

# Mary Atkins

Benefactress  
1836-1911

by Barbara Magerl

The news was incredible—an area woman in the early 1900s had accumulated almost a million dollars! When Mary Atkins' will was published, even those close to her were stunned. The woman with the plain lifestyle even rode streetcars instead of owning a carriage.

Born in Kentucky, Mary McAfee became a very frugal schoolteacher. In 1878, James Atkins, a childhood friend and long-time widower, returned to Kentucky, married her, and brought her to Kansas City.

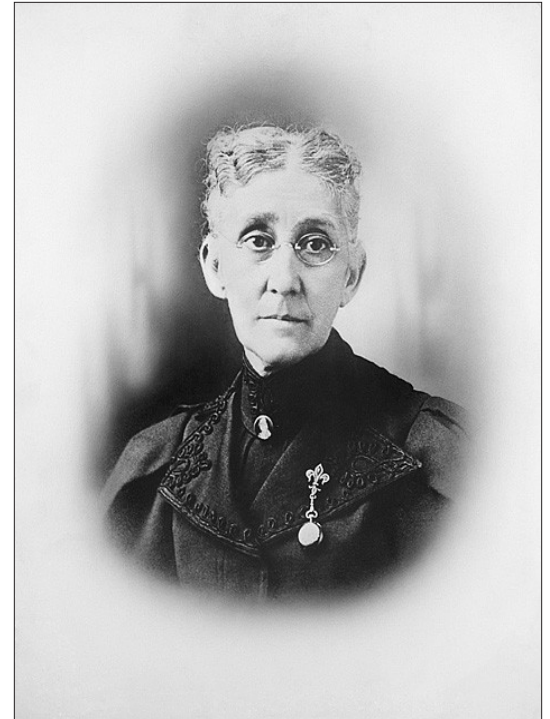
Atkins, who settled here in 1865, had invested wisely in property, which quickly increased in value when the town boomed. A man devoted to the city, Atkins died in the mid-1880s. His widow closely guarded her inherited \$250,000 estate, enjoying few luxuries. Alone and childless, she asked a niece to come live with her. This generous act would impact Kansas City.

The niece eventually married and moved to Switzerland, her husband's homeland. The 66-year-old widow reluctantly agreed to visit them and found a new world of adventure. Famous museums in Paris, London, and Rome delighted her, and on several trips she brought small art objects home.

When she died in 1911, the Atkins estate was worth nearly one million dollars. Along with bequests to family members and charities, \$300,000 was willed for an Atkins Museum of Fine Arts.

Many sites were considered, especially the Liberty Memorial Mall, but the project stalled. Publisher William Rockhill Nelson died in 1915, leaving \$12 million for artwork, but no gallery. Over the next five years, Nelson family members died, donating funds for a building.

Consultants urged that the Atkins money, then \$700,000, merge with Nelson gifts for one major museum. An east wing with a separate entrance is named "Atkins Museum of Fine Arts." At the public opening in 1933, guests walked amid French and Italian marble and listened to the Philharmonic in Atkins Auditorium. Mary



Atkins, the city's first benefactress whose life contrasted sharply with the powerful Nelsons, would have been very pleased.

### **Sources**

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