

Cornelia Peake McDonald: Civil War Refugee in Lexington

By Richard Halseth



SO MUCH of the attention paid to the Civil War centers on battles and military personalities involved that people can forget the impact the war had on plain people, and perhaps especially those of the South, where the bulk of the fighting took place. As the war dragged on into its third and fourth years, the toll it took of the southern economy multiplied. The blockade of southern ports cut off imported goods so important to daily living. The young men of the region were on the front lines, not on farms or in factories. Women took over much of the manual labor, particularly on farms, in mills, at the munitions factories and in government.

Virginia suffered perhaps more than any other state because of its geographic location. For the women of Virginia, the war created a stress almost beyond anything they had ever endured. Food was scarce, goods and services were nearly extinct and inflation was rampant. Near the end of the war, Confederate money was almost worthless. Barter became the common method of exchange.

For the first time for many of them, women took over their households with responsibility for providing for their families. Their ways were ingenious and they provided encouragement to those in the front.

To illustrate this strength of character, we may usefully consider Cornelia McDonald, refugee.

Like many southern ladies, she kept a journal and later wrote about her experiences during the conflict. What is special to us is that she spent half the war living in Lexington as a refugee after Northern troops ejected her from her family home in Winchester. In 1935, one of her sons, Hunter McDonald, published her memoirs in a book titled *A Diary with reminiscences of the war and refugee life in the Shenandoah Valley, 1860-1865*, on which much of this article is based.



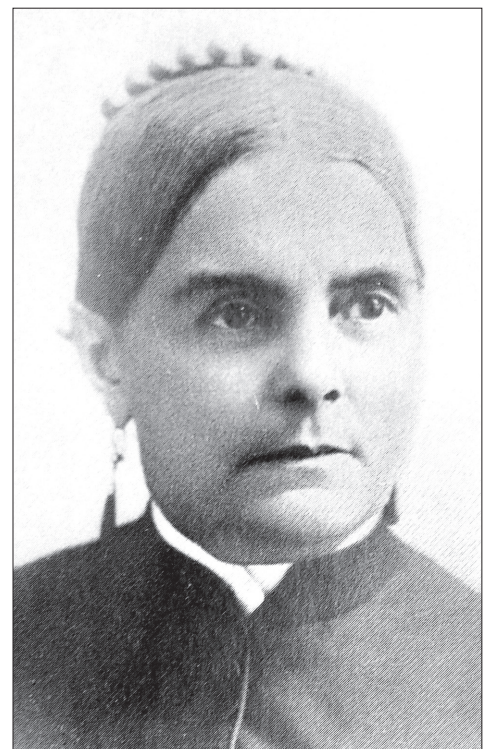
CORNELIA WAS BORN in 1822 into a wealthy and prominent Fairfax county family. In 1847 she married Angus McDonald. It was her first marriage and his second; she was 25 and he was 48. He had graduated from West Point in 1817 and earned a small fortune in

the fur trade in the Missouri Territory. In 1827 he married Leacy Anne Naylor of Romney, now West Virginia, where he then settled and launched a successful career as a lawyer. Leacy died in 1843.

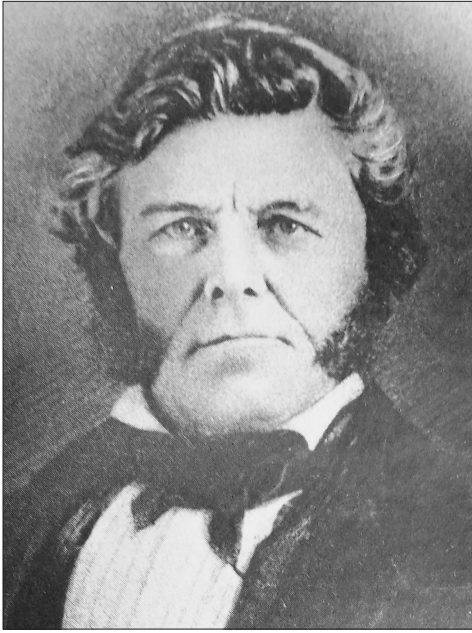
Four years later, in the year of his marriage to Cornelia, Angus purchased a home, Hawthorne, on the outskirts of Winchester, Virginia.



HEN THE Civil War broke out and Virginia seceded, Angus went to



Cornelia McDonald

*Angus McDonald, 1852*

Harper's Ferry to join the Confederate army. Although he was now in his sixties, he served ably—mainly in western Virginia, including parts of what is today West Virginia—until his health deteriorated. He was assigned to a clerical post in Richmond.

While Angus was in Richmond, Cornelia continued to live at Hawthorne with their children. In March 1862 the Confederate forces evacuated Winchester and Cornelia's odyssey began. The city changed hands so many times that historians can't keep track.

Like most Virginians in late 1860 and early 1861, Cornelia wished for a compromise that would maintain the union. But when Virginians voted in May 1861 to leave after the attack at Fort Sumter, Cornelia, loyal to her state, became a staunch secessionist.

The household for which she was responsible consisted of nine

children and six slaves. Cornelia proved herself up to the task. Her daughter describes her as "quite tall with a slender and graceful figure, queenly and elegant bearing, a beautiful brow and fine dark eyes beaming with spirit and intelligence, fine dark hair always most simply dressed. Her face seemed a good index to her character in which many noble traits mingled, but the most outstanding one was her loyalty—loyalty to her principles, to her religion, to her family and friends. A rare soul was hers, and one that had few equals." She possessed a deep piety, and through the whole story of her trials runs the rich thread of her abiding faith in the care and goodness of God.

And she was feisty.

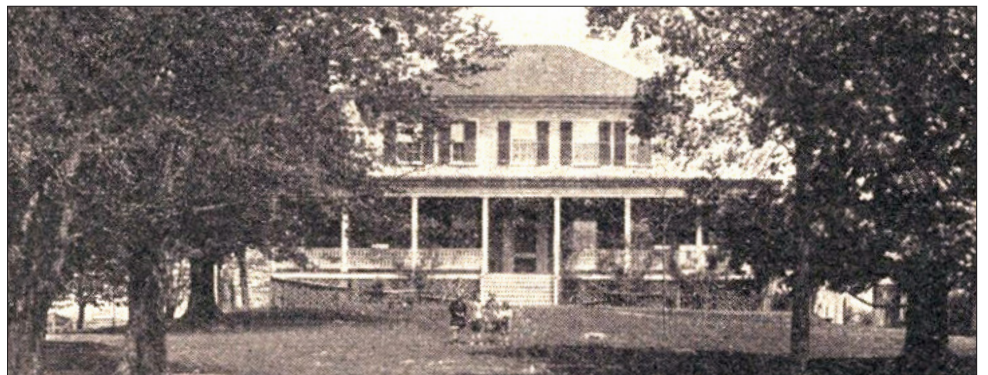


URING MOST of her time in Winchester she heard little from her husband, Angus. He sent money, but hardly enough to keep her head above water. By June 1863 Cornelia could not take any more and decided she would move from her home if the Confederate army left again. That day came in July.

The Confederate army was retreating up the valley in the aftermath of the battle at Gettysburg. Her stepson Edward, in the Confederate army, secured her a wagon which she filled with clothing, valuables and such household items she could fit. The wagon was sent off in charge of her eldest son, Harry. She and other children joined a mass exodus from Winchester amid the Confederate army moving south.

Enroute, she received a dispatch from her husband asking her to come to Richmond, as he was too ill to travel. Taking two of the children and leaving the rest in charge of Harry, she made her way to Richmond. Seeing her husband for the first time in more than a year gave her a shock. He was emaciated; his hair had turned snow white; he couldn't move from his chair.

They decided that she and the children would go to Lexington, where they had friends, to wait for Angus. To their consternation, however, the Confederate government refused him his \$700 in back pay because he was unfit for duty. They both wept in anguish: They were

*Hawthorne, the McDonalds' home near Winchester, Virginia*



Three homes where Cornelia McDonald lived during her ten years in Lexington: left, Hannah House; center, the McElwee estate, Stonegate; right, Stono.

homeless as well as penniless. She had \$65 in Confederate money. She traveled with the children to Lynchburg and there, in need of funds for passage and lodging, borrowed from a friend and sold some of her finery.

The family boarded a canal boat and arrived in Lexington on August 17. She immediately began hunting for a house to rent, and after a luckless week a friend suggested that she try the McElwees, who kindly but temporarily took her and the children in.

Cornelia next found a home in the Kerr's Creek area — but a letter arrived from Angus advising her to find accommodations in town. She rented a dreary tenement where she lived for several months. The furnishings were meager, because she had only beds and carpets and a little furniture. There were no tables or chairs, so the family sat on boxes and used a chest as a table.

In November she found another place at the corner of Henry and Main Streets, across from today's First Baptist Church. (The site is on

the corner where the "Red Square" fraternity houses are now located.) This house had escaped the fire of 1796 that destroyed most of the town. Known as the Hanna House for its first owner, it was two stories in height and had a basement. Inside there were one large room and two smaller on each floor. Only the two small rooms had fireplaces. In the basement, which had windows on all but one side, were a dining room and a kitchen with huge open fireplace. She had a pine table made that she covered with a red cloth, she had a bright carpet and red curtains brought from Winchester.



HE POSITION of commandant of the Virginia Military Institute became available and Angus secured it. He arrived in

Dick Halseth is a Civil War historian, author and a speaker. He is currently editing the journal and letters of William Watts Folwell (1833-1929) a Union officer of the 50th New York Engineers who became the first president of the University of Minnesota.

Lexington the week before Christmas, 1863. She scrounged the countryside for staples, firewood and other necessities. Neighbors and friends were very kind but she knew that there was just so much they could do and that for only a short period of time. Furthermore, Angus was feeble, his form withered and shrunken. She pinched hard to make the money stretch. A pound of meat had to serve seven children and a servant. It was a miserable winter.

By June 1864 the military news was not good. The previous year had seen huge losses at Gettysburg and Vicksburg and now came the terrible battles of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania. One of Angus's sons was wounded at Spotsylvania and returned to Lexington for the family to nurse him. General David Hunter's troops began moving up the Shenandoah Valley. On June 10, hearing that Hunter's army was closing in on Lexington, Angus and their son Harry left, knowing that if Angus were found he would be taken prisoner. They went south by way of Natural Bridge, but a few days later



*Cornelia McDonald and children in Lexington, 1870.
Front, from left: Roy, Allen, Cornelia and Harry.
Back: Hunter, Donald, Kenneth and Ellen. Photo by Michael Miley.*

were found and captured by Federal Cavalry. Angus was treated and was not released until December. By the time Cornelia arrived to reunite with him, he was dead. He was buried in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond.

While Union troops occupied Lexington, a stroke of luck put Cornelia in contact with one Major Quinn, of New York, who had befriended her two years earlier in Winchester. While stationed in Lexington, he saw that her home was protected.

Nevertheless, with Angus dead and nothing but a few Confederate dollars to her name, these were dark days. She received a fifty-pound bag of wool from her sister Lizzy, who lived in Warren County, but she did not know how to process raw wool. Window and bed curtains became dresses for the girls; she traded goods for used suits for the older boys. She

found some red worsted fringe and turned it into a plaid dress for little Nelly. She cut up old knit undershirts and reknitted the yarn into socks for the boys. And the local shoemaker, Joshua Deaver, made shoes for the children with scant prospect for payment. She would have only a cup of coffee and a roll during the day and the children would eat beans and sorghum molasses. At one point the potato crop, which had been stored in the attic, was spoiled by an early freeze.

Angus' son Edward, in the Confederate Army, sent home a scrawny cow that was part of a small herd he had captured. She paid the rent from the proceeds of the sale of her fine china.

Fortunately, she was able to hold drawing, poetry, history and French classes in her home. The boys found work cutting wood for

the government — keeping one cord of every three they cut. Colonels Williamson and Gilham from VMI sent gifts of food for Christmas and provided whatever assistance they could — limited as it was, because they too had suffered losses from Hunter's occupation.

But she was barely existing.



BY MARCH 1865, a dreadful certainty of disaster and defeat hung in the air. She saw men coming home, passing the house in groups or singly, deserting the Confederate army — going home to help their own starving families. She herself grew thin and was hardly able to take her walks. As April began the groups of deserters increased in size and numbers.

On April 10 came the news of Lee's surrender the day before. On that final day Angus's son, Edward, received a serious but not mortal wound. She wrote that "Grief and despair took possession of my heart, with a sense of humiliation that till then I did not know I could feel." The quartermaster stores in Lexington were divided up, and Cornelia received a share, bacon and beans, that she in turn shared with the soldiers passing by on their way home. As the war ended her Confederate money was instantly worthless.

Then came the assassination of President Lincoln. Her initial thoughts were that he got what he deserved, but on reflection she saw that "it was worse for the south than

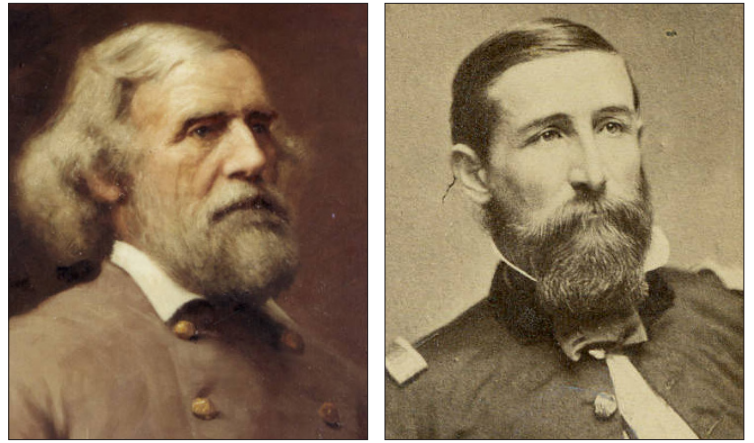
if he had been suffered to live for his satisfaction had been great when the Confederates were disarmed and he was disposed to be merciful.”

She sent Angus’s son, William, to Winchester to check on their property there. He found the house uninhabitable. So she stayed in Lexington and taught. Son Harry found work at Colonel Reid’s farm plowing; son Allan found light work to do for Mrs. Cameron. When General Pendleton came home to Lexington after service as General Lee’s chief of artillery, even he had to go behind the plough as his daughters planted the corn and potatoes.

To add to Cornelia’s problems, she spilled boiling water on her foot and was in bed for weeks and could not teach. She contacted a lawyer to see if she could sell the land in Missouri that Angus had owned there, but yet there was no word. In August despair overwhelmed her and she did not think she could cope any more. Her responsibilities overwhelmed her.

Not all her luck was bad. On one of her walks, she met Mrs. Pendleton while passing the cemetery and broke down and admitted that the family was starving. Mrs. Pendleton said she had meant to call earlier that day to tell her that she was to be the recipient of \$100 (U.S.) and she was not to ask where it came from. Long after, she learned that it was from funds sent to Canada by the

Two VMI faculty benefactors: Colonel Thomas H. Williamson, left, and Colonel William Gilham



VIRGINIA MILITARY INSTITUTE (both)

Confederate Government for secret service. After the surrender it was decided to portion it out to destitute widows and orphans of Confederate soldiers, and General Pendleton gave Mrs. McDonald’s name. Behind this godsend was a loan of \$300 from Mrs. McElwee, who had just inherited funds.

When General Lee came to Lexington in October 1865 and VMI resumed classes in Lexington in

1866, both colleges had a shortage of dormitories, and Cornelia took in students as boarders.

In the fall of 1867 she moved to Stono at the north edge of the VMI post. In 1870 she moved back into town to teach at the public school for girls in the vestry room of the Grace Episcopal Church. She continued teaching until the end of the school year in 1873, when she moved to Louisville, where her sons Harry, Allan and Kenneth had already settled. Sons Donald and Roy stayed at Washington and Lee, and Hunter and Ellen went with her. The debts she left were all eventually settled to the satisfaction of her creditors.



Bearer of good news: Kate Corbin Pendleton

THUS WE CLOSE the story of a proud and resourceful lady who through resiliency and determination brought her family through the terrible conflict of the Civil War. She was rewarded with having a loving and appreciative family, living until 1909 and now resting beside her husband in Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond.