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PATRICK HENRY'S SISTER -- ELECT LADY OF METHODISM
Compiled and Edited By Duane V. Maxey

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Part 1

INTRODUCTION

This compilation about Patrick Henry's sister was created using mostly data from some of our publications by Abel Stevens, Ezra Squier Tipple, and John Lednum. I do not profess to be the writer of most of this material. It is a compilation into which I have edited some of my own comments, and fit together the writings of the other authors. -- DVM

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Part 2

THE GREATER IMPACT OF PATRICK HENRY'S LESSER KNOWN SISTER

Perhaps most patriotic Americans have heard of Patrick Henry and his famous speech in which he said, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" However, I would estimate that very few, even in the Christian community, have heard of Patrick Henry's Methodist sister -- a person whose life spoke perhaps more powerfully with her deeds than with her words. Who today that has even heard of her can quote one word she ever spoke? And yet, I venture to say that it may well be that Patrick Henry's sister, and her husband, General Russell, exerted a far greater, deeper, and better influence on their generation than did her well-known, eloquent brother.

In compiling from our HDM Library the data for this little sketch, I was not able to locate much at all about General and Mrs. Russell prior to their conversion. However, beyond the interesting fact that she was the sister of Patrick Henry, our information did show that she had been previously married to a General Campbell, and that she had children by this marriage. Her second marriage to General William Russell, possibly, if not probably, followed the death of General Campbell. I found nothing to contradict this.

I found even less about the early life of General Russell. One reference stated that the General had served in the Continental Army, and that he had, during that time, suffered great fatigue. But, whatever their history may have been in early life, it is very apparent that they both were possessed of some noble qualities, which were enhanced by their conversion.

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Part 3

THEIR HOSPITALITY USED TO BRING THEM SALVATION

Much of our information about the Russells speaks of their generous hospitality, and it appears that God used their hospitable spirit to bring about their conversion. The home of General William Russell, was located among the Holstons in Saltville, Virginia. Even before their conversion, the Russells extended their warm hospitality to Bishop Asbury. The following excerpts from Asbury's Journal show this to be true:

"APRIL 28, 1788 -- After getting our horses shod we made a move for Holston, and entered upon the mountains; the first of which I called steel, the second stone, and the third iron mountain; they are rough, and difficult to climb. We were spoken to on our way by most awful thunder and lightning, accompanied by heavy rain. We crept for shelter into a little dirt; house, where the filth might have been taken from the floor with a spade. We felt the want of fire, but could get little wood to make it, and what we gathered was wet. At the head of Watauga we fed, and reached Ward's that night. Coming to the river next day, we hired a young man to swim over for the canoe, in which we crossed, while our horses swam to the other shore. The waters being up, we were compelled to travel an old road over the mountains. Night came on -- I was ready to faint with a violent headache -- the mountain was steep on both sides. I prayed to the Lord for help. Presently a profuse sweat broke out upon me, and my fever entirely subsided. About nine o'clock we came to Gear's. After taking a little rest here we set out next morning for Brother Cox's, on Holston River. I had trouble enough. Our route lay through the woods, and my packhorse would neither follow, lead, nor drive, so fond was he of stopping to feed on the green herbage. I tried the lead, and he pulled back. I tied his head up to prevent his grazing, and he ran back. I was much fatigued, and my temper not a little tried. Arriving at the river, I was at a loss what to do, but providentially a man came along who conducted me across. This has been an awful journey to me, and this a tiresome day, and now, after riding seventy-five miles, I have thirty-five miles more to General Russell's.

"MAY 3, 1788 -- We came to General Russell's, a most kind family in deed and truth."

No name is recorded, in the biographies of the pioneer itinerants among these mountains, with more grateful affection than that of General Russell. His house was long their refuge, and Asbury always entered it with delight.

Asbury found one of his best hosts and wayside homes, where he most needed and most prized them, among the rugged mountains of the Holston country, when, in the last century, he used to climb those heights, sometimes guarded by convoys of armed men to protect him from the Indians, for the Methodist pioneer itinerants kept pace with the movement of early emigration. The most romantic passages of his journals are his brief records of his adventures among the Alleghenies, and often at the close of weary days does he write in log-cabins that so many miles yet remain before he can reach "General Russell's," his longed-for resting-place.

While receiving the kind and refreshing hospitality of the Russells before their conversion, it is evident that Bishop Asbury was concerned for their souls. This can be seen from the following little entry in his Journal on an occasion when Bishop Whatcoat was with him at the Russells:

"APRIL 18, 1790 -- Brother Whatcoat preached at General Russell's, on the birth, character, and office of John the Baptist."

Filled with appreciation for their abundant hospitality, Asbury wanted God to bless and reward them -- no doubt with His salvation most of all:

"APRIL 21, 1790 -- (Virginia). We had a good prayer meeting at General Russell's. This family is lavish in attentions and kindness. I was nursed as an only child by the good man and woman of the house, and indeed by all the family. God Almighty bless them and reward them!"

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Part 4

THE CONVERSION OF THE RUSSELLS

The first Methodist conference beyond the Alleghenies is usually supposed to have been held at Uniontown, Pa., on the 22d of July, 1788; but a session was held in the Holston country as early as the second week of the previous May. Rev. Thomas Ware, who was present, gives some information of the memorable occasion, including interesting references to the Russell family:

"As the road by which Bishop Asbury was to come was," he says, "infested with hostile savages, so that it could not be traveled except by considerable companies, he was detained for a week after the time appointed to commence the session. But we were not idle; and the Lord gave us many souls in the place where we were assembled, among whom were General Russell and lady, the latter a sister of the illustrious Patrick Henry. I mention these particularly, because they were the first-fruits of our labors at this Conference.

"On the Sabbath we had a crowded audience, and Tunnell preached an excellent sermon, which produced great effect. His discourse was followed by a number of powerful exhortations. When the meeting closed, Mrs. Russell came to me and said, 'I thought I was a Christian; but, sir, I am not a Christian -- I am the veriest sinner upon earth. I want you and Mr. Mastin to come with Mr. Tunnell to our house and pray for us, and tell us what we must do to be saved.'

"So we went, and spent much of the afternoon in prayer, especially for Mrs. Russell. But she did not obtain comfort. Being much exhausted, the preachers retired to a pleasant grove, near at hand, to spend a short time. On returning to the house we found Mrs. Russell praising the Lord, and the General walking the floor and weeping bitterly. He had been reading to her one of Fletcher's works. At length he sat down quite exhausted.

"This scene was in a high degree interesting to us. To see the old soldier and statesman, the proud opposer of godliness, trembling, and earnestly inquiring what he must do to be saved, was an affecting sight. But the work ended not here.

"The conversion of Mrs. Russell, whose zeal, good sense, and amiableness of character were proverbial, together with the penitential grief so conspicuous in the General, made a deep impression on the minds of many, and numbers were brought in before the Conference closed. The

General rested not until he knew his adoption; and he continued a faithful and an official member of the Church, constantly adorning the doctrine of God our Saviour unto the end of his life."

Asbury soon received word of Mrs. Russell's conversion

"MAY 28-30, 1790 -- I spent at General Russell's, whose wife is converted since I left the house last; I thought then that she was not far from the kingdom of God."

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Part 5

THEIR CONTINUED HOSPITALITY AFTER THEIR CONVERSION

Here is an item which, if I connected properly with the date, occurred in April of 1792:

"Hope Hull, who had accompanied him from Georgia, and Wilson Lee, who was now returning from Kentucky, and accompanying the Bishop on to the east, were with him. Both preached at this conference with great success. General William Russell, who had married the widow of General Campbell, and sister of Patrick Henry, who had embraced religion, together with his amiable lady, and who lived at the salt-works, on the North Fork of Holston; attended this conference and accommodated a number of the preachers."

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Part 6

THE RUSSELL HOME -- ONE OF ASBURY'S MANY HOMES

Ezra Squier Tipple wrote:

"A stranger, meeting Bishop Asbury on the prairies of Ohio, asked him abruptly, 'Where are you from?' Asbury replied, 'From Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, or almost any place you please.' This was literally true; he was a man without a home." And yet, "The Man Without a Home had a thousand homes throughout the land where at the fireside he was ever an honored guest. Early Methodism had not a few most beautiful and far-famed homes, and in these no man found a warmer welcome than Bishop Asbury. At Perry Hall, the home of Henry Dorsey Gough, near Baltimore, considered one of the most elegant country residences in America at the time; in the spacious mansion of Governor Van Cortlandt, that hearty Methodist whose influence helped Methodism throughout New York State; in the Delaware home of Richard Bassett; at General Russell's, whose wife was a sister of Patrick Henry, on the West Virginia Heights; at Governor Tiffin's, in Ohio; at Wildercliffe, the beautiful home of Freeborn Garrettson on the Hudson, which Asbury called 'Traveler's Rest.'"

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Part 7

GENERAL RUSSELL'S DEATH

The following information by William Burke reveals something of the circumstances connected with General Russell's death, and also gives us information about the Russells and two daughters -- one being General Russell's daughter by his first wife, and the other being Mrs. Russell's daughter by her first husband, General Campbell:

"In the fall of 1792, General Russell and family made a visit to the eastern part of Virginia, among their old friends and relations. The general was taken sick, and died. His daughter, Chloe Russell, had just married a traveling preacher by the name of Hubbard Saunders. During their visit, Miss Sarah Campbell, Mrs. Russell's daughter, daughter of General Campbell, who distinguished himself at the battle of King's Mountain, was married to Francis Preston, Esq., of Virginia. Sarah was among the first-fruits of Methodism in the West [What was then spoken of as the "West"]. She became the mother of one of South Carolina's most gifted sons, whose eloquence has often been heard in the Senate chamber at Washington, namely, Hon. William C. Preston." -- Wakeley's, "Heroes," p. 204. See also vol. ii, p. 350; and "Women of Methodism," p. 356. New York, 1866.

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Part 8 A SOLEMN SADNESS -- A TIME OF REJOICING

The following entry in Asbury's Journal tells of his solemn sadness over General Russell's passing. However, perhaps following his message at the Russell home, there was both weeping and shouting -- a blessed time that lasted 5 hours!

"MAY 18, 1793 -- Came to Sister Russell's. I am very solemn:

"I feel the want of the dear man who, I trust, is now in Abraham's bosom, and hope ere long to see him there. He was a general officer in the continental army, where he underwent great fatigue; he was powerfully brought to God, and for a few years past was a living flame, and a blessing to his neighborhood. He went in the dead of winter on a visit to his friends; was seized with influenza, and ended his life from home. O that the gospel may continue in this house! I preached on Heb. 12:1-4, and there followed several exhortations. We then administered the sacrament, and there was weeping and shouting among the people; our exercises lasted about five hours."

Apparently, scenes of spiritual victory and blessing were common at the Russell home. Referring to perhaps another occasion with words that could apply to the above, one writer said: "Such scenes often occurred there, for Mrs. Russell kept her mansion always open, not only for the shelter of the wayworn itinerants, but as a sanctuary for the mountaineer settlers who flocked thither from miles around to hear the Gospel. Her home was a light-house shining afar among the Alleghenies."

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Part 9

PATRICK HENRY'S SISTER BECAME ONE OF ELECT LADIES OF METHODISM

In his description of Jane Trimble, Abel Stevens compares her with Mrs. Russell, who was one of the "elect ladies" of Methodism:

"The venerable Jane Trimble became a "mother in Israel" to the Methodists of the Northwestern Territory. Her family, that of her son Governor Trimble, and of her grandson, Joseph M. Trimble, (one of the missionary secretaries of the Church,) have been identified with nearly the entire history of the denomination in Ohio. She was an extraordinary woman ... She possessed a remarkably vigorous mind ... had the four gospels entirely in her memory, acquired when she was but fifteen years old. Some of the writings of Fletcher fell into her hands, and she became a Methodist in 1790 ... died ... in 1839, aged more than eighty-four years, having been a devoted Methodist nearly fifty years. She was not only one of the best, but one of the ablest women who have adorned her Church or country, a befitting associate of Mary Tiffin, Mrs. General Russell, and similar 'elect ladies' of the Church in the wilderness."

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Part 10

ASBURY'S MEMORIES OF GENERAL RUSSELL LINGERED

"SEPTEMBER 16, 1795 -- We got no dinner, and had to ride twelve miles to get to our supper and lodgings. We stopped at Governor Van Cortlandt's, who reminds me of General Russell; we had all we needed, and abundantly more than we desired."

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Part 11

THE RUSSELL HOSPITALITY CONTINUED

No doubt Mrs. Russell's continued hospitality to the Bishop was both discreet and spiritual -- times when Asbury could obtain some much needed rest and refreshment, and "widow Russell" and her household could participate with him in spiritual worship.

"SEPTEMBER 20, 1801 -- We came over the mountains to Saltsburg, and preached at the widow Russell's. N. Snethen was greatly enlarged, upon Luke 11:3, 4. I was so feeble I had but little to say, upon, "Behold, now is the day of salvation." I was pleased to see our local brethren come forty and fifty miles to visit me. We met with joy, and parted in tears."

"SEPTEMBER 11, 1802 -- I rode to the Salt Works, perhaps for the last time. Alas! there is little salt here, and when Sister Russell is gone, will there be any left? But, a few miles from the works, up the middle ridge, they have built a meetinghouse, and there is a revival of religion. I make my calculation upon four thousand nine hundred miles, from July 30, 1801, to this day. If a living man and a Christian might dare to complain-."

"AUGUST 30, 1806 -- (Tennessee). I preached at the widow Russell's; my hostess is as happy and cheerful as ever."

I did not find the date of "Widow Russell's" death, but, if this entry in Asbury's Journal, preceding his own death in 1816, is an indication of how she finished her earthly pilgrimage, then the passing of "Patrick Henry's Sister" may have been quite victorious, through the gracious gift of the One Who "gave her eternal Liberty, and not death":

"OCTOBER 30, 1812 -- We came away late to Nashville stopping on our way to speak to the widow Bowen the daughter of my ancient friend, the late, General Russell; this lady hath, three daughters who profess religion surely we have not prayed in vain."

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THE END