

Montgomery County Historical Society Profiles
Susan Elston Wallace (1830-1907)
by Joann Spragg, Montgomery County Historian

Susan Arnold Elston was born on December 25, 1830, at Crawfordsville in Montgomery County, Indiana, the fourth of nine children of Major Isaac Compton and Maria Aiken Elston. Her father was a prominent businessman in Crawfordsville, and made his money in dry goods, land investments, and banking. In 1835, he built an impressive, two-story, brick mansion for his family on a forty-acre tract of ground known as Elston Grove.¹



A relative retold Susan's description of her childhood: "A great reader and lover of books, [Susan] told of the tall old book case in the family sitting room, where she used to climb and sit on the top and read for hours, free from the numerous sisters and brothers, who would have interfered if they could have but reached her. In those days sugar came in large cones and it was a part of her Saturday morning tasks to grate enough sugar to last the family for a week. Her father was a very religious man and was opposed to any cooking on Sunday. Saturdays were days of preparation . . . and each child had his or her task to perform."²

Susan received her education in Crawfordsville and at Dr. Gibbon's Friends Boarding School in Poughkeepsie, New York.³ After graduation, she returned to her home in Crawfordsville, where she met her future husband, Lewis Wallace at the home of her sister, Joanna M. Lane. Wallace had served as an officer under Joanna's husband, Lieutenant Colonel Henry S. Lane, during the Mexican-American War. Many years later Wallace still recalled his encounter with Susan: "Fifty years and more! I can blow the time aside lightly as smoke from a cigar, and have return of that evening with Miss Elston, and her blue eyes, wavy hair, fair face, girlish manner, delicate person, and witty flashes to vivify it."⁴

There were other suitors for Susan's hand, and although Wallace was the son of former Indiana Governor David Wallace, the Elston family did not favor his suit. The reputation of his youth for getting into mischief, truancy, and lack of application to his formal studies, perhaps predisposed Maj. And Mrs. Elston against the young man. Wallace was, however, intelligent, handsome, and well-read. He even reformed his youthful ways via studying law in his father's law office. Lew and Susan had a great deal in common. They both loved literature, writing and music – she sang and played guitar and piano, he played the flute and violin.⁵ Susan accepted his marriage proposal and agreed to wait until he could establish himself as a lawyer. It took three years to accomplish that goal and win the approval of the Elston family. Lew Wallace and Susan Elston married in her family home in Crawfordsville on May 6, 1852, and they then moved to Covington where Wallace had opened his law office. Their only child, a son named after Henry Lane, was born in Covington on February 17 of the following year. Two months later, the young family permanently relocated to Crawfordsville.⁶

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*Oil portrait of Susan Elston Wallace, from the
Montgomery County Historical Society
collections*

Rose Blair Marsh, the niece of Susan's sister, Helen Elston Blair, gave the following description of Susan's marriage: "Hers was a match for love, to a poor man, and for years she lived in a most humble way, doing her own work. And afterwards, when fame and wealth were hers, she used to look back on those early years as the happiest of her life...She cared little for society, much preferring her beloved books. She told me once to make my friends among my books, for if they bored me I could cast them aside without hurt feelings and take them up again at will, and that they were the truest friends to own . . . She was a woman of quiet dignity and reserve and display meant nothing to her; she knew the worthwhile things that really count."⁷

Susan Wallace's poetry began appearing in newspapers before the Civil War. Probably her best known poem was "The Patter of Little Feet":

*Up with the sun at morning
Away to the garden he hies,
To see if the sleepy blossoms
Have begun to open their eyes;
Running a race with the wind,
His step as light and fleet,
Under my window I hear
The patter of little feet.*

*Anon to the brook he wanders,
In swift and noiseless flight,
Splashing the sparkling ripples
Like a fairy water-sprite.
No sand under fabled river
Has gleams like his golden hair;
No pearly sea-shell is fairer
Than his slender ankles bare;
Nor the rosiest stem of coral,
That blushes in ocean's bed,
Is sweet as the flush that follows
Our darling's airy tread.*

*From a broad window my neighbor
Looks down on our little cot,
And watches the "poor man's blessing"-
I can not envy his lot.
He has pictures, books, and music,
Bright fountains, and noble trees,
Flowers that blossom in vases,
Birds from beyond the seas;
But never does childish laughter
His homeward footstep greet;
His stately halls ne'er echo
To the tread of innocent feet.*

*This child is our "speaking picture,"
A birdling that chatters and sings,
Sometimes a sleeping cherub
(Our other one has wings);
His heart is a charmed casket,
Full of all that's cunning and sweet,
And no harp-strings hold such music
As follows his twinkling feet.*

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*When the glory of sunset opens
The highway by angels trod,
And seems to unbar the city
Whose buildier and maker is God,
Close to the crystal portal,
I see by the gates of pearl
The eyes of our other angel –
A twin-born little girl*

*And I ask to be taught and directed
To guide his footsteps aright,
So that I be accounted worthy
To walk in the sandals of light;
And hear, amid songs of welcome,
From messengers trusty and fleet,
On the starry floor of heaven
The patter of little feet.⁸*

Her husband praised the poem: “A more perfect mother’s song was never written.” Wallace further said of her writings that “they are not numerous, but all beautiful, pure, and exquisitely finished.” Her poetry he said had “delicacy of expression . . . tenderness . . . heart.”⁹

During the Civil War, Susan Wallace often visited Henry and Joanna Lane in Washington, D. C., while Lew served as a major general in the Union Army. Henry Lane was then a U. S. Senator and a close friend of Abraham Lincoln. One observer described Susan at this time: “She is naturally reserved, although to her friends, those to whom she has given her confidence, she is a delightful companion. Mrs. Lane, her sister, was a woman of great intellectual force, a brilliant conversationalist, and her drawing-room was practically a salon, where she gathered about her the flower of Washington society...But all this had little charm for Mrs. Wallace, and she used to slip away and spend hours reading in the Congressional Library.”¹⁰



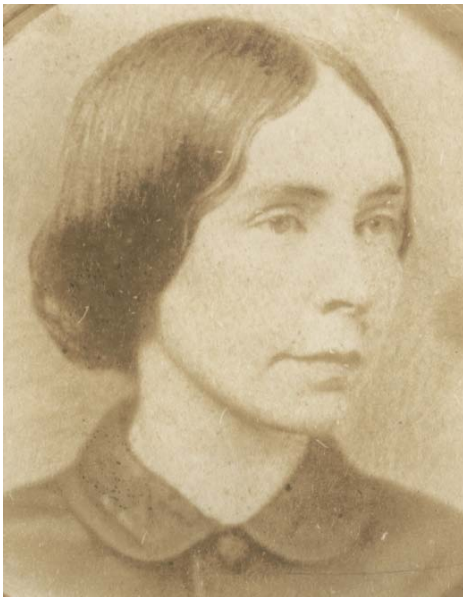
A PUEBLO GIRL SELLING CLAY IMAGES.
(From a sketch by Gen. Wallace.)

President Rutherford B. Hayes appointed General Wallace as governor of the New Mexico Territory in August 1878, and Susan Wallace followed him to Santa Fe several months later. “Whitelaw Reid had invited Wallace to write occasional letters for the *New York Tribune*, but the governor was too busy and used what time remained for writing on *Ben-Hur*, so Mrs. Wallace took up the pen instead and sent a series of travel sketches not only to the *Tribune* but also to the *Atlantic* and the *Independent*. Profiting by her husband’s assignments, she was beginning a literary career of her own.”¹¹ Although she did not care for the New Mexico area, she traveled it extensively. Eventually her collected articles became a book entitled [*The Land of the Pueblos*](#), published by John B. Alden in 1888. Susan also assisted Samuel Ellison, appointed by Governor Wallace,

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to sort and restore the New Mexico archives which were found to be in “horrible condition.”¹²

When President James A. Garfield appointed Lew Wallace as U. S. Minister to the Ottoman Empire, Susan, of course, accompanied her husband on this assignment in June of 1881. While en route to Turkey, she appeared before the Court of St. James in London. During the next four years, the Wallaces traveled throughout Europe, the Holy Land, and even into Egypt. In September 1882, Sultan Abdul Hamid II granted Mrs. Wallace an official introduction and audience, a singular honor for a woman. The sultan further surprised her by presenting her with the Order of Good Works, a “decoration of an order exclusively for ladies and previously bestowed only on two English aristocrats.”¹³ During their stay, Susan continued to write articles for American newspapers and periodicals about her travels. Publishers later collected these essays and issued them in book form as *The Repose in Egypt, A Medley*, John B. Alden, Publisher, 1888, and *Along the Bosphorus And Other Sketches*, Rand, McNally & Company, 1898.



*Photograph of Susan Elston Wallace,
from the Montgomery County Historical
Society collections*

She wrote other books too: *The Storied Sea*, James R. Osgood & Company, 1883; *Ginevra: A Christmas Story*, illustrated by Lew Wallace, Worthington Company, 1887 [published 1886]; and *The City of the Kings; What the Child Jesus Saw and Heard*, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1903. Susan, with the help of her protégé, Mary Hannah Krout, completed her husband’s last book, which he left unfinished at the time of his death in 1905. Using his correspondence and some of his articles, Susan finished *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, which Harper and Brothers published in 1906.¹⁴

In General Wallace’s autobiography, there is a wonderful tribute to his wife, a part of which reads as follows: “Her gentle soul has controlled me and bent me to her wishes, but unselfishly, and always for my good, and always so deftly that I was as one blind to the domination. My temper has never been so hot she could not lay it. She has decided me in

doubt, defended me against interruptions, saved me my time at the sacrifice of her own, cheered me when down at heart, lured me back to my tasks when the tempter would have whisked me away, held my hand in defeat and rejoiced with me in my triumphs...Her faith in me began with the beginning, when I was unknown and uncertain of myself, and the world all too ready to laugh at my attempts. Hers is a high nature, a composite of genius, common-sense, and all the best womanly qualities. The marvel, her memory, has always been at my service. Most fortunately for me the books she loves are the best and she knows them by heart. With her in call, I have no use for dictionaries of quotation . . . What of success has come to me, all that I am, in fact, is owing to her.”¹⁵

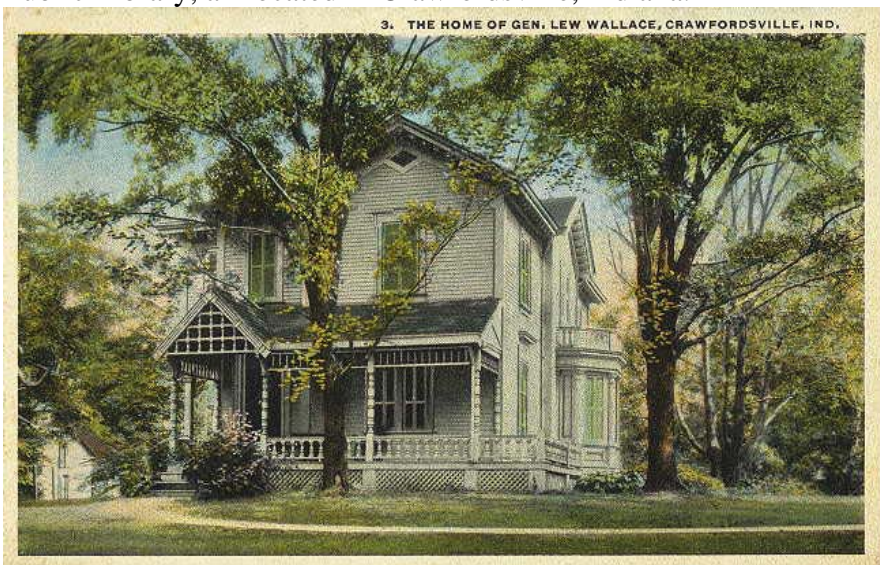
Montgomery County Historical Society Profiles Susan Elston Wallace (1830-1907)

Susan Wallace appreciated the fact that her husband's correspondence would be of interest to future historians, and she undertook to save as many of his letters as possible. Sadly many of her letters to him vanished because he was on the go so much and therefore had no means of retaining them. Wallace encouraged his wife to do more writing, but Susan "was content to remain in the shadow of her husband's colorful career. It was a true marriage; she helped him at every turn; he appreciated and counseled her...The theme of her writing was home and friends, travel, and Christianity. Her attitudes were thoroughly feminine at all times . . . With her equipment of mind and heart and facility in expressing her ideas Susan Wallace could have been a more famous author; she preferred to be known as Mrs. Lew Wallace."¹⁶ Her writings did however earn her a place in *Who's Who in America* in 1899.¹⁷

After General Wallace's death in 1905, Susan Wallace wrote to a relative: "The life of my life is gone. I am now 76 years old and my heart is a tired hour glass. It seems hardly worthwhile to watch the slow dropping of the sands . . . the past is ever present with me, and though I look through all the faces in the world, I shall never see another like that of my first, last and only love."¹⁸

Susan Elston Wallace died on Tuesday evening, October 1, 1907, at her home following "a critical condition for a week or more." A Crawfordsville newspaper reported, "Repeated attacks of the grip during the past few years had undermined her health, which was never robust, and she has had repeated attacks of heart trouble during the recent summer." She had been bedridden for three weeks when she passed away. She was buried at Oak Hill Cemetery beside her husband.¹⁹

Today Susan Wallace's papers share a place along with her husband's papers in the extensive Wallace Collection of the Indiana Historical Society in Indianapolis. You can also trod in her footsteps at the Gen. Lew Wallace Study and Museum, a National Historic Landmark; at Lane Place, the antebellum home of Henry and Joanna Lane; and find additional information in the Local History Room of the Crawfordsville District Public Library, all located in Crawfordsville, Indiana.



The home of Lew and Susan Wallace, built in 1868, along East Wabash Avenue in Crawfordsville. Renovations irreparably altered the house in the late 1930s.

Image used with permission of the Crawfordsville District Public Library

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¹ Martha Cantrell, *The Quilt Chronicles* (Montgomery County Historical Society, 1979), 18-20.

² Rose Blair March, "Sincerity and Simplicity Marked Life of Susan Arnold Wallace," *Indianapolis Star*, March 28, 1926. Rose Blair Marsh was the niece of Helen Elston Blair, Susan Wallace's sister.

³ Irving McKee, "*Ben-Hur*" Wallace (University of California Press, 1947), 22; R. E. Banta, ed., *Indiana Authors and Their Books, 1816-1916*, (Wabash College, 1949), 331.

⁴ *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography*, (Harper & Brothers, 1906), 207.

⁵ I. D. Goss, "Lew Wallace – The Youth," *The Wabash* magazine, June 1903.

⁶ Robert Morsberger and Katharine M. Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (McGraw-Hill, 1980), 45; "Married Fifty Years," *Crawfordsville Journal*, May 6, 1902.

⁷ Rose Blair March, "Sincerity and Simplicity Marked Life of Susan Arnold Wallace," *Indianapolis Star*, March 28, 1926.

⁸ "The Patter of Little Feet" first appeared in the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*, 17 April 1858. *Harper's Monthly Magazine* reprinted it in February 1859. The poem continued to be reprinted in periodicals and anthologies.

⁹ Biographical summary of Susan Wallace as a writer written by her husband, Lew Wallace, photostatic copy at the Indiana State Library.

¹⁰ "Mrs. Lew Wallace," a sketch from the *Rochester Post-Express*, printed in *Current Literature*, Volume XXVI, #5, November 1899.

¹¹ Morsberger, *Lew Wallace: Militant Romantic* (McGraw-Hill, 1980), 272-3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 289-90.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 332.

¹⁴ *Biographical Studies of Seven Authors of Crawfordsville, Indiana*, Dorothy Ritter Russo and Thelma Lois Sullivan (Indiana Historical Society, 1952), 421-438.

¹⁵ *Lew Wallace: An Autobiography* (Harper & Brothers, 1906), 209.

¹⁶ *Biographical Studies of Seven Authors of Crawfordsville, Indiana*, Dorothy Ritter Russo and Thelma Lois Sullivan (Indiana Historical Society, 1952), 419-420.

¹⁷ *Who's Who in America* (1899-1900) (A. N. Marquis & Co., 1899), 762. It appeared with additions through Volume IV, 1906-1907.

¹⁸ John A. Bowerman, "Lifelong Love Affair," in *Montgomery County Legend and Lore* (Montgomery County Historical Society, 1988), 325; letter from Susan Wallace to Mrs. George Wallace, February 18, 1907, Wallace Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

¹⁹ "Mrs. Wallace Dead," *Crawfordsville Daily Journal*, October 2, 1907.