

Mary E (Richards) Swayze
Muskegon's First Special Teacher
By Frances Harrington

If you've spent any time on Facebook (and I'll admit I spend too much), you've probably read posts about kids not being taught cursive writing anymore. I thought it was just one of those "fake news" posts I see all too often. After looking up the subject, I found that most US schools do not have cursive as a part of their curriculum. As of 2020, the website mycursive.com reported that only 21 states still required school children to learn cursive. Oh, and Michigan isn't one of them. So, if you don't know how to write cursive, how will you be able to read it? As genealogists, we know the importance of reading handwritten material since so many old documents are in cursive. Granted, some of the handwriting is hard to read, but others are beautiful. That beautiful writing skill brings me to the subject of this article, Mary E. Swayze.



Mary, born Mary E. Richards, was born in Bayham, Elgin County, Ontario, Canada in 1841. Her father, James Richards, was a farmer. His wife's name was Frances (Parker). They had 7 children. Mr. Richards had a high regard for teachers and ministers. He showed many of them the hospitality of his home over the years. Perhaps that is where Mary and her older brother George got the desire to become educators. Mr. Richards' children all went to school because he saw the importance of an education. For Mary to attend grammar school, she had to walk 2 ½ miles each day. By the time she was 15, she was teaching school, even though she was too young to receive a teaching certificate. She saved her earnings from her teaching job and when she was 18, she entered the Wesleyan Seminary at Springfield, Massachusetts. After her graduation, she returned to Canada and began teaching there. Throughout her educational years, she had a passion for penmanship. I'm not talking the normal cursive writing we were taught in grade school. I'm talking "penmanship". Penmanship is actually the art or skill of good handwriting. She spent her spare time studying it, and improving her own. She learned the Spencerian method of penmanship. Spencerian was used from 1850 to 1925 and

considered the American standard at the time because it could be written quickly, lightly, and elegantly. It became an art form to her and she proved to be very “artistic”.

In 1863, Mary married Salem Swayze and moved to the United States. They lived in Illinois and Iowa before coming to Muskegon in 1875, where Mr. Swayze worked as a contractor, carpenter, builder, and house mover for many years. A short time after their arrival, Mary approached to Board of Education offering her service as a teacher of penmanship. She showed them a sample of her penmanship and they were in awe of the beauty and readability of what she wrote. Even though they thought a special teacher for penmanship was a good idea, they chose not to do it at that time. Mary decided to start a private evening school to teach her beautiful penmanship skills. James C McLaughlin (later Congressman) and R Andrew Fleming (ex-Mayor of Muskegon) were only two of the many private students she taught. Soon, the Board decided to hire Mary on a trial basis for 2 months at \$40 per month. After the trial period she was hired on as Muskegon’s first “Special Teacher”. According to a Chronicle article, Trustee Nelson of the Board of Education said, “Mrs. Swayze’s ambition and example set to the teachers by her enthusiasm, were worth \$500 to the public schools of Muskegon”. He obviously meant \$500 per year, just slightly over the \$40 per month she made during her trial period. Her salary eventually increased to \$80 per month or \$960 per year. A very good salary in those days.

Mary was assigned as Special Teacher of Penmanship but did not have a set classroom to teach from. When she began, there were 23 school rooms (not all in the same building) and that later increased to 60 that she taught from. She traveled from school to school throughout the city. At first, she visited each school every other day and after a time, it ended up being once every 2 weeks. Later, Superintendent Bunker decided she should also teach Bookkeeping so she spent 9 weeks in Kalamazoo at the Parson’s Business College to prepare for it. Her title was then changed to Special Teacher of Penmanship and Bookkeeping.

In 1889, Mary resigned for health reasons. In 1894, she started teaching again, this time, as a Special Teacher in Grand Haven. She taught for 6 years in the public schools and 1 day each week, for 1 year, she taught at Akeley Institute. She was held in such high regard that on Arbor Day, 1900, her Grand Haven pupils planted a Maple tree in her honor. After she left the Grand Haven public schools, she began teaching at the Morehouse Business College in Muskegon and continued to give private lessons at her home.

One of Mary’s fondest memories was of a determined young maid servant who used to come to Mary’s home, night after night, for private lessons in penmanship and bookkeeping. By 1909, this young woman was working in a metropolitan office earning \$250 per month. (The average yearly wage for men at that time was \$200-\$400 a year!)

Throughout her teaching career, she held office in various teacher’s associations, like the Business Educator’s Association. She was the President of the Writing Department for the Federation of Writing and Drawing Teachers in 1897. In 1898, her Grand Haven public school pupils took 1st prize in the Commercial Teachers’ Federation penmanship contest. She was also

recognized in the Penman's Art Journal. Additionally, she was a member of Muskegon Woman's Club for many years focusing on the betterment of social and other conditions in the city.

In the book, "Romance of Muskegon" they stated that the handwriting of some of her students looks like Copperplate". Copperplate was an ornate calligraphy where upper- and lower-case letters have shading and is at a slightly different angle than Spencerian.

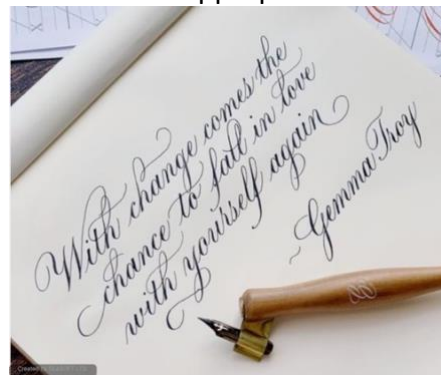
When Mary retired in 1909, she was the oldest woman teacher in the State of Michigan. Mary fought TB for 2 years before dying of the disease in 1911. She was survived by her husband Salem (who died in 1930), her son Glenn R. Swayze, and her daughter Ida Dell (Swayze) Williams.

Unfortunately, I was unable to find a sample of Mary's actual penmanship, but since she studied and taught the Spencerian method, I'll attach a sample of that.

Spencerian



Copperplate



Sources: Lakeshore Museum Center (photo), Genealogy & Local History Dept. of Hackley Library, Genealogybank.com, Ancestry.com, Findagrave.com, Penman's Journal, Daily Inter Ocean (Chicago), 1882 Catalog of Muskegon Schools, Educators of Michigan 1900 (JH Beers & Co), Loutit Library (Grand Haven Tribune), Romance of Muskegon, Spencerian Penmanship Theory (P R Spencer), Caligraphyquill.com.