

## **Pittsburgh's Persian Princess; Princess Farid-es-Sultaneh**

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Originally published in *The Homewood*, newsletter of [The Homewood Cemetery Historical Fund](#)

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At first glance, her life seemed to be what dreams are made of: luxurious residences in Paris and New York, a priceless collection of jewels, world-wide travel to exotic ports of call, great wealth, and a handsome prince. But her Cinderella-like life did not, like the fairy tale, end happily ever after.

Doris Mercer, the daughter of a Pittsburgh police captain, was born circa 1889. As a child, she acquired a love of music at the knee of her pianist mother who often accompanied her as she sang. She grew into a talented, beautiful young woman. Not content with life in Pittsburgh, Doris ran away from home at the age of eighteen to seek fame and fortune on the operatic stage. Her father later found her in New York City performing a minor role on Broadway in the musical [The Earl and the Girl](#). In hope of redirecting her life, he placed her in a church school, but she again escaped and returned to New York City. Eventually she met and married an older man, publisher Percival Harden. The marriage ended in divorce in 1919.

In 1924 she married again, becoming the second wife of [Sebastian S. Kresge](#), a multimillionaire chain store founder more than twenty years her senior. Mr. Kresge, a merchandising genius, was known for his penchant for hard work, his opposition to the use of alcohol, tobacco and card playing, and his eccentric passion for frugality. Although his personal fortune was estimated at two hundred million, he reportedly lined his worn shoes with paper and wore inexpensive suits until they were threadbare. In spite of his personal parsimony, Mr. Kresge was a dedicated philanthropist, believing that men of wealth were obligated to return to society the money they had amassed. He attempted to please his young wife by professing an interest in her love of opera and her Fifth Avenue lifestyle, but the "old school gentleman" and the high-spirited Doris were a mismatch. Their brief and stormy marriage failed. His pinch-penny attitudes and her refusal to bear children were among the bitterly fought issues of their highly publicized divorce in 1928. Mrs. Kresge reportedly received a three million dollar settlement.

The wealthy divorcee set sail for Europe and settled in an aristocratic residential section of Paris overlooking the Seine. She again pursued her vocal career and enjoyed attending the opera and receptions with a close circle of friends. The beautiful American woman of means attracted the eye of Prince Farid Khan Sadri-Kajar, a relative of Persian royalty who lived in a nearby villa. A friendship and romance developed. In letters to her family in Pittsburgh, Doris described her suitor as closely resembling the film star [Ramon Navarro](#). Although flattered by his attention, she was reluctant to consider marriage again, but the Prince was persistent and she eventually agreed to become his wife. The Prince's family sent its blessings and gave betrothal gifts consisting of a necklace, bracelet, ring, and pin of exquisite emeralds and pearls.

In 1933, Doris Kresge became a Persian Princess in a Moslem mosque in Paris. After an extended honeymoon in Egypt, India and the Far East, the newlyweds returned to Paris where their luxurious lifestyle and long-standing friendship seems to ensure a happy life. But within two years, the prince and Princess were divorced. It was rumored that the handsome Prince was in reality a “playboy Prince” who was more interested in his wife’s money than her beauty and charm.

In 1940, Princess Farid-es-Sultaneh (a title she retained, against the Prince’s wishes, until her death) returned to America and purchased Glen Alpin, a sixteen-acre private estate near Morristown, New Jersey, with an impressive history dating back to a land grant from King George in 1758. The estate’s handsome sixteen-room stone mansion, (built circa 1840) cited today as one of the finest Gothic Revival buildings in New Jersey, is still locally referred to as “the Princess mansion.” Among its amenities were nine baths, a guest cottage, a six-car garage, eight fireplaces, hand painted murals, a library, a music room, and a glass conservatory. The graves of the original pre-Revolutionary war owners of the estate lie in a grove of trees in the sprawling front yard.

The Princess never remarried, and her reclusive life at the mansion became increasingly precarious as she weathered a decade of court battles. She was robbed of nearly one hundred thousands dollars of jewels, swindled by a master con man, and sued for bad debts. In 1949, the Princess ordered an exhibition and public sale of her valuable furnishings at Glen Alpin in an attempt to recoup her financial losses. According to one newspaper account, “the Princess sat almost unobserved...while [the] auctioneer...pacingly chanted off the merchandise from the Alpine’s [sic] palatial front stoop.” Among the items sold for a fraction of their value was a half-a-room-wide Steinway concert piano inlaid with gold leaf. Reputedly, an exact duplicate was owned by Barbara Hutton and another was in the White House.

In 1959, the Princess, nearly broke and virtually alone, was diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukemia. During her final years, she sought solace in religion and the Bible. In 1960, she sold a portion of land across the street from her mansion to the Seventh Day Adventists. A church was erected on the site, and she joined the congregation where she charmed the parishioners with her operatic renditions of church hymns. She died in Morristown, New Jersey, on August 12, 1963, at the age of seventy-four. Princess Farid-es-Sultaneh was brought home and buried beside her mother, Jennie S. Mercer in the shade of a sycamore tree in The Homewood Cemetery in Section 9.3, Lot 187. Sadly, the woman who lived such an extraordinary life lies in an unmarked grave. Her obituary stated that “As death came, a romantic title and a lonely mansion...were all that remained of her fairy-tale life.” As much of her intriguing life has been lost to history, perhaps she should be remembered by her own words: “I have no regrets. My life has been exciting, and I wouldn’t have wanted it any other way.”