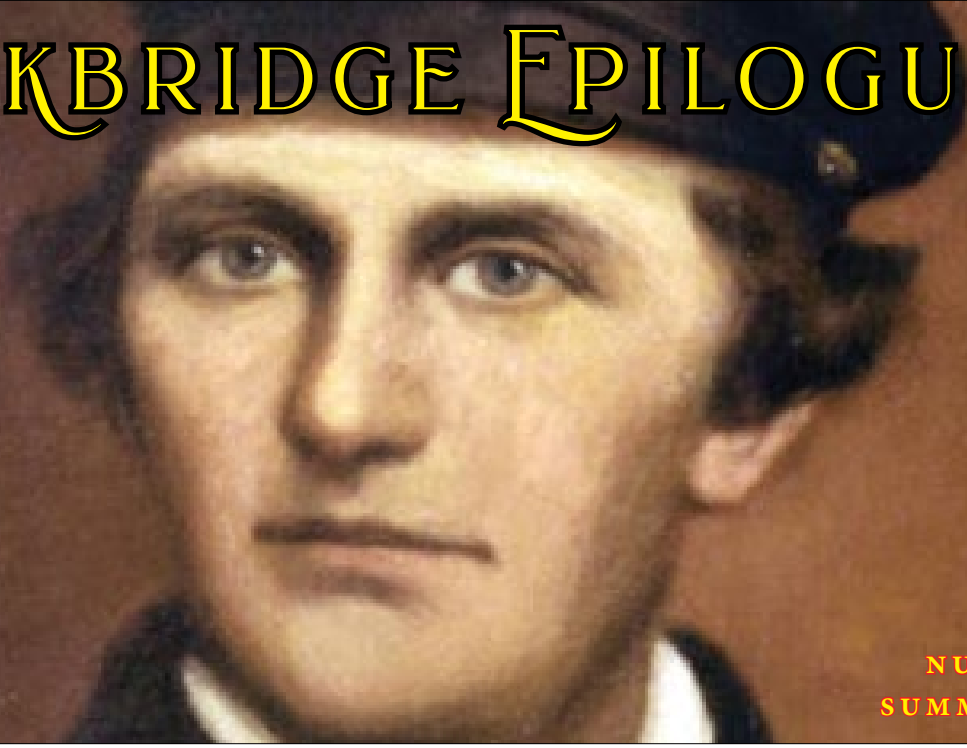


ROCKBRIDGE EPILOGUES



NUMBER 42
SUMMER 2023

J. T. L. PRESTON

By Richard Halseth

Presented to the Rockbridge Historical Society, January 26, 2009

THERE ARE NO BOOKS about John Thomas Lewis Preston, nor statues in his honor. The memory of J. T. L. Preston abides largely in the shadow of his famous second wife, Margaret Junkin Preston, and that of his brother-in-law, Thomas Jonathan Jackson. Let us balance the record here.

J. T. L. Preston (1811–90) came from a Scots-Irish background, and his lineage includes some of the famous and near-famous of Virginia. Among his descendents were four sons who served in the Confederate Army. His maternal grandfather was Edmund Randolph, governor of Virginia and Secretary of State under George Washington. His cousins, to name only a very few, included James Breckinridge, a member of the House of Representatives who helped Thomas Jefferson establish the University of Virginia; John Cabot Breckinridge, vice president under James Buchanan and candidate for the presidency in 1860; Francis Blair Jr., a second cousin

once removed, and in 1868 also a candidate for vice president; William Preston Johnston, invited in 1867 by Robert E. Lee to become Washington College's chairman of history and English literature and later the first President of Tulane University; and — not least, certainly not least in Lexington — James McDowell, who lived at Col Alto, an eloquent orator, cogent reasoner and perfect politician: U.S. Congressman and then Governor of Virginia from 1843 to 1846.

How is that for a family tree?

John Preston himself was born in Lexington on April 25, 1811. Young Preston was privileged to receive the best education available in his time. As a boy

Dick Halseth is an author, speaker and historian writing about higher education. He is currently editing the journal and letters of William Watts Folwell (1833–1929), who became the first president of the University of Minnesota. The portrait above is by Adele Williams, based on a c. 1855 photograph (courtesy Virginia Military Institute).

in Richmond he was a schoolmate of Edgar Allan Poe and he later wrote: “My boyish admiration for my school fellow’s genius was so great that I carried his portfolio home to my mother, expert in the English Classics, who praised Poe’s work.” Preston graduated from Washington College in 1828 and studied for a time at the University of Virginia, focusing on philosophy and modern languages. From there he went to Yale University, where he pursued studies in science and law. He returned to Lexington to establish his own law practice and soon became a leader in the community. It was said of him: “Mr. Preston was brilliant and capable. A typical Virginian in appearance, he was 6 feet in height, well proportioned, graceful, courteous, dignified, cordial, quick witted, fluent, and masterful.”

John Preston had inherited a handsome estate and owned land in Augusta and Rockbridge Counties. He also had land along North Main Street at Hook Lane, across from what became the Virginia Military Institute.

On August 2, 1832, he married Sarah Lyle Caruthers (sometimes spelled Carruthers). Sarah’s father had been a Lexington merchant and her mother was descended from the Archibald Alexander family, merchants at Jordan’s Point in East Lexington and builders of what we now know as the Alexander-Withrow House. Having lost both parents at a young age, Sarah lived with her aunt, Mrs. Captain Henry McClung. When she was eight years old and a pupil in a private school, she met

another eight-year-old by the name of John Thomas Lewis Preston. A romance eventually blossomed that resulted in their marriage and the birth of eight children. In January of 1856, alas, Sarah died in childbirth.

A YEAR AND A HALF LATER, in 1857, John Preston married for the second time. His new wife was Margaret Junkin, eldest daughter of Dr. George Junkin, president of Washington College, and sister of Eleanor Junkin, wife of Major Thomas Jonathan Jackson, of the faculty at neighboring Virginia Military Institute.

Margaret was described by a friend as short in stature, having dark auburn hair and small, refined features. She was possessed with an attractive personality, gracious and winning manners and the ability of charming repartée. Eventually she became known as the Poetess of the South.

John Preston is widely recognized as the moving force behind the establishment of Virginia Military Institute. For many years, the state arsenal had been located in Lexington, where it was protected by a handful of militia troops. These fellows proved to be rowdy in their behavior, and the problem, at least as perceived by townspeople, sorely needed resolution. In the summer of 1834, the leading local intellectual and social organization, the Franklin Literary Society, sponsored a debate on the future of the arsenal — specifically, whether it might be put to better use as a school that taught both

VERY FRIENDLY RIVALS

Both Preston and John Blair Lyle, a childhood friend and fellow classmate at Washington College, had known Sally Caruthers from childhood, and it is said that both men loved her. But Lyle never shared his love with her and remained silent as eventually she and John Preston married.

After the marriage, Lyle left Lexington but was eventually persuaded by Preston to return. Preston supposedly paid all of Lyle’s debts and set him up in what became his famous downtown bookstore; through the years there was an intimacy between the two men that greatly influenced the community. The bookstore became a rendezvous for the intellectuals of town. Here Daniel Harvey Hill, a member of the Washington College faculty, John Letcher, lawyer,

politician and wartime Governor of Virginia, Reverend White of the Lexington Presbyterian Church, and Major Thomas J. Jackson and others met and exchanged ideas.

In November 1856, Lyle suffered a stroke and was carried to the Preston home, where he lingered for the next nineteen months, paralyzed on his left side but clear and alert of mind. Lyle died in July 1858 and instead of his being buried at Timber Ridge, where his parents had been interred, he was laid to rest in the Preston family plot in the Lexington Presbyterian Cemetery. The tombstone Preston placed on the grave characterized Lyle as “the closest friend, the bravest man, and the best Christian ever known to him who erects this stone to his memory.”

Washington and Lee University Special Collections



Margaret Preston in 1868; portrait by William Washington

practical and military subjects. Preston argued the affirmative with poise and intelligence. The audience voted unanimously in favor of Preston’s concept.

His excellent intellect and judicial mind, his consuming energy, and his sense of the value of education ultimately helped bring VMI into existence. In the following August, three articles appeared in the *Lexington Gazette* by anonymous writer known as “Civis.” These articles argued for the concept of substituting the state guard at the arsenal with a military school. In fact it was John Preston who wrote these articles, which were received with a strong positive response by area residents. A resolution was drawn up and John Preston was designated to present it to the General Assembly in Richmond. As a result, the assembly passed an act in its 1835-36 session that disbanded the arsenal and replaced it with a military school, to be supervised by a board of visitors.

Legislators originally envisioned a military adjunct to Washington College, also located in Lexington; in March 1839, however, it was made an entirely independent institution. In Preston’s own words, the school’s object was to supplant the present guard with another, composed of young men between seventeen and twenty-four years of age. These men would perform the necessary guardsmen’s duties but would receive no pay, instead enjoying the opportunities of a liberal education.

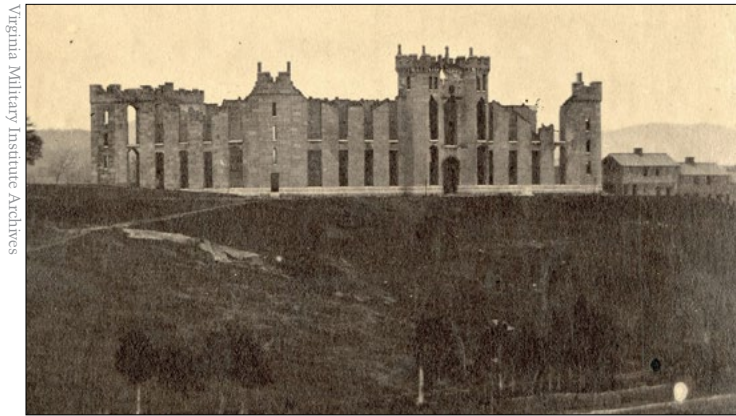
For instructions let there be: 1) A tutor to teach the classics, and the higher branches of an English education. 2) A professor to teach sciences generally. 3) A captain to discharge his present duties as an officer, and, in addition, those of an instructor in the military art.

The first [youngest] class would be principally engaged in military exercises, and upon these, with the second, would be the duties of the guard mainly devolve. Third class would be more occupied in study, and the fourth, as far as practicable, released from military duty, and under the present liberal provisions of the trustees of Washington College, might attend lectures there.

At the outset there were only two instructors, Francis H. Smith, a professor of mathematics at Hampden-Sydney College, and J. T. L. Preston. Smith was made Commandant with the rank of colonel and Preston became a major, though he had no military training and his background was limited to classical studies and the law. He became a professor of Latin and found this task so congenial that he held the chair for forty-seven years, interrupted only by the Civil War.

In 1851, when Major Thomas Jackson joined the faculty at VMI, he and Major Preston began a long, close friendship. They were both associated with the Franklin Society, the Lexington Presbyterian Church and the Lyle bookstore downtown. And, of course, they eventually became brothers-in-law.

PRESTON SERVED Virginia and the Confederacy in the Civil War. On April 20, 1861, when he was the institute’s acting commandant, orders came



Virginia Military Institute Archives
Virginia Military Institute Barracks, c. 1866, after Union General David Hunter's destructive raid in 1864.

from Richmond for the cadets to move to that location as soon as possible. Preston made the necessary arrangements, and Major Jackson led them to Richmond. Preston stayed behind with forty-eight younger cadets but soon thereafter he too left for Richmond and joined Jackson, who was commissioned colonel of Virginia Volunteers and dispatched to Harpers Ferry. Preston went with him as his acting assistant adjutant general, but his field service was of short duration: He was recalled to the institute in May.

The next spring, Preston was promoted to lieutenant colonel and left for Craney Island as an aide to Colonel Francis H. Smith, commander of the fort there. Yet in May 1864, he was back again in Lexington, instructing at the institute. In June, in anticipation of Union General Hunter's imminent raid, he arranged to have six canal boats take commissary stores, artillery, ammunition and VMI's vital records to Lynchburg.

After Hunter devastated the institute barracks, the work of the Institute was resumed in Richmond, with Preston as one of the faculty. In 1882, at the age of seventy-one, he became an emeritus professor of languages.

John Preston was a member of the Lexington Presbyterian Church for fifty-nine years and a ruling elder for forty-seven years. He was a man of strong and unwavering religious faith, a thorough student of the scriptures and extensively read in theological works. With Major Jackson he taught at the church-sponsored Black Sunday school, and after Jackson's death in May

1863, Colonel Preston continued to teach there for two decades.

AFTER THE WAR, he and Margaret had become interested in the growing commercial and industrial community then developing around Jordan's Point. He drew the plans for a chapel for the East Lexington community, and on the side of a bluff overlooking the Point it was built. He and Mrs. Preston oversaw the construction, and in fact he and his friends, most of whom were Confederate veterans, performed much of the work. When it was finished, the chapel was named Beechenbrook, after one of the works written by his wife, Margaret. This chapel became an outpost of the Lexington Presbyterian Church.

Colonel Preston loved Lexington more than any other spot on earth. On one occasion, as he took his ease on his vast veranda, a friend passing by happened to ask him why he did not travel on his vacation in place of remaining behind while his friends scattered to find rest in comfort. "Why should I take a trip," Preston replied. "There is not another place in the world as pleasant to me as just where I am sitting."

He was a familiar figure on horseback, often setting out for a day of hunting. Deer, fox, bear and birds of all varieties filled the forests around Lexington. Preston loved the song of the hound pack as he and his hunting party followed along the ridges. Breeding dogs and horses, along with advanced agriculture, consumed much of his leisure time.

He sometimes spoke his mind too plainly for the comfort of others. He was not a drinking man, and in fact Colonel Preston was described as temperate almost to a fault. He guarded his health jealously. He spoke Greek, Latin and French fluently. His prose style, as shown by numerous letters, was meticulous, always filled with feeling and quite readable in an age when stilted prose was the accepted manner. His entire life was guided by devotion to religion in an infinite knowledge of the Bible. His prodigious memory served him well and his grandchildren remember him as a man with piercing blue eyes



The Preston home in 1870. Margaret Preston is at the right in black.

who could quote at length from the Bible. He wrote for papers and periodicals, especially on religious and social subjects, but was also a regular contributor to agricultural journals. In 1881, Washington and Lee University conferred on him the honorary degree of doctor of laws.

Death came on July 15, 1890. His granddaughter, Mrs. Janet Allen Bryan, wrote that her grandfather had "a courtly and authoritative bearing, and also high ideals and what is more important a spiritual allegiance to his Lord and master. He was fortunate in birth, education and comfortable wealth. He chose to devote his life to the training of young men of character and culture." ■

View or print this article in single-page format



After this article was written, a biography — *The Father of Virginia Military Institute: A Biography of Colonel J.T.L. Preston, CSA*, by Randolph Shaffner — was published by McFarland.