

DEDICATION

*To the thousands of
Rye Country Day School community members
who, over the last 150 years, have modeled the School's motto:
Not for Self, but for Service.*





PROLOGUE



Rye Country Day School thrives today much like its beloved symbol, the oak tree. One hundred fifty years after it opened its doors, the school's metaphorical branches reach confidently to the future, anchored by roots deeply embedded in a tradition of excellent education.

In 1869 the school rose from the quiet courage of a group of parents audacious enough to challenge the way girls were educated. They wanted to imbue students with a thirst for knowledge in an unprecedented spirit of freedom and enthusiasm. In founding the Rye Female Seminary, those parents were confident there was a better way to encourage young minds than what for years had been accepted as normal.

One hundred fifty years later, Rye Country Day School continues to adapt that early sentiment and to evolve to meet the changing needs of its students. As always, the school does so with a commitment to mold strength of character and to rigorously pursue knowledge through principled action.

The Civil War, ended only four years before the school held its first classes, had shaken the country to its core. Society was reeling from a whirlwind of change. For many Americans, those post-war years were uncertain, and rightly so. The prescient parents in Rye used those unsettled times as a stimulus for progress. Their foresight began a remarkable and enviable string of unbroken adaptation and creativity in the face of continuing challenges. Founding the Rye Female Seminary was just the first step in an agile ballet that today has created a school that is committed to evolving.

The vision of those Rye parents to teach in a way that encouraged young minds to think independently and imaginatively was unusual. It called for a teacher nimble enough to face the challenges that lay ahead without wavering from the mission. The parents in Rye chose the self-assured and decisive Susan Life. Her years of teaching before she took charge of the Rye Female Seminary had prepared her to begin what has become a remarkable and unbroken span of exceptional educational leadership.

Susan Life laid the foundation that would grow into a deep pool of collective knowledge that has been passed on to school leaders and its exceptional teachers ever since: Be creative and observant, respect what those before you have done. Look to the future. Make the world a better place.

She believed in the community involvement from which the school's motto sprang: "Not for Self, but for Service." Years later, she would explain her philosophy. "The heart is cultivated as well as the manners, so that the latter may but express the kind feelings of the former."

Susan Life believed in inclusiveness, that a student needed only a chance. She believed in building sound

bodies and well-trained minds and strong character. She created a rigorous curriculum to prepare students for college, and she gave students increasing responsibility as they moved toward graduation. Susan Life wanted to instill self-discipline and independence. She wanted students to develop in character and excellence—and, most important, to serve the communities in which they lived. In a letter to a friend nearly fifty years later, she would write, "the work of a teacher was truly a work of love."

The school's path in the ensuing years was filled with challenges. There were seismic changes in the way Americans viewed women's education and their roles in society. There were increasing economic pressures, including the Great Depression and two World Wars. There were difficult questions about including boys, and pressing competition from newer schools. A new Thruway would intrude rudely into the campus.

Still, school trustees, its heads, and its steadfastly loyal alumni and parents would calmly adjust and move forward, keeping the vision alive.

Susan Life was followed by a line of leaders and teachers whose ability to adapt and continue to grow has led to today, where Rye Country Day continues to find itself ahead of the curve, preparing students for an ever-changing world.

Nothing speaks more to the continuous thread of growth than the number of graduates and families who for generations have attended the school and continue to support it—as long as change does not erode the traditions on which the school was founded.

Today, the tradition so firmly established by Susan Life continues. As headmaster Scott A. Nelson, now in his twenty-sixth year, noted recently:

"High-quality academics, innovative initiatives, and outstanding programs do not happen on their own. It takes talented and dedicated faculty, staff, and coaches to plan, lead, and implement programs that capture students' interests and feed their passions."



1869-1896

AN AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING



The Civil War's uneasy echoes had not yet fully faded when the energy and intellect of an unusual young teacher began to invite attention beyond her small school in Muncy, Pennsylvania.

Susan Life's teaching philosophy ran counter to the methods favored in most schools in the United States in 1869, where "spare the rod and spoil the child" was rigidly applied to reinforce the "three Rs," an uninspired belief in the effectiveness of nothing but rote memorization—and then only for boys. Girls were pushed along a different path, which taught skills to prepare them to be good wives and mothers.

Susan Life disagreed. She saw a need to teach in a way that stimulated intellectual and social growth to prepare girls for more than sewing and housekeeping.

The world was opening in 1869, expanding to accommodate changing times and a faster pace of life. Three years before, years of efforts to connect a cable crossing the deep floor of the Atlantic Ocean linking Europe and the Americas were successful. In May of that year the expanding eastern and western sections of the first transcontinental railroad were linked with a celebratory golden spike in Promontory, Utah—an engineering feat considered extraordinary.

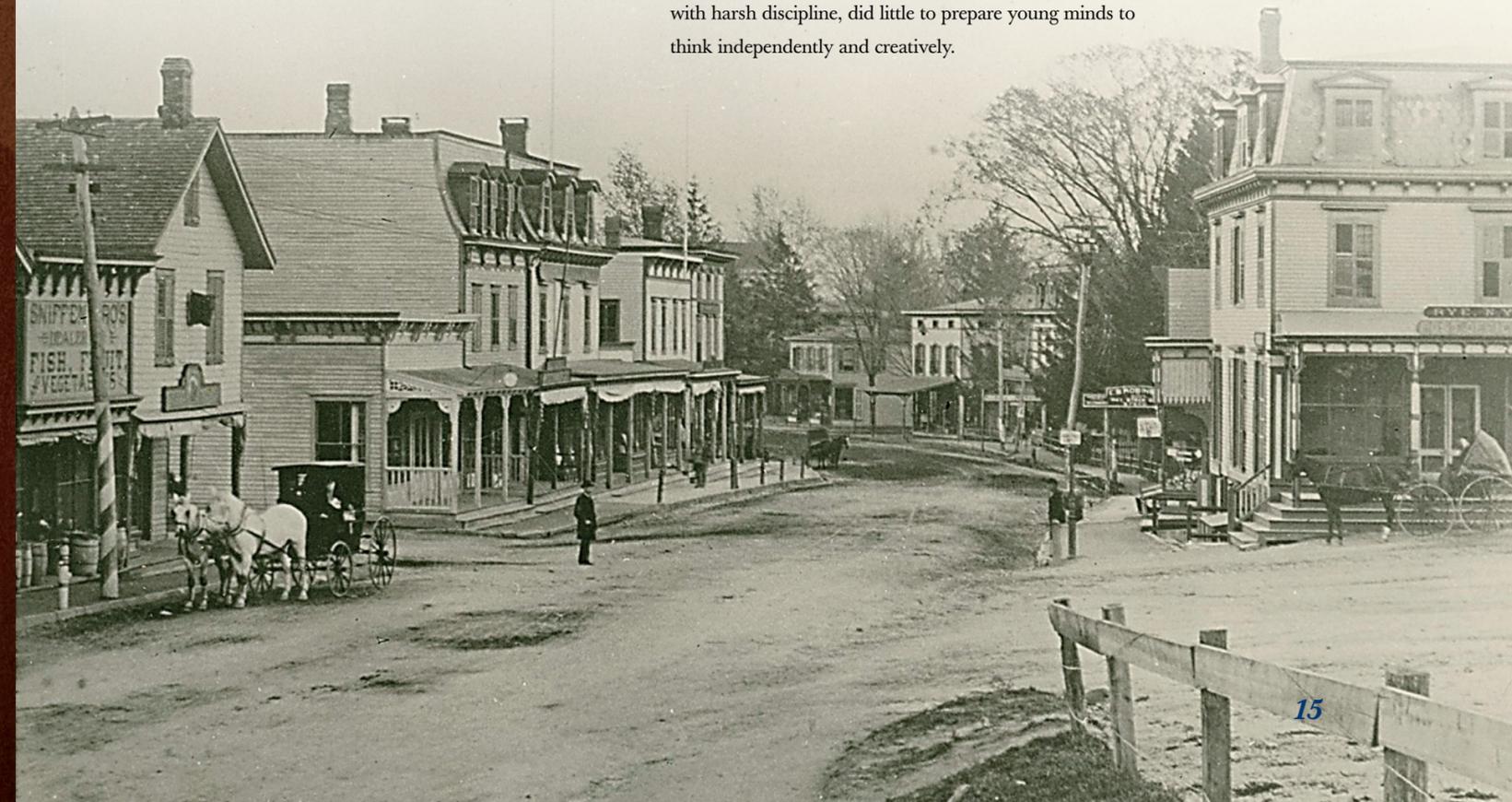
In 1869 the very concept of education was under fire. The old way, monotonous memorization reinforced with harsh discipline, did little to prepare young minds to think independently and creatively.

Opposite: Susan Jane Life, 1833-1932

Below: Purchase Street, Village of Rye, New York - late 1800s

"The heart is cultivated as well as the manners, so that the latter may but express the kind feelings of the former."

Mrs. S. J. Life





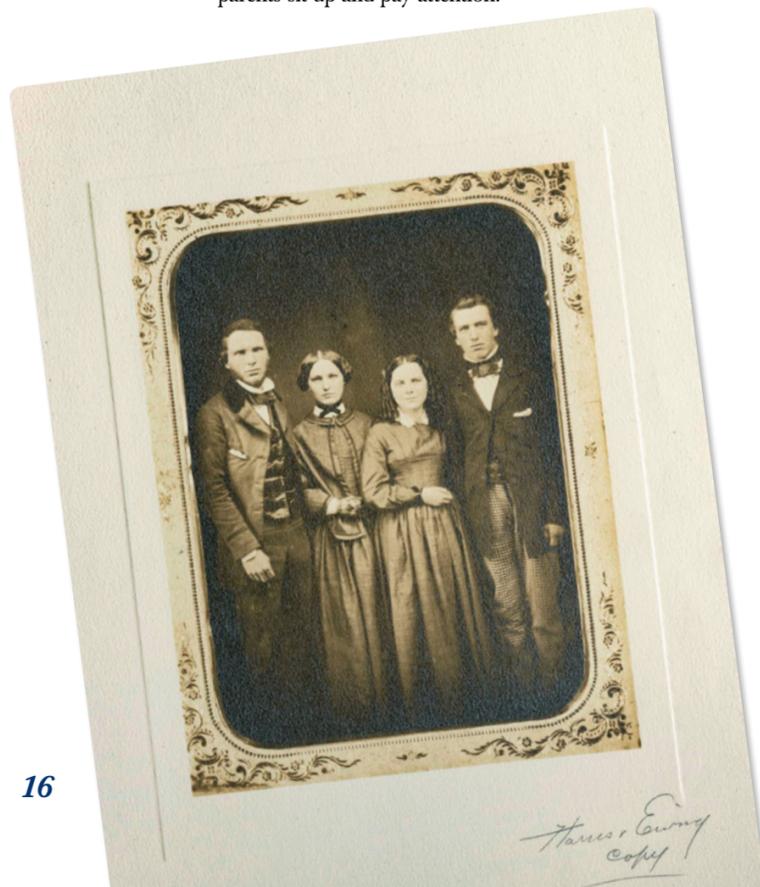
Sixty-five miles from Rye in Poughkeepsie, Vassar College had recently held its first graduation. The all-female class signaled success for a school established for “affording girls as thorough an education in the higher linguistic, mathematical, and scientific course as the universities afford to the boys.”

With the Civil War behind them, hopes held in abeyance for years began to insert themselves in the placid village of Rye, New York, among a group of concerned parents who were unhappy with what local schools offered their daughters. They envisioned a school for girls that promoted educational excellence, social awareness, and a spirit of innovation. They wanted a private school with superior standards and a staff who would provide their daughters with challenges and opportunities beyond those offered by local schools.

Susan Life’s work at her small church school in Muncy two hundred miles away reflected precisely what the Rye families wanted. Memorization was all well and good, she felt, but there was more. She believed in educating the whole child in order to develop students who were engaged and challenged—and excited about being part of the community. The startling way she stimulated young minds made her students and their parents sit up and pay attention.

Owego Academy, Owego, New York, where 15-year-old Susan LaMonte began tutoring pupils, including a young and yet to be famous John D. Rockefeller -1850s

Below: Susan J. LaMonte, age 20 (second from left), with her siblings, A.H. LaMonte, Isabel H. LaMonte, and Cyrenius M. LaMonte



Mrs. Life was a born teacher. She had begun her career at a salary of \$1.35 per week in the small western New York town of Owego. At age fifteen she was coaching other teachers in algebra for their New York state licensing exams and tutoring John D. Rockefeller, who began attending the Owego Academy in 1852. The Academy was considered the finest secondary school in the region. The young Rockefeller, just starting on his path to become the wealthiest man in the United States, had struggled to pay the \$3 per semester tuition.

Later, as the tremors of the Civil War spread, Susan Life would find herself in Muncy, the young wife of a new minister, and she found that her parish duties left room to pursue her passion for teaching. After noticing that the daughters of the parish “knew nothing but the three Rs,” she began a school for girls she felt was “a natural outgrowth of the needs of the time.”

Susan Life wanted to introduce her students to realities of the world beyond their classroom and small town. Two nights a week she had her young charges roll bandages for wounded Union soldiers.

Rolling bandages was not a task to be taken lightly, done while chatting away distractedly with friends. It was painstaking work that required the girls to be patient, attentive, and empathetic—qualities that would serve them well as adults. There was no absorbent cotton in those lean years. Table linens, bedsheets, clothing, even draperies had to be sacrificed and cut into strips. Fine threads had to be tediously combed for batting to absorb blood from wounds. The bandages had to be rolled tightly and pinned. Susan Life knew this was not work for idle hands and minds.

She taught her girls the value of enterprise. Two other evenings she had them knit woolen mittens, socks, caps, and mufflers. Afternoons were used to teach the girls to make soups and jellies and meat broths for the sick and wounded.

The work—which would form the basis of what would later be called “service learning”—embodied the essential values that Susan Life offered her students—and it would become her touchstone and motto: “Not for Self, but for Service.”

News of Susan Life’s unusual philosophy would pique the curiosity of school communities much farther way. Her methods were considered not only effective but revolutionary. Word spread quickly, and schools in New York, Philadelphia, and Princeton wanted her.

Thirteen clergymen near Muncy, backed by fifty parents of girls Susan Life had taught, expressed their high regard for Susan and her husband, William, in a letter that would reach the parents in Rye.

“Their school at Muncy gained a wide-spread reputation for thorough instruction, accurate scholarship, and rapid improvement of the pupils in the various

branches of study. The healthy tone of piety pervading the school and the happy influence exerted upon the pupils boarding with the Principal are deemed worthy of special mention.”

The ambitious families in Rye were intrigued, and they entered the competition for Susan Life’s services. With funds to start the new school for their daughters provided by William Matthews, a prominent attorney and father of a young girl, they extended a hopeful invitation.

The Lifes accepted and, in 1869, “the first boarding school for young ladies between New Haven and New York,” the Rye Female Seminary, opened its doors on Grandview Avenue with an enrollment of 60 girls—25 boarders and 35 day students.

Susan J. Life in the late 1860s when she accepted the calling from the Rye Female Seminary

The former Matthew’s Estate, earlier a boys’ school, became the main building when Mrs. Life and Rev. Life accepted the invitation to establish “the first boarding school for young ladies between New Haven and New York” in 1869.





Rye Seminary entrance and parlors during the 1870s



Rye Seminary Rye, N.Y.



“The magnificent building, with its cheery school-rooms, cozy sleeping apartments, well-furnished dining hall, ample piazzas, and beautiful grounds, has all the comforts that can be desired in a home.”

—from the Rye Female Seminary Catalogue, 1876

Several of the girls came with Mr. and Mrs. Life from Pennsylvania, and two from Little Rock, Arkansas. The youngest pupil was Isabel Matthews, daughter of the school’s benefactor, William Matthews—who that year would also endow a boys’ school on the Post Road and Park Avenue called Bradford Mansion. Boys would attend through fifth grade, when tradition called for them to move on to preparatory schools before university.

Westchester County was growing rapidly in the years after the Civil War, its population increasing nearly 30 percent from an 1860 population of 99,000 by 1869. Wealthy entrepreneurs from New York City began buying up farmland on which to build elegant estates. Steamboat service from the city and the completion of the New Haven Railroad drew outsiders to Rye’s beaches, where horse racing in an area called “the Flats” became very popular.

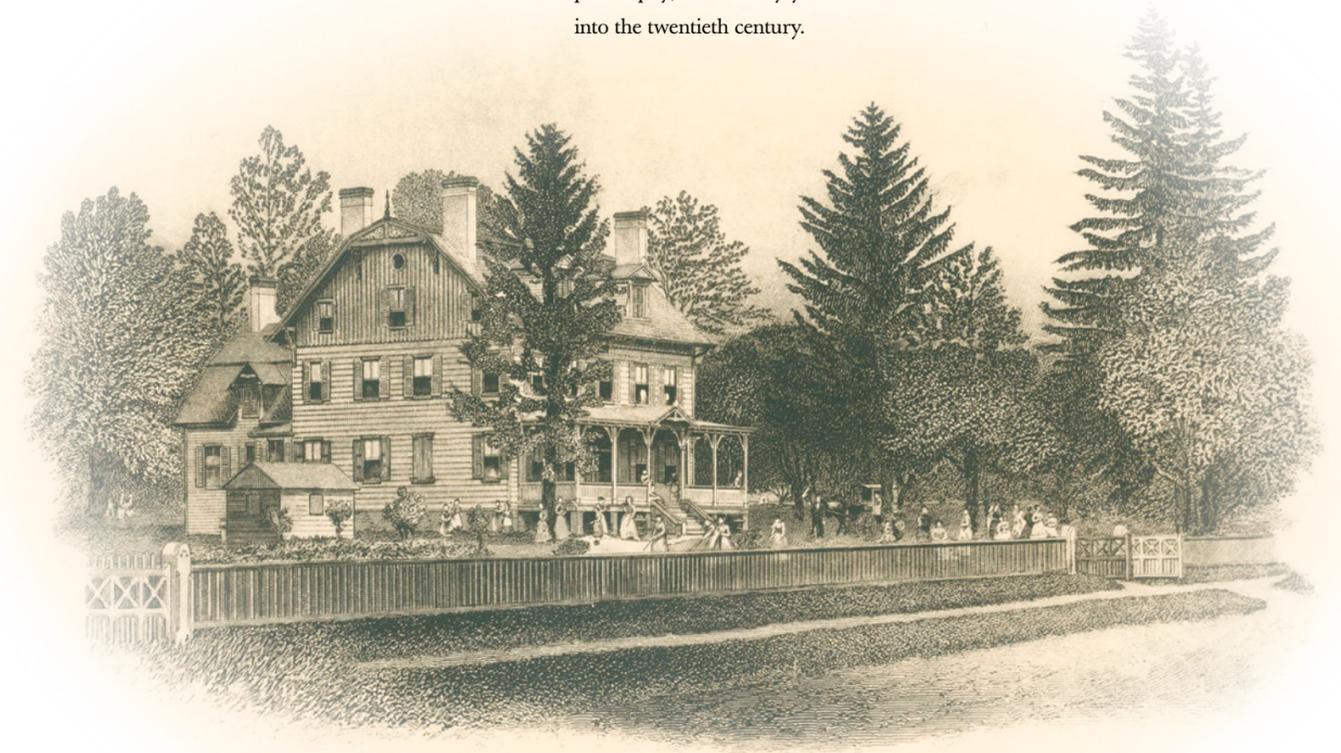
A few miles away, the new students of the Rye Female Seminary settled enthusiastically into a building that had

once been the home of Chrestomathic Institute, a school built in 1834. The pleasant and comfortable campus had come a long way from colonial times, when locals called the area Wolf Pit Ridge. The hill had once been sliced with deep pits dug by the settlers to trap the many wolves that threatened the small village. Town leaders offered fifteen shillings as a bounty for each wolf caught.

From the first day, the Rye Female Seminary emphasized not only academic excellence, but Susan Life’s required community service with the goal of producing well-rounded students. William Life would teach ancient languages. Susan Life would serve as head of school and teach mathematics and English. Among later faculty were the Stowe sisters, Harriet, Mary, and Lucy, dedicated teachers drawn to Susan Life’s unique philosophy, who twenty years later would lead the school into the twentieth century.



Artist’s etching of Rye Seminary - 1869



RYE SEMINARY



Main Meeting Room, classroom in the Rye Female Seminary original building - 1890s

Classes for the youngest students—called the “junior department”—included English, natural philosophy, French, German, Latin, and physiology. Middle department girls would study rhetoric, biblical antiquities, natural history, universal history, astronomy, and art. Senior department classes would include government, evidences of Christianity, classical antiquities, geology, and the history of arts and sciences.

The school’s first catalog stated that “ample opportunities are afforded for exercising in the open air, which is encouraged and facilitated by large and attractive grounds, handsomely laid out in garden and lawn, organized by shrubbery, sufficiently shaded by trees of various kinds, and surrounded and intersected by walks and drives.”

Tuition and board that first year, which included “washing not exceeding twelve pieces per week” was \$350. Classes in Latin, German, French, and Italian required an additional \$10 per quarter, as did art classes for crayon, watercolor, sepia, and India inks. Pupils were asked to furnish their own sheets and were told to bring “umbrellas, overshoes and water-proof cloaks.”

At the close of the first year, 1870, the Rye Female Seminary produced one graduate. A committee of “five local gentlemen” observed the final oral exams.

“The pupils showed a real knowledge of their subjects,” the committee wrote. “The instruction is most capable and careful. While in the entertainments, there has been afforded ample evidence that the most elegant accomplishments of womanly education have by no means been neglected.”

There was more to daily life at the school than exams in those first years. Susan Life quickly established ironclad rules. No day students were allowed to visit the post office, railroad station, or to loiter in the village. All young children and any using public transportation had to be chaperoned. The front steps were for teachers only. Girls were to dress appropriately: no short-sleeved dresses.

In the first years there was a single tin tub on the dormitory’s upper floor that ran hot and cold water. With so many girls, it required careful planning to see that each got a bath once a week. Each girl was given five to seven minutes to bathe. If she missed her allotted time she would have to wait a week.

News of the school spread quickly, and parents wanting the best for their daughters went to great lengths to get them there. One mother would accompany her two daughters on the train to the school for years. In extreme weather she would bring her work and lunch and sit in the station until she could take her daughters home.

Opposite: Vegetable gardens were a prominent scene in the original campus landscape and were harvested as part of the meals served to students and faculty of the school.

Picnics and outings regularly took place on the back lawn of the Main Building - c. 1900.





In the 1870s and 1880s, students from the Rye Female Seminary would travel into Manhattan to have their senior portraits made at the studios of prominent New York photographers.

