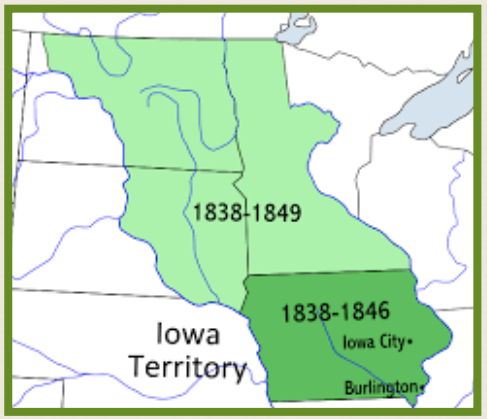
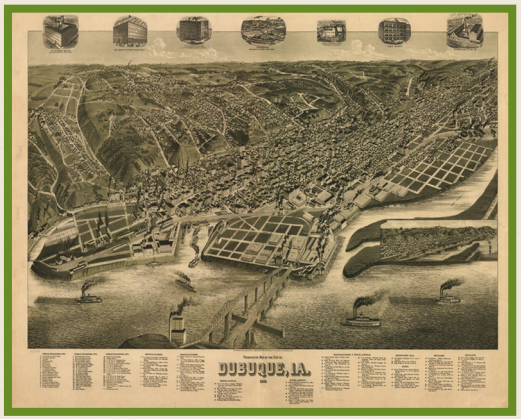




Ursula Kennedy Holmes had pain that was devastation. She turned to opium to stop the pain. She usually used opium pipes to inhale the vapors. Ursula often headed to Dubuque, Iowa for treatment. It was here, when she was thirty years old, that Ursula died of heart disease probably from opium abuse.



Ursula Kennedy was born February 3, 1811, in Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Her parents were Edward Kennedy (1776-1855) and Susanna Gordon (1782-1829). Ursula, her siblings, including Robert Kennedy, and her parents moved to Marion, Ohio in 1826, and opened a tavern. She worked at the tavern.

Among others in Marion was William Holmes, a judge, and Rachel Day Holmes and their son, Thomas Andrew Holmes. Thomas married Ursula on November 12, 1829, according to *Henry David Jones Koons: Philadelphia to Shakopee, Minnesota With Notes on Shakopee Pioneers Thomas A. Holmes and Robert Kennedy Holmes* by David H. Eggler. Then Tom went to Milwaukee and then to Rock County, Wisconsin, where he founded the first of the several towns that he brought into existence.

Ursula was sufficiently hardy to make Holmes's first trip up the Mississippi with Robert, his wife Frances B. Jones Koons Kennedy, and their children. On that trip they became ice-bound on the river before they could reach their destination of what is now St Paul.

Some books contain inaccuracies and, according to David H Eggler, appear to put Ursula in an overly dramatic light.

But for some reason, very few people ever talked about her. L. Kessinger, who wrote *The History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin*, said in 1888, "All the parties whom I had a chance to consult with regard to the particulars of the life of Thomas Holmes, himself included, were persistently silent on this one point (concerning Holmes' first wife)…"

According to Lafayette Houghton Bunnell, in the book, *Winona (We-No-Nah) and Its Environs on the Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Days in 1897*, "There was a demon of unrest in (Thomas A.) Holmes, partly inherited, and partly the result of a misalliance with a woman entirely unfitted for frontier life."

Ursula was the petted daughter of a hotel keeper of Baltimore, Maryland, and came west with her brother, Robert, and his wife and two children. Ursula was much younger than her husband, and no doubt married with an expectation of wealth and a return to her beloved Baltimore. She soon saw that that would never be fulfilled.

Besides her dislike of frontier life, Ursula was subject to periodic attacks that made her frantic with pain. Without the option of a competent doctor, she used opiates, which finally enslaved her. Ursula probably kept a supply of opium paraphernalia such as specialized pipes and lamps that were necessary to smoke the drug. She would recline to hold the long opium pipes over oil lamps that heated the drug until it vaporized, allowing her to inhale the vapors.

In 1840, Thomas built a strong trading boat of hardwood lumber, partly covered with a deck. After floating down the Rock River over the rapids, he loaded up his goods above the rapids on the Mississippi River, and was towed to Dubuque, Iowa.

Holmes stayed in Dubuque for some time while Ursula was treated for what was termed heart disease by the attending physician.

Later, Holmes headed to trade with the Indians, while Ursula stayed in Dubuque with some previous friends for treatment. Thomas returned from his trip up the river with lumber and had built a comfortable house.

Ursula, who returned in 1841, had rooms assigned by her brother, Robert, and his wife, who kept the house for Holmes as a hotel. Ursula seldom appeared but stayed in her room.

Thomas and Ursula had a partially adopted child (or foster child) with "a very little Indian blood in her veins," named Matilda.

When Ursula had attacks of pain and aversion, she called upon Matilda for help. She did not call on her husband or brother. According to Bunnell, the two men had no sympathy for nor appreciation of her

condition. In fact, Robert called Ursula's pain "tantrums."

At one time, Lafayette Houghton Bunnell was heading down the river to attend his sister-in-law's pregnancy. Ursula wanted to attend, and she wanted to have Matilda along.

Robert called Bunnell aside and said that if the boat tips, please save the child first. "Coming from his brother, the warning angered me, and I replied that both persons and their lives would be held sacred by me," noted Bunnell.

The remark showed that Ursula had a distrust of her brother and her husband. Luckily, Ursula and Matilda arrived safely.

Bunnell noted that he often thought of Ursula, and the bravery and devotion to Matilda. (It is also noted that after this time, no information about Matilda popped up in historical articles.)

Ursula Kennedy Holmes, the first wife of Thomas A. Holmes, died of heart failure, probably related to opiates, in Dubuque, Iowa in 1841, at thirty years old. No cemetery or tombstone has been found.

There was no hope for any reconciliation or adaption to the frontier life for Ursula from her husband. Thomas's character showed the difference between Thomas and his fastidious wife.

Once Thomas A. Holmes noted, "While I can only just about write my name now, I can skin a muskrat quicker than an Indian."



A woman using a pipe to smoke opium.

Thomas loved the smell of the Indian camp, and of skinning muskrats, rather than the civilized life that his wife wanted.

Bunnell noted that he admired Ursula's good qualities and felt that death had cured her of her diseases.

Bibliography

Bunnell, Lafayette Houghton. *Winona (We-No-Nah) and Its Environs on the Mississippi in Ancient and Modern Days in 1897*, 2013.

Eggler, David H. "Henry David Jones Koons: Philadelphia to Shakopee, Minnesota With Notes on Shakopee Pioneers Thomas A. Holmes and Robert Kennedy Holmes." *Bellefonte Historical and Cultural Association*, May 2020. www.bellefontearts.org/Eggler_genealogy/Koons.pdf.

Kessinger, L. *The History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin*, 1888.

SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY
2109 Boulder Pointe, Shakopee, MN 55379
952-693-3865
shakopeeheritage.org

SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



Ursula Kennedy Holmes

1811-1841

The First Wife of Thomas A. Holmes

Compiled and written by David R. Schleper, Shakopee Heritage Society © 2022