

## Whatever happened to...Catherine Beal

By Beth Hoad  
Palmyra Historian

Sometimes in my research as historian, I come across items about which I become so curious that I feel obliged to delve immediately into the mystery created by its very presence. One such item was Catherine Beal's obituary that was passed on to me by a former East Palmyra resident. Several older residents had mentioned Beal's name to me in passing, but none of them elaborated on their relationships with her or their knowledge of her.

At first I was afraid that no information was available, as is often the case. However, the obit, entitled *Prominent E. Palmyran Dies at 90*, contained some fascinating statements. The first one that peaked my interest was "Miss Beal held the distinction, among others, of having been the first woman to graduate from Syracuse University, and was in the first class to receive degrees from that college." After much research, I found that to be partially true. Although she was the first to graduate in *her* Class of 1876 from the Syracuse University School of Fine Arts, it may have been a result of her grades or perhaps because she was first alphabetically, since there were a total of 8 women in the class. Actually the first woman to graduate from SU did so in 1872. Although records of Beal's grades were not available, it is a fact that she was elected a member of Phi Beta Kappa. It was a rare honor for any woman of that time to be chosen for membership in the national scholastic honorary fraternity.

Catherine, known as "Kate," was born September 24, 1850 in a neat circa. 1806 brick farmhouse in East Palmyra, which still stands and is now owned by Reg and Judy Langdon. Her parents were Jeremiah M. and Hanna (Corwin) Beal, and she had two brothers and five sisters, one of whom died in infancy. The family was considered well-to-do since they owned more than a hundred acres of farmland, a gristmill, a sawmill and several houses in and around the hamlet.

Apparently Kate did well in school and went on to college. She worked her way through Syracuse University and graduated Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1876. She taught a year in Vermont, received a glowing recommendation from G. F. Comfort, Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Syracuse and went on to teach at Northwestern University at Evanston, IL until 1890. During her time at Northwestern, she also traveled throughout Europe studying art and fine-tuning her skills.

According to the University archivist, she was required not only to teach the various subjects of Painting, Drawing, Perspective, Modeling and Industrial Designing, as well as Art History and Theory, but also to act as Cottage Supervisor for the 35 or so young women resident students. Therefore, she was not only responsible for the education of the girls, but also for their well-being and the upkeep of the house. Her official title was Director of the Art Department, but in fact for the whole time she was there, she actually was the *entire* Art Department. Records from Northwestern indicate she was highly regarded, but seriously overworked and that her courses were not

considered as important as she had hoped. This was witnessed in the President's Report dated June 17, 1884 as follows:

*The Art Department under the care of Miss Catherine Beal has been conducted with great diligence and ability. She greatly needs assistance, as she be so constantly engaged. The Director of such a Department should have more time for self-improvement. It is to be hoped that the circumstances of establishment of a regular course of study and exercises, and the employment of additional instructors in this Department.*

The minutes from the Executive Committee meeting held on November 12, 1885 indicate that her state had not improved.

*In answer to the communication of Miss Beal asking to be relieved from certain duties connected with the oversight of the hall of the Woman's College building the Executive Committee would express thanks for the extra work she has done for several years, and while they hope she will still render such aid to the government of the Woman's College as special circumstances may require. Yet they would say to her, that they do not consider that the engagement with her requires the continuance of the extra labor she has performed.*

In a report of the same committee dated July 15, 1887, the following was noted.

*On motion of Mr. Pearsons, it was Resolved, that Miss Beal shall be allowed all the income from the Art Department and nothing shall be charged against that department for expenses and that no appropriation be made for supplies of any kind for the department. Also that Miss Beal shall continue to receive accommodations, board, etc. in the Women's College, in consideration of her teaching as heretofore.*

Perhaps all those years were merely training for things to come. On April 1, 1890, she submitted her resignation. As a result, the Department of Art was discontinued and the College of Liberal Arts no longer offered Drawing or Painting courses. It was suggested that a Fine Arts Department not be resumed until it could be established "on a higher plane and with better means than heretofore."

Kate then returned to her birthplace to manage the family farm and ultimately to assume ownership after her father's death in 1897. She proved to be an outstanding and innovative manager who was respected by her peers throughout the community and Wayne County. Her land was highly productive, her cattle well fed and sleek and her Clydesdale horses were considered the most beautiful around. Her crops were high yielding and her apple orchard productive as witnessed in several newspaper clips around the turn of the century.

One former East Palmyra resident who worked for Kate in her later years during the 1930's said, "She was fair and paid her bills. She expected a day's work for a day's pay, and she supported her church. (She was a member of the East Palmyra Methodist

Episcopal Church of which her uncle, Caleb Beal, Jr, was one of the founding trustees.) But she wouldn't abide the neighborhood children being on her lawn." Another remembered that she was stout and always carried a large basket to church, while yet another recalled being scared out of her wits by the aging and stern matron.

There is an unconfirmed report that she designed wallpaper for a company in Buffalo for a while after she left Northwestern. We do know she did continue her artistic endeavors throughout her life after she returned to New York, and was well known in the area at the time for her paintings, wood carvings and hand-painted china. Joan Vicinus of Sodus Point is Kate Beal's grandniece and owns several signed pieces of china that Beal painted. She also has a number of unsigned paintings that her aunt is believed to have painted.

"Kate" Beal never married, and died at age 90 in the house where she was born. She was buried in the East Palmyra Cemetery beside her sister on her parents' lot.

Catherine Beal grew up in an era when women were just beginning to "think outside the box." They were starting to think independently, starting to realize that they could make their own way in the world and did not have to depend on a husband to provide for them. Society still expected them to marry and raise families—unless, that is, they became schoolteachers, seamstresses, housekeepers or the like. Although we will never know what her thoughts on the subject were, she lived long enough to gain the right to vote and saw many changes in attitudes towards women with careers other than homemaker. In many ways, she was a strong woman; made so perhaps not only by her nature, but also by her circumstances.

(Captions) This picture, taken for the 1887 yearbook of Northwestern University, is one of two identified photos of Kate Beal known to exist.

This house located on Tellier Rd. in East Palmyra, is where she was born, lived her life except for her years in Illinois, and where she died.

Joan Vicinus proudly displays some of the china pieces painted by her great aunt.