

Nannie Jordan Remembers Especially Interesting Rockbridge People

MOTHER AND FATHER

IN THE FALL OF 1862 we all had scarlet fever – four of us, and on the 28th of December, my father died. A sad Christmas for my mother and the beginning of a new life.

He was a Mason and was buried by them – a graduate of Washington College – now Washington and Lee University – a President of the Franklin Society in 1850.

This society took an active part in State politics, and was an outstanding power in the history of Virginia. Being the only literary society in Lexington, the debates held there carried a powerful influence. I've been told that my Father was a brilliant and fearless speaker.

He knew the war would make changes, and longed to live to see the end – but “man proposes, and God disposes.” He never owned a slave. Being past the age of service – sixty-two – he became Surgeon of the first company to go forward, “The Rockbridge Rifles,” in 1861. He was born in 1800.

My mother was Martha Motherwell Sloan – her mother, Mary Shields, her Grandmother, Mary

McDougall – Her Father, John Sloan, was one of three brothers who came from Scotland to America in Colonial days, perhaps on the over-crowded Mayflower.

One of these brothers chose New York (New Amsterdam) and added “e” to his name, Sloane, and prospered. A second went to North Carolina and later owned a gold mine. The third settled in Virginia – and, though this branch “got along” and didn’t “stick in the mud,” they have not yet “set the world on fire,” and I am the last of the name, fighting my battles alone, and far past my three score years and ten – but proud of the names of Jordan and Sloan until I sleep under the shadows of Old House Mountain with my fathers.

My mother was a graduate of “Salem College” in North Carolina – now Winston-Salem – a Moravian School then, and unchanged now. I loved to listen to her memories of those days – her art teacher was named “Miss Krampsh” [?] and was born without hands. In spite of this, she taught embroidery, other needle work, and painting. One of her class



*Nannie Jordan, 1876.
Photograph by Michael Miley.*

mates was a full-blooded Indian – named “Manfredonia Napier.”

And Oh! the beautiful big ginger cakes she talked of at her “Alma Mater.”

My mother died on the 7th of February 1897 in the 77th year of her age.

PERSONALITIES



HIL NUNN, better known as “Dixie,” is a familiar sight in Lexington, he stands, when not at work, in an alley near the

County News Office. He wears long white aprons which he makes himself out of sugar bags – always white and clean, and he washes them himself – he makes his own shoes which are the work of an artist – considering his tools and materials – the soles are cut out of boards, and the tops out of just anything. He is a hard worker and capable of many things. He refuses a charity offering and I have heard that a large sum of money was recently stolen from him – his hard earned savings. When Phil walks on Main street – it is on the road – never the sidewalk – and tips his hat to the churches and to the houses that have given him employment – and to every one he meets. He seldom goes beyond a monosyllable and is a model of politeness. There are no more of “Phil’s” type in Lexington or elsewhere.

Other outstanding personalities among our colored people were:

Jim Jackson, the barber always voting the Democratic ticket – and respected by everybody. Tom, his son, now holds his place and is an old man.



A sidewalk brick in Lexington commemorating Phil Nunn. McCrum's Drug Store was on South Main Street, across from the old courthouse.

Jim Humbles, a property owner and a Democrat.

Preston, janitor of the Presbyterian Church and Tom Hughes Janitor of the Washington and Lee.

John and Jim Bonyer, general workers, and Harvey the time honored janitor of Washington and Lee University.

'JEFF'

JEN. JACKSON had a servant named Jeff [Shields]. In those days called a “body-guard” – Jeff was his constant and faithful attendant all through his service in the war. Jeff once said that if Gen. Jackson seemed nervous and retired oftener than usual into his tent for prayer he knew a battle was pending. After it was all over and Gen. Jackson had gone to his reward, Jeff came back home to live. Those who remained of his company included him in all encampments and reunions. He received a decoration at each one.

Some years afterward when I, too, came back home, I met Jeff on the street. He greeted me and I said “Jeff I don’t believe you know me.” He replied, “Miss Nannie, if I didn’t know you I would know you were your Father’s daughter.” Thereupon he proudly threw open his coat that I might see a chest literally covered with badges, ribbons, etc. Jeff is dead. I don’t know but I hope these honors were buried with him.

He had a wife named “Lou” – because of Jeff’s immense prominence



Jefferson Shields (1829-1918), by legend elected to membership in the Stonewall Brigade.

and popularity Lou was somewhat sniffy – we may say snobbish.

'THE VILLAGE SMITHY'

*Under a spreading Chestnut Tree
The Village smithy stands
The Smith, a mighty man was he,
With strong and sinewy hands.*

“UNCLE JIM” Sinseney was known to all, black and white alike, as “Uncle Jim.” A methodist, a member of the choir, and often spoken of as “the choir” because of his powerful baritone voice – no training, but just the whole-hearted love of God in every note of it. Graduates of W. & L. University have been known to ask, on their return visits to Lexington, that he come and sing for them, his favorite hymn “Palms of Victory.” At a Union Thanksgiving in one of the churches, he was called on for “evidence.” He rose, came forward and

sang “I am so glad that Jesus loves me” — I don’t think there was a dry eye in that church. A consistent Christian he lived and as one he died, claiming the respect and trust of all who knew him.

GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE



EN. LEE became President of Washington and Lee University shortly after the close of the war and remained in that capacity for five years.

His name was a magical invitation for our Southern boys, and the states responded to the call.

He was reserved, but courteous always to the students, though never familiar. He was a splendid figure, as he took his morning ride on Traveler, often on our little Main St. seeming too big and grand for his surroundings but not too big to respond to my little brother’s familiar “Hello! Gen. Lee” — he would turn around and have a little conversation with my brother.

I don’t remember ever having seen him walk on the streets of Lexington, he took his walks on the campus or in the country. He always seemed pre-occupied and thoughtful, as if he could never shut out the scenes of horror through which he had passed. He was very fond of children and would often stop and talk to them. He was always like that. Once he was seen to tip his hat to a colored man; when some one remarked it, he said, “I cannot let a colored man excel me in politeness.”

[Four students from Tennessee enrolled at the college, namely:] John Graham, J. W. Ewing, Allison and Cockrell. As these boys boarded some distance from the university, they conceived a plan to keep warm between classes; they rented a vacant room in college, bought a stove and each in turn furnished a cord of wood, at \$5.00 a cord, cut to fit the stove. They suddenly realized that the price was occurring too often and that the wood seemed to be “taking wings.” A plan was agreed upon to catch the thief. A hole was bored in one of the top logs and the hole filled with powder. Next morning, while they were in class, there was a loud explosion, all rushed out to find the stove wrecked and the room on fire. Prof. Joynes had been in his class room next door, he was rushing wildly, back and forth, declaring it to be a malicious attempt upon his life. He felt his unpopularity and had brooded over it. This occurrence was, of course, reported to Gen. Lee; not knowing or suspecting the perpetrators of it, he announced in chapel next morning that he would be in his office that afternoon to receive any one who cared to call. Those boys were scared “out of their boots.” They thought their time had come, their honor was in Gen. Lee’s hands, and they would be dismissed from college. They waited in his office that afternoon while he gave an audience to Lord Wolesley. . . . When Lord Wolesley left John Graham came forward and told his story, assuming the entire responsibility of the explosion.

Gen. Lee listened quietly with one of his rare smiles, then merely said; “Mr. Graham, next time use less powder.”

GEN. LEE’S COFFIN




EN. ROBERT E. LEE died Oct. 12, 1870. I remember the sad announcement as I sat in my Mental Science class at the Ann Smith Academy. School was instantly dismissed, and a black pall seemed to have descended over Lexington. Then came the question of a casket, not one in Lexington! Mr. Koonz was our only undertaker. A shipment had been ordered several days before, from Richmond, but they had not come. The time of transportation from Richmond was three days by canal. There was no casket for Gen. Lee, and the situation was appalling!

They came at last, and were landed at Alexander’s wharf in East Lexington. In the night of Oct. 9 1870 the waters of our little “North River” were swelled to enormous proportions from mountain streams. We called it “a freshet.” The wharf and all its contents, including the coffins, were swept away. There were some indomitable spirits in the community who would not be discouraged, so search along the flooded river banks was begun, though with faint hope that a casket would be recovered. Two young men, Charlie Chittum and Harry Wallace, were among those eager to have the honor, and win the glory of doing a last service for General Lee. They waded for hours in the


mud and debris along the river banks in their earnest search. Their efforts were finally rewarded. A coffin had washed over the big dam and lodged on a little island two miles down the river.

THOMAS J. JACKSON

 BEFORE ENTERING THE WAR, General Jackson's home was in Lexington. He established a Sunday School in the Lecture room of the Presbyterian Church for colored children. When he went into service he put this school in the hands of Col. J. T. L. Preston who was a relative. As he grew up each girl and boy of the Church took up her or his work there – the time was 3 o'clock Sunday afternoon – hot or cold – and we all loved it.

Gen. Jackson was a patient of my father while he lived in Lexington. He was in some ways a difficult patient because of his strong will and the determination that made him a famous general. He always insisted upon sleeping in a shirt wrung out of icewater, and no persuasion would alter that.

MISS FREELAND

 MISS MAGGIE" Freeland came to Lexington in late years of the nineteenth century – with her, came Miss Betty Clarke who had been her chaperone in her debutante days. What a vast difference these two made in the lives of the V. M. I. boys. A house was

rented "within limits" and the doors left open that the boys might come and go and feel the sweet influences of home. The routine of Military life often became irksome to the Fourth-class men [freshmen] and many of them grew homesick and, ready to quit – then some one would say "Go to see Miss Maggie." After a talk with her and a "date" made with "Miss Bettie" for a dance at the next "hop" the V.M.I. life took on another aspect. Miss Bettie had counted her three-score years and ten but she never tired of dancing with those boys and they loved her. I have heard them say she could continue dancing all night if the music didn't stop. I once asked her, "Miss Bettie, don't you ever feel like resting? Wouldn't you enjoy a more quiet life?" (for she was just my mother's age). She replied, "Yes, my dear, but I have no home. I live in the homes of others, and if I do not entertain I am not wanted." She was an expert pianist.

Miss Maggie, by permission of the President [superintendent], placed an urn in the main arch of the V.M.I. where the winds blow more fiercely than any other place in the world in the winter. Hot coffee and sandwiches were there at all hours of the night for the officer on duty and the sentinels.

MATTHEW KHALE



AKER OF THE General Washington Statue at W. and L. University

This statue, on the main building of W. & L. University, was carved by a cabinet maker, Mathew Khale, from a block of wood, with crude tools – he had no training, knew nothing about sculpture and little education of any kind – but there it has stood, watching the students come, the graduates go. It has received many coats of paint as the sentiments of the students varied – red – again white, red – then white, and once held a black flag.

When Edward Valentine, the sculptor, paid his last visit to Lexington he pronounced this statue a "work of art" – "not a false line on it."

Mathew Khale was a brother-in-law of Jacob Fuller who was the first Librarian of College. When the Library was in "Newcomb Hall" before Andrew Carnegie donated the present beautiful building.

Mathew Khale died "unhonored and unsung."

NANNIE JORDAN AND HER 'SMILES AND TEARS'

Nannie Jordan, born in Lexington in 1856, was a much-loved teacher and "a woman of happy and pleasant personality and strong character, deeply religious," as the Lexington Gazette said when she died in 1942. Along the way, she wrote a delicious memoir she called "Smiles and Tears of Other Years," consisting of stories, usually amusing and always vividly told, that shine a fascinating light on our town and its wondrous people. From time to time we'll be publishing the best of "Smiles and Tears," wishing that we had been there to hear her tell these tales herself.