

Cotten, Elizabeth Brownrigg Henderson ^[1]

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By [C. Sylvester Green](#) ^[2], 1979

4 Aug. 1875–3 Feb. 1975

Elizabeth Brownrigg Henderson, women's rights leader and librarian, was born at Salisbury, the daughter of [John Steele](#) ^[3] and Elizabeth Brownrigg Cain Henderson. She was a direct descendant of Thomas Henderson, a Jamestown, Va., settler (1612), who came from Dumfries, Scotland. Her paternal line included eminent lawyers and members of the U.S. Congress. Her father, during his service in [Congress](#) ^[4] (1885–95), was the originator of the successful move to establish [Rural Free Delivery](#) ^[5] throughout the United States. [Archibald Henderson](#) ^[6], scholar, litterateur, and mathematician of Chapel Hill, was her brother.

Elizabeth Henderson was educated in the private school of Salisbury and then attended [St. Mary's School](#) ^[7], [Raleigh](#) ^[8], from which she was graduated with honors. Before she was twenty-five she had become an active and outspoken member of the [Daughters of the Confederacy](#) ^[9] and had dedicated herself to raising money to provide assistance to Confederate veterans of the [Civil War](#) ^[10]. She appeared before the [North Carolina General Assembly](#) ^[11] in 1901, pleading successfully for increased pensions for those veterans, in a speech received with great enthusiasm by the legislators. It is believed that she was the first woman ever to speak before the assembly.

As a civic and social leader in Salisbury, Miss Henderson was interested in amateur theatricals; her distinguished cousin, "[Christian Reid](#) ^[12]" (Mrs. Frances Christine Tiernan), made her the central character in a play, *Under the Southern Cross*, and a novel, *Princess Nadine*. Miss Henderson used the play to raise money for the work of the [Daughters of the Confederacy](#) ^[9], reading it before many audiences throughout the state. Her interest in poor and struggling people led her to undertake many projects for social betterment in Salisbury and [Rowan County](#) ^[13]. In addition to her membership in the Daughters of the Confederacy, she was an active member of the local chapter of the [Daughters of the American Revolution](#) ^[14] and served for a term as its regent.

While her father was in [Congress](#) ^[4], she spent a great deal of time in Washington. In later years she recalled frequent visits to the White House and personal acquaintance with President and Mrs. [Grover Cleveland](#) ^[15]; though she often revisited the White House in subsequent years, Mrs. Cleveland remained her "ideal White House hostess."

Miss Henderson was married on 16 July 1908 to Captain [Lyman A. Cotten](#) ^[16], U.S. Navy; they had two sons, Lyman Atkinson, Jr., and John Henderson. Married at the age of thirty-three, she had already established her position as "Charming Bessie Henderson" of Salisbury.

Although Salisbury remained her home, she spent many years of her married life at posts where her husband was stationed, principally China, Japan, and Turkey. As the wife of the chief of staff of the American Naval Representatives, she entertained extensively, receiving local personages and the leading ambassadorial, military, and missionary leaders. She was presented to royal and imperial princesses in Europe, and her life in Constantinople was "fascinating, the hours filled with gaieties." Yet she found time for social services. While Captain Cotten was chief of staff to Admiral Mark L. Bristol, U.S. high commissioner, she spent much of her time in relief work for Russian refugees. The six years the Cottens were in Japan were the most notable of her foreign residence. She was organizer and first president of the Woman's Club of Tokyo and a leader in the Woman's Auxiliary of Trinity Cathedral; she was active in the establishment of a library and a nursing association and in the support of St. Luke's Hospital (in 1930 she was chairman of the committee in the Diocese of North Carolina to raise funds for that hospital). Hostess for many formal occasions in Japan, she earned tribute as "the most admired and beloved American woman who has ever lived in Japan."

During the years of World War I, while her husband was at sea or on active war duty, Mrs. Cotten participated in Liberty Loan drives, supervised [Red Cross](#) ^[17] work rooms, served as chairman of the Eighth Congressional District's Council of National Defense, and was the organizer of the local Navy League. During the dread influenza epidemic of 1918, she organized and supervised countless volunteer nursing units and diet kitchens. Through all the war years she diligently emphasized methods of conservation and organized and promoted canteens for military personnel.

On the death of Captain Cotten in 1926, his widow moved to Chapel Hill; she made her home there until her death. North Carolinians remember her best for these nearly fifty years of her life. She became an energetic member of the North Carolina Suffrage League and the [League of Women Voters](#) ^[18]. An ardent Democrat, she was vice-chairman of the Eighth Congressional District party organization in 1928 and was a diligent worker in behalf of Al Smith's candidacy for the presidency. She made speeches all over the state and was lauded for her "convincing eloquence." She was renamed to the group in 1930.

In 1933 she was favorably considered for appointment to the U.S. Civil Service Commission, although the post went to

the widow of Governor Benton McMillan of Tennessee. In the early 1940s, she was an original promoter of the restoration of Tryon Palace ^[19] at New Bern, a project made possible in the early 1950s through the generosity of Mrs. J. E. Latham of Greensboro. During the Second World War ^[20], Mrs. Cotten carried on an extensive correspondence with friends in Europe, especially England, about the problems of peace after the war. Although in her late sixties, she found many ways to serve the war effort and encourage others working in civilian projects.

Mrs. Cotten began an entirely new career in 1932, which brought her great fame and praise. She became assistant to Dr. J. G. deRoulhac Hamilton ^[21] in his successful effort to establish the Southern Historical Collection ^[22] in the Library of The University of North Carolina ^[23]; she was also the first curator. After promoting the organization of the Friends of the Library ^[24], she became its first secretary and used her position to solicit and secure thousands of items of Tar Heel memorabilia and historical data. She was particularly successful in obtaining records and papers of U.S. naval officers and private papers of prominent North Carolina families of the previous two hundred years. She was the production supervisor (1935–39) of the Works Progress Administration ^[25] project that produced the *Guide to the Manuscripts in the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina* (1940). At its 1958 meeting, the Friends of the Library bestowed on her a laudatory citation for expansive and comprehensive work in behalf of the library. She was the author of *John Paul Jones–Willie Jones Tradition* ^[26] and coeditor of the highly respected *Old Homes and Gardens of North Carolina*.

Throughout the years, Mrs. Cotten served the Episcopal Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, of which she was a dedicated member. Her funeral service was held in that church on Thursday, 6 Feb. 1975, and several days later graveside services were held in Arlington National Cemetery; Captain Cotten had been buried there in 1926.

References:

Chapel Hill Newspaper , 4 Feb. 1975

Chapel Hill University Gazette , 21 Feb. 1975

Charlotte Observer , 30 Nov. 1930; 23 Feb. 1936

Nat. Cyc. Am. Biog., vol. A (1930); North Carolina Collection (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), for data file

Raleigh News and Observer , 3 Feb. 1975 (obit.)

University of North Carolina Library Notes , 21 Feb. 1975

Additional Resources:

Elizabeth Henderson Cotten Papers, UNC: http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/c/Cotten,Elizabeth_Henderson.html ^[27]

Lyman A. Cotten Photographic and printed material collection, circa 1870s-1960s:
<http://www.lib.unc.edu/ncc/pcoll/inv/P0051/P0051.html> ^[28]

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Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press,^[36]

1 January 1979 | Green, C. Sylvester

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