

# Two Historic Houses and ONE REMARKABLE WOMAN

The Life and Legacy of Jessie Daniel Ames

By Ellen Davis

**M**ichele Ledeborn and husband Herb had never heard of Jessie Daniel Ames until they started looking for an historical Georgetown home and stumbled upon the historical marker in front of the house at 1004 S. Church Street. “Her accomplishments are amazing and inspiring,” Michele says.

Barbara Meyer believes Jessie also lived in her house at 705 East 3rd Street. She and husband George bought it in 1989 and lovingly restored the house to become one of the city’s finest historic homes. But they had no idea about its history until Barbara later read Jessie’s biography. Now it’s definitely a point of pride.

And with good reason. Jessie Daniel Ames was one of the great unsung heroes of several U.S. rights and equality movements going back nearly 100 years, and she spoke up for what was right when society called for women to remain silent. Starting here in Georgetown, Jessie ran the local phone company, helped Texas women earn the right to vote, and took a leadership role in the anti-lynching movement. Former Southwestern University History Professor Martha Mitten Allen credits Jessie as “a pioneer who laid the groundwork for the flowering of the black rights and



*A historical plaque marks the front of 1004 S. Church Street.*



*Jessie's Daniel Ames' first Georgetown house at 705 East 3rd Street.*

women's rights movements in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s."

Now owned by the Meyers and the Ledebohms, respectively, Jessie called these two Georgetown houses "home" at important turning points in her life. The Meyers now live in Jessie's first Georgetown house—705 East 3rd Street. Jessie's family bought the place in 1901, according to records Barbara found while researching former owners.

By then, the Daniel family had been in Georgetown for eight years, having moved here in 1893

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to allow eldest daughter Lulu to attend Southwestern University. Jessie herself was born in Palestine, Texas, in 1883, and graduated from Southwestern at age 19.

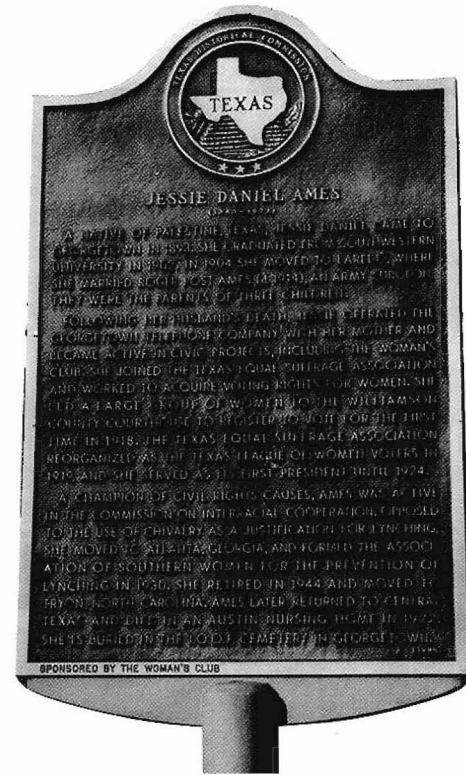
Soon thereafter, Jessie and the rest of the Ames family seemingly left Georgetown behind in a move to Laredo. She met and married an Army surgeon there named Roger Ames, who was 13 years her elder, but the couple spent most of their married life apart since he traveled

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with the Army to different posts, eventually ending up in Guatemala working as the physician to the American Consul and the United Fruit Company.

That's where Roger died in 1914 of malarial complications, leaving Jessie as a 31-year-old widow with three small children to support. Fortunately, Jessie's mother Laura now ran Georgetown's telephone company, which her father James had purchased before his own death. In fact, the building stood at the corner of Church and 10th Streets, where the Verizon building stands today.

Jessie soon joined her mother as the company's bookkeeper. She "demonstrated a new-found talent for administration and organization," says biographer Jacquelyn Dowd Hall in *Revolt Against Chivalry*, and she acted as the company's manager for most day-to-day business. Her



mother soon sold the house on East 3rd Street, moving with Jessie to the larger house on Church Street, which pioneer settler David Love originally built in 1867. This is where the next phase of her life essentially began.

Jessie became active in Georgetown's social, intellectual, and business circles. Unlike many of the town's less self-sufficient women, Jessie felt she had the right to vote on issues affecting her livelihood, so she organized the Georgetown Equal Suffrage League, and in 1916, the group held its first meeting at her Chintch Street home.

Two years later, Texas passed a bill permitting women to vote in state primaries, but due to its timing, Jessie and her group had just 17 days to register women in time to vote. They organized a massive campaign. About 3,300 women came to the county courthouse "by wagon, hack, and on foot" to register, as author Clara Stearns Scarbrough tells it in her 1973 book, *Land of Good Water*. "Officials and citizens were startled and impressed."

Jessie also got involved with the Texas Equal Suffrage Association. Biographer Jacquelyn Dowd Hall credits TESA President Minnie Fisher Cunningham with bringing Jessie "out of obscurity" and starting her on the road to regional prominence. After getting elected as the state association's treasurer in 1918, she helped make Texas the first Southern state to ratify the 19th Amendment in 1919.

Before the amendment became law, the TESA reorganized as the Texas League of Women Voters, and Jessie served as its first president. She represented the national League at the Pan American Congress of 1923, and served as a delegate-at-large to the national Democratic Party conventions of 1920 and 1924.

In 1924, she stepped down as state League president, but took up a few new fights. Touched by the plight of Black parents struggling to educate their children in overcrowded and under-funded Williamson County schools, and troubled by the early 1920s rise of the Ku Klux Klan, Jessie became director of the Texas Council of the Commission on Interracial

Cooperation, which was based in Atlanta. Also in education, Jessie helped to found the Texas branch of the American Association of University Women, becoming its first president in 1926.

She seemed to leave Georgetown behind again in May 1929, when she moved to Atlanta to become the Commission on Interracial Cooperation's national director of women's work, where she first faced the horrors of lynching. Only one year later, she founded the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, which argued—counter to the prevailing opinion among Southern men—that lynching was not a form of chivalry designed to "protect white women." She documented that the rape of white women by African-American men—the rationale behind lynching—seldom occurred, and that the true motive for lynching was rooted in racial hatred.

"During the long, dark period of racial segregation and oppression from the end of Reconstruction to the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, there were relatively few white Americans who were willing to work openly and actively on behalf of racial justice," writes Columbia University History Professor Alan Brinkley in his book *Invisible Giants—Fifty Americans Who Shaped the Nation But Missed the History Books*, which features a chapter on Jessie. "Jessie Daniel Ames, a white southern woman, emerged from an unlikely background to become—at great personal risk—a powerful, committed, and effective leader in mobilizing opposition to lynching in the South."

With the movement gaining ground, Jessie retired to North Carolina in 1944. But as Georgetown's luck would have it, she returned in 1968 to live with her younger daughter. She lived another four years before dying of pneumonia in Austin at the age of

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88. Jessie is buried with her family in the International Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery behind Southwestern.

Jessie's legacy is now in the university's capable hands—it maintains her books on race relations, labor relations, and women's suffrage as the Jessie Daniel Ames Collection. Also, Southwestern's Jessie Daniel Ames Lecture Series has been going since 1985, featuring regular presentations in feminist studies topics. And of course, the Meyers, the Ledebohms, and other Georgetowners keep her fond memory alive for everyone.

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*Jessie's Daniel Ames is buried with her family in the International Order of Odd Fellows Cemetery behind Southwestern.*

### **Sources:**

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