

Clelia Peronneau McGowan: First Women Alderman

In December of 1923, a mere four years after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Clelia Peronneau McGowan and Belizant A. Moorer broke ground by becoming the first women elected to the office of Alderman in the City of Charleston. Although little is known of the life of Belizant Moorer, McGowan left a rich documentary history through her own writings and the through the papers of the many charities she supported. What emerges through an examination of these sources is the picture of a life shaped by the circumstances of the time. From Reconstruction to women's suffrage, to the Jim Crowe era, we see a glimpse of how the circumstances of the time affected the life of an elite southern woman.

McGowan's family came from a privileged background, although they lost much of their wealth in the aftermath of the Civil War. Her mother, Eliza Peronneau, was born into a prominent Charleston Huguenot family, and her father, William Mathewes, came from a family of successful Georgia planters. Although she hailed from an elite southern culture, Clelia's mother Eliza received a remarkably progressive education for the time period. Under the tutelage of her Swedish teacher and governess, Rosalie Roos, she was exposed to both feminist and abolitionist ideas. She passed these views on to Clelia and later cemented her daughter's progressive upbringing by fostering a connection with Rosalie Roos. By this time, Roos had returned to Europe where she married into a prominent political family and co-founded a women's magazine. Clelia spent a year living with Roos, gaining exposure to ideas of racial equality and equal opportunity.¹

Following her return to the States, in 1885 Clelia married into one of South Carolina's most prominent Abbeville families. Her husband, William C. McGowan, was the son of a former Confederate general and well-respected judge, Samuel McGowan. The couple raised four children, two boys and two girls, before William died of pneumonia in 1898. Soon after, Clelia moved to Charleston to raise her children with the support of nearby family and friends.²

Eventually McGowan became active in local clubs and political organizations and by 1920 was president of Charleston's Equal Suffrage League. Although most Charlestonians deplored the progressive ideals they viewed as emanating from the North, Clelia McGowan embraced them; perhaps it was her elite social standing that shielded her from the condemnation of her peers.³ Moreover, McGowan's privileged circle put her in contact with powerful men who acknowledged her strengths and elevated her into positions of political power.

In 1920, McGowan was one of two women appointed to the South Carolina State Board of Education by Governor Robert A. Cooper. During her time on the board, Clelia was frustrated by the ambivalence of other members toward improving black education. Perhaps the powerlessness she felt to exact any change on the Board of Education prompted her to accept the encouragement of Thomas P. Stoney, the 1923 mayoral candidate, to run for Charleston City Council. Early in his law career, Stoney

¹ "The Mathewes Family: Pioneers in the Georgia Hills," *The News and Courier*, 8 July 1979; Louise Anderson Allen, "Clelia McGowan's Journey: From the Fires of War to a Life of Social Activism," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* v. 104 n. 2 (April 2003): 84-85.

² Joan Marie Johnson, "The Shape of the Movement to Come: Women, Religion, Episcopalians and the Interracial Movement in 1920s South Carolina," *Warm Ashes: Issues in Southern History at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 204; Allen, "Clelia McGowan's Journey," 85-86.

³ Johnson, "The Shape of the Movement," 202.

had become acquainted with McGowan when he lodged in her home. He also understood the importance of McGowan's social connections.⁴

Although she received a somewhat hostile reception at political rallies leading up to the election, McGowan was elected to serve the City under newly elected Mayor Stoney in 1924. During her four-year term, McGowan served as chairman for the Committee on Public Education and the Committee on Public Charities, after the resignation of Alderman Gardner in 1925. She also served on the Committee on Sanitary Matters, the Committee on Pleasure Grounds, and the Committee on Insurance.⁵

Perhaps her most important work as City Alderman involved her position on the Committee on Pleasure Grounds, which oversaw matters relating to city parks. Towards the end of his first term, Stoney received a petition signed by several prominent African-American religious leaders requesting a suitable playground for black children. Stoney felt compelled to act and reaching out to McGowan wrote, "can't we take definite action now and do something along this line. I only have eight months more to run and I want to leave something worth while [sic] accomplished."⁶ Heading up a committee appointed by the Chamber of Commerce, McGowan advanced a plan to gain funding from the Harmon Foundation which granted donations to causes benefitting African-American communities across the country.⁷ Thus Charleston's Harmon Field was established on President Street in late 1927 becoming one of the city's first public playgrounds built specifically for black children.

McGowan's work on the City Council and interest in ameliorating the condition of African Americans in Charleston ultimately led to her increased involvement with a group based out of Atlanta known as the Southern Commission on Interracial Cooperation. Her work with the Commission became so important that she chose not to run for reelection in 1927.

Despite her retreat from the Charleston political stage, McGowan remained deeply involved in social and educational issues up until her death in 1956. Clelia Peronneau McGowan left behind a legacy that stretches far beyond her work with the Charleston City Council. Her belief in equality of opportunity fostered decades of work towards ameliorating conditions in underprivileged communities and resulted in the establishment of several institutions which remain standing to this day, including the Shaw Community Center and the Charleston County Public Library. She was not without fault and as several historians have pointed out may have been driven out of a sense of "noblesse oblige." She was nevertheless a torchbearer whose pioneering work deserves great admiration and respect.⁸

⁴ Allen, "Clelia McGowan's Journey," 88.

⁵ *Yearbook 1925: City of Charleston, South Carolina*, (Charleston: Southern Printing and Publishing Company, 1927).

⁶ Thomas P. Stoney to C. P. McGowan, 15 February 1927, Thomas P. Stoney Papers, Records Center of the City of Charleston, South Carolina.

⁷ "Begin Enlarging Playground Site," *News and Courier*, 9 March 1927.

⁸ For further discussion see: Johnson, "The Shape of the Movement to Come;" and Edmond Drago, *Charleston's Avery Center: From Education and Civil Rights to Preserving the African American Experience*, ed. W. Marvin Dulaney, (Charleston: History Press, 2006), 137-138.