

Ann Martin

Most of Detroit knew Ann Martin. A merchant at the Central Market, she was familiar to rich and poor and called “Nancy” by all. Her retail specialty was game, including quail and venison. She had an exuberant personality, penetrating black eyes and a colorful vocabulary.

Born in a squalid Philadelphia neighborhood in 1799, Martin was widowed twice before the age of 29. She came to Detroit as the housekeeper for Walter Harper in 1837. Following the death of Harper’s second wife, Martin became his lifelong companion.

Both her personality and appearance were strikingly unlike other women of her era. For church, she wore elegant clothes, always widow’s black. Attending to her stall in the market, she wore rough brogues, large gingham aprons and sunbonnets.

In 1859 both Harper and Martin donated valuable pieces of land to establish a hospital. The hospital itself was named for him, while the avenue leading to it was named for her. She died at Harper Hospital in 1875.



Ann Martin's Detroit

1837 was a year of triumph and tragedy in Detroit. Citizens were elated in January as Michigan became the 26th state in the union. Later in the year the nationwide Panic of 1837 caused land speculators, banks and even the new state government to default on debt payments.

Detroit gradually recovered and grew from a frontier town into a leading metropolis on the Great Lakes. Within a few decades the population had exploded, from 7,000 in 1837 to 45,000 just prior to the Civil War.

In 1864 Harper Hospital opened on the outskirts of a bustling town. The busiest streets were paved with round sections of cedar logs and lit by gas lanterns at night. Carriages and wagons rolled to busy shops along Woodward and Jefferson avenues. Michigan soldiers mustered on Campus Martius before boarding trains heading for the frontlines of the Civil War.



Hero?

Ann “Nancy” Martin was one of Detroit’s most successful merchants during the mid-1800s, earning a reputation in some quarters as an honest and trustworthy merchant in the city’s Central Market.

She drew strength from the tragedies of her early life and this inspired her to provide for others in need. The deaths of two husbands and the tragic death of her infant daughter gave Martin deep empathy for people needing care. Throughout her life, she donated her time and resources to helping those less fortunate, and she was especially noted for her work with Civil War veterans. This generous spirit was on display when she teamed with Walter Harper to donate the land for what would become Harper Hospital.

Contemporaries described her as an earnest Christian woman. A devout churchgoer, Martin could be found each Sunday morning in her pew at First Presbyterian Church.

In a look back at her remarkable life, an article in the *Detroit Free Press* recognized Martin for “her strict integrity, her generosity, (and) her constant readiness to help those in need.”



Villain?

Ann “Nancy” Martin was a prominent businesswoman at a time when society expected little from women other than for them to marry, keep a clean home and raise their children. The fact that she chose a nontraditional role, combined with her oft-demonstrated love of drink and her scandalous relationship with prominent Detroitier Walter Harper, led many Detroiters to condemn her.

There was much speculation about her relationship with Harper and she was often blamed as the cause of the “domestic troubles” that led to the death of his second wife after only eleven months of marriage. Martin herself later acknowledged that she had “lived with Harper since they came to Detroit,” a statement that some saw as a confession that she had been involved with him during his marriage.

Her reputation as a merchant also left something to be desired. Despite her successes, newspaper articles of the time described her as a “huckster, a rout, uneducated, coarse, raw and rude.” Many who saw her in the market described her as noisy and quarrelsome.

Martin’s notoriety is also documented in a variety of police reports and court records. Known for her addiction to strong spirits, she was a frequent lodger at the Detroit House of Correction on charges of public drunkenness. One notable offense landed her more than 90 days in public custody.

