

Kate Waterman Hamilton (1841-1934)

Kate Waterman Hamilton was born on November 12, 1841 in Schenectady, New York the only daughter of Farwell H. Hamilton and his wife Ruth A. Cady Hamilton.

In the early 1850s the family left New York to live in Steubenville, Ohio. Here Kate would receive her education and grow to adulthood. Steubenville is on the far eastern side of Ohio on the Ohio River and across the river from West Virginia. Steubenville would have been a small town in a rural area of Ohio and it may have been here that Kate heard the “hill country” dialect which she would often use later for characters in some of her writings.

In 1870, the family once again moved westward, this time to Bloomington, Illinois. Here, her father was employed as a pattern maker and later a carpenter at the Bloomington Stove Company. By this time Kate was 28 years of age. In the census reports for 1850 and 1860, her name is shown as Catharine. But now in the 1870 census her name is Kate W., and for the first time her occupation is shown as “Authoress.” Succeeding censuses would show the same.

Kate never married. She lived with her parents until their deaths in the 1890s. Her brother Erskine married Mamie Robb in 1899, and Kate made her home with them for the rest of her life.

Kate had an early proclivity for writing. She would entertain childhood playmates with her stories, and continued writing all her life. A reporter who interviewed her in 1906 wrote of her “retiring disposition” and her modesty which “almost amounts to a fault.” But Kate did live in an active family household for many years and surely had great powers of observation which she translated into the entertaining stories she wrote.

Her works were published in newspapers and popular magazines of the day. We know of published works from 1863 on. In later years she wrote stories in conjunction with her brother Erskine with whom she lived. She also wrote under the pen name “Fleeta.”

Kate really found her niche in church work. She wrote many, many stories and articles for publication for Presbyterian Sunday Schools. She greatly enjoyed her local work with children at the Second Presbyterian Church in Bloomington. Indeed, she served for 40 years as Superintendent of the Primary Department of that church. Kate was also a member of the local Longfellow Club.

Kate’s writing appealed to adults and youth alike. Her stories were wholesome tales that always had a moral to them. Houghton Mifflin published a number of her novels including her most successful one, *The Parson’s Proxy*, which was published in 1896. This story concerns a new minister in a hill country parish who is badly treated by one of the locals. That fellow repents and is converted. The story includes several other interesting characters whose lives intertwine to make an interesting tale.

Another popular novel was *Rachel’s Share of the Road* (1882). The latter novel is interesting in that the protagonist, Rachel, is the daughter of a wealthy railroad magnate and yet actively supports a strike by workers at a foundry owned by her father.

Kate eventually published more than forty books, short stories, and poetry. One biographer wrote: “Unlike many women writers who began as Sunday-school writers and then wrote for commercial firms, Hamilton continued to publish works in the 20th Century for juvenile readers by the religious publishers, even though she occasionally wrote for commercial companies.”

In 1934 at the age of 93 Kate fell and broke a hip on a Monday in November. On the following Friday she died and was buried with the rest of her family in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.