

# CAPTAIN MARY MILLICENT MILLER

Mary Millicent (Garretson) Miller was born in 1846 at 2120 West Main Street in Portland, Kentucky. On August 3, 1865, she married Captain George Miller. George built a new house at 3816 Bank Street (Portland) for him, Mary, and his children from a previous marriage to reside. Mary and George then had four children of their own: Lucille (Miller) Duckwall, George Miller, Emma Miller, and Norman Miller.

As she and George went into business together — Mary naturally assumed the role of captain — buying, selling, and trading products from their boat, the *Saline*, a 178-ton sternwheeler. In addition, records indicate George had failed the exam due to color blindness and was unable to renew his license. As many people saw Mary handling the business, typically considered a “man’s” job, they began to complain to authorities, stating an unlicensed woman was running a steamboat business. So, to maintain their steamboat business, George encouraged Mary to apply for her license.

After months of studying for the exam, Mary knew everything there was to know about steamboating and could answer questions that would have distressed many steamboat masters. Although she passed her examination, the Louisville inspectors kept her waiting, refusing to give Mary her license and calling the headquarters in Washington DC for advice. The Secretary of the Treasury in DC stated Mary should be allotted her license “if fitted to perform the duties required, in spite of sex” and further noted that it may “socially degrade any woman to which it was issued.”

Thus, on February 18, 1884, the *Daily Picayune* in New Orleans, Louisiana, announced that Mary Miller, a “lady steamboatman,” was officially licensed to captain a steamboat! Mary became well-known by the clients along her routes, people often remarking how kind she was and stating, “Her voice is strong and clear, and her manner is that of one accustomed to command.”

As the business grew, the *Saline* became too small. George and Mary then worked together and built their second boat, the *Swan*, in their own front yard. However, railroads became the common mode of transportation in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, allowing people to travel to their destinations in a fraction of the time on rail than by steamboat, causing the steamboating business to decline — eventually forcing Mary and George to sell their boats. Mary refused to let go of her license in case an opportunity would arise where she would need it once again.

Afterwards, Mary dreamed of moving to a lighthouse, where only seagrass would grow, and she would never have to garden. George supported her in this dream and gave her permission to bring along their four children. Unfortunately, Mary was never able to make this lighthouse dream a reality.

After a trip to the Gulf of Mexico, Mary became ill and had to return home to Portland. Records state she had contracted “hay fever,” however it is unknown whether this statement is factual given the relatively limited medical knowledge of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A year after her initial illness, Mary’s condition worsened into paralysis of her lower limbs. Although able to still communicate with her family, her health steadily declined over the course of the next three years.

On October 30, 1894 at 4:30 a.m., Mary Miller passed away in her home on Bank Street. That night, George slept outside on the boat, unable to bear sleeping in the house where the body of his dead wife lay. Mary is buried in Louisville’s Portland Cemetery (N. 36<sup>th</sup> St and Pflanz Ave).

In 1993, Mary Miller was inducted into the American Merchant Marine Hall of Fame at Kingspoint, New York.