

Holley Native Became Johnson & Johnson Matriarch



Evangeline Brewster Armstrong Johnson Dennis

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After a three-year stay in Medina, Frances Folsom became one of the area's most beloved young women after her marriage to President Grover Cleveland. Yet I was hoping that March would provide me with six Saturdays to write about notable women from Orleans County, but I suppose that I should not feel limited to writing about such subjects to a single month!

The only lasting local memory of Evangeline Brewster Armstrong exists within a stained glass window at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Holley. The window reads, "Presented by Mrs.

Evangeline A. Johnson A.D. 1894” featuring an image of St. Paul “posed in this window holding a book and pointing upward to heaven as though he were giving a benediction,” as described by C.W. Lattin. Evangeline was born in 1865 at Rochester, New York to Edwin Rutherford Armstrong and Martha Gifford, who were married on August 13, 1857. Edwin Armstrong was raised in Wilson, NY, later teaching school in Rochester and later becoming principal of a school in that area. From 1862 to 1863, he attended medical school at the University of Michigan and graduated from Buffalo University’s medical program in 1865. Three years later, he arrived in Holley where he would become one of the most prominent physicians in the area.

The feature of this story is not Dr. Armstrong, but his daughter Evangeline. According to Martha Armstrong’s obituary, “[Mr.] and Mrs. Armstrong were prominent factors in the social life of the village...” and Martha was a “cultivated musician” and leader in musical matters in Holley. It a general understanding that Dr. Armstrong was also well connected in medical circles throughout the country as presumed by Evangeline’s marriage to Robert Wood Johnson on June 27, 1892. Twenty years her senior, the founder and president of Johnson & Johnson took an immediate liking to the young and strikingly beautiful young woman, just 27 years of age. Some authors suggest that Evangeline’s attraction to the aging and “heavier” Johnson was strictly related to the power and wealth associated with such a relationship.

The couple’s first son was born on April 4, 1893, a little over nine months after the couple married in the foothills of the Great Smokey Mountains near Maryville, Tennessee. The rural girl immediately transformed into the belle of New Jersey’s urban society. Robert Johnson paid little attention to his children and Evangeline considered herself a member of the upper echelon of society, refusing to interact with those around her and becoming a recluse. At the family home in Gray Terrace, she was provided with a full staff of butlers and maids to assist her in rearing the children. July 14, 1895, the couple welcomed their second son, John Seward Johnson, into the world. The young boy suffered from childhood illnesses, allergies, and asthma, and suffered with dyslexia. Evangeline paid extra attention to her “little angel,” the pet name she gave him because of his constant suffering from illness during his childhood.

On February 7, 1910, Robert Johnson died as a result of complications associated with Bright’s disease, leaving his 44-year-old widow and three children to mourn his passing. Evangeline took her two youngest children to New York City in order to enjoy the high-style social life she always dreamed of. While living in the city, she developed a relationship with John W. Dennis, a member of the British Parliament; the two left New York for London, leaving the children behind. As noted by Jerry Oppenheimer in his book *Crazy Rich: Power, Scandal, and Tragedy in Inside the Johnson & Johnson Dynasty*, young Seward Johnson was left with a New York City socialite and friend of Evangeline who sexually abused the young man until his brother Robert rescued him.

Evangeline married Dennis, but their life together was short-lived. On September 9, 1919, she died at her country estate in Nocton, Lincolnshire. Two weeks earlier, she tripped on street curbing in London and broke her hip; a blood clot later developed as she recuperated. Lattin writes in *Luminaries in the Firmament*, “In any day and age no work of art is ever created at small expense. I’m sure back in 1894 this large window depicting a life-size St. Paul was

considered as expensive. It is easy to understand, knowing Mrs. Johnson's background, how she was able to afford it."