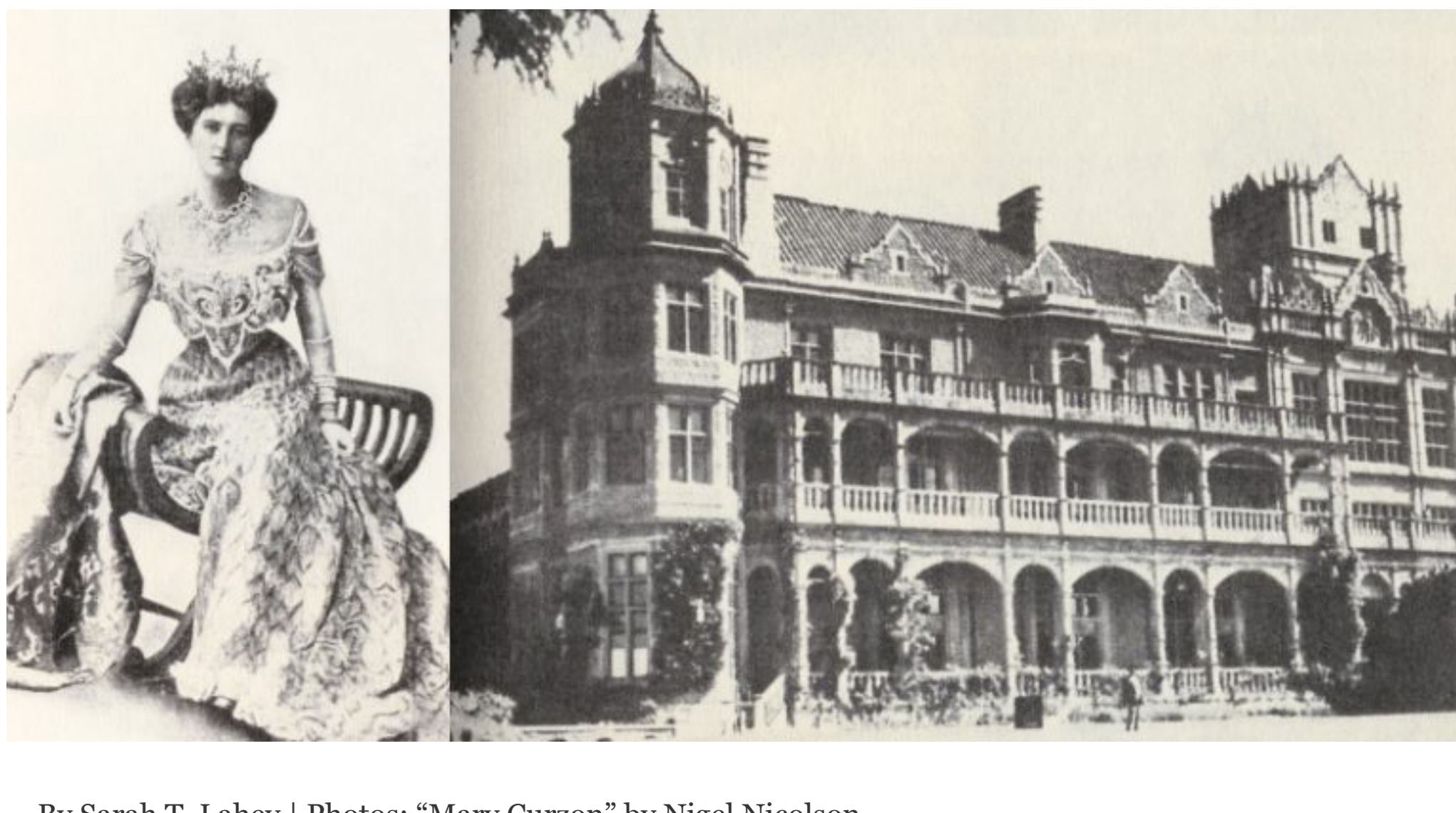


A Lake Geneva Princess

Kristin Dvorak

3 years ago



By Sarah T. Lahey | Photos: “Mary Curzon” by Nigel Nicolson

For generations Lake Geneva has had its share of famous residents and visitors. And for many summers it was the childhood home of Mary Leiter — a Chicago heiress who would become the Vicereine of India.

THE STORY OF LEVI Z. LEITER

Mary was the daughter of Levi Z. Leiter, a retail tycoon and Chicago millionaire. Levi got his start as a clerk in a dry goods store and met none other than a young Marshall Field. The two soon became friends and planned their future together. Field was a traveling salesman and Leiter was a bookkeeper: the combination was perfect.

By 1867, they established Field, Leiter & Co. The store was an immediate success and flourished until the **Chicago Fire**. Field and Leiter lost \$2.5 million in goods but managed to re-open the store 18 months later. Leiter also had the business savvy to purchase real estate immediately after the fire, obtaining land at a bargain price.

During these years of entrepreneurship, Levi Leiter married a young schoolteacher named Mary Carver. She gave birth to their first child, Joseph, in 1868, and Mary followed in 1870. They would go on to have two more daughters — and a life filled with wealth and privilege.

Geneva Lake was deeply important to Levi Leiter. It offered an escape from retail life and a place to spend private time with his family. He brought the family up as early as 1877 and eventually chose a plot of land directly adjacent to the **Sturges**, the “founding family” of Lake Geneva. Leiter was proud to build one of the first grand mansions on the lake.

A HOME IN LAKE GENEVA

When Mary was 10 years old, Leiter started to build a summer “cottage” on Geneva Lake. Linden Lodge was completed in 1880 and it included 37 main rooms, 19 fireplaces, a first-floor ballroom, multiple wine cellars, an astronomical observatory and an authentic Dutch windmill reaching six stories high. While the house was still under construction, a local reporter wrote: “It will be in every detail the grandest home in the state.”

Only a year after settling at Linden Lodge, however, Leiter split with Marshall Field. Rising tensions had divided the men for years, and differing personalities finally ended the partnership. Leiter was forced to sell his shares of the business (due to some maneuvering by Field) and the store became simply Marshall Field & Co.

As it turns out, Leiter had a backup plan. For years, he invested personal money in stocks, mining and real estate — all of which earned him a small fortune. He owned hundreds of acres of farmland in Lake Geneva and significant land in downtown Chicago. As Nigel Nicolson notes in his biography of Leiter’s daughter, Mary:

“Leiter was able to devote his remaining 23 years to travel and the acquisition of art,” while Field was chained to the store.

MARY’S CHILDHOOD

After the split with Field, Mrs. Leiter insisted the family move to Washington, D.C., where elite society — and eligible husbands — awaited the girls. Leiter agreed to the move on one condition: they would keep Linden Lodge. The family continued to make the trek to Wisconsin most summers, although Mrs. Leiter preferred Newport, Rhode Island. It is unclear precisely when young Mary stopped going to Lake Geneva, but she visited as late as 1893 — at age 23.

In Washington, young Mary Leiter took the social scene by storm. She quickly became friends with Frances Cleveland, the wife of Grover Cleveland, president of the United States. Mary and Frances were the same age, inseparable and both new to politics. Mary helped Frances plan White House luncheons and state dinners. Her mother, a shameless social climber, could not have been happier.

But Mary was not always the dutiful daughter. She studied dancing, singing and art — as any lady should do — but she also took an interest in “masculine” subjects. Levi Leiter paid for Mary to spend a summer studying history, arithmetic and chemistry with a professor from Columbia University. He was not content to raise a debutante daughter, and Mary was not content to be one.

Mrs. Leiter insisted on numerous trips to Europe to introduce the girls to society. During one trip to London in 1890, Mary met George Curzon, heir to the Barony of Scarsdale. She saw him several weeks later and was completely in love. George remained non-committal, although it is unclear why. He was 11 years Mary’s senior, and his family’s estate was in severe debt. A young heiress like Mary was a lucky catch.

George paid little attention to finances, though. He was a politician, scholar and geographer. Mary found him absolutely fascinating.

AMERICAN DOLLAR PRINCESS

Two years after meeting George, Mary saw him again in Paris. They had an on-and-off courtship, but at last, the two became secretly engaged. However, the wedding would not occur for another two years after George returned from a geographical exploration of Afghanistan.

The couple was wed within days of George’s return to London, and Mary became an “American Dollar Princess,” a nickname for wealthy American heiresses who married into the British aristocracy. All signs pointed towards love, however. Their letters, which multiplied throughout the years, suggest a deep affection between the two.

LIFE IN LONDON

Living in a new city, across the Atlantic from her family, Mary found London an unwelcoming place. George worked up to 18 hours a day: attending Parliament, reading, corresponding and rarely sleeping. Mary was alone most of the time. She wrote to her mother, “I never knew how much I loved you all until I had to be separated from you.”

Mary rallied with the birth of her first child, Irene, in 1896, along with another daughter in 1898. George kept busy with a political campaign for secretary of state at the foreign office.

In 1898, the couple received the surprise announcement that Queen Victoria had appointed George as the Viceroy of India. Make no mistake: George had lobbied for this position, but no one as young as he had ever been appointed. George and Mary were thrilled — and terrified. This was a five-year appointment, and they would soon move to India with a baby and toddler.

ADVENTURES IN INDIA

When Mary arrived in Calcutta, the center of British rule in India, their escort included a squadron of cavalry, a company of infantry and 120 bodyguards. Mary’s life soon revolved around state dinners, public appearances and very hot weather.

Mary became a favorite among the Indian people as the result of her boldness. She was the first white woman to visit the Khyber Pass, an extremely remote area where few Europeans dared to go. She likewise traveled to many provinces under George’s control, including Burma, Bangalore, Mandalay and Hyderabad.

Mary did have moments of indulgence, however. For the state ball of the Delhi Durbar (the Court of Delhi) in 1902, she had House of Worth in Paris design an extravagant gown known as her “peacock dress.” It was made of gold cloth and embroidered with hundreds of peacock feathers.

When royal duties afforded some free time, Mary worked diligently on a range of social causes. She pressured George to create a forest reserve for the endangered rhinoceros and spoke on behalf of India’s poor and homeless.

At the prompting of Queen Victoria, Mary also supported female doctors. According to religious tradition, most Indian women would not allow themselves to be touched by a male doctor. Mary established “Victoria Scholarships” for young females in medical school, raising more than 50,000 British pounds for the cause. To this day, there is a Lady Curzon Hospital in Bangalore, named in Mary’s honor.

RETURNING HOME

By the end of George’s five-year term as Viceroy, Mary was pregnant with their third child and ready to come home. The plan was to return to England, and from there Mary would go to America. Without consulting Mary, however, George extended his Viceroyalty for another two years. She tried to dissuade him, but George was intent. So, in January 1904, Mary returned to England without him.

The year began with the joyful birth of her daughter, Alexandra, but ended in her father’s passing. Mary could not attend the funeral and was devastated. She once wrote to her father from India: “My life here is lived with you ever before me as an example, an example of conscientiousness, integrity, firmness and reserve.” With Levi’s death, a great star faded from her life.

George arrived back in England shortly. The year, unfortunately, seemed to have no end of bad news. That summer, Mary suffered a miscarriage and subsequent infection. By September 1904, George was planning her funeral.

And then, to everyone’s surprise, Mary made a miraculous recovery. George wept, and then made his way speedily back to India. The Viceroyalty had to be continued. Several months later, an extremely weak Mary managed to follow him.

TO INDIA AND BACK

Mary did feel better in the warmer climate of India. George, however, did not fare so well. His second term as Viceroy was plagued with political intrigue and backstabbing from members of his own cabinet. Within less than a year, George was forced to resign his post.

Mary rejoiced at this change of plans. She planned a three-month stay for the family in the south of France. No one knew that several months later she would be dead.

It might have been the drafty English country house. It might have been a medical complication from the infection she suffered only a year earlier. It might have been the stress of traveling to India and back within a period of several months. Regardless, Mary died — quite suddenly — of a heart attack in London on July 18, 1906. She was 36 years old, and the mother of three young children.

THE LEITER LEGACY

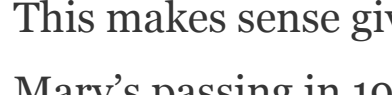
After Mary’s death, George Curzon retired from political life and became chancellor of Oxford University. He eventually remarried and raised the girls on a country estate.

It wasn’t until 1923 that the Leiters sold Linden Lodge. By that time, Mary’s mother had passed away, and Linden Lodge belonged to Mary’s three siblings. According to Lake Geneva historian Paul Jenkins who published “Book of Lake Geneva” in 1922, Linden Lodge had been occupied by Mr. Seymour Morris “for the last 15 years.”

This makes sense given that Levi Leiter died in 1904, and he was by far the most attached to Linden Lodge. With Mary’s passing in 1906, one wonders if the family simply felt it too painful to spend time in Lake Geneva. Mary’s mother was firmly settled in Washington, D.C. and Mary’s sisters were both married and living in England. Joe, Mary’s older brother, was the only one who still spent time in Chicago.

It is a testament to the family’s overall attachment to Lake Geneva, however, that it took them so long to sell. The estate remained intact 13 more years, until it was destroyed entirely in 1939 to make way for the Lake Geneva Manor Association. In 2017, the association held a celebration called “Leiter Days” to celebrate the history of this iconic section of the lake. Levi Leiter and his regal daughter would have been proud.

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