Who were the Sterlings?

Cordelia Sterling grew up as a meticulous, self-aware child of privilege in the town of Stratford in the era leading up to the U.S. Civil War, according to a family friend, Mrs. Catherine Bunnell Mitchell, her niece, who penned a “recollection” of the life of the Sterling House founder.

Cordelia was born in 1846 the third and youngest child of sea Captain John William Sterling and Catharine Tomlinson Plant.

As a six-year-old child, Cordelia “daily climbed into a chair and stood before a mirror, carefully adjusting her skirt and underpinnings” before going to school at the exclusive Stratford Academy. “She was always dainty, small and fragile, with sparkling brown eyes,” according to Mrs. Mitchell.

Cordelia was “the pet of her parents and older sister, and the companion of her brother, John, two years her senior. She would think little of playing in John’s games with other boys and remembered until the end of her life being “remonstrated by a local minister” who deemed her behavior quite “unladylike.”

Cordelia remained shy in life, but never lacked friends nor social attention. Throughout her life, she remained very close to her sister. And despite her diminutive stature – just a pinch over five-feet tall and never weighing 100 pounds, “Nothing ever turned her from what she thought was right.”

She was a product of her privileged class. “She loved pretty clothes and the latest fashions, and had the advantage of travel” in an era when most people did not travel much at all.

In 1872, seven years after the end of the Civil War, her brother John gifted her a trip to Europe accompanying his business associates. She saw England, Paris, the Rhine and Rome. Cordelia returned to conservative Victorian-era Stratford with “slinky skirts from Paris, which horrified American women who still wore hoops.”

In 1877, and again a gift from her brother, Cordelia spent 15 months traveling in southern Europe, and her later-in-life travels included journeys to Hawaii, Egypt, Greece and Algiers. She also spent time at the famed Saratoga Springs in New York State, seeking relief from the mineral springs.

In 1886, John Sterling, now a powerful and wealthy New York City attorney, built the family mansion at 2283 Main Street, Stratford, on land originally purchased by his father. The original home, which stood much closer to Main Street, was moved to the rear of the property – and the Sterling House of today, where Cordelia lived until her death, was built in 1886.

Reportedly a good listener, Cordelia liked walking and visiting her Main Street area neighbors, leaving a calling card when no one was home. She was philanthropic and “regularly contributed” to causes including wildlife protection, the care of sick children, education for the underprivileged, varied church activities, the Seaman’s Institute in New York and it has been written that Cordelia “personally knew each of the 60 old ladies in the Osborne Home located in New York.”

Her first experience being on her own was the year she spent at the Roberti Boarding School in New Haven. She became very homesick.

After brother John died in 1918, Cordelia inherited the right to the earned income from a considerable sum of money her brother set aside in trust. For the remainder of her life, she continued to live comfortably and with her financial future secure, she began to display her philanthropic spirit.

She paid for electric light poles to get electricity to “lonely woman,” she bought a young couple a “Ford” automobile, wheelchairs for the disabled, and granted monthly allowances for the elderly. “She knit baby caps for young friends and an incredible quantity of sweaters and socks” for many including Labrador fishermen, Mitchell wrote.

Prior to her death in January 1931 at the age of 84, Cordelia Sterling had to make a choice as to the disposition of the trust fund that her brother John had created. The money would automatically go to Yale – a huge benefactor of John Sterling already – unless Cordelia directed the trust’s proceeds to one of the six other institutions that John’s will had supported, among them the Town of Stratford.

She chose the Town of Stratford, and “with the counsel of her two nephews, her sister and their neighbor, Judge Howard Curtis, the plan for a community center was formulated into Cordelia’s will” well prior to her death in January 1931 at the age of 84, Mitchell continued, “She wanted it named not for herself, but for her high seas sailor father, Captain John Sterling.”