

# Charlotte Gibson Wilson



**B**orn July 12, 1876, in Rutland, Vermont, Charlotte was the youngest of the four daughters of Colonel William Ruff Gibson and Frances Lord Thrall Gibson. Her father was born in Charleston, S.C., May 30, 1831, but grew up in Philadelphia. He was a paymaster in the cavalry from 1857 until his death in 1899. He served in the Union army during the civil war and later was stationed in San Antonio. He may have been assigned to General

Custer's army for a period, but he managed to avoid being present at Little Big Horn. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Her mother, Frances, was Colonel Gibson's second wife. His first wife, Kate Johnson of Philadelphia, died giving birth to a son in 1860 only 18 months after they were married. The son also died in infancy. Frances Thrall was from Rutland, Vermont, and her family can be traced back to a William Thrall who was born in 1605 and fought in a war against the Pequod Indians in New England in 1637. Charlotte was named after Frances's sister, Charlotte, who married Frederick Chaffee of Rutland.

Charlotte's sisters were Bessie (b. September 10, 1872), Mabel Rose (b. October 14, 1873) and Ellen Thrall (b. December 3, 1874). They all attended a boarding school in Philadelphia run by their aunt, Margaret Gibson (b. 2/12/1844, d. 7/25/1934). When Charlotte was 13, her mother died in San Antonio at the age of 45. During the following year Colonel Gibson took his daughters to Atlantic City for a vacation. One of the people staying in the same lodgings was John Wilson, a retired banker and lawyer who spent most of his time travelling abroad. He was 43 and Charlotte was 14, but he apparently took enough interest in her to stay in touch with her for 17 years until he eventually proposed to her.

Colonel Gibson died in 1899 when Charlotte was 23. He left no inheritance to his daughters and army pensions were only paid to widows. Charlotte went to work as a librarian in Hagerstown, Maryland. Her sister Mabel had already married her first cousin Newman Chaffee and lived in Vermont. Nell married W. L. Conaught and lived in Hendersonville, N.C. Bess was a trained nurse who eventually lived in the Philippines.

In 1902 when Charlotte was 26 she travelled around the world for a year with

George Chaffee and his family. George was Charlotte's cousin and the brother of Newman, Mabel's husband. Charlotte came along as a companion to the three children, Alice (age 15), Fred (age 13) and Charlotte (age 11?). When she returned, she wrote an account of the trip as a "geographical reader" for fifth grade students. It was published in 1906 as *In The Golden East : An Illustrated Journey in Eastern Wonderlands*. The book describes their journey across the US by train and then to Hawaii, Japan, China, Ceylon, India, Egypt, and Italy. They travelled extensively in India, including a visit to Darjeeling at the foot of the Himalayas.

In 1907 at the age of 31 she married John Wilson, who was 60. They lived in Europe

*Charlotte in 1905 two years before her marriage*







*"The strait connecting San Francisco Bay with the Pacific Ocean is called the "Golden Gate," and about sunset we sailed through it into the broad expanse of ocean, and the water and clouds reflected the golden radiance, making it seem as if a golden gate had truly been thrown open for us to pass through. Soon after, it began to be rough, notwithstanding that we were on the Pacific, or Peaceful Ocean. Peaceful! Every one went to bed and stayed there for two or three days, and oh! the misery of it!"*

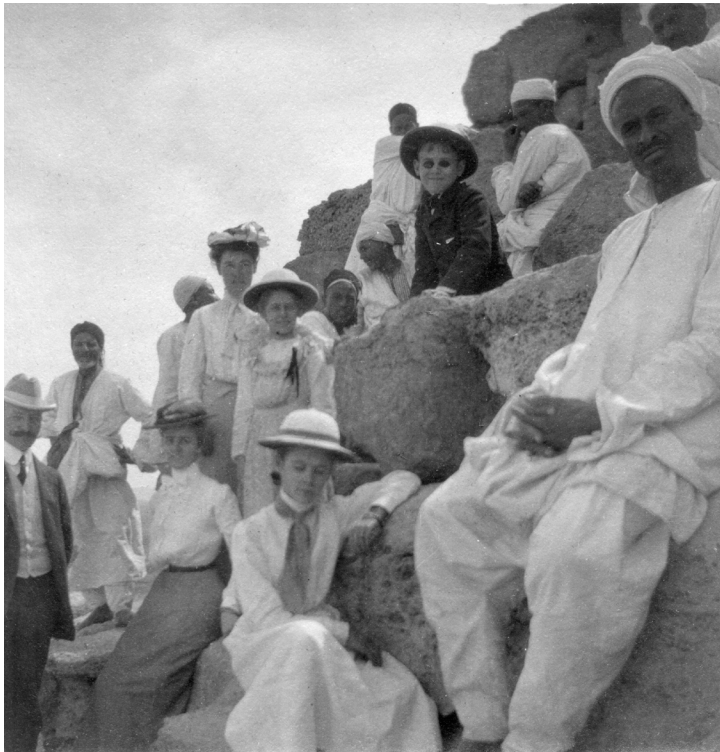
*But when the sea calmed down and the children began to make friends with the other children on board, the two days' misery was soon forgotten; for, you see, on shipboard you can play bean-bag, or hide and see, or shuffle-board, all day long on the deck; and when you are tired of that you can curl up in a steamer chair with your boon companion, and tell stories; and if it is after dinner, as like as not you will go fast asleep, and the first you know some one has carried you down and put you to bed in your funny little closet-shelf bunk."*

*In the Golden East: An Illustrated Journey in Eastern Wonderlands by Charlotte Chaffee Gibson*



*Charlotte with her cousin George Chafee, his wife Mellie, their children Alice, Fred and Charlotte, and an unidentified Gentleman*





*"We needed three Arabs apiece to get us up, for the steps from one stone to another were so high that two stood on the stone above and pulled, while the third stood on the stone below and pushed. Long before we got the top, though we had many rests on the way, we felt as if our arms were pulled out of their sockets. But from the top we had a wonderful view -- of Cairo and the fertile valley of the Nile on one side, and of the Pyramids and the Sphinx on the other, in a waste of sand that extended farther than the eye could see."*





*Charlotte and Elizabeth*

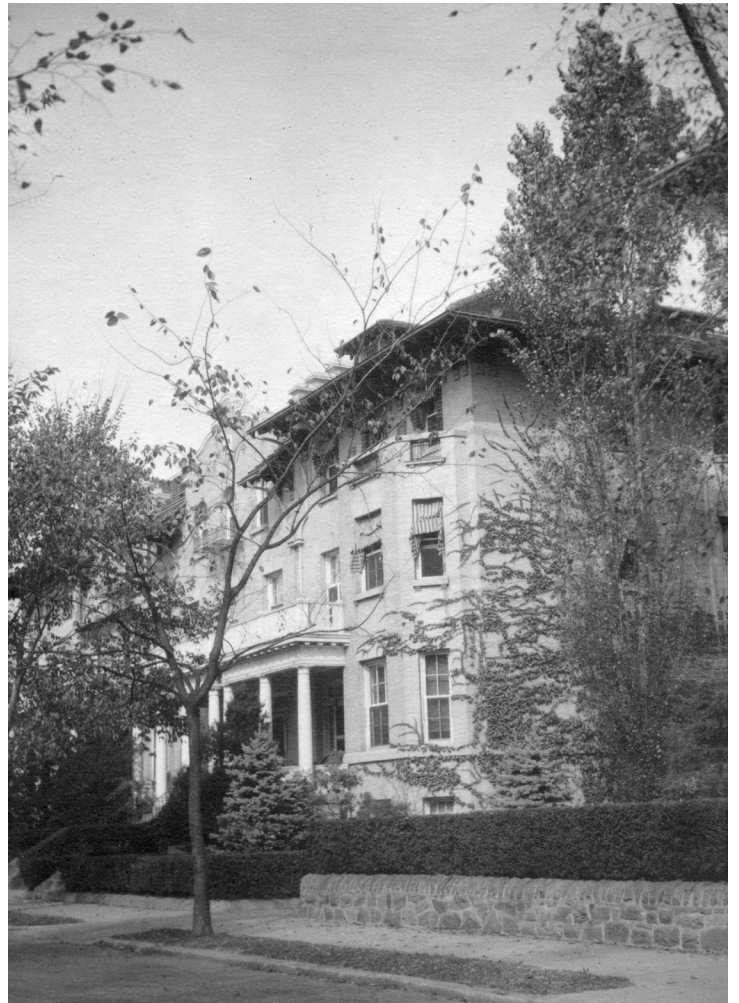


*2615 Woodley Place, Washington, D.C.*

until she became pregnant; and they returned to Atlantic City, New Jersey, where their daughter, Elizabeth, was born on November 20, 1909. They settled in Washington, DC, in 1910 at the house on Woodley Place.

Shortly after Elizabeth graduated from college in 1930, John Wilson died at the age of 83. Charlotte was 54 and lived the rest of her life in the house in Washington. In 1932 she and Elizabeth took a trip to the Philippines, Japan and China, visiting her sister Bess in the Philippines and re-visiting some of the cities in Japan and China she had seen with the Chaffees.

Her daughter married in 1934 and left Washington but often returned for visits with her children. Charlotte seemed to enjoy her role as a doting grandmother affectionately known as "Gaga." She endeared herself to her grandchildren by making clothes for their







*Charlotte and Elizabeth*





*Gaga in Birmingham*

*Charlotte,  
Elizabeth and  
Charlotte*



*Charlotte, Nell, Mabel and Bess*





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Dear Elizabeth,

I have just received your letter. I was amazed when I looked at the check, because of your Mother's generous thought of me. Though I loved her more than anyone in the world, except my own family, when she talked to me about what she should do for Cora, I said the only experience I had to go by was when Mr. Spalding's Executor told me he had left me \$5,000 & his long time coachman and auto driver \$10,000. She said "that is a large sum." Yes I said, but you say she has been here more than 20 yrs. I never dreamed that I would be a beneficiary. Her face, with that lovely smile comes to me many times, especially when I know what I ought to do, but do not want to do it. Then I know what she would say.

Had she been able to talk I think she would have told you not only how glad she was to see you, but also how pleased she was with the way you bore the great trial of those days you were here. I so often think of Gertrude's old colored woman, who said, "God moves in a mysterious way his blunders to perform."

Cora came in to see me. She almost cried when she talked about Mrs. Wilson; but she is with nice people who pay her 30 per week. You are entirely right; it is a good thing to be busy, especially since you did and do such a good job with your children. But I must not weary you.

My love to you,  
R W Baker

(Dr. Robert Baker was Charlotte's doctor as well as a close friend. Cora was the household cook.)



stuffed animals and playing card games with them. She apparently remained an impressive and even (to some) intimidating presence until her death.

She suffered a stroke at the age of 74 and died 12 days later on June 27, 1950. She was buried in Rock Creek Cemetery in Washington and her entire estate passed to her daughter.