MARY THAW THOMPSON

[From a portrait in the possession of her daughter, Mrs. Thomas H. Eddy]
MRS. WILLIAM REED THOMPSON
A MEMORIAL
LILY LEE NIXON

On September 12, 1944, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania lost one of its oldest and best friends, Mrs. William Reed Thompson.

She was born eighty-eight years ago near the Point on the then fashionable Penn Street between Third and Fifth Streets. She was the daughter of Eliza Burd Blair, formerly of Washington, Pennsylvania, and William Thaw, a noted Pittsburgh financier and philanthropist.

Mary Thaw received her early education at the Hemans Institute for Young Ladies, a school kept in the strictest Victorian manner a few doors from her home, and also from a tutor, the head of the Fourth Ward Public School. To this man, James R. Newell, she owed her intellectual awakening; for she determined to go to college in a day when few young ladies cared to go. Since her beloved father was greatly interested in astronomy, she chose Vassar, where the widely known Maria Mitchell taught that subject. It was a small college at that time with a preparatory school in connection with it. Mary Thaw attended both, graduating from Vassar in 1877.
Two years later she married William Reed Thompson, who had been born on General Robinson Street in Old Allegheny. His mother had come from near-by Washington where William had planned to attend Washington and Jefferson College, but instead he had fought to preserve the Union. Upon his return from the Civil War he entered a bank and quickly became one of the most prominent bankers of the twin cities.

Five daughters were born to Mary Thaw Thompson and her husband: Mrs. Edward B. Reed and Mrs. Henry Van Cleef now residing in New Haven, Connecticut, and Mrs. John C. Dilworth, Mrs. Thomas H. Eddy, and Miss Dorothea Thompson living in Pittsburgh. Three of them, like their mother, graduated from Vassar. Her family life was her greatest interest; she entered fully into the joys and sorrows of her children and her husband. She aided him and endorsed his efforts when he became a leader in civil life; treasurer of the Johnstown Flood Relief, of the Russian Famine Fund, and of the relief of the city's unemployed in the Panic of 1893. He was also one of three Pittsburgh delegates to the American Conference of International Arbitration.

Mrs. Thompson's mother had died when Mary was only six years of age. Her father had been her ideal during the formative years of her life; after her marriage to a man of similar tastes she was doubly influenced by men. Yet she never lost her strong individuality and insisted that women should advance to an equal status with men—the two sexes being "the two wings of the bird of humanity"—as she so aptly put it.

After her family, her greatest interests were her college and her city. Her close connection with the management of Vassar began in the latter part of the 1880's, and she was a trustee for more than twelve years. With her lifelong friend, Mrs. Charles M. Pratt (class of 1880), Mary Thaw Thompson gave the lovely chapel that adorns the Vassar campus.

The intense interest that Mrs. Thompson had for the betterment of her city was shown in many ways. She organized the first Young Women's Christian Association cooking school; she was one of the originators and a past president of the Women's Exchange; she furnished and gave many books to the library donated by her husband to Washington and Jefferson College in honor of his mother; together with Mr.
Thompson she helped to found the Allegheny Preparatory School on Lincoln and Galveston Streets; she gave many books and manuscripts to the Darlington Library of the University of Pittsburgh; she was a member of the board of directors of the orphanage on the North Side; and of course she had long been a trustee and a valued friend of this Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, as had been her husband and her brother, Benjamin Thaw. Time and again when this society needed financial aid she gladly gave it.

Such important public offices and contributions were known to all. There were, however, many individuals struggling to accomplish some worthwhile purpose who were unobtrusively helped by Mrs. Thompson. In such cases, like her father before her, she did not let her right hand know what her left hand did. Born into a wealthy family and descended from Benjamin West and Robert Fulton, she was truly democratic in her attitude toward people—only the high goals to which folks were slowly but honestly striving were the criteria for her estimate of them.

This society should long remember and be influenced by the awareness of life, the keen perception of public trends, and the intense interest in all promising people and movements which were part of the personality of Mrs. William Reed Thompson.