the ways of the world, will not be surprised at her strange, eventful history.

A woman testifying before a Senate Committee was big news in 1872. Newspaper articles on Mrs. Mason appeared in Tennessee, New England, South Carolina, Louisiana, Illinois and more. Just like today, the newspapers capitalized on an opportunity to entertain and sell more papers.

Truth did not seem to be of particular importance, and the articles boldly assert many contradictory attributes and life story details. One story says she was married to another man before Frank. Another says Frank died during the war (he died in 1897). Some conflate the Rose O'Neal Greenhow story with Ada's. The desire to mythologize to fulfill fantasies of romance and heroism is very evident. There is scorn expressed as well for the "female lobbyist," with biblical references to Eve tempting Adam.

"A Woman in the Fullest and Best Sense of the Word"

This July 8, 1872 article (The Inter Ocean, Newspapers.com) gave the curious a satisfying experience of the "real" Mrs. Mason. Although long, the piece is full of colorful details.

MRS. MASON AT HOME

An interesting Interview – Her Views on Cuban Affairs—No Friend of Filibustering Expeditions—Diplomacy to Liberate Cuba

(From the Washington Patriot)

Readers of the newspapers (and who does not come under that category these days?) will remember the "French arms investigation" which not long ago came off here in Washington. They will also remember that among the names of witnesses subpoenaed and examined in connection with that case was that of Mrs. A. H. Mason, a lady residing in this city, who, it was alleged had had "something to do"

—vague as this expression is—with the transaction that was being investigated, and who it was generally presumed knew a good deal more about this affair than she chose to tell. Be this as it may, the case has long been brought to a close, and the reports submitted; but the name of Ada H. Mason still lingers over the finished records of the committee and floats through the newspapers of the country, shrouded in a certain dim mystery, surrounded by certain vague surmises and speculations as to its bearing, or rather that of its owner, upon this case; and the association of a woman's name with this, in itself sufficiently dry and prosaic case, naturally has had the same effect as sauce piquante on a dish of solid English roast beef—i.e., render this more palatable, and exciting the popular appetite for more of it.

For this reason it has not been wanting in anecdotes and newspaper paragraphs about the lady who figured somewhat conspicuously—much against her will, we dare say—in the famous case referred to; and “Mrs. Mason” has been made the heroine of more adventures, and had more romantic incidents attributed to her than Sylvanus Cobb could possibly find room for in all his novels, were he to write uninterruptedly for a hundred years or more (which heaven—for the sake of posterity—forbid!). Newspapers, north and south, west and east, have published columns of what purported to be her “history,” spiced with anecdotes of what she did, or did not do, during the war; but, strangely enough, all these accounts, of which we can lay our hands upon a dozen at this very moment, differ from each other in the most wonderful manner, notwithstanding the fact that they all claim to be “authentic.”

Having naturally some curiosity to see the Mrs. Mason of whom we had heard and seen so much in the newspapers ever since that French arms investigation, we provided ourselves with a letter of introduction from a mutual lady friend, and one afternoon last week called at her residence. This is a large and old-fashioned building in the western part of the city, in a rather exposed location, to which entrance is effected through a wide, old-fashioned porch, on a level with the street. This we found occupied and guarded by a large, shaggy dog of the Newfoundland breed, who seemed somewhat dubious as to whether he should let us pass unmolested or not; but observing that he was securely muzzled, in conformity with the city ordinance, we pushed boldly on and rang the bell.

We were received by a tall and graceful lady, whose whole appearance—blue eyes, fair complexion, and auburn hair—at once reminded us of Mlle. Christine Nilsson.

Upon entering, we were ushered into a handsomely furnished parlor, darkened to keep the heat out, where, in a corner by the window, we took a seat, awaiting the arrival of Mrs. Mason. The surroundings indicated a high degree of refinement and taste; a number of music books—chiefly compositions by Beethoven and Mendelssohn—lay scattered upon the piano, which was opened, having on the music stand one of Bach's fugues, to conquer the difficulties of which had evidently been the task of the young lady who had just received us. On a center table were a number of books, arranged in graceful disorder, interspersed with which were numbers of the *Patrie*, *Figaro*, *Le Journal des Debats*, and the *New York papers*, received by the last mail. Photographs and paintings, mostly family portraits, were scattered in profusion over the walls, and the whole room had an air of refined comfort that at once conveyed a most favorable impression of its occupants, whom we had not yet seen.

It took but a glance to notice all these details, and we had only been a few minutes in the room when a

handsome, fair-haired boy, of some thirteen summers, entered the room, and, opening the blinds, dispelled the twilight in which the room had been clothed. He then announced that his "mamma" would be down directly, and, picking up one of the French papers, went out in the porch, where, through the window, we shortly afterward saw him studying the paper and fondling the big dog. A few moments afterward Mrs Mason entered the room, offering a graceful apology for having kept us waiting. The appearance of this lady has been so often described in the newspapers that we shall not go into a detailed description here. As to her age, we have no means of knowing that; we can only say, as did Merecourt of Mme. De Geradin, in answer to Delphine Gay: "Be off," said she, "with your dusty register; the age of a woman is on her face in her eyes and in her smile; and the smile, the eye, the face of Mme. De Geradin are five-and-twenty years old; and if facts and dates seem to contradict this, pay them no heed!"

The formal introduction over, Mrs. Mason at once entered into a conversation upon the leading questions of the day, showing that she was well posted upon the topics of the time. She conversed with equal fluency and facility upon politics, literature, domestic and foreign; art matters, music, etc., and in a manner which gave evidence that her knowledge of these matters was not merely superficial, as is too often the case with your refined lady of the period, but that she had given much time and study to these subjects, and was thoroughly well versed as to their details. From speaking of the Cincinnati convention our conversation naturally came to Baltimore; Greeley and Brown, and Groesbeck and Summer were objects of our conversation, which then by degrees became changed in tone; took in Cuban affairs at great length, and brought up in Paris in a discussion of the merits of the "salon" of 1872, as criticised in the Patrie and Figaro, and the Paris correspondence of the Patriot. Once engaged upon art, the conversation naturally merged into music and literature, and thus three hours were spent in a most pleasant and profitable manner, and three more might have been passed, had not the deepening shadows and setting sun given warning that it was late, and that duties which would bear no postponement called us elsewhere.

Below we shall endeavor to give an outline of the most interesting part of our conversation, prefacing only that, as we took no notes, the sketch of what was said is wholly from memory. Mrs. Mason, reared in a school of pure democracy, possesses views far advanced of many of the politicians who are recognized as authority by the parties they represent, or to which they belong. Of this we became convinced upon the perusal of the letters she sent to Senators Schurz and Summer previous to the Cincinnati convention, of which, upon our request, she furnished us with copies, which, however, we are not at liberty to publish. Her advanced views and clear insight in politics was also apparent in our subsequent conversation on Cuban affairs. Mrs. Mason has long been identified with the cause of Cuba, and she is probably better posted upon the affairs of that tale than any other American woman.

While conversing upon this subject, which she has so greatly at heart, she grew warm, and explained her views as to the proper policy for the Cubans to pursue, at great length, and in a very lucid and interesting manner. "I tell you, sir," she said, "these filibustering expeditions, of which we hear so much, and of which, alas! so many Cubans are led to expect so much, are not destined to benefit the cause for which are ostensibly got up. No, sir; on the contrary they do a great deal more injury and retard the

advancement of the cause which they claim to support. The leaders of these expedition—men like Gens. G[.]Jordan and Ryan—are simply soldiers of fortune, brave it cannot be denied, since they run very considerable risks in putting themselves in the positions they do, and taking the responsibilities and risks which they incur. But brave to what purpose? These men follow filibustering as a regular profession which gives them employment; and for the pay they receive (\$250 per month) I believe that they would lend their assistance to most any cause sufficiently hazardous. No, sir; mark my word. No relief will ever come to Cuba through these men or their haphazard exertions. If Cuba is to be freed it must be through diplomacy and statesmanship—intrigues, if you will—through the conception of skillfully laid and manipulated plans, and a state department which possesses the brains to execute them and has a nation with courage enough to back it. But of these all important factors in Cuba's liberation we have seen no evidence as yet, while this very day hundreds of American citizens, residents of Cuba are openly persecuted and oppressed by the Spanish authorities, without having the means of redress, as the United States refuses to protect them or their rights. Why, sir, an American citizen is today an object of derision and ridicule in the streets of Havana, while an Englishman proudly walks the same streets with the proud consciousness that he enjoys the protection of a government that is both willing and capable of taking care of the humblest of her citizens!"

We own that the blood rushed to our cheeks as Mrs. Mason detailed the numerous insults which had been heaped upon American residents of Havana by the Spanish volunteers, while no English citizen was ever known to be molested. She recounted the murder of an American citizen, about a year ago by the volunteers, for wearing a blue necktie and how when the trial came off the wife of the British consul at Havana, who had been an accidental witness to the murder, appeared in court dressed in a blue dress, with white cravat and a red ribbon in her hair—the very colors which caused the death of the unfortunate American—and, upon being warned by the authorities not to venture in the streets in this costume, she proudly answered, "I am the subject of her majesty, Queen Victoria; let them touch me if they dare!" And she left the court room and reached her home unmolested. Had she been an American woman, Mrs. Mason concluded, "she would have been torn to pieces by the mob."

Many other incidents, showing the utter disregard by the Spaniards for the stars and stripes and the deep respect for the cross of St. George, were narrated in course of our conversation on Cuban affairs. Mrs. Mason repeatedly expressed her disapproval of filibustering expeditions in any shape or manner intended to "free" Cuba, and regretted that the notion had become quite prevalent, especially in New York that she is a chief mover in these affairs, to which, on the contrary, she is, and always has been, most strenuously opposed.

Our subsequent conversation related chiefly to literature and music, (in both of which arts Mrs. Mason is thoroughly at home, and in which she takes an intense interest. She did not, she said think much of the so-called "literary reunions," which have of late years come in vogue in this and other cities; that is, as a rule, for of course there were exceptions. But she had usually found them to be very solemn and pseudo-high toned affairs with an immense amount of pretense, and very little solid learning and sound ability to back it up.

One little incident had especially given her a rather unfavorable opinion of "literary reunions," which she

related as follows: While on a visit to some friends in a certain section of South Carolina, where the inhabitants pride themselves upon their alleged direct descent from the Huguenots, she was one evening invited to participate in a "literary reunion," at the house of one of the shining lights of the community. An essay was read upon the virtues of Madame de Maintenon, which endeavored to show that she had not, as is ordinarily supposed, influenced the political actions of King Louis XIV, and that she had, in this respect, been much abused by history. Mrs. Mason, while conceding that Mme. De Maintenon, doubtless, in many respects, was entitled much more to praise than blame, could not, however, at the same time, refrain from expressing some astonishment that the woman at whose instigation the edict of Nantes was revoked and the Protestants persecuted, should be held in such high esteem, and considered sans reproche by downright descendants of the Huguenots. As the saying is, "She had them there;" the learned society had evidently forgotten all about the connection of the illustrious French woman and the edict of Nantes, and the literary descendants of the Huguenots had nothing further to say.

With this little anecdote [we] ended our interview with Mrs. Mason, in whom we found a lady of rare attainments, a high degree of culture and refinement, a devoted mother, and a woman in the fullest and best sense of the word.

What Do You Think?

Was Ada "not a model of virtue" or "a woman in the fullest and best sense of the word?" Did she have a romantic relationship with Frank Mason, bearing two children out of wedlock? No record of their marriage has been found to date.

Where do their stories converge?

Both grew up in Alexandria. Both of their fathers served in the Alexandria government. Frank went to medical school with the two people Ada claimed were witnesses at their Paris wedding, Julian Taylor and George Morris. According to a letter Betsey wrote to Frank, all three future doctors planned on studying medicine abroad around 1852 or 3. All three applied for passports. The April 20, 1872 Alexandria Gazette article included above stated that Ada and family went to France prior to the war, and when she returned she referred to herself as Mrs. Mason. So it is in the realm of possibility that Ada and Frank were in Paris, France at the same time and married there. (Records of civil marriages in Paris, France prior to 1860 were lost in a fire.) There is one problem though. Julian Taylor died in Paris, France on December 16, 1852, a little over a year prior to the alleged marriage (*Despatches from US Consul in Paris France 1796-1906* T1, Roll 10, National Archives). So either the Official Records information is wrong, or Ada was not telling the truth regarding Julian Taylor being a witness at her wedding.

What about Arkansas? Ada's letter to Frank written from the Old Capitol Prison in 1862 referred to her "sufferings in Arkansas." There is evidence that Frank and his brother Pen (Arthur Pendleton Mason) moved to Arkansas in 1859. In 1859 Betsey transferred ownership of Huntley to Frank and Pen along with a number of slaves. A Virginia Court of Appeals case states that they took the slaves to Arkansas (Grattan, Peachy R., editor. 1868. Reports of the Cases Decided in the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia, Vol. XVIII, from October 1, 1867 to October 1, 1868. Richmond: Fergusson and Rady Printers. p. 544). In 1860 Pen lived in Douglass Township, Arkansas (1860 Federal Census). Lastly and perhaps

most telling, little Frank was born in Arkansas in 1859 according to the 1870 Federal Census.

Our imaginations can fill the gaps in the story in a variety of ways. We might entertain that Ada was everything from an abandoned wife and mother, to a cunning gold-digger following Frank around. Had Frank fallen for Ada in Alexandria when they were young? Did he move to Arkansas in part to hide Ada from his mother?

She was well educated and savvy, managing to live an interesting and independent life. Did she spy for both North and South? There is evidence that she shared information to aid both North and South as it fit her immediate needs.

Ada may have had a flare for the dramatic and a loose relationship with truth, but she was indeed a woman ahead of her time. She supported herself by becoming a speculator and trader. She was clearly a very strong individual, not unlike her would-be mother-in-law Betsey Mason, although it would cause them both to roll over in their graves to hear it.



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