

Heather Register

"A Biography of Katherine Carson Breckinridge"

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Working Thesis Statement:

This thesis argues that Katherine Carson Breckinridge's status as an elite white woman born prior to the Civil War allowed her the education and privilege to witness and take part in historically significant local, national and international events. Raised on a Louisiana plantation, privately tutored in New York and married in Memphis, Breckinridge's life follows the traditional pattern of elite southern women during the second half of the nineteenth century. Although she does not become an activist for women's issues like many of her kinswomen, her views on contemporary issues epitomize the views of many privileged southern woman of her generation.

Through her marriage to Clifton Rodes Breckinridge (US Congressman from Arkansas), she was asked to join the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) as a charter member and became Arkansas' first state regent. The DAR was the largest and most dominate patriotic organization to emerge during the resurgence of the Americanism following the country's Centennial Celebration in 1876. The four founders of the DAR recruited women with social, political and financial standing during the first five years of the organization's existence as a way to provide the society with credibility and status. Breckinridge qualified for membership and as the wife of a United States Congressman from Arkansas, she was appointed the state's first state regent to Arkansas. In the first few years of organization, the members became divided on the issue of linear versus collateral descent. Breckinridge followed the lead of her kinswomen and resigned her position as regent and her

membership in the society as a protest against the practice of collateral descent.

When her husband was appointed Minister to Russia by President Cleveland, Breckinridge accompanied him and served as his confidant and advisor during their four years in Saint Petersburg. Breckinridge left a written record of her life in Saint Petersburg. Her commentary on Russian court life, customs, and foreign policy relevant to the United States provides a new perspective to a much written era in history. Her observations on the United States' position in the world of late nineteenth century European politics are from the perspective an elite white Southern woman accustomed to viewing the world and society from the top. As the United States Minister's wife, her position changed in Russia due to the United States' status in Europe.

Historians have argued that the wives of great white men are not historically significant in their own right simply because of their choice of husband. In some cases this argument is true. Martha Washington is considered a great woman not because of what she did but because she was married to George Washington, father of the country. I contend many of these so-called wives are significant in their own right because of what they said, wrote or did. They should not be completely discounted at first glance because of their marital status. Katherine Breckinridge, although the wife of a powerful politician, was an astute observer of the Washington social atmosphere and the Imperial Russian court life. She did not found the American Red Cross or became a leading activist in the women's rights movement. She was an ordinary woman in a privileged social arena who wrote letters to friends and families about her experiences. She is significant in her own right.