

Angel of the Shenandoah: Jessie Hainning Rupert (May 15, 1831 - March 11, 1909)

Jessie Park Hainning, born near Dumfries, Scotland, and the youngest of ten children, moved to America with her family in the early 1830's. Her father, a Presbyterian minister, settled the family near Cincinnati, Ohio. Although she was orphaned at seven years of age, Jessie was educated at private academies in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania and received the best schooling that any woman could have received in America in the 1850's. She was taught to believe in the abolition of slavery and to love all of God's children.

After graduation, Jessie moved to Lexington, Virginia, where she became principal of the Ann Smith Academy. On Sunday afternoons, she and her friend Thomas J. Jackson, a professor at VMI, taught Black children how to read using the Bible as a textbook and the Presbyterian Church as their school. The year was 1857, a time in Virginia's history when it was against the law to teach a group of African-Americans how to read.

Jessie moved to New Market in 1858 and became the principal of the New Market Female Seminary. She met a man named Solomon Rupert, the grandson of Solomon Henkel and though his family strongly objected, they became good friends.

The Civil War began in 1861. When the first Rebel flag came to New Market, some of the town folk decided to hang it on the porch of the Seminary just to see what that Yankee woman would do when the flag was discovered. Word spread through the town and a crowd of curious onlookers waited in the morning light. When Jessie went out onto her porch, she spotted the flag and the crowd of men and women across the street. Without hesitation, she marched back inside the Seminary and quickly returned with matches. She jerked the flag down and sat it ablaze. Instantly, there were screams of "seize her" and "kill her" and angry residents raced across the street and onto her porch. Men grabbed her by her arms and pulled her down the street to the town's jail on John Sevier Road. Her friend Solomon Rupert, who was Justice of the Peace, was forced to put her into jail, which was actually necessary to protect her from the angry mob that likely would have killed her.

Local authorities could not decide what they would do with Jessie. She was a woman. Yet, she had burned the Rebel flag, and there was no doubt



Jessie Hainning Rupert
(1831-1909)

whatsoever that she was a Yankee sympathizer, probably a spy. She was a traitor and was actually charged with treason. Two weeks later a solution presented itself. The commanding Confederate general and his troops were camped near the town. Local authorities would let this General determine the Yankee woman's fate.

Following what must have been a solemn wagon ride for Jessie, she waited with her guards for admission to the General who would set her sentence. When Jessie entered his tent, she probably cried tears of joy because there before her sat her old friend from Lexington, Professor Jackson, now General Thomas J. Jackson, soon to be Stonewall Jackson! Jackson stood and extended both hands in a warm welcome. There were surprises all around that day. General Jackson did not know that the Yankee woman being brought to see him for sentence was Jessie. Jessie did not know that Professor Jackson was the commanding Confederate general. The townspeople had no idea that the Yankee woman not only knew General Jackson, but that they were friends. Her sentence: General Jackson sent her home with an armed guard and gave her permission to keep that guard for as long as she felt she needed protection. This incident was the beginning of the town's extreme ostracism of her. Jessie believed that it was the Lord who had sent her to New Market; and so, New Market was where she would live, strive to do His will, and stand firm for all that she believed was right. It did not matter that the townspeople hated her. She would stay.

Shortly after the flag incident, Jessie and Solomon Rupert were married. Family members were angry, shocked, and dismayed.

Residents probably thought that Jessie was a spy and indeed, they were right. On one occasion, she trudged weary, cold miles from New Market to Mt. Jackson through mud and ice over roads and through fields to get a note to the Yankees warning them of the Rebels' approach. That day, she saved many northern soldiers from capture or death.



Solomon P. Rupert (1823-1867)

During the War, Jessie and Solomon found "common ground" by doing all that they could to help both soldiers and civilians from the north and the south by providing food, shelter, and limited medical care. Included among those they helped to save were William B. Thaxton and Ensign Smith. William, a young soldier from Georgia, was nursed back to life from near death from what was probably pneumonia. His family was sent word that he had died. His father actually showed up on Jessie's doorstep to find where his boy was buried so that he might take the boy's body home as he had promised the "boy's dear mother." In a separate incident, a Confederate Chaplain found Ensign Smith, a member of the 34th Massachusetts; in a ravine on the Battlefield two days after the NM Battle had ended. He was near death and asked to be taken to Mrs. Rupert's home, saying he wanted to die in the home of someone "who loved old Glory as

much as he.” Ensign Smith did not die—he was thought to be dead and the dead cart was sent for-- but he survived his wounds and the war.

In June 1864, in return for the kindnesses and care she had given the Yankees, Gen David Hunter gave Jessie a document with his official seal declaring that New Market would not be burned no matter what the residents of the town did that was injurious to the Yankees. Only a few weeks later, she had need of that document when a Henkel relative doused Hessian troops with hot water and so inflamed them that they tried “to fire” the town.

Jessie, whose beloved Solomon committed suicide in 1867, was ousted from the Seminary and charged back rent for the years of the Civil War. With financial assistance from the Freedman’s Bureau and the American Missionary Society, she built a new schoolhouse in New Market where she taught children, both black and white. The Cottage Institute was a boarding and day school for white children; the Woodworth Cottage Institute was a night school for black students. When residents discovered that she had gotten funds from the north for her school and when they realized that she was teaching black students, her enrollment dropped dramatically. Still on February 22, 1870, she and her students celebrated George Washington’s birthday by flying an American flag from the attic window of the school. Warned of danger by the local postmaster, Jessie had a pistol in her shirt pocket and that night, she needed it. After dark, Ku Klux Klan members knocked on her door to “take in that flag.” She pointed the pistol at them and with a steady hand and proud voice told them that the first man who tried to take in that flag, would likely be a dead man.” They departed and the flag waved on.

After public education became the law of Virginia in 1870 and support from the American Missionary Society for schools ceased, Jessie supported herself and sons by giving lectures in the New England states on her life as a Yankee in a southern town during the Civil War. Her school remains standing on Congress Street today.

Jessie lived in New Market until her death in 1909. She died surrounded by some of the very women who had persecuted her earlier in life. These ladies had come to respect Jessie’s belief in equality for all. They had come to recognize her personal courage in sometimes standing solitary for her beliefs. And, they had come to realize that more than Yankee, Jessie Park Haining Rupert was a Christian seeking to do the Lord’s Will.

Cottage Institute 1868 -1870 & Woodworth Institute 1869 -1874



Jessie is buried in New Market beside her beloved Solomon. At her funeral, the minister spoke these words, which have become her epitaph:

“Here lies one, who famishing fed the hungry; though herself suffering, gave aid to the distresses; though surrounded by enemies, loved all, and who lived to hear her former enemies call her The Angel of the Shenandoah.”

Sources:

Roe, Alfred S. *An Angel of the Shenandoah: a life sketch of Mrs. Jessie Hainning Rupert, New Market, Virginia. “Daughter of the Regiment,” Thirty-fourth Massachusetts Infantry.* Privately printed by Thirty-Fourth Regiment Veteran Association. Worcester: Mass.: Commonwealth Press, 1913. (Roe made heavy use of Jessie’s own transcript, now among the Dupont papers.)

Stewart, Nancy Branner. *Angel of the Shenandoah: a dramatic monologue.* Stephens City, VA.: Commercial Press, 1993. (Among other sources, Nancy used newspaper reports of Jessie’s lectures in New England, numerous other newspaper and magazine articles, and Jessie’s transcript.)

@ Susan Smith.

Illustrations courtesy of Nancy Branner Stewart