

Juliette “Daisy” Low: A Biography



Daisy with early Girl Scouts at camp, Savannah.
GSUSA-Juliette Low Birthplace Archives

In 1912, Juliette Gordon Low (1860–1927) founded Girl Scouts of the USA, an organization that today serves millions of girl members and alumnae. A true believer in the potential of all girls to have courage, confidence, character, Juliette Low is credited with establishing and nurturing a global movement that has changed the world.



Early Life

Juliette Magill Kinzie Gordon was born on October 31, 1860. An uncle called the baby “a Daisy” and the nickname stuck. Friends and family called her “Daisy” for the rest of her life. (Since she was a friend to all Girl Scouts, we like to call her Daisy at the Birthplace.) Daisy was the second daughter of Eleanor Kinzie Gordon (“Nellie”) of Chicago, Illinois, and William Washington Gordon II (“Willie”) of Savannah, Georgia.



Daisy with her brothers and sisters in about 1873. From left to right: Mabel the fifth child, Eleanor the eldest, Daisy the second eldest, baby George Arthur, Alice the third child, and Bill the fourth child.
GSUSA-Juliette Low Birthplace Archives

Daisy's early childhood was marked by the American Civil War (1861-1865). Her father went away to fight for the South (Confederacy). Her mother Nellie's Illinois family fought for the North (Union). Daisy's mother, her Grandmother Sarah Gordon, Aunt Eliza, and enslaved women workers like cook Nancy and May, Daisy's nurse, struggled to make sure that the children had enough to eat.

Daisy was a sensitive, curious, and adventurous girl known for her sense of humor, compassion, and concern for others. She was interested in animals, nature, sports, and the arts.

Daisy's parents could afford to send their children to elite schools to continue their education. She attended boarding schools in Virginia and New Jersey, and as a young woman attended finishing school in New York City. Daisy's favorite subject in school was art, and she enjoyed painting, drawing, and sculpting for the rest of her life.



Daisy with friends from finishing school. From left to right, Abby Lippit, Daisy, and Mary Gale Carter.
GSUSA-Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Archives



Adulthood

Daisy fell in love with handsome William Low (called "Billow"), son of a wealthy British businessman, Andrew Low, who had a house in Savannah. Her parents worried that Billow did not work for a living, but when Billow's father died and Billow inherited his fortune, they did not stand in Daisy's way. Daisy was old enough to make her own decisions and despite her family's concerns, she married Billow in 1886, and together they set up homes in both England and Georgia.



Daisy and Billow on their wedding day, December 21, 1886,
on the piazza of her family home.
GSUSA-Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Archives

Daisy had trouble with hearing because of childhood ear infections and an improperly treated ear abscess as a young adult. After her wedding, as guests were throwing rice at the newlyweds for “good luck”, a piece of rice lodged in Daisy’s ear. The resulting infection and operation to remove the rice damaged her hearing even more. For the rest of her life, Daisy struggled with almost total hearing loss.

Despite this initial setback, Daisy became a popular hostess among her husband’s society friends in England and Scotland. Daisy’s husband enjoyed the high life, and she entered into a life of hunting parties, society dances, and presentations at court.



Daisy as an English society wife, about 1890.
GSUSA-Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Archives

Although most of her married life was spent in England, Daisy returned often to the United States to connect with friends and family members—and also to find support during what ultimately proved to be an unhappy marriage, ended by Billow’s death in 1905.

After her husband's death, Daisy began on a search for meaning in her life. Daisy and Billow never had children, and she felt that she'd failed at marriage and motherhood. What was her life's purpose? In her search, Daisy turned to her family and friends, to her artwork, and also to adventure—traveling to far-away places like Egypt and India.



Birth of a Movement

A meeting in 1911 with Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of Boy Scouts, changed the course of Daisy's life. Like Daisy, he enjoyed sculpting, nature and the outdoors, and the company of young people. They had a lot to talk about! Baden-Powell suggested she work with Girl Guides in England and Scotland, the sister group to Boy Scouts which was first organized by his sister Agnes in 1910 at his request. Daisy jumped right in, starting Guide troops in London and rural Scotland.



Robert Baden-Powell, his wife Olave Baden-Powell, and Daisy worked together to grow Girl Guides and Girl Scouts.
GSUSA-Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Archives

In 1912, she sailed home to Savannah from England, determined to bring Girl Guiding to the United States. Telephoning a cousin from her home, she announced, "I've got something for the girls of Savannah, and all of America, and all the world, and we're going to start it tonight!"

From that first gathering on March 12, 1912 of 18 girls from her cousin's school, Daisy broke the conventions of the time—reaching across class, cultural, and ethnic boundaries to ensure all girls, including those with so-called disabilities, had a place to grow and develop their leadership skills.

Whenever there was a question about what to do next, Daisy always said “ask the girls”. It was the girls themselves who decided they wanted to be called “Scouts” in America, instead of “Guides”, and the name was officially changed to Girl Scouts in the United States in 1913.

Daisy worked tirelessly to grow the new organization and for many years used her own money to pay expenses, even selling her valuable pearl necklace when they were short of funds. Using her innate talent for fundraising and public relations, combined with her vast network of friends and supporters, Daisy led Girl Scouts with passion and determination—ensuring it was, and always would be, an experience that was “girl led.”



An Enduring Legacy

Daisy died January 17, 1927 at home in Savannah, Georgia, after a long and private struggle with breast cancer. Two hundred Girl Scouts attended her funeral. She was buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery, wearing her Girl Scout uniform.

Daisy is remembered today with camps, schools, and scholarships established in her honor. Other tributes include postage stamps, a World War II battleship, numerous biographies, and even an opera about her life. In 2012, 85 years after her death, Daisy was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her services to the nation by President Barack Obama.



The Birthplace



The Birthplace belongs to Girl Scouts—that's you!
The Girl Scout Leader Magazine, June 1954
GSUSA-Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace Archives

The beautiful Federal-style house where Daisy was born was built in 1821 for Savannah Mayor James Moore Wayne. In 1831, he sold it to his niece Sarah Gordon, and her husband William Washington Gordon I, Daisy’s grandparents. Daisy’s parents moved in with Grandmother Sarah, then a widow, soon after they were married in 1857. After the Civil War, Daisy moved with her mother and father to a house down the street, but the old family home was always the center of Gordon family life.

After Grandmother Sarah’s death in 1882, Daisy’s parents moved back in, and began to make the house their own. In 1886, they added a fourth floor and a side-porch which they called a “piazza”—completed just in time for Daisy’s wedding reception to be held in the house.

Four generations of the Gordon family lived in the house before the Girl Scouts of the USA bought it in 1953. Girl Scouts around the country—and even the world—put on pageants, held fashion shows, and went without treats to save their dimes and dollars to help buy and restore the Birthplace. Girl Scouts knew this house was to belong to them, and were excited to be a part of saving it.

Since its official opening as a museum and program center in 1956, the Juliette Low Birthplace has hosted millions of visitors from around the world, including thousands of Girl Scouts and Girl Scout alumnae. We’re glad that you’ve decided to visit us and be a part of Birthplace history!

