

CAPTIVE
OF THE
LABYRINTH

Sarah L. Winchester
Heiress to the Rifle Fortune

Mary Jo Ignoffo

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Jacket photographs: Sarah L. Winchester's enormous, labyrinthine house, which she designed and had built on the outskirts of San José, California, between 1886 and 1906, when its seven-story tower and other tall portions collapsed in the San Francisco earthquake. This photograph, which predates the quake, was probably taken from a water tower. After Winchester's death, the house was transformed into a tourist attraction, the Winchester Mystery House. Courtesy History San José. Inset: Sarah L. Winchester, circa 1872, portrait by Isaiah Taber of San Francisco. Courtesy History San José.

For Pat

INTRODUCTION



SARAH WINCHESTER'S LIFETIME SPANNED THE VICTORIAN AGE. SHE WAS born in 1839, two years after the teenaged Queen Victoria was crowned, and eighty years later, as death approached, Winchester could have been a Victoria look-alike—a stooped little lady, face veiled, in black silk mourning garb. Like the queen, she had seen profound personal and societal transformations occur during her lifetime. Winchester's attitudes and tastes were shaped as turbulent religious, aesthetic, and political seas changed America in the years just before and after the Civil War.

Winchester was born Sarah Lockwood Pardee in New Haven, Connecticut, at the peak of the Industrial Revolution and in the same year that the *Amistad* incident focused worldwide attention on New Haven. At the time, the underpinnings of America's religions were making seismic shifts, and belief systems such as spiritualism and transcendentalism entered the mainstream. Sarah was nine years old when the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Before her death in 1922, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had established women's right to vote. She was witness to and the product of a magnification of women's roles in the world. But despite her financial and apparent social independence, Winchester was not able to live as she wanted. In California as well as in Connecticut, her days and decisions were highly circumscribed by the boundaries of traditional upper-class womanhood. She developed a sharp intellect, but had no prospects for higher education. She admired clever, time-saving inventions, but her gender and class kept her from engaging in work that was more than a hobby. She often ignored social, religious, and business expectations, but this gave fodder to labels of superstition, religious fanaticism, and mental illness. These judgments, although often rendered against women who ventured beyond the implicit confines of womanly behavior, overwhelmed any personal identity she may otherwise have achieved.

When Sarah Pardee married William Wirt Winchester in 1862, he was heir apparent to a large and profitable clothing factory in the center of

New Haven. At age twenty-five, William was running the day-to-day operations of the Winchester & Davies Shirt Manufactory, and there was no question that one day he would carry it to unparalleled production and record profits in New England's garment industry. But within four years of his marriage, William had relinquished his partnership and taken on a leading role in a rifle company. His father's aggressive investments in a weapons factory dragged William into this unlikely occupation. The younger Winchester's unexpected conversion from garment-maker to gun-maker changed the course of his life as well as his new wife's.

The design and manufacture of firearms had undergone a dramatic evolution, almost literally in the Winchesters' Connecticut backyard. Eli Whitney, inventor of the labor-saving cotton gin, established the Whitney Arms Company late in the eighteenth century in Hamden, Sarah's ancestral village. Whitney applied the principles of mass production with interchangeable parts (tactics that the Winchester firm later adopted) to appreciably accelerate the process of weapons production. In the meantime, Samuel Colt of Hartford invented the "revolver," a pistol with a revolving barrel, and Horace Smith and Daniel Wesson partnered in developing a repeating pistol called the "Volcanic." These sidearms were the immediate precursors of the "Winchester," a revolutionary advance from the traditional muzzle-loaded musket.¹ The Winchester was the first financially successful repeating rifle and the most sought-after long arm in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. It generated great wealth for the Winchester family.

Sarah and William Winchester, together with William's parents, built a palatial home on the outskirts of New Haven overlooking the new Winchester Repeating Arms Company factory. From 1868, when they took occupancy of the new mansion, until 1880, the couple lived in high style and traveled together, and William devoted himself to his father's rifle factory, which he planned to take over one day. Sarah's mother died in the spring of 1880, and William's father died at the end of that year. Just three months later, in March 1881, William died from tuberculosis, leaving Sarah his Winchester Repeating Arms Company stock worth \$77,700, which paid dividends of \$7,770 annually, and she stood to inherit another \$200,000 worth when her mother-in-law died.² If those three deaths were not enough to cope with, Sarah's eldest sister, Mary Converse, died in 1884. The following year, she fled New Haven a grief-stricken woman of few words and even fewer companions, a practical, no-nonsense Yankee embarking on a quest to create a California retreat where she could heal from the loss of her husband. She purchased land in the warm and salubrious Santa Clara Valley and invited her assorted sisters with sometimes difficult husbands and half-grown children to come live near her. This

extended family generated episodes that embroidered Winchester's early years in California with comedy and tragedy and headaches—common symptoms of complex family relationships.

Winchester's move to California came at a time when thousands of others were settling in the West. After the midcentury Gold Rush, there had been a steady stream of pioneers making the trek by wagon across the prairies and over the mountains to California. With the opening of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, the stream grew, and by the middle 1880s, people were flooding into the West to start life anew. At the beginning of her residence in California, Winchester was very much like others of her class who lived in the valley. She joined Leland and Jane Stanford, who, recovering from the death of their only son, laid the foundation for a great university. Another neighbor was the Pullman railcar heiress, Harriet Pullman Carolan, who brought her fortune into a marriage and set the social scene on the San Francisco Peninsula. Carolan's best friend, Virginia "Ella" Hobart Baldwin, was heiress to one of the Comstock Lode's silver barons, Walter S. Hobart. Like the Stanfords, the Carolans, and the Baldwins, Winchester owned several homes on which she lavished expensive decor and furnishings. She purchased a houseboat (others may have preferred a yacht) for summering. In this company, Winchester may not have appeared particularly odd.

The excesses of the Gilded Age were less apparent in California than in the East, however, and Sarah Winchester's display of wealth, although in step with a few of her neighbors, mostly stood out in the rural and middle-class valley. Her house and ranch took on the look of a personal "exposition," a micro version of the enormously popular world's fairs held during that era. While the international expositions in Philadelphia in 1876, Paris in 1889, Chicago in 1893, and Glasgow in 1901 reflected the wealth and achievements of nations around the world, the homes of the wealthy during this era made public statements about the aspirations and sensibilities of their owners. Winchester's house, for example, displayed a collection of disparate styles and decorations in the building arts. She found great satisfaction in directing the construction and remodeling of the large, "rambling" (to use her word) house.³ The landscape of the ranch was divided into carefully cultivated fruit and nut orchards, plus decorative gardens favoring Japanese-style horticulture. An English garden with French statuary accented the Victorian house. Setting Winchester apart from both neighbors and other elites was the fact that she herself superintended the construction rather than hiring a construction manager. She drew plans and directed implementation until 1906.

The ways that Winchester spent her vast income put her in the public eye and the society pages. Like a modern soap-opera star, she was often

the target of far-fetched newspaper stories. In 1895, a San José newspaper writer wondered why Winchester kept adding rooms, turrets, and towers to her already enormous house, suggesting that she must be superstitious. Perhaps, the story went, she was afraid she would die when construction stopped.⁴ Several subsequent articles built on the first and specifically linked her building practices with guilt for those killed by Winchester repeaters. For the next two decades, increasingly complex reports declared Winchester superstitious, compulsive, obsessive, and clairvoyant.⁵

Meanwhile, as Winchester withstood this ridicule, she supported siblings with monthly allowances. Three sisters had also moved to California, leaving a lone sibling, a brother, in New Haven. Of the siblings, Sarah's sister Isabelle "Belle" Merriman lived closest to her. She and her husband lived on a nearby ranch that Sarah had purchased. Belle was as outspoken as Sarah was silent. Involved in politics and Progressive Era social issues, Belle worked as California's first state humane officer. She rallied for kindness to animals and railed against child abuse. On a number of occasions she carried out citizen's arrests, causing street scenes and scandals reported in the press. She was ridiculed for speaking out, and Sarah was ridiculed for silence. Each sister was foil to the other and each withstood the burden of association. The Merrimans' daughter, Marion, who was called "Daisy," was Sarah's favorite among her nieces and nephews. In the early 1890s, Daisy left her parents' Mountain View ranch to move in with Aunt Sarah, where she lived for fifteen years, until she married. Sarah Winchester and Daisy Merriman established an unbreakable bond of affection and loyalty that endured hardship, tragedy, success, and disappointment.

The great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 wreaked havoc at Winchester's house. The seven-story tower collapsed, and fifth and sixth floors dropped into the lower part of the house. A dozen chimneys toppled and many walls crumbled. Winchester decided not to repair the damage, opting instead to simply have the fallen debris hauled away. Almost no one responded to the earthquake like she did; most felt it was in their best interest to rebuild. She demonstrated no such compunction, and in the years after the earthquake there was almost no construction at the old house, so the quake left lasting scars. The house's so-called stairs that lead to nowhere had previously led to an upper floor. Likewise, doors that now open out into thin air were once entryways to suites of rooms, and pipes protruding from the house's exterior once plumbed upper floors. The oddities of the giant house are easily understood when one takes into account the massive earthquake of 1906.

Winchester weathered more ridicule after the earthquake. She was presumed to be mad because she did not rebuild or adequately repair

her mansion. At the same time, advancing age brought declining health. Although she kept social engagements in the years her niece lived with her, after Daisy Merriman's marriage in 1903, Winchester stayed mostly in seclusion. Rheumatoid arthritis took its toll, and her hands and fingers became disfigured and gnarled, so she kept them gloved whenever in public. She had very few teeth and opted to wear a veil to conceal her face. Her refusal to participate in society or be interviewed by the press cast her as a woman of mystery and superstition. Despite the fact that she owned five homes and spent most of the last twenty years of her life in the one in Atherton, California, she was never fully able to escape the old rambling house that bears her distinctive architectural signature. Since the turn of the twentieth century, she has been a captive of the labyrinthine house in San José, confined with its legends and mythology.

Winchester's life in California was not easy, but she remained despite many personal setbacks. She could have returned to New Haven at any time, but like her ancestors who transplanted themselves from England to New Haven, she lived out Connecticut's state motto, *qui transtulit sustinet* ("the one transplanted still sustains"). She died on September 5, 1922, at age eighty-three. It was a private death mourned by only a handful of relatives and employees. She did not presume to defeat death, but planned quite carefully for it, right down to the details of her funeral.

Upon her death, attorney Frank Leib told the local newspaper, "Mrs. Winchester was all that a woman should be, and nothing that a good woman should not be. . . . If there is a heaven, there she must surely be."⁶ His comment points to a Sarah Winchester caught in the cross fire of her own inclinations of what were appropriate ways to spend her life and money against expectations of New Haven and rural San José society. She found herself living as her own frontierswoman, demanding a right to privacy and defending herself from defamation and libel while fighting off provincial and intrusive neighbors. She was also caught in a much broader cultural cross fire, one that echoes in our own day—an ambiguity about women's roles and about those who manage their own wealth, an uncertainty about how we relate to firearms, and conflicting feelings about religious beliefs. The supremely private Sarah Winchester drew extraordinary attention to herself. She kept her religious affiliation private, but she became a way for the public to perpetuate fundamental religious beliefs—a belief in the supernatural, for example—without putting it on themselves. The press placed squarely on Winchester's shoulders doubts, insecurities, and secret hopes about life after death without surrendering its own solid scientific ground.

Winchester's legacies fall into two categories: the intentional and the accidental. The bulk of her estate benefited the Connecticut General

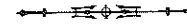
Hospital Society's William Wirt Winchester Hospital (today part of Yale/New Haven Hospital), a tubercular clinic that she began funding in 1909. Sarah Winchester's mortal enemy was not death. It was tuberculosis, the disease that stole her husband. Her life's work focused on funding the fight against that illness. When she created more than a dozen trust accounts to benefit nieces and nephews, she dictated that the principal from the funds would ultimately revert to the hospital.

Winchester's better-known but unintended legacy is the Winchester Mystery House in San José. Of the several houses that she owned at the time of her death, all sold except the strange San José house. The property was leased to an amusement-park promoter who capitalized on existing legends and transformed Winchester's house into a haunted house for the express purpose of attracting paying tourists. It has evolved over ninety years into a major California tourist attraction, and the house remains privately owned by descendants of the first renter.

The mythology surrounding Sarah Winchester is difficult to dislodge, since it has become as institutionalized as the tourist attraction. In fact, a visit to her house today is disappointing, since it has almost no furnishings and there is so little of Sarah Winchester to know or to take away (the only exception is the collection of art-glass windows). However, the public appetite for the macabre seems as strong as ever. The pull, the draw, the magnetism of the Winchester House is substantially prodded along by nearly ninety years of advertising. The bottom line that promoters through the years have understood very, very well is that no one can resist a good ghost story. Promoters may not have made up the Winchester story, but they have made absolutely certain that ghosts, rather than history, stay front and center in any discussion of the widow of the rifle fortune. It is ironic that the house was leased in 1923 rather than sold, which saved it from the wrecking ball. The bankers who wanted to be rid of it were certain that if they had been able to sell it, the buyer would have razed the old ramshackle house. It is very likely that Winchester would have agreed with those bankers, and would be amazed that her house has survived this long.

CHAPTER 1

New Haven's Daughter



SARAH LOCKWOOD PARDEE WAS BORN IN A CHARMING NEW ENGLAND TOWN. At least that is how Britain's popular author Charles Dickens saw New Haven, Connecticut, when he visited just about the time she was born, a year before he penned his classic ghost story, *A Christmas Carol*. The town's seventeen-acre Green with three beautiful churches particularly captured his fancy. "The effect is very like that of an old cathedral yard in England," he noted, "... a kind of compromise between town and country; as if each had met the other half-way and shaken hands upon it."¹

Even the climate was widely admired. One account (written when most of the present-day United States had yet to be explored) claimed, "As to pleasantness of situation and salubrity of air, New Haven is hardly exceeded by any city in America."² The whitewashed fencing of the Puritan days had lately been replaced with black iron gating, and hundreds of elm trees had matured into leafy tunnels sheltering carefully groomed streets. New Haven was, as Dickens saw it, one of America's most beautiful cities, and the vibrancy and comfort of the Green became a standard by which other towns measured their relative ambiance.

Sarah Winchester's ancestors had lived in New Haven almost since its founding, making her American roots as old as the colonies. In 1644, a battered and maimed twenty-year-old George Pardee tumbled off an emigrant ship into the shallow harbor at New Haven Colony, a fledgling village on Connecticut's coast. Pardee was Sarah Winchester's fourth great-grandfather, the younger son of an English clergyman descended from a French family.³ He had been chased out of his native Somersetshire, England, for hard-line Puritan statements, and after a brutal beating, he had fled for his life. His escape from anti-Puritan England was in the nick of time, for he had been beaten so badly that he never fully recovered and walked with a pronounced limp for the rest of his life. This marked