

# Mrs. Eliza Thompson Edgerton Newport

*One of Minnesota's ten most outstanding women in 1924*

While many women's accomplishments of the early twentieth century were not well documented, our founder Eliza Thompson Edgerton Newport is an exception.

A biography of Eliza Newport was published in *Who's Who among Minnesota Women: A History of Woman's Work in Minnesota from Pioneer Days to Date, Told in Biographies, Memorials and Records of Organizations* by Mary Dillon Foster.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Nancy Podas

and Elizabeth Morgan. She attended Mrs. Hannah's school, Washington, Pennsylvania.

Eliza was the grandmother of our late NSCDA/MN member Nancy Podas and great-grandmother to member Christine Podas-Larson. Nancy Podas wrote a biography of her mother in 2009. These sources and Korsgaard's<sup>2</sup> thesis detail only some of the accomplishments of this founder of our Minnesota Colonial Dames.

Born in Marietta, Ohio, November 15, 1838, Eliza was the daughter of Luther Edgerton

Eliza taught school before she married Reece Marshall Newport on October 27, 1863, at the age of 24. Reece graduated from Marietta College (Ohio), was valedictorian and Phi Beta Kappa. He was attending Union Theological Seminary in New York City when the Civil War broke out. He returned to Ohio, married Eliza, enlisted, fought in several battles, was promoted to colonel at age 25, and to brigadier-general at 27, for meritorious service. He was appointed chief quarter master by President Lincoln and was stationed in Baltimore, Maryland. After the war ended he came to Minnesota as auditor, having been appointed treasurer of the northern Pacific Railroad, with general offices at Brainerd. In 1873 they moved to Minneapolis and in 1876 to St. Paul. In St. Paul, General Newport was first a land agent for the Great Northern Railroad and later worked in real estate, eventually owning the firm of R. M. Newport and Son.

Eliza and Reece settled in a spacious home on the bluff at 217 Summit Avenue with their children Luther, Mary and then Reece, Jr.



Figure 2. Eliza Edgerton Newport with grandchildren Mower R. and Beatrix Newport about 1901 from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society

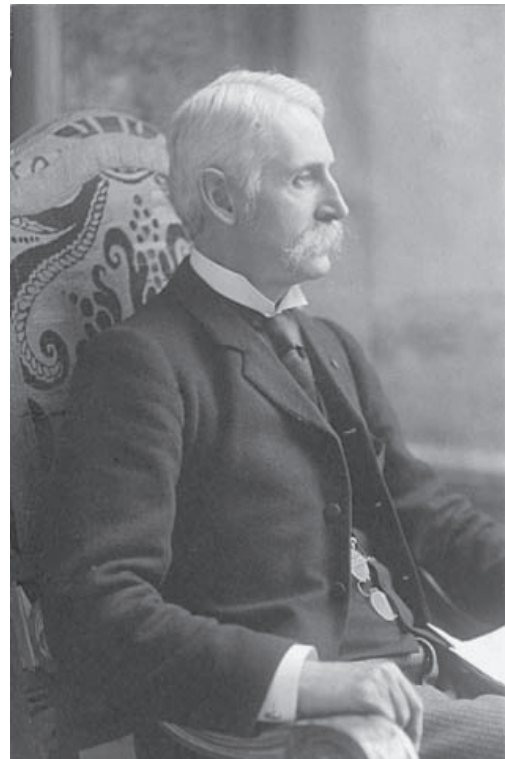


Figure 3. Reece Marshall Newport

from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society

It was the beginning of Eliza's truly remarkable civic and social accomplishments. She was a great organizer and had a passion for working with and helping young people, perhaps from her teaching experience, and for patriotic and charitable endeavors.

## *St. Paul Bethel Association*

One of her projects, the St. Paul Bethel Association, installed and maintained the first coffee house in St. Paul. At the time most traffic came up the Mississippi River by boat so the shop was located near the landing. Coffee and food were sold at cost.

Who's Who Among Minnesota Women states that "In 1891, she assisted Reverend David Morgan in organization of St. Paul Bethel Association, which built and maintained a house-boat, moored at the foot of Sibley Street. On this boat were a coffee-room (the first to operate on the cafeteria plan in the United States) and sleeping rooms, first mission in America to furnish low priced clean lodgings for working men. Those without funds could work about the boat or at a woodpile on shore alongside. Mrs. Newport was president of Ladies Bethel Society and under her direction afternoon teas were given every Friday, at which from 100 to 300 poor women listened to musical programs and instructive addresses on problems of life. Mrs. Newport kept up this work until her death."<sup>3</sup>

Korsgaard's thesis gives us more insight into Eliza's important contributions.

"The boat must have been a very lively place for all the activities that were held on it. ...the organizers...saw the need for more services and branched out to offer assistance to the women who lived along the river and downtown.

Although in 1903 the Bethel's officers were all male, of the thirteen trustees, three were women, including Mrs. R. M. Newport...The Bethel also boasted a large Women's Auxiliary Board, which was most likely responsible for the many women's activities held on the boat. The boat never lodged women, but its administrators did much to try to help the very poor women of the area. In the "work room," women were provided materials with which to sew for themselves and their children. They received instruction in sewing, and when they completed a project, it was sold to them for a low price. Although the Bethel was reportedly a non-religious organization, it did operate under Christian principles, and ran a Sunday school that had 400 enrollees by 1903.

One of the most interesting of the women's activities however, was the Bethel Mothers' Club, founded in 1888 by Mrs. R. M. Newport (among others). ... Originally club meetings centered [[on]] informal talks by the middle and upper class women who directed the club, and the earliest talks focused on hygiene and health. Life in St. Paul slums was dangerously unhealthy, but these talks [[might]] have also been a method of in [[exposing]] new immigrant women to the "American" way of running a home. The talks eventually expanded to include speeches by successful St. Paul citizens who explained what they did for a living. The women's club directors decided that a dab of culture would liven up the meetings, so

music recitals and recitations were also added. Soon after establishing the Mothers' Club, a nursery was added to the activities of the boat so that the club members would have a place to put their babies while they attended club meetings.<sup>4</sup>

## *Young Women's Friendly Association (Y.W.F.A.)*

St. Paul's population grew from 41,173 in 1880 to 133,156 in 1890. There were opportunities to make great wealth. Immigration to Minnesota was at its peak. In the midst of this, an economic panic occurred.

"It is unknown what effect the depression of 1893 to 1896 had [[on the women's organization work.]] One would expect that the usage of charities increased during those years...Eliza M. Newport stated in her 1894 report of the president of the Young Women's Friendly Association: 'what a trying (year) it has been—owing to the "times," which have been hard beyond precedent—to those responsible for the association, as well as to those whom we have been endeavoring to aid, a year most depressing upon all classes, all conditions.'"

Korsgaard describes the organization:

"The Young Women's Friendly Association (Y.W.F.A.) was established in 1899. In 1890 Bishop Gilbert interested St. Paul business men in expanding the operation. The men soon found that they did not have enough time to give, and a board of twenty-four female managers ...was established. The men stayed on the advisory board. The Association became a club for working girls and attracted 114,549 visitors in 1895. It had a 'parlor reading room,' complete with books, magazines and a piano, and visitors could buy an inexpensive lunch there or bring their own. Classes in "physical training," cooking, stenography, and English were taught in the Y.W.F.A. rooms. The Y.W.F.A. tried to be self-sufficient, so it did charge for cooking classes. The cost was originally fifty cents, then... lowered to twenty-five cents to attract more students. Finally, tuition was lowered to ten cents.<sup>6</sup> In later years a bookkeeping class and reading club were established."<sup>7</sup>

With a board of women, this association developed into one of the most constructive and beneficial influences in the community. On New Year's Day, 1896, 1,500 people attended an "Open House" reception of this association, at its rooms at Seventh and Jackson streets.<sup>8</sup>

"The Association clearly states its Christian motives in its annual report, written by the President, Eliza M. Newport... 'The desire and aim is not solely to promote the physical comfort of those who frequent the rooms, but to reach their hearts, gain their confidence, and by daily and hourly personal contact, example and teaching to lead them to consecrate themselves to Christian living.'"<sup>9</sup>

In 1894, the Y.W.F.A. established a dormitory that housed eleven girls, either on a permanent or transient basis...”

She initiated having matrons employed in police stations to better the condition of women following arrest.

### *St. Anthony Park Woman's Association and the Auxiliary of the G.A.R.*

The Grand Army of the Republic (G.A.R) was the VFW of the nineteenth century. Like the VFW today, the veterans of the Civil War had a women's auxiliary. According to Korsgaard, Eliza used her leadership skills in establishing the St. Anthony Park Woman's Association.

“In 1896, Mrs. Newport organized 1,200 women of St. Paul under seventy-five vice presidents to act at the Hospitality Committee for the Grand Army of the Republic Encampment that was held in St. Paul that year. After the encampment, St. Paul women stayed organized (under Mrs. Newport's direction) to raise funds for a soldier's memorial, and St. Anthony Park Women were particularly active. They formed their own association, and at their first official meeting, a letter from Mrs. Newport was read. The letter encouraged them to “meet, organize, enthuse and report progress at the next general meeting (of the monument committee).”<sup>10</sup> After a few months, city-wide patriotism faded, but St. Anthony Park Women liked being organized, and established themselves as a club. Their all-encompassing mission was:

- To foster patriotism and better knowledge of the history of our country
- Social and intellectual improvement
- To care for the sick and needy
- To do all possible for improving and benefiting our beautiful suburbs.”



### *The Daughters of the American Revolution*

The Daughters of the American Revolution (D.A.R.) St. Paul chapter, the first in Minnesota, was founded by Eliza. She was appointed regent. In January 1892, she was appointed state regent and served for seven years. She was elected vice president general of the national DAR in 1895. Her St. Paul DAR chapter petitioned the Board of Education to fly the flag over schools. In 1894, Minnesota became the first state to fly the flag of the United States over all schools during school hours.<sup>11</sup>

When Eliza was state regent of the Minnesota DAR, an article written about Eliza's genealogy was published in

the DAR *American Monthly Magazine*. It was written by Mrs. John Quincy (Ada Walker) Adams, another founding member of the Minnesota Dames. Eliza had at least two Revolutionary War ancestors. Her “great-grandfather, Eliphalet Edgerton, of Norwich Connecticut, was taken prisoner by the British, was confined in a prison ship at Halifax and died from the effect of his hardships.”<sup>12</sup> On her maternal side, Colonel George Morgan first served as a first lieutenant from Philadelphia, but shortly received a commission of colonel and served through the winter at Valley Forge. The article does not mention her Colonial ancestor, William Bradford of the Mayflower and Plymouth Colony.

### *Other charitable and civic work*

According to her granddaughter Nancy Podas, around the fireside of the Newport's library, companies of young men and homeless were brought together.

In addition to these endeavors, Eliza traveled extensively in Europe with her family, was active in House of Hope Church, Town and Country Club (her husband and son were original members), and ...

“was vice president of the Mary Washington Association and member of Mayflower Association; was the chairman of hospitality committee at the meeting of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in Saint Paul and was a life member of the New Century Club.”

The Minnesota State Federation of Women's Clubs was established in 1895 and “immediately took up the work of general civic betterment, the promotion of free public libraries, and the improvement of public schools.”<sup>12</sup>

*Who's Who Among Minnesota Women* describes one of her accomplishments, “Moved by an appeal on behalf of female prisoners, to better conditions following arrest, she initiated the effort that resulted in having matrons employed in police stations of St. Paul.”<sup>13</sup>

Eliza was also a member of the Free Kindergartens Society that was founded in response to the increasing numbers of working women in St. Paul.

She was a member of the Mitford Home for Working Girls. It was a clean, warm, safe alternative to the tenements for business women and working girls. The home was administered by a Board of Lady Managers. In 1888 its budget was \$5,397.86. The Home relied heavily on cash donations. Mrs. J. Q. Adams, another of the Minnesota Colonial Dames founders, as assistant treasurer made personal loans to the Home when money ran tight. To raise money, the managers held a “Russian Tea” in the Chamber of Commerce Halls.<sup>14</sup>

Both Mrs. Newport and her husband Reece Newport were active in the Newsboys Home Association that would become Child Saving and Prison Association. In the nineteenth century, many orphaned children lived on the streets and supported themselves by selling newspapers and shining





Figure 4. Rachael Rice Newport and Mary Newport  
from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society  
shoes. This association found housing for them.

In 1924, fifteen years after her death, she was named one of Minnesota's ten most outstanding women "heartily interested and active in every effort to better the true and lasting welfare of mankind."

Eliza died May 28, 1909 at age 71, and her husband, Reece, died November 2, 1912 at age 75. The Newports had three children. The oldest, Luther, married Rachael Rice, the daughter of Henry Rice, Minnesota's first Senator and the young couple moved to Philadelphia. Mary, very active socially and civic-minded like her mother, was appointed the

first head of the Minnesota Arts Board by Governor Johnson. She moved to New York City and lived there until her death. Reece Jr. worked alongside his father in R.M. Newport Realty Company, married, and had four children.

### Endnotes:

1. *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women* p 233
2. Korsgaard, Kara Maria, Hemline University master's thesis, "*The Meeting Adjourned and Tea was Served, The Organizational Lives of Elite Women in Late Nineteenth Century*," St. Paul, May 1988 St. Paul, Minnesota p 56-58.
3. *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women* p 233
4. Korsgaard footnote p 87, *The Proposed Home of the Bethel Association* (St. Paul, 1903), p. 15
5. Korsgaard footnote p 87 *Ibid.* p 7,
6. Korsgaard footnote p 88, *The Young Women's Friendly Association of St. Paul* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Co., 1895), p. 8.
7. Korsgaard footnote p 88, *Ibid* p 6.
8. Korsgaard p 62
9. *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women* p 233
10. *Ibid.*
11. "A Glance into the Past of the St. Anthony Park Woman's Association," *St. Anthony Park Woman's Association St. Paul Papers 1897-1926*, Minnesota Historical Society, p. 5.
12. Bennett, Dorothy, *Highlights of the History of the Minnesota State Society of the NSDAR 1891- 1991*, Minnesota State Society NSDAR1994
13. Adams, Ada Walker (Mrs. John Quincy) "Mrs. R. M. Newport," *American Monthly Magazine*, National Society Daughters of the American Revolution
14. Other sources used by Nancy Podas included: *History of Minnesota (Historical Society)*, *History of St. Paul* (Historical Society) by Andrews, *American Monthly* (DAR Washington, DC), *St. Paul Dispatch*, Washington County Historical Society, Marietta, Ohio, *St. Paul, Saga of an American City* by Virginia Brainerd Kunz (Ramsey County Historical Society) and Eliza Edgerton Newport's personal papers.
15. *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women* p 233
16. Korsgaard p 61-62, 81
17. Photos are from the Minnesota Historical Society Collection



Figure 5. Home of Eliza and Reece Newport at 217 Summit, St. Paul later  
demolished to become the parking lot for the St. Paul Cathedral.

from the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society



# Christine Podas-Larson

*President/Chief Executive Officer Retired, Public Arts St. Paul*



Figure 6. Christine Podas-Larson (photo by Bill Kelley)

There is no doubt that Christine Podas-Larson, inherited her great grandmother, Eliza Newport's, DNA.

In May of 2015, Christine Podas-Larson was interviewed by MinnPost writer Joe Kimball as she was about to retire after 30 years as the head of Public Arts St. Paul. The following is a summary of that article. Christine summarized the work of the organization in this way:

“Public Art Saint Paul brings artists together with communities to shape a public realm that fosters imagination, explores civic values and the community’s evolving history, and strengthens public places as vessels of public life. Our work beautifies the city and brings art into our everyday civic lives; it’s our civic connective tissue. We know that artists illuminate social and environmental conditions, and our work fosters a deep fondness for this place of our personal histories and civic lives.”

Christine went on to describe how it started, after a gathering of civic leaders gathered in 1986,

“we spent nearly two years in study and held conversation throughout the community. The conclusion: People across a range of interests thought that public art was important to the city’s future. Because St. Paul is a municipality, county seat, state capital and federal river port, a singular municipal arts commission was not a solution – the idea was to take a look at the entirety of the public sphere. So the nonprofit Public Art Saint Paul was established to serve as a big tent for this purpose.

I was hired as the president/CEO – Dave McDonell (of the St. Paul Companies) was the first board chair, [then Mayor George] Latimer aide Dick Broeker and George Reid were advisers.

In the beginning I was the sole employee and our office was in my house, and we had a \$50,000 budget. In the early 1990s we moved into shared office space in the Minnesota Building downtown. Since 2000 we have had our

own offices, currently in Lowertown, and our staff has grown to include a director of operations and administrative assistant, two city artists, and an education director. Our budget is now about \$900,000 per year.

She went on to describe the highlights of their accomplishments.

“The three downtown parks – Kellogg Mall, Mears and the Saint Paul Cultural Garden (an extension of Kellogg Mall). They are beautiful! They serve the city well. They set models for collaboration. The Wabasha Street Bridge... Western Sculpture Park..., Minnesota Rocks!, University Avenue Project, CREATE, The Neighborhood Meal. The City Artist Program [is] an ongoing engine of ingenuity that will change the city’s DNA.”

Pictures of these accomplishments speak more than words.



Figure 8. The Western Sculpture Park



Figure 7. Kellogg Mall



Figure 9. Saint Paul Cultural Garden