

THE PROTECTION OF AN ICON:
NASHVILLE, THE LADIES HERMITAGE ASSOCIATION, AND
THE IMAGE OF RACHEL JACKSON
1915-1945

By

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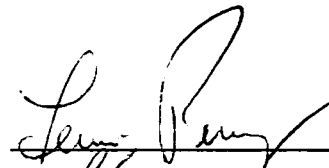
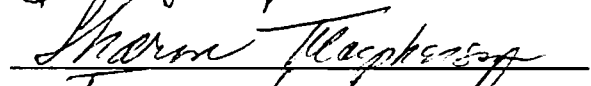
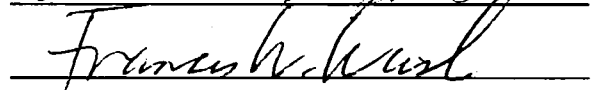




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Introduction

The story of Rachel Jackson and her relationship with General Andrew Jackson has been the subject of many forms of public scrutiny since her own lifetime. Even before her death in 1828, Rachel gained many champions who defended her against malicious gossip spread about her divorce from Lewis Robards and her subsequent marriage to Andrew Jackson. In the election of 1828, Jackson supporters, led by long-time friend John Overton, formed a committee to publish "truthful" accounts of the events surrounding Rachel and Andrew's courtship and marriage.¹ Later in the nineteenth century and particularly during Jackson's presidency, the publicity surrounding her life grew even more, as many Americans viewed the slander as the cause of her fatal heart attack. Early biographers of Jackson, including Amos Kendall and James Parton, devoted some discussion to the events surrounding the Jacksons' marriage; within this discussion they included sketchy biographies of Rachel as well.² Victorian ladies, it seems, enjoyed reading sentimental tributes to Rachel. She was the subject of a large section of an 1870 composite biography of the First Ladies.³

¹John Overton, as leader of the Nashville Central Committee, penned the pamphlet "Friends of Truth and Corruption's Adversary" in summer 1828 in response to violent newspaper attacks on the character of Mrs. Jackson.

²Amos Kendall's 1844 work, Life of Andrew Jackson: Private Military, and Civil (New York), and James Parton's 1860 volume, Life of Andrew Jackson (New York), are the best of the early works on Andrew Jackson. There is another short 1818 work, Memoirs of Jackson, by Samuel Putnam Waldo (Hartford, CT) which lauds Jackson's military heroism; it makes no mention whatsoever of Mrs. Jackson.

³Laura C. Holloway, Ladies of the White House, Trow and Smith, New York, 1870.

Writers in the twentieth century have been no less intrigued than were her contemporaries with the intimacies of Rachel Jackson's life. The leading authorities on Jackson, the foremost of which is Robert Remini, have included biographical detail about Rachel in their works on Andrew.⁴ Some twentieth century writers have, though, been more anxious than earlier authors to tell Rachel's story simply for its own merit. Three biographies devoted solely to Rachel Jackson have been published in the twentieth century.⁵ The romantic tale of the Jacksons' marriage has also found an audience with the readers of fiction and with moviegoers.⁶ The number of scholarly articles, also, continue to rise; the latest of these is Norma Basch's recent piece on the morals of the 1828 election.⁷

⁴Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821 (Harper and Row, New York, 1977), Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832 (Harper and Row, New York, 1981), and Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833-1845 (Harper and Row, New York, 1984) comprise the three-volume set of biography and political history. An earlier, shorter biography, Andrew Jackson (Harper and Row, New York, 1966) provides much the same relevant information on Rachel.

⁵Mary French Caldwell's General Jackson's Lady (Kingsport Press, Kingsport, TN, 1936) is actually the only full-length, scholarly biography of Rachel ever published. Shorter volumes include Nellie Treanor Stokes' Rachel Jackson (Ladies' Hermitage Association, Nashville, 1942) and Christine Noble Govan's children's biography, Rachel Jackson: Tennessee Girl, (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1955, although the series dates back to the 1930s and the original publishing date may be earlier).

⁶Two works of fiction, Nashville historian Alfred Leland Crabb's book, Home to the Hermitage (Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1948), and Irving Stone's The President's Lady (Doubleday and Co., Garden City, NY, 1951), present a warm picture of the courtship and marriage of Rachel and Andrew and go far in portraying fairly accurate visions of life at the Hermitage in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. These works are painstakingly researched, so the atmosphere they provide is quite accurate. Extremely heroic but not so accurate are the movies about the Jacksons that have enraptured Americans. "The President's Lady", (1955) starring Susan Hayward in the title role, is the screen adaptation of Stone's novel. "The Buccaneer", the story of the pirate Jean Lafitte, Jackson, and the Battle of New Orleans, was immensely popular with Tennesseans, especially the later version (1958) with Charlton Heston as Jackson. Another, "The Gorgeous Hussy", (1935) tells the story of the infamous Peggy Eaton (Joan Crawford) but includes scenes with an aged, countrified Rachel and Andrew in Washington in 1824.

⁷Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828", Journal of American History 80: 890-918, 1993. Not so adventurous as Basch's argument that the Rachel Jackson electoral scandal suggested two competing moral systems between the Whigs and Democrats is Peggy Robbins' article, "Rachel and Andrew Jackson" in American History Illustrated 15: 22-28, 1977, which offers a brief overview of Rachel's life.

In the late nineteenth century, a group of Nashville women undertook the preservation of the Hermitage site, and in so doing assumed a kind of proprietorship of the story of Rachel and Andrew. Arbiters of Nashville society, these women incorporated the Ladies' Hermitage Association (LHA) in 1889; after petitioning the state legislature, the LHA became administrators of the mansion and its immediate acreage.⁸ Modeling themselves after the Mount Vernon Ladies Association founded in Virginia in 1859, the LHA organized with the intention to preserve the home of the Andrew Jackson for future generations.⁹ Although the preservation of the Hermitage was a public concern, membership in the LHA was very selective. Only the socially elite of Nashville were considered for membership, and even then, candidates had to have two sponsors from the organization to support their petition. Invitations to their occasions were the most coveted in Nashville society.¹⁰ These women lauded their connection with the history of Tennessee and considered themselves to be true daughters of the South. Their task, they believed, was twofold. They claimed to "represent the womanhood of Tennessee and the nation" as well as being the dedicated force behind "preserving the Hermitage as it was during Andrew Jackson's lifetime."¹¹

⁸The LHA did not receive the full Hermitage farm acreage from the state until much later, and even today the Hermitage historic site only controls 625 of what was once a 1000-acre farm.

⁹Ladies Hermitage Association, The Hermitage, Home of General Andrew Jackson, Seventh President of U.S.A., Mary C. Dorris, Regent, 1909, p. 3.

¹⁰Don Doyle, Nashville in the New South 1880-1930, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1985, pp. 68-69.

¹¹"The Situation at the Hermitage," pamphlet, 1922, Tennessee State Archives.

The images of Rachel Jackson that the LHA presented from the years 1915 to 1945 changed significantly. In the early years of the LHA, the prevailing image of Rachel Jackson was that of a submissive wife who stayed very much in the background of her famous husband. Defending Rachel against unpleasant images created by national media in 1925 and again in 1935 prompted a revision of this image. This later image reveals a woman who managed the plantation in her husband's absence, displayed courage and fortitude, and yet remained a capable and hospitable hostess. By presenting these two images, the LHA redrew the illustration of the ideal woman of the Old South, as they considered Rachel to be. This new image of the woman of the Old South became a vehicle, it seems, for a defense of the Old South in general for the LHA and for other Nashvillians.

The archives of the LHA form the basis for most of the primary material for this thesis. Members of the LHA throughout the years, from the 1890s until very recently, collected scrapbooks with mementos of the year (if the scrapbook was dedicated to a particular year) or several years. Examples of the collected material include old luncheon invitations, invitations to the Jackson Ball, and newspaper clippings relevant to anyone or anything connected with the Hermitage or the LHA. These newspaper clippings might be anything from a social club report to a feature column about a dedication ceremony in Jackson, Tennessee. These scrapbooks have proved invaluable for obtaining a sense of the concerns and priorities of the LHA. I also examined the papers and personal scrapbook of Mrs. Bettie M. Donelson, an ex-Regent of the LHA, in the Tennessee State Archives.¹²

¹²The Heard Library at Vanderbilt possesses only one of the LHA-published visitors' guidebooks; I am grateful to Sharon MacPherson, the deputy historian at the Hermitage, for allowing me access to the collection there.

Initially, in their published literature, the visitors' guidebooks, LHA members did not concern themselves with minute details about the Jacksons' private life. On the contrary, they argued that trivial detail proved irrelevant in recounting the great deeds of the General. Moreover, the LHA at that time did not engage in biographical writing, *per se*. Other works sufficed to describe the Jacksons, including S.G. Heiskell's Andrew Jackson and Early Tennessee History¹³. The story Heiskell told, however, contained very little detail about Rachel personally. Rather, Heiskell's description of the Jacksons' courtship is largely a tribute to Andrew's chivalry rather than a source of biographical detail about Rachel. The image Heiskell fostered was that of an innocent lady wronged by a jealous husband and rescued by a romantic suitor. After her marriage to Andrew, Heiskell's Rachel retreated to the quiet of the Hermitage, content to live out her life in domesticity if she could. The LHA ignored most aspects of the Jacksons' domestic life in their guidebooks, giving it only cursory mention compared with Andrew's military and political exploits. To be fair, they did not have at their disposal many sources with which to examine the domestic side of the Jacksons. While they did include a significant amount of early biographical detail for Andrew, the early LHA guidebooks for Hermitage visitors contained nothing about Rachel. In the early years of the Hermitage restoration, Rachel remained only a pale shadow in portraits.

However, when the LHA disagreed with any account of either Andrew or Rachel, they dove into action quickly. The first episode of this open disapproval came in 1925, when author Meade Minningerode published the "Rachel Jackson" portion of his upcoming

¹³S. G. Heiskell, Andrew Jackson and Early Tennessee History, Ambrose Printing, Nashville, 1918.

composite biography, Some American Ladies: Seven Informal Biographies, in the *Saturday Evening Post*. Minningerode's account of Rachel's early life is as accurate as any, but, according to the LHA, he made the mistake of not according the proper respect to either Jackson or Rachel. He even made mention of Rachel's lack of education and countrified manners. The LHA immediately took up Rachel's defense. They formally censured Minningerode's work, and asked state historian John Trotwood Moore to write a "factual" account of Rachel Jackson as a rebuttal to be published in the *Post*. Members of the LHA themselves (along with several of their husbands) submitted indignant editorials in Nashville newspapers decrying the backwoods, ignorant image of Rachel that Minningerode had published. Not only Nashville newspapers published these defenses; other Southerners were equally angered by the tarnishing of one of the South's heroines. Spurred on by Nashville's example, New Orleans, Knoxville, and Chattanooga newspapers sought to expose Minningerode's "slander"; they also carried pieces designed to present the proper image of Rachel Jackson.

After the Minningerode article and book, the image of Rachel Jackson became more of a concern for both Nashville as a whole and the LHA in particular. In 1936, there again appeared an unflattering image of Rachel Jackson in the film, "The Gorgeous Hussy", starring Joan Crawford in the title role as Peggy Eaton. The film pitted the young, beautiful Peggy against the elderly, infirm hick Rachel, a comparison unthinkable to the LHA and some other elites in Nashville. In addition to writing editorials for and letters to the Nashville newspapers, the LHA made a plea to the state legislature to ban further

screenings in the state of Tennessee, as the portrayal of the Jacksons, Rachel in particular, was so grossly inaccurate.

After these two episodes of detailed, unflattering images of Rachel, Tennesseans clamored for the "real" Rachel -- Rachel as she existed in state folklore: pretty, chaste, devoutly Christian. Mary French Caldwell's 1936 scholarly biography General Jackson's Lady provided the public with many heretofore-unknown details about Rachel. The biography, while thoroughly researched, did not have great public appeal and went out of print quickly. The LHA, spurred on by the appeal for the Rachel of local myth, began including much more information on Rachel in their guidebooks. They also sponsored the writing, by one of the members, of a short biography, Nellie Treanor Stokes' Rachel Jackson, in 1942. In this work and in the information in the guidebooks, the LHA Rachel was touted as a paragon of gentility and grace. Unlike the image of the long-suffering and helpless victim of scandal, the Rachel that emerged from this later literature was courageous in facing strife. At the same time, their Rachel very ably managed the Hermitage in Andrew's absence and played a central role in the career of her husband.

The differences in the two images of Rachel provoke several questions. One, certainly, is which of the two is the more correct. Aspects of both images have some historical evidence; for instance, we know that she smoked a pipe on occasion, we know she was fond of music and some poetry, and we know she became devoutly religious late in life.

The more perplexing question that arises is, though, why the images of Rachel differ in the way they do. I will argue that the LHA actually presented two images of womanhood with their descriptions of Rachel. The first image seems very much like the Victorian ideal of

the domestic woman; she was an influential entity inside the home but nowhere else. The second, I contend, emerges as a much more modern vision of the ideal woman who has a role in public affairs.

This thesis will examine the changing ideals of womanhood in the story of Rachel Jackson and offer several reasons why this change emerged in the early- to mid-twentieth century. The image of gender contained in the description of Rachel Jackson represented, for its developers, an image of the Old South as they understood it. When the image of Rachel was challenged as in the *Minningerode* and *Gorgeous Hussy* episodes, the women of the LHA and their Nashville supporters perceived this challenge to be directed not only at Rachel but also towards the South. Their defense of the image of Rachel seems to be, then, a defense of the culture of the Old South.

The LHA's defense of the Old South takes a paradoxical turn, however, because the image of womanhood they present is quite modern. While claiming to represent the Old South, the image they present seems to reflect values and attitudes of the twentieth century. I believe that the influence of modernity on traditional Southern culture in the twentieth century in general, and to women in particular, made the ideals of the Old South both obsolete and unrecognizable. To be able to retain their approbation of the "Old South", the LHA had to reshape the image of it into something they could understand and emulate in the modern period. Moreover, illustrating some modern values as actually being those of the "Old South" seems to have made the LHA more comfortable with the new ideals of twentieth-century womanhood. In making the image of "Old South" women modern, it could not be claimed that twentieth-century Southern women were iconoclastic or unfaithful to

their heritage. I will argue that the changes in the roles of women along with other changes in Southern society prompted the reconstruction of the Old South. The way the LHA and those in Nashville who shared their views accomplished this was by changing the image of womanhood as it was embodied in Rachel Jackson, their heroine.

Chapter I will describe the specific images associated with Rachel in the earliest literature, the early guidebooks and Heiskell, the building blocks of the myth that fed into the twentieth century. This chapter will also provide a discussion of the contrast Minningerode and "The Gorgeous Hussy" offered to the popular image. Chapter II will examine the image of Rachel in Caldwell, Stokes, and the late guidebooks. This image, while being claimed as a great lady exemplifying qualities of a better, bygone era, displays some attributes that do not fit the model of quiet domesticity of "Old South" ladies. Rather, this image of Rachel illustrates her as an active, intelligent woman who has purpose other than as a decorative ornament for her husband.

From examining the image of Rachel of the later texts, it becomes clear that the Rachel described is not really a truthful historical depiction. Rather, she became a cultural icon for the twentieth-century South in general and for Southern women in particular, a heroine of the "Old South". Even though the writers held the idea of the "Old South" as culturally-sacred, modern viewpoints creep into their narratives. It is clear from the modern qualities attributed to Rachel, especially in the later period, that the writers superimposed their ideology onto her history. This is to say, she was a great heroine of the "Old South", but at the same time, she showed characteristics of a more modern cultural system. This paradox suggests that the writers, and indeed the public that enjoyed these stories of Rachel,

were caught in a kind of tug-of-war between the legend of the "Old South" and all the positive, unique qualities it entailed, and more homogenous, modern American culture. This new culture enabled women to emerge from their solely-domestic influence of the nineteenth century to a more public role in the twentieth. The conclusion will examine this intercession between old and new. It will provide possible reasons for both the adherence to the legendary virtues of the Old South and the movement towards modern American culture, including the work of other preservation societies in maintaining a Southern distinctiveness and women's organizations leaving the private sphere to tackle public social issues.

Chapter One: Andrew Jackson's Wife

Rachel Jackson's story has been fodder for writers since 1827, when the details of her divorce and remarriage became a political weapon against Andrew Jackson. Adams supporters, especially in Cincinnati, demanded that Americans learn the truth of the shocking "domestic relations" of the General in their pamphlet, "Truth's Advocate." Although Rachel and Andrew were fully accepted within the community with everyone knowing the details of their courtship and marriage, Jackson's faithful rallied to publish a rebuttal that would meet with national approval. This committee whitewashed the story until both Rachel and Andrew were mere victims of a cruel twist of fate and much malicious gossip. Just as the Jackson supporters adapted the couple's history to be acceptable to a larger cultural ideal, each generation following this has adapted the story to suit itself.¹⁴

The writers of the early twentieth century whitewashed the affair as did the 1828 committee. Like the Nashville Central Committee in the nineteenth century, local historians in the early twentieth century were vehement supporters of Jackson. Their task was to defend the popular hero image of Jackson which had been developing since his lifetime. Detail about Rachel Jackson was important only insofar as it meshed with the popular

¹⁴The details of the divorce and marriage are still open to debate. Rachel married Lewis Robards in Kentucky, where her parents had moved after initially arriving in Nashville in 1781. The couple had several separations, during one of which Rachel met Andrew Jackson, a boarder at her mother's home in Nashville. The reconciliations were failures, and Rachel left for Natchez to stay with friends. Jackson escorted her downriver. It was claimed that while she was away the news came to Tennessee that Robards, by an act of the Virginia legislature, had divorced Rachel. Jackson then married her in Natchez that same year. The divorce, however, was not officially granted by Kentucky courts until 1794, whereupon Andrew and Rachel remarried legally. Spanish records in Natchez, though, catalogue Rachel's arrival there as 1790. It seems plausible, or even probable, that they knew she was not legally divorced at the time they first married.

image of Andrew. Jackson supporters in this time did not attempt to outline Rachel's positive personal attributes if they had little bearing on Andrew's image. However, negative press about Rachel was detrimental to the hero image of Andrew. These writers, then, explained just enough about Rachel to satisfy their claim of her suitability as a mate for Old Hickory. The literature from the turn of the century does not offer great detail about Rachel Jackson's life. The detail that does surface from Heiskell and Colyar¹⁵ is little more than repetition of Overton's account of the marriage and courtship. In fact, Heiskell's 18-page chapter on Rachel includes seven pages of Overton's statement verbatim.¹⁶

The earliest 20th-century works produced about the Hermitage were guidebooks for visitors to the historic site. The guidebooks were first published in 1905 and then edited (and updated, as the books also contained inventory of artifacts at the Hermitage) by the LHA annually, using the Regent of the particular year as the first author. Because they were updated yearly, these visitors' guidebooks provide a good source for the developing image that the LHA held and publicized of Rachel and of Andrew Jackson. The earliest guidebooks dedicated the work of the LHA to Andrew Jackson and his accomplishments. The first line of the book, couched under a portrait of Jackson, read that "in his inspiring memory (the Hermitage was) preserved."¹⁷

In the earliest books, 1905-1917, Rachel exhibited little presence at all. Different Regents mentioned nothing about Rachel's character or role at the Hermitage in their

¹⁵A. S. Colyar, The Life and Times of Andrew Jackson, Marshall and Bruce, Nashville, 1904.

¹⁶Heiskell, pp. 309-327.

¹⁷Hermitage: Home of Andrew Jackson, Dorris, 1905, p. 3.

editions. Indeed, there were but two references to her. The guidebooks told readers that "Andrew Jackson and his wife adopted the infant son of Severn Donelson in 1809," and, mentioning her Christian name for the first time near the end of the text, they related that "Mrs. Rachel Jackson, wife of General Jackson, died in 1828."¹⁸ That Severn Donelson was Rachel's brother and the infant actually was her nephew did not warrant mention. Probably most local people were aware of this fact, but the LHA did not seem at all interested letting visitors know. This may have been, to them, superfluous detail about Rachel herself.

It was not until 1923 that the guidebook received a major overhaul. Under the Regency of Mrs. Walter Stokes, who later wrote a separate biography of Rachel herself under her given name, Nellie Treanor Stokes, the LHA expanded the biography of Andrew Jackson in the guide. Under the heading "Domestic," visitors to the Hermitage could finally learn a tiny bit about the mistress of the plantation. In the 50-odd pages into which the book was enlarged, Rachel was allotted only one three-quarter page section.

Of course, in a space so small, a character sketch of Rachel could hardly be developed in any detail. The only description offered of Rachel personally was that she was "a truly good and noble woman."¹⁹ In fact, "Rachel" or "Mrs. Jackson" was little more than a passing reference in describing Jackson's home life. "Rachel" or "Mrs. Jackson" appeared only five times in this section, and never as the subject of a sentence, while "General Jackson" or "Jackson" appeared 11 times with seven of those being the subject of the sentence containing them.

¹⁸Hermitage: Home of Andrew Jackson, Mary C. Dorris, 1905, Louise Lindsley, 1911, Mrs. B.F. Wilson, 1915, and Bettie M. Donelson, 1917.

¹⁹Hermitage: Home of Andrew Jackson, Stokes, 1923, pp. 10-11.

Rachel's agency in Hermitage life seems, at best, to be lessened and at worst, denied in this work. Her own persona seems obliterated even by the heading of the section. "Domestic" could reasonably apply to anything within parameter of the house, and it was here that the story of Rachel was told. It is clear from this heading that the authors placed Rachel in only one area of Andrew's life, his house. Indeed, she seems inseparable from the home, which he was away from most of the time.

Even in her marriage, Rachel was not celebrated in these early guidebooks for specific personal attributes of her own. Rather, the General's affection for her became the measuring stick by which her character was assessed. In another work, Dorris quoted Amos Kendall, a biographer of Jackson: "I had never seen Mrs. Jackson, but from that moment I pronounced her a superior woman. None but a woman of surpassing virtues could so fix the affections of such a man."²⁰ Dorris used Rachel only to portray a sensitive, chivalrous side of Jackson; she all but ignored her part in the relationship. Moreover, she did not trouble to explain those specific things about Rachel that enraptured Jackson. For Dorris, and probably the rest of Nashville, her audience, it was enough that Rachel was the vehicle for Jackson's sensitive side. "For all his stern military qualities," wrote Dorris, "Gen. Andrew Jackson had a most romantic side to his nature, which needed nothing stronger to prove it than his own chivalrous marriage to Rachel Donelson."²¹

If Mary Dorris were ignorant of most of the details of Rachel's life and of her specific traits, this failure to mention them would be understandable. However, Dorris had

²⁰Mary C. Dorris, The Preservation of the Hermitage, 1889-1915: Annals and Stories, Ladies Hermitage Association, Nashville, 1915, p. 164.

²¹Dorris, Preservation of the Hermitage, p. 162.

delivered at the January 19, 1910, LHA meeting, according to the *Tennessean's* "Club Report," "a most interesting and comprehensive paper on Mrs. Andrew Jackson." The report further claimed that "there possibly (was) no one in the city better able to give a detailed and authentic account of Mrs. Jackson's life and character than Mrs. Dorris, as was proven yesterday after hearing her paper."²² This detailed account given by Dorris suggests that the LHA actually was aware of more particulars about Rachel than they actually published. This also implies that Rachel was deliberately left vague and domestic in the public literature when in fact more was known about her.

This description of Rachel entirely within a domestic framework meshes neatly with the Victorian ideal of womanhood. The ideal of the private, domestic woman pervaded American, and particularly Southern, culture in the late nineteenth century. The Victorian image of the proper woman was one who did not involve herself in matters outside the home, particularly in employment or in political affairs. Such public activism was considered "unfeminine." Of course, this is not to say that the ideals were practiced, as scores of women found employment in many industrial sectors, particularly cotton mills in the South. Many American women became involved in suffrage issues in the later decades of the century. The elite women of the LHA, with their descriptions of Rachel in the guidebooks seem to have held onto the Victorian ideal, at least until the mid-1920s.

²²*The Tennessean*, January 19, 1910, Ladies Hermitage Association Green Scrapbook, the Hermitage. It is unfortunate that no copy of the paper Dorris delivered is known to exist today, so I do not know exactly what Dorris reported about Rachel. I do know that she delivered a paper on Dolley Madison the week before the paper on Rachel. That Rachel was lumped together with other first ladies seems indicative of the LHA's early disregard for Rachel's unique place at the Hermitage.

The vague image of Rachel, as a quiet, noble wife endured for over twenty years in the writing of the LHA. It seems plausible to presume, further, that the LHA would have altered their presentation of Rachel so dramatically had not conflicting images been brought forth from other quarters. Heiskell's portrayal of Rachel in 1918 had not prompted any change in the LHA's information on Rachel; probably this is because the members agreed with his sympathetic treatment. In the mid-1920s, and again in the mid-1930s, however, two episodes offered a serious, nationwide challenge to the domestic, quiet, dignified vision of Rachel Jackson.

Minningerode and "The Gorgeous Hussy"

In 1925, the *Saturday Evening Post* published an excerpt from an upcoming biography of the First Ladies by Meade Minningerode. Minningerode's "Rachel Jackson" and the imagery it presented met with opposition from many quarters, particularly the upper classes, in the state of Tennessee. Minningerode, unlike the LHA-favored Tennessee authors before him, Heiskell and Colyar, did not rely upon Overton's account as the basis for his narrative. Further, instead of detailing Jackson's military exploits and describing Rachel in a shadowy background, he was interested in her own personal habits and daily routine aside from those of Jackson. It is clear that Minningerode did not subscribe to the hero worship of Jackson that is evident in writing up to the mid-1920s on the pair.

Nashvillians found Minningerode's portrait derogatory to Rachel because the woman he described was rough and ill-educated. Contrary to the previous mythmakers, Minningerode did not endow sterling, benign, vague qualities like goodness and nobility to

Rachel.²³ Minningerode unearthed primary source material to make new claims about Rachel's character and activities. He also used both Parton and Sumner's biographies of Jackson, controversial themselves in Tennessee. Colyar, for instance, branded both Sumner's and Parton's works as "cowardly mode(s) of destroying a great man" because their presentation of Jackson was, he believed, conceived from biased spite.²⁴

Unlike any other authors before him, Minningerode examined Rachel's own letters and letters from people in New Orleans that discussed her. He declared that Rachel was barely educated and socially inept. He asserted that "it is useless to pretend she was not illiterate."²⁵ Minningerode also revealed the laughter hidden by the delicate New Orleans ladies at the picture of the "fat little dumpling" bobbing opposite her gaunt husband in a jig.

Nashvillians also took offense at his interpretation of Rachel's religious life. He described Rachel and her sisters as part of a nationwide evangelical movement rather than as a deep, individual spiritualism. "Rachel," he claimed, "had suddenly 'gotten religion,' strenuous, austere, militant, Presbyterian religion. It had happened along in 1816, under that wave of pioneer preaching which had flooded the frontiers after the war."²⁶ It appeared that anyone, including Rachel and her sisters, could have been caught up in this wave of evangelicalism. Illustrating Rachel's religiosity as part of this movement seemed somehow to detract from the notion that Rachel's faith was honest and unique. He seemed

²³Mary C. Dorris, The Hermitage, Home of General Andrew Jackson, Ladies Hermitage Association, 1915, reprinted 1934, p. 10.

²⁴Colyar, p. 33. He believed Jackson to have been cursed, like no other great soldier, by "enemy biographers."

²⁵Meade Minningerode, Some American Ladies: Seven Informal Biographies, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1926, p. 208.

²⁶Ibid, p. 217

quite sarcastic about Rachel's religion, claiming that "salvation hung, so to speak, like the sword of Damocles above the General's unreceptive head."²⁷ Most of Minningerode's analysis proved opposite to the local saintly vision of Rachel.²⁸

Minningerode's discussion of the divorce scandal provoked more ire in Nashville than any other issue, probably because not only did he deviate from Overton, but he went as far as to suggest that Rachel and Andrew were not innocent victims of a legal mix-up. Further, Minningerode was the first to call into question Jackson's legal acumen because of his confusion about jurisdictional law regarding divorce proceedings, as he had believed the divorce was granted by the Virginia legislature rather than the Kentucky court. Minningerode also doubted Jackson's common sense in not checking out the validity of the rumor after it spread in Tennessee; it was, Minningerode claimed, "an unpardonable lapse."²⁹

The storm of controversy aroused in Nashville prompted a rash of heated editorials in local and national newspapers ostensibly in the defense of Mrs. Jackson. At the protest meeting called in Nashville by the editor of the *Banner*, LHA members and other Nashvillians including John Trotwood Moore, state historian, decided to write an answer to Minningerode. Moore volunteered to write the principal article to be published in the *Post*,

²⁷Ibid, p. 218.

²⁸Minningerode was not, however, entirely deflating to the popular myth of hero and heroine. Nor was he interested in sensationalist journalism. As he was one of the first to examine primary sources such as traveler's accounts, he was able to state definitively that Rachel was considered an exceptional hostess and was renowned for her hospitality. She had, he agreed, the rare ability to make everyone feel at ease.

²⁹Ibid, p. 204.

but many other people wanted to participate in Rachel's vindication.³⁰ The official redress sent to Minningerode and his publisher was signed by Mrs. Walter Stokes, Regent of the LHA, Mrs. Betty [sic] M. Donelson, president of the Andrew Jackson Society, E.B. Stahlman, publisher of the *Banner*, and several others. Many community leaders (LHA members, historians, a judge and a Congressman) wrote columns for local newspapers. Like the earlier works, these columns, however, go further in protecting the image of Andrew than they do in describing Rachel. These newspaper excerpts offer a window to view the specific complaints Nashvillians had about Minningerode's image of the Jacksons, as well as the corrections they believed were necessary.

Rather than meet Minningerode's claims about Rachel's personal traits and daily habits, the writers of these newspaper articles worked strenuously to push Rachel's womanly role back into an unspecific trait, that of being a "good wife." The "good woman, good wife" category sufficed, indeed was complete, in describing Rachel as a woman in these texts. "She stands out as a Christian woman, kind and hospitable to the last degree," Judge Ewing wrote of Rachel in the *Tennessean*.³¹ However, exactly what being a "good wife" entailed, aside from providing hospitality to her husband's guests, defied explanation. It is clear that these writers assumed that (in Rachel's case, at least) woman's function was determined only by what sort of wife she proved to be. In this explanation of womanhood, women became viable entities only by their role in marriage. As no other explanation of Rachel's persona

³⁰Notes on the Nashville meeting. Bettie M. Donelson Papers, Tennessee State Archives.

³¹*The Tennessean*, "Minningerode Rapped by Ewing," May 20, 1925 (no by-line), Bettie M. Donelson Papers, Tennessee State Library.

was forthcoming from these writers, she would have little basis for existence if it were not for the man in her life.

Perhaps even more than in the pre-1920 literature, in responding to Minningerode's work, writers in Nashville viewed Rachel's actions and character as only a reflection of Andrew Jackson. Thus, because Minningerode challenged the accepted image of Rachel, he necessarily challenged the image of Andrew. The articles, while ostensibly correcting inaccuracies and exposing Minningerode's "lies" about Rachel, go further in protecting Andrew. For example, one article stated that "The story of Rachel Jackson...reads like the production of one who has essayed the role of a cold-blooded and exact historian, who, in spite of hell and high water, was going to show the clay in the feet of a popular idol rather than extol *his* (my emphasis) great virtues."³² While the author of this piece acknowledged that the story was about Rachel, greater significance was placed on the defense of Andrew. There was no mention here of extolling Rachel's "great virtues". Further, in the official statement made in the protest meeting, Moore reinforced the clear impression that it was Andrew that Nashville gathered to defend. Rachel, it seems was an afterthought. "We are here to defend the honor of Andrew Jackson and his wife...it is our sacred duty and privilege to defend his honor."³³ These citizens always began their criticism by vindicating Rachel, but never did she seem the principal focus of their protest efforts. Usually she ended up excluded in the powerful final part of the sentence or paragraph.

³²The Tennessean (no by-line), May 21, 1925. Bettie M. Donelson Papers, Tennessee State Archives.

³³Minningerode, p. 187.

This piece and others criticized "exact historians," those scholars with an eye for seemingly trivial detail. The detail that Minningerode had offered showed Jackson to be a rough, swaggering frontiersman with an eye for gambling and speculation, whose impetuous nature got him into more than one public fight. Minningerode's detail about Rachel revealed a jolly, generous, and kind though completely inelegant woman who needed social tutoring. Local writers thought that Minningerode, caught up in historical minutiae, had a tendency to miss the overall picture, i.e. the greatness that Andrew Jackson had shared with the world. Dorris claimed that Andrew "rank(ed) easily among the first of those men who have had a hand in the making of the history of this great republic."³⁴ The editorials worked to rid the myth of damaging detail that might have detracted from wide, sweeping claims of Jackson as a good man and as a founder of true democracy in the United States. This detail would also have assigned a specific identity to Rachel that writers were unwilling to grant. Labelling details about Rachel as "unimportant" gives evidence to this. Not only did they object to the actual claim, for instance, that Rachel was illiterate, but they considered information like this about her unnecessary. Dorris, quoted in the *New Orleans Tribune*, declared "(t)hat Mrs. Jackson was not adept at spelling was unimportant and is still more unimportant now. She was a good woman, a good wife..."³⁵ Another source pronounced, "that her dancing was not up to the requirements of the minuet is trivial and irrelevant."³⁶ What was relevant, the writers believed, was that she had sufficient

³⁴*New Orleans Tribune*, (no by-line), May 23, 1925. Bettie M. Donelson Papers, Tennessee State Archives.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*The Tennessean*, May 21, 1925, republished in Minningerode, p. 190.

qualities to "capture the heart and fire the imagination of a man like Jackson and hold his chivalrous devotion until the last days of her life."³⁷ Local writers believed that missing the larger, more important issues of Andrew Jackson's chivalrous nature and patriotic value was an important omission fostered by this misguided attention to detail.

Like Minningerode's "Rachel Jackson," the film "The Gorgeous Hussy" likewise prompted local consternation. The film told the story of Peggy O'Neal Timberlake Eaton, the woman who stood in the center of social scandal in Jacksonian Washington. Secretary of War John Eaton's bride Peggy, the daughter of an innkeeper in Washington, had an unsavory reputation for involvements with various politicians before her marriage. The ladies of Washington, including Emily Donelson, Jackson's niece and hostess, refused her invitations and did not return her calls. Jackson, still grieving over Rachel's death and seething at the social scandal that undoubtedly hastened it, vehemently defended Peggy and tried (fruitlessly, it may be added) to force Peggy's social acceptance, even to the point of sending Emily Donelson back to Tennessee.³⁸

The majority of the movie takes place before the "Eaton malaria" had broken out in Washington. The young, beautiful Peggy O'Neal (Joan Crawford) welcomed the elderly Jackson couple to Washington (presumably in 1824) at the outset of the film. Andrew (Lionel Barrymore) was depicted as a crotchety old man whose loud, opinionated remarks set him apart from polite society. Rachel, in her turn, appeared as an infirm, pipe-smoking, dried-up old woman. The pair served a dramatic purpose in offsetting the youth and beauty

³⁷the Tennessean, May 21, 1925, reprinted in Minningerode, p. 190.

³⁸Harry L. Watson, Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America, the Noonday Press, New York, 1990, p. 100.

of Peggy and John Randolph opposite them. Further, Rachel and Andrew seemed to be close friends with the O'Neal family; in the film Peggy affectionately referred to them as "Aunt Rachel" and "Uncle Andy."³⁹

The image of the couple in the film aroused incredible fury in Nashville. The LHA delivered a petition to the state legislature, proposing a ban on further screenings of the film in the state of Tennessee. No action by the legislature followed, but public sentiment all but burned the film in effigy. As in the Minningerode episode, Nashvillians vented their anger in newspaper editorials.

Reau E. Folk, husband of the Regent of the LHA, delivered the longest and most heated objection to the images of Rachel and Andrew in the film to the *Banner*. Although Lionel Barrymore, he concedes, was a great stage personality, Folk argued that he could not accurately portray Jackson, or even come close. Folk criticized the "Barrymore stoop," which he claimed to be wholly unlike the famed "military carriage" Jackson displayed. Further, Barrymore failed in his portrayal because of his "whimsicalities of manner and speech." We can suppose that with this comment Folk disagreed with the peculiar accent, phrases, and mannerisms that Barrymore's Jackson used. Jackson, in real life, the Nashvillian claimed boldly, "had no such whimsicalities and was direct in speech and dignified and courtly of manner." Another unknown writer raged that the "Hero of New Orleans and the Sage of the Hermitage (was) pictured as a shambling, drawling, illiterate, senile weakling."⁴⁰

³⁹That Eaton used familiar titles and did not show proper respect to the pair seemed upsetting in and of itself. Remini claims that the nickname was historically inaccurate as well. He was 'Mr. Jackson', even to Rachel. She did not use 'Andrew', and "no one ever called him 'Andy'!" Remini, 1966, p. 32.

⁴⁰*The Tennessean*, November 10, 1935. Red Scrapbook, the Hermitage.

The image of Rachel presented in the film was just as bad, or worse, than that of Andrew, according to the editorials. Folk not only pointed out several mistakes made by the movie in describing Rachel, ~~and~~ but he also offered a counter-explanation of her. The presentation of Rachel as a "pipe-smoking, anemic, amiable old backwoods woman" appeared to be little more than a "caricature" rather than a fair portrayal. "Rachel Jackson was born a lady and was one innately all her life," Folk proclaimed. The anonymous writer lambasted the movie, claiming that the

attempt to represent the beautiful and gentle Rachel, the idol of Jackson's heart, honored by all who knew her for womanly worth, though denied the highest culture of the schools, as a coarse, uncouth, slangy, stringy-haired creature of the wilderness is an indefensible liberty with the truth, repelling to every instinct of propriety.⁴¹

The vague qualities attributed to Rachel continued in these editorials in response to "The Gorgeous Hussy". We never quite learn what "womanly worth" is, and we are again rushed to accept that she was "a lady all her life" without much evidence. However, the corrections of the film expressed by the editorials mark the beginning of change in the image of Rachel espoused by Nashville and the LHA in the mid-1930s. "The Hermitage," Folk claimed, "built for her by Jackson in 1819, is a memorial to her character, taste, and refinement. Anybody who visits the Hermitage and catches its atmosphere cannot but feel resentment at ignorant and malicious pens which try to traduce her." While Rachel is still intimately connected with the domestic, the house, there is a sense here that she has some proprietorship over it. The image that Folk presents here of the house being Rachel's as much as, or even more so than Andrew's is very different from the guidebooks' portrayal

⁴¹Ibid.

of General Jackson's home, *his* legacy. The agency endowed to Rachel with this image would expand in later LHA writing about her.

The public fury over the Minningerode piece and "The Gorgeous Hussy" died down all within a few months of its outbreak. The memory of the harmful, slanderous images created of Rachel and Andrew, however, did not. There existed the genuine fear that those who were not readily familiar with the Jacksons would take the Minningerode and "Gorgeous Hussy" images seriously. Folk recognized that while "the informed" would give little credence to these presentations, he questioned anxiously, "What about others who may receive lasting erroneous impressions?"⁴² The attacks on the traditional image of the domestic Rachel of the Old South prompted the LHA to provide their own truthful description of Rachel, one that gave much more information than the guidebooks offered and was thus less easily misconstrued. The intent of their writing seemed to be to re-illustrate the Rachel they knew, i.e. the refined, domestic Rachel of the 1920s and early 1930s, in a more concrete way. However, in the following decade, the LHA actually created a new image of Rachel. Their new Rachel was still gracious and hospitable, but she became much more managerial and directly involved with other areas of Andrew's life. With this new set of images, the LHA reconstructed both the ideal of womanhood and with it, the interpretation of the Old South.

⁴²Ibid.

Chapter Two: Rachel Jackson, Hermitage Matron

The image of Rachel Jackson that the Ladies Hermitage Association presented until the mid-1920s contains aspects of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. The vision of proper womanhood the LHA brought forth, through Rachel, was that of a woman who was inextricably tied to the home and who stayed very much in the shadow of her husband. Both Meade Minningerode's article (and later) book, along with "The Gorgeous Hussy," challenged this model by bringing Rachel out of the shadowy background in which the LHA had placed her. They presented an ignorant, countrified Rachel whose manner, though kindly, was far from the genteel domestic ideal. This rough-edged Rachel clearly did not fit the LHA's conception of who and what Rachel and women of her time truly were. In their corrective to Minningerode, the LHA reshaped their old, vague "good wife" image of Rachel. The Rachel that emerged from this revision proved to be capable, courageous, intelligent, and quite polished socially. This recreated Rachel ushered in, it seems, a perception of antebellum womanhood very different from the Victorian one. The new image seems to reflect characteristics of the "New Woman," the woman of the twentieth century.

Tennessean writer Hugh Walker suggested in the late 1940s that the publication of Mary French Caldwell's General Jackson's Lady emerged from the desire of the LHA to "set the record straight" on the true character of Rachel Jackson.⁴³ The general idea that Walker proposed seems to be fairly accurate. Compared to the paucity of information on

⁴³Hugh Walker: "Rebuking the 'Gorgeous Hussy'," *Tennessean*, 1946? (exact date unknown), Red Scrapbook, the Hermitage.

Rachel at the beginning of the century, the output of detail from Nashville seems like an explosion. That this outpouring on the local heroine occurred only after an unflattering portrayal of her appeared in national media seems more than coincidental. Aside from the editorials and the rebuttal in the *Post*, some of the elite of Nashville and the LHA obviously wanted to counter the damage done by Minningerode and the Gorgeous Hussy with a detailed image of their own.

From 1935-1945, the image of Rachel Jackson was transformed from the vague "good wife" of Andrew Jackson into that of a woman who had specific responsibilities in her home and community, definite opinions of the world around her, and a personal stake in the political activities of her husband. These new ideas stand in opposition to the writing Nashville offered before the Minningerode and Gorgeous Hussy episodes. Writers, like Mary French Caldwell and Nellie Treanor Stokes, in the third and fourth decade of the 20th century viewed Rachel through a different lens than their earlier counterparts. Rachel was, for these writers, an individual whose life commanded close scrutiny for its own merit rather than just to evidence chivalrous, gentlemanly qualities of her husband. Stokes and Caldwell illustrated Rachel playing a much larger and more complex role in both public and private life than had previously been described, even by detail-driven Minningerode. Rachel, for Treanor and Stokes, occupied a wider space in public life and was possessed of astute intelligence and understanding. Moreover, the Rachel that they presented had other qualities, such as beauty and social grace.

A major concern for both Caldwell and particularly Stokes was to make Rachel the heroine of their works. In the previous LHA literature about the Jacksons, Rachel always

remained in the background, even in the discussion of her divorce. Andrew's career successes later in their lives eclipsed other mention of her. Moving Rachel to the fore meant making her story, as Andrew's had been, an exceptional adventure. Stokes' 18-page booklet told readers of a courageous woman who suffered under a jealous husband, found love and happiness finally in the arms of a great man, and died of illness before being able to take her place with him in the White House. Caldwell, too, made Rachel into a great heroine who, though possessed of a kindly, intelligent nature, found herself embroiled in political muckraking about an incident she thought long forgotten.

Caldwell's book still stands today as the only full-length, scholarly work on Rachel's life. Caldwell used both the old images of Rachel in Heiskell, Colyar, and Parton, but she also had at her disposal records from Jackson's store and correspondence from both Jackson and others. Caldwell's Rachel does not float dreamily around the halls of the Hermitage, and even from the detail described here, it is clear that the tone of Caldwell's description is much more matter-of-fact than Stokes. However, Caldwell does go beyond scholarly boundaries when she vehemently denies the accuracy of New Orleans merchant Vincent Nolte's description of Rachel and Andrew making a ridiculous spectacle dancing in New Orleans. Nolte, according to Parton, was a known exaggerator, but Caldwell seemed unable to accept any unfavorable description of Rachel, even from primary sources. She appeared especially unwilling to grant that Rachel was unused to high society, although Caldwell quoted a letter from Rachel herself in New Orleans to her brother-in-law in which she admitted that "in fact I have seen more already [sic] than in all my Life past, it is the finest

Country for the Eye of a Stranger [sic]."⁴⁴ From the awe expressed in her letter, it is evident that country Rachel had indeed come to town.

This unwillingness to confront what seemed, from some primary source material, to be the real Rachel, countrified, plump, and not very adept at dress and fashion, was manifest further in some of the portraiture that emerged in the early 1940s. While even the original portraiture of Rachel was enhanced in the 1830s (Figures 1, 4, and 6), the copies that circulated around Nashville and the nation reflect a desire to alter Rachel's physical appearance and demeanor. One Earl portrait was removed in the early 1940s and an enhanced copy commissioned to replace it, though it never was hung on the Hermitage walls. (Figure 7) Howard Chandler Christy repainted another of Earl's portraits of Rachel, which was proudly donated to the White House collection of First Ladies' portraits by the United States Daughters of 1812 around 1942. (Figure 5) In the recopied portraits, Rachel emerged as a mid-twentieth century beauty, young and slender with a softly oval face, long graceful neck, and stylish clothes. (Figure 2) Any observer of these portraits would be hard pressed to believe the physical image put forth by either Minningerode, the "Gorgeous Hussy", or indeed the contemporary accounts of Rachel's appearance.⁴⁵ (Figures 1 and 3)

⁴⁴Caldwell, pp. 328-332.

⁴⁵After the film "The President's Lady" was released, most Americans believed she looked exactly like Susan Hayward. My own mother, as she saw the movie when she was young, expressed shock and disbelief when I showed her what Rachel actually looked like.



Figure 1. (left) The most well-recognized portrait/engraving of Rachel Jackson. This is a copy of one of a series of miniatures produced in Washington in the 1830s by Louisa Catherine Strobel. Andrew sent these miniatures to favorite nieces. He considered the depiction a good likeness and wore the miniature under his coat until his death. Authors Holloway (1870), Stokes (1942), Caldwell (1936), and Dorris (1915) used this miniature, or a slight variation of it.

Figure 2. (right) The same portrait as in Figure 1, enhanced to 20th-century standards. This is the frontispiece of the 1955 children's biography Rachel Jackson, Tennessee Girl, by Christine Noble Govan, illustrated by Robert Doremus. Note the beautiful swanlike neck, perfectly arched eyebrows, and absence of double chin. The headdress and gown remain much the same as the original.

Figure 3. From Minningerode's short biography "Rachel Jackson" in Some American Ladies: Seven Informal Biographies, 1926. This is one of two illustrations of Rachel, the other being an engraving of a Strobel miniature. This actually was an engraving circulated at the time of Rachel's death in 1828. Facial detail is minimal and actually nondescript, yet Rachel here cannot be called attractive. Mary Ormsbee Whitton also used this in her 1948 book, First First Ladies.





Figure 4. The second of the best-known portraits of Rachel Jackson. This is by Earl, but it is not a life portrait. It was done in the late 1820s either from artistic memory or from another unknown portrait. Like the Strobel miniatures, there are several variations of this portrait. It was used frequently in the newspaper articles surrounding the Minningerode and "Gorgeous Hussy" scandals. It was also used in Caldwell's biography, along with the Strobel miniature. A variation of this portrait is currently (as of January, 1994) being sold at the Hermitage gift shop.

Figure 5. The same portrait, enhanced magnificently by Howard Chandler Christy. It was commissioned by the United States Daughters of 1812 and presented as a gift from the state of Tennessee to the White House around 1942. It still hangs today in a small reception room in the East Wing, though is not included in the general tour of the mansion.



Figures 6 and 7. This is probably the most startling of the image changes brought about in the early twentieth century. The portrait on the left was done by Ralph Earl about 1817, as Rachel is shown with her topaz jewelry presented by the ladies of New Orleans. It hung for more than 100 years in the back parlor of the Hermitage but was taken down in the early 1940s. A substitute was commissioned in its place, and the original has since been lost. The enhanced version (right) was done by a local artist. Note the dramatic weight loss, change of facial shape, and the lightening of features. Not even her dress remained the same, as cute, fashionable puffy sleeves replaced the set-in ones. The copy, which actually never hung in the mansion, has now been returned to the artist.

Contrary to Dorris' claim that detail about Rachel's life was unnecessary, the post-1930s writers were keen to collect all sorts of trivia to add to the heroine image they created. Stokes displayed a Rachel Jackson that was strong enough to withstand all types of hardship. She related a portion of the flatboat trip from Virginia where Nancy Gower, a 13 year-old from another boat, was hit by an arrow from an Indian attack but remained silent until out of Indian range. "In that sort of stern school did the child Rachel learn fortitude in bearing the uses of adversity," Stokes declared.⁴⁶ Christine Noble Govan, a children's biographer of the early 1950s, went even further, and illustrated a valiant Rachel taking part in the defense against this same Indian attack by steering the boat after a servant fell and struck his head.⁴⁷ There is no historical evidence that this is true, as Rachel is not mentioned in her father's journey diary, and no source mentions her recounting it.⁴⁸ However, the image of a courageous girl in physical danger is a signpost to the type of brave woman that girl would turn out to be.

Caldwell believed that Rachel, as long as she was near Jackson, could endure any trial: "travel over rough trails, or by circuitous and dangerous waterways...let famine come, or plenty; peace, or war; applause of the populace, or bitter attack."⁴⁹ Stokes asserted that

⁴⁶Stokes, pp. 7-8. The Nancy Gower episode is true; John Donelson wrote of Nancy's experience in his diary. That Rachel learned a lesson in bravery from this is difficult to either prove or disprove.

⁴⁷Christine Noble Govan, Rachel Jackson: Tennessee Girl, Bobbs-Merrill, 1955, pp. 165-170.

⁴⁸Children's biographies, especially this series titled "Childhood of Famous Americans," often fictionalize their character's lives to a great extent. One reason surely is because there is little historical evidence for many of the childhoods they seek to describe. These books are intended, in many cases, to teach moral lessons to children, and events and dialogue are made up to illustrate values clearly. Adult biographies, on the other hand, usually are meant to inform readers of historical fact.

⁴⁹Caldwell, p. 331.

even though the "last chapter of her life was the most trying" it did not "break her spirit." Rachel retained, through the political scandal surrounding Jackson and her in 1824, "a calm dignity," Stokes told readers.⁵⁰

In addition to becoming a courageous little soldier, the image constructed of Rachel showed her to have great skill in social setting, especially if that setting were in her own home. "Upon the shoulders of Rachel fell the responsibility of reigning as the gracious mistress" of the Hermitage when guests came around.⁵¹ Stokes quoted Senator Thomas Hart Benton, an early visitor to the Hermitage, as he recalled Rachel having "a faculty--a rare one of retaining names and titles in a throng of visitors, addressing each one appropriately, and dispensing hospitality to all with a cordiality which enhanced its value."⁵² Stokes pushed this issue a bit over the top when she claimed that Rachel had "a quality of queenliness in natural grace and dignity."⁵³

The most glaring difference between, say Dorris' Rachel and the Rachel of the later works, comes in the treatment of Rachel's character in relation to the image of Andrew Jackson. While Rachel was not treated as wholly independent from her husband (as indeed historically she was not), their lives were shown to have a more mutual relationship than had previously been established. Stokes dismissed the early part of Andrew Jackson's life in her biography of Rachel, a never-before occurrence. "It is unnecessary," she stated, "in this story

⁵⁰Stokes, p. 17.

⁵¹Ibid, p. 16.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Ibid, p. 17.

of Rachel to go into the history of Andrew Jackson before he came to Tennessee."⁵⁴ In previous histories of either of the two of them, Jackson's biography was always the more important, and no detail known about his life, before or after Rachel, had been spared.

Caldwell claimed that Rachel's philosophical outlook on political life affected Andrew's decision to resign from the U.S. Senate. Rachel knew that men were sometimes called to public duty, but she had reached the conclusion that public office as a lifelong career was disagreeable. Caldwell asserted that "the continuous seeking of empty honors which, when acquired, resulted only in the absence of the man she loved, interested her not at all". "It was this attitude on her part," Caldwell went on to say, "which led Andrew Jackson to resign his seat in the United States Senate...".⁵⁵ The claim that Rachel's intellectual opinion had any bearing whatsoever on decisions Andrew Jackson made about pursuing politics, or indeed any part of his career, was new. In this light, Rachel and Andrew seemed to have had very open communication and influence on many areas of each others' lives, not just domestic life at the Hermitage. The older works briefly mentioned Rachel having moral influence over Andrew, but a practical, intellectual influence was unheard of.

Stokes's view of the influence that Rachel held over Jackson's career was somewhat different from the intellectual influence that Caldwell proclaimed. She stated:

⁵⁴Ibid, p. 10.

⁵⁵Caldwell, p. 177.

"More often than not great deeds of men find their fountain head in the inspiration welling from the being of a beloved and cherished woman. Who shall view the epochal career of Andrew Jackson and gainsay that one sees Rachel, too!"⁵⁶

While she accorded Rachel an inspirational influence rather than an intellectual one as did Caldwell, she still gave Rachel some credit for Jackson's success. It does not seem that Rachel was baggage for Jackson to bring along with him; she was a positive contributor to his career. In Stokes' opinion, it was impossible to view Jackson's achievements as a solitary experience.

Rachel's familiarity with public affairs in general was a new theme introduced in the later works. Stokes and Govan made much of the fact that through her father (a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses) she had, from a very early age, been exposed to political discussion. Stokes described the baby Rachel accustomed to hearing stories of "life at the seat of the government."⁵⁷ Govan, as well, put forth that young Rachel listened with interest to the political discussion that surrounded the American Revolution.⁵⁸ This girlhood interest later manifested itself with Jackson. Transactions such as land deals and court cases Jackson advocated proved to Rachel, according to Caldwell, to be "quite as fascinating a subject as it was to the men around her."⁵⁹

Rachel's image again appeared as that of a more capable and assertive individual in the portrayal of her role as manager of the Hermitage while Andrew was away. Caldwell

⁵⁶Stokes, p. 17.

⁵⁷Ibid, p. 5.

⁵⁸Govan, pp. 79-81.

⁵⁹Caldwell, p. 167.

claimed that "Rachel...carried on the work of the plantation...during her husband's absence".⁶⁰ However, the ideology that the female still could not exactly match the male's managerial ability was not abandoned. The various tasks of the plantation were done "not quite, perhaps, as might have been done if the master had been at home, but well enough to keep things going satisfactorily."⁶¹ Here, on one hand, it is evident that a new facet was introduced into the image of Rachel, that of a quasi-manager. Yet, on the other hand, Caldwell could not envision that a woman was as fully able as a man to handle supervision of crop planting and slave discipline.

These new qualities attributed to Rachel, it seems, find their roots not in the Victorian ideal of womanhood, but in its revision in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The sphere of influence women held expanded greatly in the Progressive Era (1890 to 1920), and this expansion continued through the 1930s and 1940s. The "New Woman" of this time possessed an interest in public affairs her Victorian grandmother did not, she demonstrated her intelligence and practical ability in her daily routine, and she took to the streets to promote social causes. The domestic life of the new woman proved different from that of her grandmother as well. Instead of her serving solely as the moral guide of the household, the woman of the late-1920s became the practical manager of her home. The new Rachel seems to have many of the characteristics of these "new women;" indeed, it seems that the Rachel presented in the 1930s and 1940s reflects new ideals of womanhood of that time.

⁶⁰Ibid, p. 191.

⁶¹Ibid.

The most strikingly modern characteristic endowed to Rachel in these later works seems to be her interest in public affairs like land transactions and her attention to political discussion. While Rachel does not seem like a political crusader by any means, she does have a stake in both the settlement of the region and in the career of her husband. This conservative public role seems very much like the role taken by elite club women in the 1920s. Before the Twenties, women of the upper classes formed clubs whose function was largely social and cultural. These included garden clubs, literary societies, and historic preservation associations. Members of these groups did not support public reform causes, especially suffrage, because socially activist women lobbied openly for political and economic reform unrelated to the traditional moral sphere of feminine influence.

This ideological divide narrowed in the late 1910s. Suffragists shifted their arguments to encompass the indirect influence of wives and mothers into the movement. With this more moderate (and more traditional) position, club women became convinced that suffrage and other public causes did no more harm to their traditional roles as wives and mothers than did their cultural societies. Club women came to view public activism as an extension of their home duties. In this way, elites joined the middle-class reformers quite cautiously, but joined them nonetheless.⁶² The LHA seemed to be an example of this sort of

⁶² Mary Martha Thomas, "The 'New Woman' in Alabama, 1890-1920," *Alabama Review* 43: 163-180, 1990, pp. 179-180, Nancy Woloch, Women and the American Experience, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1984, pp. 287-293, and Anastatia Sims, Feminism and Femininity in the New South: White Women's Organizations in North Carolina 1883-1930, Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1985, pp. 1-5. Don Doyle supports this ideological change with his description of the LHA in Nashville in the New South, 1880-1930, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville, 1985, pp. 68-69. Anne Firor Scott also suggests that individual women not involved in either activist movements or in elite clubs were affected by the heightened public voice of women in general. She quotes Ernest Groves, a North Carolina sociologist, who claimed that by 1929 only extremely isolated women were removed from the current of sociological and cultural change. In The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, pp. 213-214.

movement toward the public arena. Rachel's limited, though obvious, public concern seems very much like the cautious approach of the elite women of the twentieth century. Rachel certainly does not appear as a radical activist in this literature, but her displaying a role in public life signifies a modern departure from her earlier vague, domestic description.

The managerial skill the new Rachel exhibited by taking charge of the plantation also seems very much more modern than the Victorian homemaking ideal. Ruth Schwartz Cowan has suggested that technological innovations of the 1920s such as electric appliances, canned foods, central heating, and running water had a profound effect on the transformation of the labor of the housewife. As the means of production for this type of labor was revolutionized, she contends, the image of the ideal laborer likewise changed. Women were seen to take charge of all roles within their homes--to be a manager rather than an inert supervisor. The homemaker's vocation was, in other words, professionalized to a certain degree. Magazines began to publish articles devoted to improvements of skills, and academics began defining the housewife's role.⁶³ The Rachel that emerged from the late literature, though still supervising servants, seems to take a much more active role in the management of her household and farm, much like the new domestic managers of the early 20th century. Rachel's managerial skill seems much more like business know-how than domestic talent.

That the new Rachel maintained a ladylike demeanor and was a gracious hostess does not fall out of line with the ideal of the 1930s, especially the ideal of the Southern lady.

⁶³Ruth Schwartz Cowan, "The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century," in History of Women in the United States: Domestic Ideology and Domestic Work, Nancy F. Cott, ed., K.G. Saur, Munich, 1992, pp.375-394, and Woloch, p. 295.

Even though women developed career opportunities in many areas, outward ladylike behavior continued to be cherished by even the most successful career women.⁶⁴ That Rachel was presented as being a paragon of charm and hospitality does not, then, seem anomalous in fitting her into a twentieth-century perspective.

The authors of the works themselves seem to exemplify the changing roles of women. Mary French Caldwell was quite a young woman who was not a full-fledged member of the LHA, though she had ties with the group. It does not seem surprising that one of a younger generation should portray a more modern image of Rachel. Nellie Treanor Stokes, however, had been an LHA member for years. As one of the signers of the protest against Minningerode in 1925, she called herself Mrs. Walter M. Stokes. But the time of her book in 1942, she wrote as Nellie Treanor Stokes. Stokes own departure from the label "Mrs." illustrates how pervasive the change in ideology must have been throughout society. Both the old establishment (Stokes) and the younger anti-establishment (Caldwell) embraced modern values and presented Rachel as a modern woman.

The Rachel that the LHA put forth in the late 1930s indeed exemplifies many of the characteristics of a modern, "new woman" of that time. Anne Scott has claimed that the self-image of Southern women, by 1930, contained new elements of self-confidence and independence.⁶⁵ The self-confident Rachel, the Rachel who remained dignified in the face of the political scandal, surely fits into this model. By restructuring Rachel with these new characteristics, the LHA also offered a re-interpretation of the time in which she lived. The

⁶⁴Scott, pp. 225-226.

⁶⁵Ibid, p. 229.

Old South, as they believed Rachel was its shining example, became very similar in spirit and ideology to their own time.

Conclusion: The Reinterpretation of The Old South

In 1944, southern historian and Vanderbilt professor Frank Owsley stated that being comfortable with one's history, glossing over it and not offering revision, signalled being at peace with the surrounding world.⁶⁶ The early Tennessee biographers of Andrew Jackson seem to fall prey to this kind of complacency. Heiskell and Colyar's hagiographic works offer little, if any, criticism of either Andrew's political policies or of his personal actions. The LHA, by facing the challenges to their image of Andrew and Rachel offered by Minningerode's historical research, had to confront both their past and their present. They had to confront the past in order prove that the Jacksons were people worthy of their approbation. They had to confront the present to maintain their links to a much-cherished past.

The task of facing the present proved difficult. The traditionalism of the South and of American culture in general was under great pressure from many quarters in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Technological innovation introduced new social and cultural structures based upon industrial capitalism rather than agrarian values. It has been suggested that Southerners were particularly susceptible to confusion about their place in modern American society because of their slow industrialization versus the rest of the United States. For example, improvements in communication, such as radios and automobiles reduced sectionalism by bringing different parts of the nation together, creating

⁶⁶Harriet Chappel Owsley: Frank Lawrence Owsley: Historian of the Old South, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1990, p. 157.

a common "American" culture.⁶⁷ Where was the traditional, distinctive "Southerner" left in the amorphous mass of modern American culture?

Most importantly, we have seen, in the previous chapter, how the ideals of women changed in the early twentieth century. Women were called upon to exert influence outside the home and become more than moral inspirations of the family. Women's organizations became less like social clubs and increasingly publicly active in function. Southern women, though, seemed to be under pressure to conform to the new ideals of womanhood, yet not to conform completely. On the one hand, propaganda from popular magazines and from publicly active women called upon them to become educated, independent, and capable. On the other hand, tradition dictated that they pursue these new opportunities with ladylike decorum; "pushy" or proudly independent women were not appreciated.⁶⁸

The LHA, by the mid-1940s, had issued two very different images of womanhood with their description of their first lady, Rachel Jackson. The first of these provided a brief, non-detailed sketch of a gentle woman who stood very much in the shadow of her illustrious husband. The second set of images, growing out of what they considered to be vicious attacks on Rachel's honor, exposed a woman with a very active role in the career of her husband, whose courage and fortitude sustained her in the midst of both physical danger and political scandal, and whose social aptitude proved beyond reproach.

One of the most important issues raised by the LHA's heightened interest in Rachel, and moreover in their changing attitudes toward presenting her, is the identification LHA

⁶⁷Warren I. Susman, Culture and Commitment 1929-1945, George Braziller, New York, 1973, pp. 3-8.

⁶⁸Scott, pp. 221-226.

members felt they had with the image of Rachel. We must also question the reasons why the LHA so vigorously opposed presenting some details about Rachel gathered from scholarly research, especially in the Minningerode case. The article indeed offered some unflattering aspects of Rachel, but in some instances the details it brought out were concretely documented with primary source material.

The answer to this query lies, it seems, in what the LHA and their supporters believed the unflattering imagery actually to represent. Although the LHA and some Nashvillians passionately believed the image of Rachel herself that Minningerode and "The Gorgeous Hussy" introduced to be incorrect, they claimed that these revisionists had other agendas. For instance, Senator McKellar, in a prepared speech before Congress after Minningerode's article was published, supposed that the propaganda served to "bolster the waning fortunes of the Republican Party." Minningerode's article, he suggested, "was a carefully prepared attack on the Democratic Party."⁶⁹ Here, the image revision functioned, according to McKellar, as a planned political maneuver against Andrew Jackson's party. Yet, based on the letters to the editor in the newspapers, some Nashvillians believed that the most shocking thing that these presentations actually did was to cast a slur on Southern culture.

The editorials surrounding "The Gorgeous Hussy" illustrate an indignant attitude not only for Rachel and Andrew, but for the whole South as well. Lee Wilkinson, a contributor to the *Banner*, recalled that Andrew and Rachel had received unfair treatment by Minningerode and claimed that "the only prominent defender of Jackson north of the Mason

⁶⁹*Tennessean*, "McKellar Raps Minningerode", June 1, 1925, Bettie M. Donelson Papers, Tennessee State Archives.

and Dixon Line was Theodore Roosevelt." Wilkinson perceived that historically, Jackson had never been accorded respect and admiration outside the South. He perceived the images in film to be another example of the criticism of Jackson that had always come from non-Southerners. As for the film, he admitted that he had not seen it; word of mouth was enough to dissuade him. He concluded his letter with a very colorful paragraph that blasted those non-Southerners who attempted to reconstruct his homeland:

I have found out since growing to be an old man that much of the Civil War history taught me from Yankee-made history books was untrue, misconstrued, and deliberately falsified; and this bunch seems to be at it yet. The present and oncoming generations ought to have their history taught them by honest, pure-hearted purveyors of past events instead of scandal mongers, and muck-rakers.⁷⁰

That Mr. Wilkinson seemed to have his time frame incorrect (Rachel died in 1828, 33 years prior to the Civil War, and Jackson died in 1845, 16 years before the war) is significant in that it illustrates the deep wartime, sectional division that still, as late as 1935, characterized some Southerners. Another anonymous writer questioned, "(h)ave we, indeed, reached that point in an iconoclastic age when all reverences and ideals must be surrendered to a spirit of mental and emotional adventure? Is nothing to be sacred from commercialized sensationalism?"⁷¹

That Minningerode, a Southerner and a Virginian, confronted the unsavory, less romantic side of Rachel and Andrew, both confused and angered those citizens gathered to protest his work. Mrs. Stokes, Regent of the LHA, asserted that it was "impossible to understand the action of Mr. Minningerode, who...was [a] minister of the Gospel and a

⁷⁰*Nashville Banner*, November 10, 1935, Green Scrapbook, the Hermitage.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

Virginian." Dr. Witherspoon, the next speaker at the protest meeting, declared that he did not care about Minningerode's credentials because these notwithstanding, "the man [was] a liar."⁷² That Minningerode could "lay violent hands upon this white flower of a chivalrous love and devotion," the group lamented, "is proof of how alien is the spirit that failed to discern it."⁷³

Minningerode's publishers acknowledged the Nashville protest, which was included in the final form of Minningerode's book. They recognized that a peculiar "fundamentalist attitude" emanated from Tennessee against the article. Delicately, they also intimated that the South, clinging to somewhat outdated traditionalism, refused to recognize the truth presented by scholarly research. "In certain communities," they wrote, "there does appear to survive a mediaeval [sic] point of view towards the fruits of not altogether unlaborious and unscientious research."⁷⁴

Caldwell and Stokes countered the abrasive views of the Old South that they perceived Minningerode to have presented in their works on Rachel. Embedded in these closer analyses of Rachel was the wish of the both Caldwell and Stokes to present the women of the Old South--with Rachel as the grande dame of "Old South" Tennessee--as having superior qualities. For although they appreciated the wilderness frontier into which Rachel came from Virginia, references to the Old South lauded the romantic image of a gracious, bygone era in these narratives. We are told that Rachel's servants, for example,

⁷²Minningerode, p. 188.

⁷³Ibid, p. 190.

⁷⁴Ibid, p. 192. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find a Nashville response to the sentiments expressed by George Putnam and Sons, Minningerode's publisher.

were trained "in the old Southern fashion" of her mother and grandmother.⁷⁵ Even in the rustic Hermitage, hospitality, full larders, and well-mannered servants made up "the ease of manner common to the plantation homes of the Old South."⁷⁶ Imbuing Rachel's home with references to the Old South was an important part of constructing the newer image.

Caldwell and Stokes were not alone in their bid to preserve the culture of the Old South. Another way of furthering the "correct" image was to have the Southern version of history taught in schools.⁷⁷ Historic preservation societies, also, worked to promote the golden images of the "Old South". The sites protected by preservation organizations were valuable historic monuments, but they also would be used to teach the virtue, refinement, and patriotism of an era gone by.⁷⁸ Virginia activists in the Association for the Protection of Virginia Antiquities (APVA), envisioned their task as not only maintaining the historic places of the Old Dominion but also keeping alive the myths and legends associated with those places, i.e., the traditional values, embodied in men like Washington and Lee, so that

⁷⁵Caldwell, p. 183

⁷⁶Ibid, p. 214.

⁷⁷The LHA probably also advocated "correct" teaching in schools. Bettie Donelson saved a clipping from the *Tennessean* regarding a textbook committee meeting wherein committee chief Mrs. Rutledge Smith also believed that children should be taught Southern heritage, "the legends of the Southland," just as they were taught "those of ancient Greece and Rome." (Bettie M. Donelson papers, Tennessee State Archives) Some members of women's organizations in other states, especially, were keen to appreciate a certain slant to the telling of history. For instance, North Carolinian Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) opposed Northern versions of Civil War history. They opposed Northern teachers coming South, and they diligently perused textbooks used in North Carolina schools. DAR members advocated all-Southern teaching to get across the "correct" version of the war to young people. (Anastasia Sims: Feminism and Femininity in the New South: White Women's Organizations in North Carolina, 1883-1930, Dissertation for University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1985, pp. 1-5.) It has been noted earlier that Mr. Lee Wilkinson, in his letter to the editor, resented the same kind of Northern influence in Tennessee.

⁷⁸James M. Lindgren, "'Virginia Needs Living Heroes': Historic Preservation in the Progressive Era," *Public Historian* 13: 9-24, 1991.

the modern generation could emulate those sterling qualities. "We cherish our past for the sake of our future so that while preserving the one we are building the other for ages yet to come," APVA member Joseph Bryan explained.⁷⁹ These Virginians, like the North Carolinians and Tennesseans of the same period, also actively sought to break what they believed to be the Northern stranglehold on the telling of history. They considered themselves in a sort of competition with New England, vying for the position of birthplace of American liberty and identity, Plymouth versus Jamestown.⁸⁰

The Ladies Hermitage Association, with its reconstruction of the image of Rachel Jackson helped to further the twentieth-century ideal of the "New Woman" in the South. Along with this reconstruction, the LHA also offered the public a reinterpretation of the Old South. The new image of Rachel embodied many qualities that, although in the name of the "Old South", seems much more modern than the domestic, withdrawn-from-the-spotlight ideal put forth by earlier writers like Dorris and Heiskell. Rachel had definite influence over Jackson's public career; she remained calm and dignified, even in periods of extreme stress, not collapsing under the weight of scandal; and she showed strength of will wholly unlike a submissive lady of the former "Old South." Even the artists made Rachel over to fit twentieth-century ideals of attractiveness. In this way, the LHA re-established and reassured its link to the past. By making Rachel, an antebellum woman, seem very much like twentieth-century women, the LHA members still had an ideological kinship with

⁷⁹James M. Lindgren, "For the Sake of Our Future': The Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97: 47-74, 1989, pp.47-51.

⁸⁰*Ibid*, p. 53.

their foremothers. Though they were somewhat different than women of a century before, their work did not seem to be iconoclastic or rebellious against tradition.

The image of Rachel Jackson altered significantly in the early twentieth century not by accident or coincidence but by manipulation of source material. The values and ideals of the imagemakers themselves were superimposed upon the history of the one they claimed to describe. This is, perhaps, a problem with writing history in general, because its writing seems to be slanted towards the social or political agendas of its writers. Even professional historians, it seems to me, might sometimes have trouble in providing substantive analysis because their views may be based upon their present perspective. This outlook might prove successful for the objectivity it provides; one can stand away from an event and formulate a good analysis of a "big picture." Imposition of present values on the past, however, is not always successful. Instead of an objective, realistic analysis of the past, one receives an interpretation encumbered with the ideological vision of the generation thrust upon it. That, in turn, becomes a primary source like the works I have studied here. I do not mean to imply that the work of all historians or of historical organizations lies in deliberately distorting the past. I do think, however, that social, political, or cultural opinions are present in even the best historical scholarship, and we must be sensitive to these.

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