

JULIA A. FLISCH: A LEGACY DISCOVERED

Robin O. Harris
Georgia College Student

The cornerstone for the Georgia Normal and Industrial College was laid in Milledgeville, Georgia, on November 27, 1890. The *Atlanta Constitution* described the event this way:

Of all that has occurred in the past to give this city history, political gatherings and the great days when it was the seat of government and the cradle of legislation, nothing has brought together such a surging mass of humanity, representing business, politics, religion and society of the great Empire State, as this day has brought to witness the beginning of legislative aid in behalf of the girls of Georgia.¹

It was indeed a great time of festivity. There was a parade, complete with bands and marching drill teams, that included more than seven thousand participants. Over ten thousand pounds of barbecue was served on tables over two thousand feet long. In the evening a formal dance was held to cap off the celebration. With a contingent of over two hundred members of the Georgia legislature present, the podium rang with political rhetoric. Politicians and dignitaries rose, one after the other, to proclaim the momentous occasion. Governor William J. Northern gave a powerfully eloquent speech in which he touted Mrs. William Atkinson, whose husband had authored the bill establishing the school, as the "woman of the day."² Mrs. Atkinson's indignation at seeing young white women toiling in the cotton fields had prompted her dedication, and thereby that of her husband, toward ensuring better opportunities for women's education in Georgia.³ Later the role of GNIC was expanded to include all women, and eventually even men.⁴

After Northern's speech, a young woman came to the rostrum. She was an honored guest, and the only woman with a formal part on the program. Her name was Julia Flisch. Newspaper articles that reported the event spoke of the way she "charmed every heart," and how frequently her speech was interrupted by applause.⁵ How did the twenty-nine year old daughter of a confectioner come to be found on the dais for this most august occasion?

Julia Flisch was born in Augusta, Georgia, on January 31, 1861. She was the daughter of a German mother and a Swiss father. Her mother, Pauline, was a strong, independent, well-educated woman.⁶ Her father, Leonard, was a confectioner whose fortunes rose and fell periodically throughout his life.⁷ One of Flisch's unpublished manuscripts tells the thinly-disguised story of her parents' marriage. The emphasis is on the wife's attempt to establish a non-

traditional marriage--a partnership rather than a dictatorship; and the husband's slow realization that his wife is fully as intelligent and capable as he himself, and should be treated accordingly.⁸ It appears that the influence of her parents' marriage was instrumental in developing the views on women and their role that made Flisch a woman ahead of her time.

Because of Julia's "frail" health the family moved to the healthier climate of Athens, Georgia, while she was still an infant. There Leonard Flisch dispensed ice cream, cakes, and other sweets to the students of the University of Georgia for nearly twenty years. His shop was one of their favorite gathering places.⁹ Since the family intermittently resided in rooms over the business, Julia was frequently surrounded by the intellectual give and take of the students. The experience, along with her parents' commitment to education, encouraged her to excel as a scholar. No matter what the status of the Flisch family finances there was always money for education.¹⁰ In 1877 Flisch graduated with honors from the Lucy Cobb Institute in Athens.¹¹ She unhesitatingly applied for admission to the University of Georgia, where her brother Henry was a student. Her application was quickly denied; the University was for the young men of Georgia--women need not apply. Even though the rejection from this all-male institution should have been anticipated, it appears to have made a deep impact on Julia and her family. Within a short time the Flisch family moved back to Augusta, and Julia went to New York for business training.¹² Her sense of loss, disappointment, and anger at the University emerged years later, and provided the fuel for her fight for education for women.

In November 1882 a letter to the editor appeared in the *Augusta Chronicle*. It was signed simply, "A Young Woman," and read in part:

Give a worthy aim to the young girl who looks with eager eyes into the dim vista of the future. Point out a path by which she can, with honor and credit, make herself independent, at least in a measure. Give her some hope, other than that of an early marriage; give her the pleasure of earning her own money, and learning to lay it out to the best advantage; and better than all, give her the dignity of knowing herself to be of some active use in the world . . . If indeed, we must give account of idle words and idle hours, where will the mighty Judge lay the fruitless lives of so many of our Southern women? In their name I beg of you--give the girls a chance!¹³

This highly forthright and unconventional opinion created quite a stir in Augusta, eliciting varied responses from both sexes. A month later the identity

of the writer was revealed as twenty-one year old Julia Flisch.¹⁴ "Give the Girls a Chance" became her battle-cry, and that of the *Augusta Chronicle* which adopted her fight for education for the women of Georgia. Flisch became a special correspondent for the paper and effectively utilized it as a platform for her views on women.

A 1989 magazine advertisement pictured a facsimile of a diploma from an early women's college. It reads:

She has learned enough Mathematics to count twelve place settings; Biology sufficient to tend a vegetable garden; the Chemistry necessary to keep a pot boiling; and Geography adequate to locate her husband's possessions in the house.¹⁵

The true pathos in this is that the description of women's education is all too close to the curriculum offered by many of the female seminaries of the nineteenth century. As early as December 1882, Flisch spoke out against this "ornamental and superficial" education system as she espoused the need for practical attainments. Flisch believed that as women throughout the country demanded the protection and security of a practical education a brighter, stronger womanhood would develop and become the pride and glory of the nation.¹⁶

In 1886 the *Augusta Chronicle* dispatched, in their words, "one of their brightest and best correspondents" to cover the week-long commencement activities of the University of Georgia.¹⁷ The first three articles dispatched by Flisch were successfully dispassionate, deviating from routine reporting only by expressing consternation at the lack of serious scholarly pursuit on the part of many of the students.¹⁸ In the final article, written after commencement, Flisch could restrain herself no longer. Nine years of pent up feelings poured forth:

Commencement is over. The Chapel is closed, the music has died away, the campus is deserted. I walk the silent paths 'neath the shade of the trees, and the past comes forth from its shadows to mingle with the sunshine of the present. In childhood I wandered under these very trees and played about these grim old buildings heavy with age or decay. Later, I dreamed dreams full of unrest; dreams where the golden stores of knowledge were opened to my eager gaze. What marvels of learning those callow young sophomores and (conscientious) seniors then appeared to us. What happiness it seemed to us to stand at the threshold of life with the consciousness of knowledge gained at a price well paid! All dreams, you see!

Our hearts might thrill at the music and the applause; our minds might hunger for the crumbs that fell from the table, but the feast was not for us. These provisions were for the sons of Georgia. In them her daughters could not share. For the daughters must a table less rich be spread. Oh! Georgia, little as thou hast done for thy sons, it is yet something, but what hast thou done for thy daughters?¹⁹

This same year Flisch published her first novel. *Ashes of Hopes* is an immense Victorian novel in many ways reminiscent of *Jane Eyre*. Characterized by a convoluted plot and unbelievable coincidences so typical of the novels of this period, the novel is set apart by the strength and independence evidenced by the main female characters. The story follows three young women through boarding school and their coming of age. As each of the young women grows into an awareness of who she is as an individual, their dialogue reveals beliefs and opinions radical for the times. Perhaps this accounts for the small commercial success achieved by this work.²⁰

The publication of Flisch's novel did not in any way lessen her commitment to molding public opinion throughout the state in favor of education for the women of Georgia. She pleaded for not just intellectual enlightenment, but for "a practical education--an education for both hands and brain." "Give us bread," she wrote, "but let it not be the bread of dependence." Flisch felt that the South was lagging far behind other parts of the country where women were being trained to fill positions in stenography, mechanical drawing, and typewriting. She challenged the public to open its eyes to the ever growing need for women to be able to support themselves, and often their families. Flisch encouraged the women of Georgia to focus influence and pressure on the state legislature in such a way that the representatives had no choice but to respond to public opinion and move on the matter of women's education.²¹

Due to Flisch's consistently outspoken advocacy of female education, she was chosen to speak on behalf of the women of Georgia at the laying of the cornerstone of Georgia Normal and Industrial College.²² The following comments from the speech made by Flisch nearly one hundred years ago:

Is anyone able to compute the waste of brain and soul power induced by faulty systems of education? . . . It has come to pass that the question now is not "What can women do?," but "What can't she do?" . . . The world has no cradling arms for dependent women, but it has work for skilled fingers, and respect for that woman who has the courage to dare and the power to do . . . You do not unsex a woman when you make

her independent. You only strengthen and develop her.

Flisch closed with this challenge:

Archimedes said, "Give me but a lever strong enough, and I will move the world!" The women of Georgia are saying: "Give us but a place to stand and a lever strong enough and we will do more; we will recreate a world!" My friends, this is what this institution will be: a lever in the hands of our women.²³

When Georgia Normal and Industrial College opened its doors on September 30, 1891, Flisch served on the faculty; first as a teacher of stenography, typewriting, and telegraphy, and later as a teacher of ancient and medieval history.²⁴ Her broad-based intellectual outlook set her apart from her peers and made her extremely popular with the students. Miss Cornelia Chappell, the daughter of Georgia Normal and Industrial College's first president, Dr. J. Harris Chappell, though only a child at the time, remembers that everyone was in awe of "Miss Julia." She was a brilliant woman of energy and purpose, and considered an unusually fine teacher.²⁵ She contributed articles and comments on current affairs to many of the state's newspapers.²⁶

In 1892, when the *Athens Banner* printed an article by Mrs. M. A. Lipscomb stating that the Georgia Normal and Industrial College did not meet the requirements necessary to train teachers since its emphasis was on industrial training, it was Flisch who came to the school's defense by explaining Georgia Normal and Industrial College's aims, purposes and results. She stated that liberal arts courses were the foundation of the college. To this foundation were grafted *either* the normal *or* the industrial courses. These were two separate and distinct branches. A small number of students were allowed to take some industrial courses in addition to their collegiate and normal work, but this was rare, and in such cases the normal work always had priority. Flisch believed that Georgia Normal and Industrial College offered the finest opportunities for women in the state, and that women should put aside their personal prejudices and recognize the grand work being done there for the general good of the women of Georgia. She felt that when the "noble women at the head of educational interests" in the state understood the work being done at Georgia Normal and Industrial College they could only wish the school well.²⁷

Although various sources credit Flisch with a masters degree during her tenure at Georgia Normal and Industrial College, it was only an honorary one bestowed upon her in 1899 by the University of Georgia--the school whose denial of her admission had created a warrior in the battle for female education.

The degree was the first one ever give by the University to a woman, and was awarded twenty years before women were admitted there as students.²⁸

Dr. Chappell announced his resignation as president of Georgia Normal and Industrial College in 1905 because of poor health; Flisch resigned soon after.²⁹

During her time in Milledgeville, Flisch became close friends with Mrs. Jesse Phillips, the mother of historian Ulrich B. Phillips. Their relationship was so close that upon Mrs. Phillips's death in 1906, Flisch wrote a memorial article about her for the *Union Recorder*. In it she mentioned her daily presence with Mrs. Phillips in the last months of her life. It is therefore not surprising that when Flisch determined to fulfil her educational dreams she chose the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where Ulrich Phillips was teaching.³⁰

At the time, the head of the History Department at the University of Wisconsin was Frederick Jackson Turner. In the early years of the twentieth century the University of Wisconsin was the center of great historical research and interpretation. Turner was like a magnet drawing serious, enthusiastic students from all across the country. As Phillips explained, "Turner was primarily a teacher responsible to a nation of students in a host of disciplines, a maker of historians even more than a scholar."³¹ This was the atmosphere when Flisch arrived on campus in 1905. Her diploma from the Lucy Cobb Institute allowed her to enter the University of Wisconsin at the junior level. She quickly completed her undergraduate work and received her M. A. in 1908.³²

During her time in Wisconsin Flisch published two papers in the *American Historical Review*, a rare achievement for a woman in the early twentieth century. In 1906 her topic was "The Public Records of Richmond County, Georgia." This article, along with her M. A. thesis, "Land Legislation in Georgia," is indicative of Flisch's commitment to thorough and complete research.³³ Her work entitled "The Common People of the Old South" was published in 1909. Flisch advocated the study of the ordinary people of the old South in order to understand the past, and to answer the problems of the present.³⁴ She was one of the earliest historians to challenge those who believed the South could be understood only by emphasis on the aristocracy of the planter class. Flisch chastised the South for neglecting the "materials of history that lay hidden in bundles of old letters, in yellowing manuscripts in the family escritoire." Only now are historians seriously beginning to focus research in the direction of the common people.³⁵

Because of her mother's poor health, Flisch had to leave the University of Wisconsin in 1908. Her deep sense of family obligation was the only thing that could separate her from the intellectual environment she had found so

stimulating and fulfilling.³⁶

Upon her return to Augusta Flisch began teaching at the Tubman High School for Girls. Interviews with students from Tubman reveal Flisch as a teacher who always expected, and usually obtained, the best from her students. She frequently exhorted them to "Think! Think! Think!" She challenged them to pursue intellectual excellence and not to accept the limits society would impose on them. Flisch encouraged her students to become lawyers, accountants, and physicians--positions not usually sought by women in those days. Before women even possessed the vote, she stressed the importance of being politically knowledgeable. While having her students write in the front of their American history books, "All of life is problem solving," she exhorted them to view life's difficulties as opportunities for problem solving and never to lose sight of the goals they set for their lives. Over the years Flisch received many letters from former students crediting her with instilling in them strength, determination, and confidence in their own abilities. More than one eager female student was able to attend college as a result of Flisch's personal attention, and even financial support.³⁷

Flisch published her second novel *Old Hurricane*, in 1925. The story is set in central Georgia and focuses on a plantation carved from the wilderness. Sally, the heroine, is a strong woman, who in spite of impossible odds, does whatever it takes to provide for and protect her family. Though Flisch received many letters and critical reviews in admiration of "Sally," the book had little commercial success.³⁸

Augusta Junior College was established in 1926. Major George Butler, the first president, had only two specific choices for faculty; one of these was Julia Flisch. She was the only initial female faculty member, and served both as Dean of Women and Professor of History. She is even now referred to as "one of the most distinguished scholars ever to be associated with the college."³⁹ Everyone, faculty and students alike, was awed by her intellectual brilliance and teaching ability. Her former students are amazed to learn of her various honors and accomplishments. They remember her simply as "the Duchess," who when "honoring" them with a "thought question" always assured them the answer was in their heads somewhere; they just had to "bring it to the front."⁴⁰ In 1936 Flisch retired from teaching because of severe eye problems.⁴¹

Throughout her life Flisch was associated with the Georgia Federation of Women's Clubs, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Equal Suffrage Party; yet she was not what one would have considered a "club" woman. She was always willing and able to speak on women's issues, education, and current events, but never promoted herself. While unequivocally a social feminist, she presented her views on an intellectual level, never an emotional one.

Because of her high intelligence, many of Flisch's friends held to the belief that she possessed two brains.⁴² This rumor, probably started by awed students or male colleagues in order to explain her superior intellect, seems ludicrous; yet a study of Flisch's life and words reveal an extraordinary woman. Flisch epitomized the "New Women" of the South--those born during and after the Civil War, who no longer subscribed to the Southern "lady" image, but pushed for a chance to develop as individuals and independent human beings. She believed that women were without a doubt the equal of men and deserved to be treated accordingly; yet she saw opportunities for women as enriching traditional values rather than precluding them.

All of her life Flisch wrote short stories, poems, and novels which she consistently peopled with strong, independent women. Publishers, while praising her style and structure, assumed the general public was not ready for the women portrayed by Flisch; thus many of her best works remain unpublished. Her writings were social histories that allowed her to focus on individual women and their struggle to adapt to socio-economic issues on a personal lever. Although her stories often contain flowery passages or moral messages now considered old-fashioned, her presentation of female characters is more in tune with modern authors and the changing roles of women today than those of her own era.⁴³

In the last years of her life Flisch became discouraged. She saw the twentieth century which had begun with such promise for opportunities and advancement for women sink by the thirties into a lethargic society where women took for granted the rights which had been won for them, and failed to strive for more.⁴⁴

Julia Flisch died on March 17, 1941 at age eighty-one. Augusta mourned "the Dean of Augusta Women," and Flisch was lauded as "having done more than any other person to advance the cause of women's education in Georgia."⁴⁵

In a lecture Anne Firor Scott presented at Mary Baldwin College, she stated that for each educational reformer "whose life and works are known to us, there are dozens whose records, if they survived at all, are buried in local histories or dusty memoirs."⁴⁶ For the last fifty years Julia Flisch has been just such a person. Her legacy to the women of Georgia somehow slipped into historical oblivion. Her manuscripts have remained unread and forgotten in cardboard boxes. The school whose very existence is, at least in part, a result of her championship, has been unmindful of the extent of her contributions. Little by little this is all being changed; her life and works are being brought to light in hopes that one day Julia Flisch may receive the acknowledgement and recognition she so richly deserves.

NOTES

- ¹"The Great Day," *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 November 1890.
- ²Ibid; "A Great Day for Girls," *Augusta Chronicle*, 28 November 1890.
- ³Lottie M. Curl, "The History of the Georgia State College for Women," (M. A. thesis, Georgia State College for Women, 1931), 43-44.
- ⁴William Hair, James C. Bonner, Edward B. Dawson, and Robert J. Wilson, III, *A Centennial History of Georgia College* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 252, 258.
- ⁵*Atlanta Constitution*, 28 November 1890; *Augusta Chronicle*, 28 November 1890; Alice Napier, "Miss Julia A. Flisch," 28 May 1946.
- ⁶Napier, 28 May 1946.
- ⁷Julia A. Flisch, Unfinished family history, Julia A. Flisch Special Collection, Georgia College, Milledgeville, Georgia.
- ⁸Julia A. Flisch, "Cavierzel and Wife," Julia A. Flisch Special Collection, Georgia College, Milledgeville, Georgia.
- ⁹Augustus L. Hull, *Annals of Athens, Georgia, 1801-1901*, (Athens: Banner, 1906), 376-77.
- ¹⁰Flisch, Unfinished family history.
- ¹¹"Lucy Cobb Commencement," *Augusta Chronicle*, 23 June 1877.
- ¹²Napier, 28 May 1946.
- ¹³Letter to the Editor, *Augusta Chronicle*, 20 November 1882.
- ¹⁴Editorial, *Augusta Chronicle*, 3 December 1882.
- ¹⁵Advertisement for Virginia Slims, *People*, 11 September 1989.
- ¹⁶"The Education of Women," *Augusta Chronicle*, 31 December 1882.
- ¹⁷Editorial, *Augusta Chronicle*, 10 July 1886.
- ¹⁸"The University," *Augusta Chronicle*, 13, 14 July 1886.
- ¹⁹"The University," *Augusta Chronicle*, 15 July 1886.
- ²⁰Julia A. Flisch, *Ashes of Hopes* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1886).
- ²¹"Give the Girls a Chance," *Augusta Chronicle*, 12 June 1889.
- ²²Napier, 28 May 1946.
- ²³*Augusta Chronicle*, 28 November 1890.
- ²⁴Hair, *Centennial History*, 24.
- ²⁵Cornelia Chappell, Personal Interview, 22 January 1989.
- ²⁶Hair, *Centennial History*, 11.
- ²⁷"Normal Schools," *Milledgeville Union Recorder*, 8 November 1892.
- ²⁸Hull, *Annals*, 377; Napier, 28 November 1890; *Catalogue of the Trustees, Officers, Alumni and Matriculates of the University of Georgia* (Athens: E. D. Stone Press, 1906), 208; "University Commencement," *Athens Banner*, 23 June 1899.

²⁹Hair, *Centennial History*, 105; Julia Flisch, Letter to Bessie Linderstruth, 9 December 1937, Julia A. Flisch Special Collection, Georgia College, Milledgeville.

³⁰"In Memorium--Mrs. Jessie Young Phillips," *Milledgeville Union Recorder*, 14 August 1906.

³¹John H. Roper, *U. B. Phillips: A Southern Mind* (Macon: Mercer Press, 1984), 42.

³²Anne E. Biebel, University of Wisconsin, Letter to the author, 25 January 1989.

³³Julia A. Flisch, "Report on the Local Records of Richmond County, Georgia," *Annual Report of the AHA for 1906* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1908), 159-64; Julia A. Flisch, "Land Legislation in Georgia," (M. A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1908).

³⁴Julia A. Flisch, "Common People of the Old South," *Annual Report of the AHA for 1908* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1909), 133-42.

³⁵Merton L. Dillon, Letter to the author, 29 November 1988; Hair, *Centennial History*, 11.

³⁶Flisch, Letter to Linderstruth.

³⁷Personal interviews: Anne Braddy, 13 November 1988; Bertha Carswell, 17 January 1989; Elizabeth Otwell, 17 January 1989; Ruby Pfadenhauer, 12 November 1988.

³⁸Julia A. Flisch, *Old Hurricane* (New York: Crowell, 1925); Correspondence, Julia A. Flisch Special Collection, Georgia College, Milledgeville.

³⁹Edward J. Cashin, *A History of Augusta College* (Augusta: Augusta College Press, 1976), 25.

⁴⁰Personal Interview: Bertha Carswell, 17 January 1989; Telephone Interviews: Margaret Bailie, 17 January 1989; Virginia Scott, 17 January 1989; Camel Viaden, 17 January 1989.

⁴¹Flisch, Letter to Linderstruth.

⁴²Joe Heiterer, "Many Augustans Will Never Forget Miss Flisch," *Augusta Chronicle*, 27 May 1972; Personal interviews; Telephone interviews.

⁴³Julia A. Flisch, Unpublished manuscripts; Julia A. Flisch Special Collection, Georgia College, Milledgeville.

⁴⁴Flisch, Letter to Linderstruth.

⁴⁵"Miss Julia Anna Flisch, Veterna Teacher, Dies," *Augusta Chronicle*, 18 March 1941.

⁴⁶Anne Firor Scott, "The Higher Education of Women."