

# Haskell, Mary (Howe) (c. 1812–1894)

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## GERALD WHEELER

Gerald Wheeler, M.A. in religion (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan) and M.A.L.S. (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan), served the church for more than 47 years as an editor, first at Southern Publishing Association in Nashville, Tennessee, then at the Review and Herald Publishing Association, Hagerstown, Maryland, after its merger with Southern. He retired as head book editor. Wheeler has written numerous articles and books, including biographies on James White (2003) and Stephen Nelson Haskell (2016). He contributed to the first revised edition of the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1976) and *The Ellen G. White Encyclopedia* (2013) and continues to edit for denominational publishing entities.

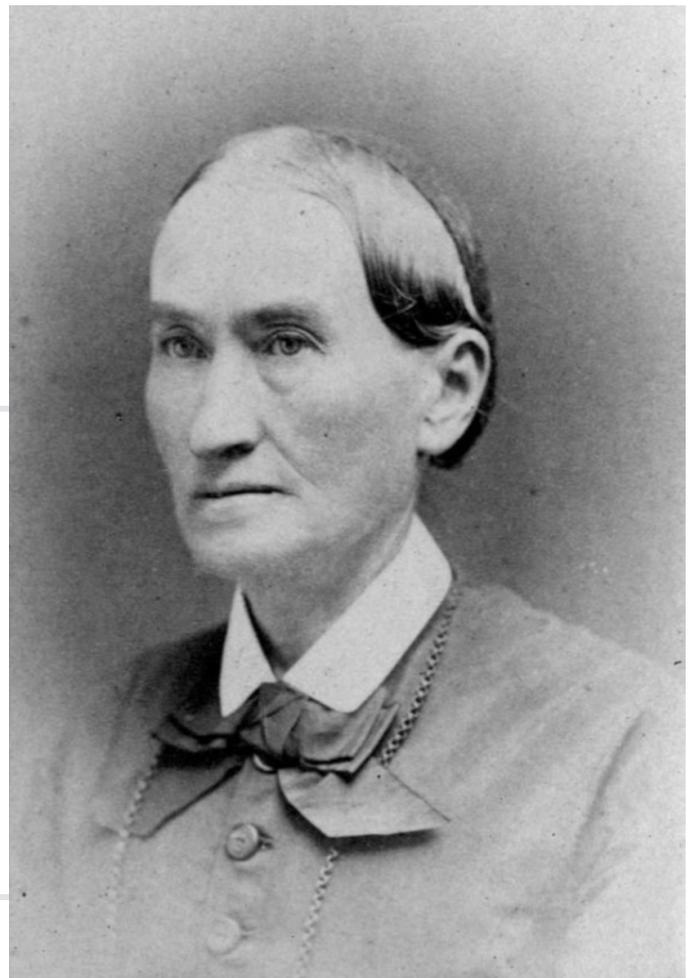
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The first wife of Stephen Nelson Haskell, Mary E. Howe was born in Massachusetts about 1812.<sup>1</sup> Apparently a self-proclaimed invalid, she was being supported by a man, possibly her half-brother, for whom Stephen Haskell, while still in his teens, came to work as a farm hand.

## Puzzling Personality

When Haskell's employer became terminally ill he asked Stephen to take care of Mary after his death. Her father was dead and her mother in her 80s.<sup>2</sup> Unable to think of any way to fulfill the request except by marrying the woman, Stephen proposed to her and she accepted. They were married April 10, 1851. She was about 38 and he 17. Despite the age differences, the marriage lasted more than 40 years. According to one of his biographers, Ella M. Robinson, Haskell "felt at the time and ever afterward that the difference in their ages was minimized by the cultural and educational advantages she contributed."<sup>3</sup>

Besides the unusualness of the marriage itself, Mary's contemporaries also found themselves puzzled by her. Rowena Elizabeth Purdon, a long-time staff member at Atlantic Union College in South Lancaster,



Mary E. Haskell, c. 1890

Loma Linda University Photo Archive; Dept. of Archives and Special Collections, Loma Linda University.

Massachusetts, where the Haskells lived for many years, remembered Mrs. Haskell as “a plain little lady, determined in her manner and a bit eccentric.” Elsewhere, Purdon described her as someone “with firm set lips and a powerful will to move any mountains in her way.”<sup>4</sup> Mary Haskell shared her library with the students of the church’s South Lancaster school, and tradition said that she wrote poetry. Mary also helped Stephen, who had no formal schooling, to acquire a self-taught education. Under her influence he became a voracious reader and started building a library of his own.

Early denominational chronicler Arthur W. Spalding wrote that

Traditions take in ample territory about Mrs. Mary How [sic] Haskell. Thus: She was an invalid; she could manage spirited horses as few men could. She was a martinet with firm set lips; she was a loving wife, who rose at an unearthly hour to greet her husband, back from a two-year world-girdling journey. She was a cultured woman, a poet, whose large and carefully selected library was the mecca of thoughtful students in the early days of the South Lancaster school; she was a recluse, who was seldom home to visitors. But each and every purveyor of these several tales agrees without scruple to legends of others. A remarkable woman!<sup>5</sup>

## Health Struggles

Many decades later Stephen wrote to Ellen G. White that Mary had been miraculously healed. He told Mrs. White that

Physicians said [that] were she healed she could not walk as she had lost the use of her muscles by being bed ridden. I thought God would heal her. This He miraculously did the second or third year after our marriage. We were at this time Methodists but we had become acquainted with God. My wife had for years experienced true sanctification.<sup>6</sup>

Ellen White wrote at least two letters to the couple, both dealing with health, that she later had published as Testimonies.<sup>7</sup>

The testimony entitled “Experience Not Reliable” dealt with several long-standing practices that Mary indulged in that Ellen White felt were worsening her invalidism. One was Mrs. Haskell’s reluctance to bathe regularly. It was a not uncommon phobia of the time when people easily caught colds in drafty and poorly heated houses. Mary feared that bathing would make her chilly. Ellen White, demonstrating an advanced understanding of the mind-body relationship, explained that Mary’s blood vessels were responding to her belief that she would be cold in a bath, and consequently she did indeed become chilly. Another issue involved Mary Haskell’s conviction that too much physical activity would make her more of an invalid than she already was, a belief that she based on what she thought her “experience” had taught her about her personal health. Mrs. White emphasized that one should not trust such “experience,” but should test it against known physiological laws. She believed Mary should seek the help of the physicians of the new Adventist health institute.

Although Mary desperately needed more physical activity, she firmly believed herself incapable of it. Additional exertion, she was convinced, would only worsen her condition. Other people simply did not understand her situation. However, Ellen White pointed out that Mrs. Haskell was able to get in and out of a carriage. She could use the same muscles in other ways, such as walking. Often she expended greater effort in order to get others to do something for her than if she had done it herself. While she might pray for divine healing, she also had a role to perform.

The other testimony stressed that both Mary and Stephen needed to improve their diet. It appears that the couple had become so ascetic and frugal that they endangered their health. They needed to purchase more nutritious food. Such a near-starvation diet would have further weakened her.

## Home Missionary

During the early years of their marriage, the couple worked together, becoming more and more active in their new Sabbatarian Adventist faith. Mary had received a small inheritance and together she and Stephen invested it in the growing denomination. As a homemaker, she did not travel with him but involved herself in activities that she could do at home, including a prayer group that she started with three other women. Every Wednesday the group, which called itself the Vigilant Missionary Society, met in the local Odd Fellows Hall, the site of the local Adventist church. The women prayed for their children, neighbors, isolated Adventists, as well as former members of the Millerite Movement. Stephen Haskell encouraged and supported their activities. He formally organized them on June 8, 1869, with a Mrs. Roxie Rice as president and his wife as vice president.

The first lay-organized ministry of the newly developing Seventh-day Adventist Church, the society distributed a thousand pages of pamphlets during its first year of existence. Soon its members began sending, all at their own expense, hundreds of Adventist tracts and booklets across New England and eventually to foreign countries. They worked to get Adventist books into local libraries. The women also began writing to individuals interested in Adventism. Two members even taught themselves French and German so that they could correspond with non-English-speaking people. Impressed with what the women were doing, Stephen encouraged them to form the first conference-wide Tract and Missionary Society in the newly-organized New England Conference, itself newly-organized with Haskell as president. From the tract society would evolve an Adventist publishing distribution system as well as the forerunner of Adventist personal ministry programs.

## Wife of a Traveling Leader

As Stephen acquired more and more responsibilities in church leadership, he increasingly spent more time away from home, leaving Mary more and more alone. First, he would travel throughout New England visiting churches and isolated members. Later, he became president of conferences on opposite coasts of the United States. When leadership appointed him to the General Conference committee, he found himself being sent on overseas

trips, sometimes lasting a year or two or more.

Mary would wait patiently in South Lancaster, doing what she could there. During his thirteen-month trip to Australia and New Zealand, she lived with a friend in a dorm room in South Lancaster Academy's South Hall, writing letters and encouraging lonely students. Learning that her husband's train would arrive at 6:30 in the morning, Mary now in her 70s, made herself get up, dress, and with another person's help, managed to get to the door so that she could open it to greet her husband. But Stephen was still so excited by his experiences during the trip that he immediately left after breakfast to the school chapel to tell others of his adventures in the South Pacific.<sup>8</sup>

While Stephen did bring Mary to Battle Creek, Michigan, when he worked at the General Conference for a period, most of the time she remained in the couple's home in Massachusetts. Ellen White, concerned that Mary spent so much time alone, especially as she grew increasingly frail, urged Stephen to spend more time with her, saying that she "should be glad if your wife could have your company more than she has had, poor woman!"<sup>9</sup>

Eventually, while Stephen was serving as president of the California Conference, Mary asked to join him there. He had struggled with the decision for some time, afraid that the long trip to the West Coast would worsen her health or even lead to her death. Also, he had not been able to find a caretaker for her. But after obtaining the help of a woman named Anna Rasmussen, he brought Mary to the West Coast in 1892 and rented a cottage on the grounds of St. Helena Sanitarium north of San Francisco. Once she arrived in California, she enjoyed being there, especially the carriage rides around the countryside. Hydrotherapy treatments at the sanitarium improved her health.

Stephen now wrote to Mrs. White,

I think that it is my duty to spend more time with her than in the past although she never says a word against my going away, only she clings to me as never before." Perhaps troubled by thoughts of how much he had been away in the past, he said, "I owe her a debt of gratitude and have a duty to her.

He had decided that it was "not duty for me to leave her when she is sick."<sup>10</sup>

His long absences from Mary, however, seem to have bothered Haskell to the end of his life. Writing to W. A. Spicer after the death of his second wife, Hetty, he began with a reference to Mary, stating, "Twenty five years ago my first wife died while I was away from home."<sup>11</sup> But at the moment he felt it also a duty to accept the constant requests to attend camp meetings and then take another trip overseas.

Mary's health began to decline once again when she suffered a series of partial strokes. Eventually, church leaders cabled Stephen, who was in the midst of an itinerary to Scandinavia, Central Europe, and then England, that he needed to return to California immediately. When she rallied once he was back, he thought that he could again resume his administrative duties but remained near her. Finally, she became bedfast and died of a stroke on January 29, 1894, at an age estimated at between 78 and 81 (though Stephen himself gave her age in the

obituary he wrote for her in the characteristically detailed style of the time as 81 years, four months, and six days).<sup>12</sup>

Despite their great age differences and the other difficulties that their relationship had faced, after Mary's death Stephen wrote to Ellen G. White in typewritten capital letters: "I LOVED HER AND SHE LOVED ME."<sup>13</sup>

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White, Ellen G. to S. N. Haskell. January 14, 1887. Ellen G. White Writings, [egwwritings.org](http://egwwritings.org).

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## NOTES

1. 1850 United States Census, Fitchburg, Worcester, Massachusetts; Roll: 340; Page: 188A, [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com). Although some biographers spell her maiden name "How," Stephen Haskell consistently spelled it in his letters with an e.

2. 1850 United States Census, Rutland, Worcester, Massachusetts; Roll: 341; Page: 401A, [Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com).

3. Ella M. Robinson, *S. N. Haskell: Man of Action* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1967), 13. See also Gerald Wheeler, *S. N. Haskell: Adventist Pioneer, Evangelist, Missionary, and Editor* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Publishing Association, 2016), 31, 36-38.
4. Rowena Elizabeth Purdon, *The Story of a Church: Presented on the Occasion of the Diamond Anniversary of the Founding of the South Lancaster Seventh-day Adventist Church, April 28 & 29, 1939* (South Lancaster, MA: College Press), 7.
5. Arthur W. Spalding, *Footprints of the Pioneers* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 11.
6. S. N. Haskell to Ellen G. White, December 29, 1909, Ellen G. White Estate, [ellenwhite.org](http://ellenwhite.org).
7. Ellen G. White, "Errors in Diet," *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1 (1868), 204-209, and "Experience Not Reliable," *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 3 (1875), 67-79, Ellen G. White Writings, [egwwritings.org](http://egwwritings.org).
8. Robinson, 87.
9. Ellen G. White to S. N. Haskell, January 14, 1887. Ellen G. White Writings, [egwwritings.org](http://egwwritings.org).
10. S. N. Haskell to Ellen G. White, August 10, 1892, Ellen G. White Estate, [ellenwhite.org](http://ellenwhite.org).
11. S. N. Haskell to W. A. Spicer, October 26, 1919, cited in Wheeler, 328.
12. S. N. Haskell, "Mary E. Haskell obituary," *ARH*, February 20, 1894, 127.
13. Cited in Robinson, 14.

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