

# General James Blair Was One of Colorful Men of This Section

General James Blair was one of the strong men who was nurtured in that cradle of strong men, The Waxhaws. A giant in stature who had the strength of three ordinary men, a military leader, a statesman and an athlete was he. He lived in an age when dueling was a favorite method of settling disputes and it was but natural that he should have had a number of personal arguments with other outstanding leaders.

In the opinion of some writers Blair was a bully but he had gentle traits as well as some that were not so admirable. His reputation as a bully was probably made because of the fact that he was more or less violent and reckless while under the influence of liquor. He drank heavily in his latter years but this was largely because it brought him relief from acute pains which he suffered as a victim of rheumatism.

One of the distinguished sheriffs of Lancaster county was General Blair in his earlier days although he moved from the Waxhaws to Kershaw county while comparatively a young man.

James Blair as a young man was the champion wrestler of this vicinity as he was six feet, six inches tall and it is not on record that he was ever bested in a wrestling match. Had he lived in the present day he would have been the answer to the prayer of any football coach.

The Blairs were among the early settlers in the Waxhaws and it is probable that Belair section derived its name from this family as the misspelling of names was not uncommon in the early days.

Concerning Blair the following appears in "Historic Camden": "We have little in regard to his early days. He was born in the Waxhaws and was the son of William and Sarah Douglas Blair. Francis Blair an elder brother commanded a company under Col. Adam McWillie in the war of 1812. In March, 1818, when 28, Blair was elected general of the eighth brigade of state militia, being at that time sheriff of Lancaster county. This was a distinction at his age, as the military was then the main avenue to public promotion, also a pastime that filled the place of baseball and football in these days."

"But the muster was not all parade. Here feats of wrestling, boxing and 'gouging' were indulged in, often ending in serious affairs. The candidate for popular honors had to win his spurs. Blair was a perfect Hercules in all such encounters and stood without a rival. It is related how the champion of North Carolina muster fields, hearing of the Wax-

haw giant came down to tackle him on his own ground and drove straight to his home. Finding Blair in the field the North Carolinian insisted on having a round right there and then. Blair unhooked his mule and the result of the grapple was that Blair threw his adversary over the rail fence with such force that he had to recuperate in the hospitable Blair home."

About 1820 Blair moved to Kershaw county where he married. Col. W. M. Shannon who was a boy at that time had the following to say concerning the general:

"Few men have made so strong an impression on us in our youthful days. We have sat upon his knee, admired and loved his gentle, winning manner, his expression and noble face, and yet in an hour after would be somewhat afraid of the other General Blair whom we would see on the streets or some platform. General Blair was one of nature's noblemen so that when he came out among men in the outer world he towered above them as he had done among the native growth of the back woods."

In 1821 he was elected to congress for the district composed of Kershaw, Lancaster, Chesterfield and Sumter counties. He was then living on Lynches Creek about six miles from Bethune. According to historians Blair indulged in strong drink, and on one occasion it is said that when a neighbor, Lovick Young, incurred his dislike, he drove his horse into the Young home, had his horse leap over the cradle of the Young infant while the father hid under the house.

Kirkland and Kennedy in their book on Kershaw county wrote as follows:

"It was inevitable that he should figure in brawls and duels. Several were averted on the eve of the event such as that with James H. Hammond (afterward governor and United States senator), which ended with drinks instead of shots, after principals and seconds had gathered some place in North Carolina. That with Thomas P. Evans actually occurred. Evans was very small and wore a coat much too large, which saved him, for Blair's ball passed through the coat without touching Evans, who had no valid excuse for missing so huge a mark as the general."

Such exploits enhanced rather than impaired the general's popularity. In 1828 he again stood for congress and defeated Richard I. Manning of Sumter. From that time he became the recognized head of the anti-nullificationist party in South Carolina. With his hot temper it is a

little strange that he should have adopted the conservative side.

The battle over nullification waxed hot in South Carolina during the time Blair was in congress, and he alone of South Carolina's delegation was opposed to nullification. In a letter to his constituents he wrote as follows:

"The union for better or for worse, and what heaven has joined together none but the devil or a nullifier would wish to put asunder."

On September 7, 1832, a great tribute was paid to General Blair when a banquet was served in his honor at Camden with 700 prominent persons in attendance. The leading toast was "General Blair, our representative in congress, worthy of Old Hickory. Well done, thou good and faithful servant, you voted against the act of 1828, the vote of two senators and six representatives to the contrary."

General Blair rose to speak as the band played, "Hail to the Chief". He concluded a masterful address by saying: "Kershaw district, may she ever exercise that prudence and patriotism which characterized the distinguished officer of the revolution after whom she was named."

General Blair's star set when he was in the prime of life. He was addicted to drink and morphine to allay the sufferings of rheumatism, becoming crazed thereby. At the Washington theatre one night in March, 1834, something in the play displeased him, and in a fit of aberration he fired a loaded pistol at the actors. He was fined five dollars after a doctor testified that he was under the influence of brandy and opium to alleviate his sufferings.

Soon afterward his last desperate act ended his life. On April 1, 1834, as he lay in bed depressed by sickness, he fired a pistol ball into his brain.

The New York Courier and Enquirer said of him following his death:

"He was brave to the very verge of utter indifference to fear. We knew him well and know that a nobler spirit never inhabited a human bosom. Although brave at all times he was bland and gentle in all the relations of life. He was more thoroughly and decidedly popular than any other man who ever lived within the district he represented in congress."

"It has been a matter of astonishment to friends as well as to enemies that he could write as well as he did upon subjects with which an uneducated man like himself could hardly be supposed to be conversant, but there was a native genius in Blair that rose above all disadvantages."

