

James Breckinridge

1763-1833

James Breckinridge, frontier aristocrat and leader, was born in Botetourt county, Virginia, near Daleville on March 7, 1763. His grandfather, Alexander Breckinridge arrived in Philadelphia from Northern Ireland in 1728 with his wife and children. This Scotch-Irish family soon migrated to Augusta County, Virginia, but upon Alexander's death, his son Robert moved his family in the early 1760's to Botetourt County. James was the third son of Robert Breckinridge and his second wife, Letitia Preston.

As a mature man, James Breckinridge (1) was six feet two inches tall. His shoulders were wide and he was known for his excellent posture. He had a "fine head, expansive brow, a well-shaped mouth and a keen piercing eye. He was elegant in dress, generally appearing in public with neat fitting cloth coat and pants, polished boots, spotless ruffled bosom, and a gold headed cane." (2) Little is known of Jaimy's boyhood, except that he liked to hunt and to fish. At an early age he had a deep interest in the militia and served as a messenger during his mid-teens. His early education was acquired through private tutors and, following his older brother John's example, he completed his higher education at the College of William and Mary.

The Revolutionary War interrupted his college career but he did return to graduate in 1785. James studied under the famous lawyer, George Wythe. His education and his life were influenced and enriched by such other famous Virginians as Jefferson, Monroe, Madison, John Marshall, Patrick Henry, George Mason and Henry Lee.

At the age of eighteen, Breckinridge was commissioned as an ensign and served under his uncle, Colonel William Preston, and later under General Nathaniel Green in North Carolina.

After the War, the popular veteran entered the political arena in earnest. In 1782 he became a deputy clerk in Fincastle, in 1789 was elected to the Virginia General Assembly and the same year became a trustee to the town of Fincastle where he was practicing law. By 1791 he had become active as a surveyor - a financial necessity since the community could not support a lawyer.

On January 1, 1791, James Breckinridge and Ann Seldon of Elizabeth City County were married at historic St. John's Episcopal Church in Richmond. The young couple" settled in" Fincastle. By 1804 he had increased the size of their plantation two miles northwest of Fincastle and had built the elegant mansion "Grove Hill." This estate in time became one of the nearly four hundred thousand acres and made Mr. Breckinridge a wealthy man and a famous frontier planter.

For thirteen sessions James Breckinridge served in the Virginia Legislature (1789-1824) and also was a Representative to the Eleventh United States Congress (1809-1817). During this time he was again called to active duty by the Virginia Militia and served as a brigadier general in the War of 1812.

After 1824, "The General" never sought an elected office. His chief interest became the new University of Virginia where he worked closely with his friend, Thomas Jefferson, in getting the institution established. He served on its Board of Visitors from 1819-1827.

James Breckinridge was a Federalist, yet he was an independent thinker and was never bound by strict conservative doctrine; he was primarily concerned with and interested in benefitting his state and community by developing and protecting the frontier, by promoting agriculture, by encouraging education, by expanding transportation, and by protecting the rights of the individual. He was truly a man of the people!

He practiced law as "an intellectual pursuit" and charged a very modest fee of ten shillings (under two dollars) for services rendered. His training in law and his practice of this profession were of infinite value to the citizens of "transmontane Virginia." (3)

General Breckinridge died May 13, 1833 and was buried with all military honors at "Grove Hill." He lived a long and profitable life filled with a diversity of interests which he was able to develop because of his keen intellect, his talents, and his abiding love for his section of Virginia.

THE BRECKINRIDGE LAW OFFICE

A room in this building was occupied by James Breckinridge while practicing law. Since there were no photographs nor inventories left by him, an effort has been made to depict the office of an attorney of prominence and wealth of the early 1800's.

Since Mr. Breckinridge was a friend and admirer of Jefferson, the shutters and bookcase are copied from the ones at Monticello. The paneling is typical of the period as are the colors in the decor. The brass sconces are replicas of those in the pantry at the Governor's Palace in Colonial Williamsburg. The fireplace was restored with bricks from the Fincastle Courthouse, designed by Jefferson.

The desk, the large wooden chair, the barometer, and the settle are authentic antiques made in the early 1800's. The oval-bottomed candlesticks and the wrought iron andirons are on loan from a member of the Breckinridge family. Several of the books are from the library of General Breckinridge and the sign outside the door is copied from his bookplate. The sketch of "Grove Hill" was copied by Mrs. Sergius Lloyd, from an old picture.

The restoration of the James Breckinridge Law Office was financed by the General James Breckinridge Chapter of the DAR through the sponsorship of Antique Shows planned and executed by Mrs. Holman Willis, a former regent of the Chapter. The first piece of furniture - the desk - was placed here in honor of Mrs. Willis. The project was inaugurated during the term of Mrs. L. Edger Foley as regent (1968-71) and was completed during the term of the present regent, Mrs. John W. Boswell. The Committee for the Restoration consisted of the following members: Miss Nell D. Walters, Historian, Mrs. Sergius Lloyd, Mrs. Parke Buchanan, Mrs. Victor Dandridge, Mrs. John Larson, and Mrs. Holman Willis.

1. The spelling of "Breckenridge" to "Breckinridge" was changed circa 1783 or 1784 to avoid confusion of title to land grants as various branches of this famous family migrated farther into southwestern Virginia and into Kentucky and Ohio.

2. Thomas D. Houston, "Early Days in Fincastle" - June 20, 1783.

3. Katherine Kennedy McNulty

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Appreciation is expressed to:

1. The Roanoke Historical Society for the use of the JOURNAL OF THE ROANOKE HISTORICAL SOCIETY - Volume 7 - Number 2 - the article, "General Breckinridge, Frontier Man for All Seasons" by Katherine Kennedy McNulty.

2. Members of the Breckinridge family now living in the Roanoke-Fincastle-Salem area for factual information about their famous ancestor.

WALNUT CABINET

Cabinet was given to her by Edison Old of Hollins who was working on the Blue Ridge Parkway. He was in Washington, D.C. when they were restoring the Ford Theatre and someone there had given it to him.

Donor: Florence H. Floyd, 98 years old

POTTERY JUG

Made in Israel Christian Potter's Shop across from the Becky Holmes house in Fincastle, VA

Donor: Rebekah Peck

CROCK

Circa 1867 1875

Made by George N. Fulton

Donor: Claudine Fulton Ellis

REDWARE

Made by "Potter Pete" Obenshain

Donor: Mrs. W.F. Bowles (Netty Margaret Obenshain)

BRECKINRIDGE PEWTER FLASK

Belonged to John Cabell Breckinridge (1821 1875).

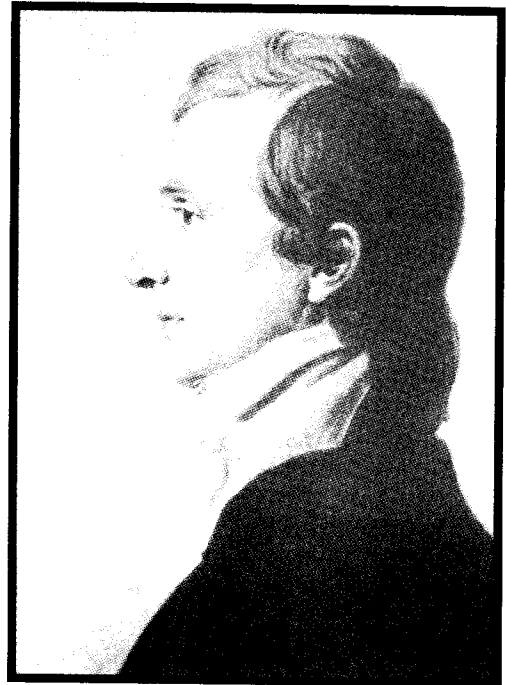
He was a great nephew of General James Breckinridge of Botetourt County. He served as Vice President of the U.S. from 1857-1861 under James Buchanan.

Donor: Daniel Schorsch

James Breckinridge

Attorney At Law

Botetourt County



1763-1833

LAW OFFICE

Restored by the

General James Breckinridge Chapter DAR

1972