

## Prologue: Sign Here

*On June 1, 1867, John Simmons signed his will at the law office of Benjamin F. Brooks at 40 State Street in Boston. The contents of the will provided an endowment to Simmons College and ensured the education of thousands of women with unwavering emphasis on preparing for the world of work. Unfortunately, no documents have been found to describe what John Simmons was thinking that day. To illuminate a critical moment in the College's history, I based the following dramatization, which set in motion the founding of Simmons College, on what is known and on what I imagined. In doing so,*

*I've taken creative license; however, the rest of the biography is based on factual information uncovered by extensive research.*



“Collins, please return to the mansion.” John Simmons, one of Boston’s wealthiest men, gave this order as he stepped out of his well-maintained barouche.

“Today’s business will take me a few hours,” he said, checking his pocket watch to make sure he would be punctual for his one o’clock appointment. “Miss Mary Ann needs your services at home. Collect me here at five.”

“Yes, sir,” his Irish manservant replied in a thick brogue, having helped his carefully groomed seventy-year-old employer onto the city sidewalk at 40 State Street in Boston. The afternoon of June first 1867 was a temperate day, perfect for the long-planned work ahead.

In his signature long black coat with high collar and black cravat, John Simmons stood tall and slim, despite his age and chronic disease. He looked up at the lawyer’s office he was about to enter.

“Benjamin F. Brooks,” he said to himself, recalling the national hero Benjamin Franklin. “May my Benjamin be as wise as Mr. Franklin,” John mused, remembering the progressive thinker for whom many a young man had been named.

John was confident he had chosen the right advisor for today's mission. Although a generation younger than John, Benjamin F. Brooks, the legal counsel for Jordan Marsh, a leading Washington Street department store, was later described as "a man needed every hour by merchant princes and business magnates" having "the success of character rather than intellect" and a "capacity for business rather than finished culture." Like his client John Simmons, Brooks was described as "free from all show, pretention and display."

That day in Boston, the Yankee magnate John had his mind on transformative action. During his carriage ride, John noticed an exhausted-looking young woman walking on the sidewalk with a large load of shirts under one arm, her other arm dragging a daughter beside her. Memories of women in reduced circumstances flooded his mind. From the war widows of 1812 to post-Civil War sole providers, visions of hard-working women tugged at his conscience. How many unskilled women had he turned away because they lacked appropriate training? How many souls were at the mercy of this capitalist metropolis? He thought, "Such lost potential!"—and it was this potential John sought to encourage and support through legal means. As he knocked at his lawyer's door, John sighed.

After four hours of detailed decision-making, fifty-one-year-old Benjamin Brooks paused and asked his client, "Are you quite certain you want to do this? Is this absolutely your intention?" Brooks rose from his mahogany chair, walked to the opposite side of his desk, and put his hand on his longtime friend's shoulder.

"Fairness is what I am after," John replied, his right hand grasping his fountain pen.

"As you wish," Brooks answered, and he excused himself to collect the legally required three witnesses.

This interlude gave John Simmons time to recall the people who had enriched his life, including his tireless father and calm-tempered, vivacious mother. John smiled, thinking of his beloved and beautiful wife Ann who had given him four sons. His grandson John III had been named in his honor. With these loved ones, John had shared fortune and misfortune, happiness and heartache.

He had been blessed with his two daughters, Mary Ann and Alvina, who had stepped in at their mother's passing. Six years a widower, John still enjoyed Sunday morning breakfasts with granddaughters Anna and Harriet.

With Brooks' assistance, the day's carefully conceived legal decisions had taken the form of a formal testament regarding John's estate, his plan for the coming years. "Thy will be done," Simmons whispered, mingling his will with that of the Lord's, as Brooks returned to the room

with three office conscripts. Witnesses Horatio G. Parker, Henry Lunt and Fritz H. Rice were enlisted to bear witness to John's will.

"Do you have any second thoughts, any additions, or corrections?" Brooks asked. "Perhaps something you'd like to say?"

Sitting upright, John answered, "Hand me that document." The benefactor valued action over public proclamations. "Deeds, not words," John asserted, quoting Benjamin Franklin. "Give me the will. I am ready to sign."