

Lucy Breckenridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864.

Mary D. Robertson, editor
Columbia: University of South Carolina Press (1994)
Copyright 1979, Mary D. Robertson

ISBN0-87249-999-5

Parts of this journal appeared in *Civil War Diaries*, Volume 23, No. 1, (March 1997)-copyright by The Kent State University Press

I was originally led to read this book by my father-in-law, an amateur historian. He is a descendant of [William Clark](#) of the [Lewis and Clark Expedition](#) fame. Also weighing in was the fact that Lucy Breckenridge lived just a few miles distant from my home. I read it in hopes of perhaps getting a few references to my own forebears.

The Breckenridge family

The Breckenridge family has roots which run deep within Virginia history. Lucy's great-grandfather was Robert Breckenridge, appointed by King [George III](#) in 1769 as one of the first colonial justices in Botetourt County, Virginia.

The 3rd son of Robert was James Breckenridge, who eventually became Lucy's grandfather. He served in the [Revolutionary War](#) and then became Deputy Clerk of Court at age 19. He went on to study law at Washington College (now [Washington & Lee University](#)), and graduated in 1785 from [William & Mary College](#). While there he studied under [George Wythe](#), one of the pre-eminent legal minds of the day. Wythe numbered among his students such figures as [Thomas Jefferson](#) and [John Marshall](#). After graduation James returned home to Fincastle, the seat of Botetourt County, where he opened a law office. James Breckenridge went on to serve in the legislature of Virginia, and eventually the US Congress (1809-1817). He also served in the [War of 1812](#) with the rank of Brigadier General.

By the turn of the century, James Breckenridge had amassed considerable wealth and holdings, owning some 4,000 acres. He married in 1791 and soon began construction of his family home, Grove Hill. It was an expansive Federal style manor consisting of 26 rooms, most heated by fireplaces. Grove Hill was the site

of visits by many people of note, among them Thomas Jefferson, [James Madison](#), [Patrick Henry](#), [James Monroe](#), [Edmund Randolph](#) and others. Grove Hill was accounted the most impressive home in the area, and often hosted as many as 50 guests.

In 1804 James Breckenridge petitioned for and received permission to dam Catawba Creek, powering a water driven mill. The mill became another revenue stream to the Breckenridge family, providing milling services to the surrounding area. The mill itself was constructed largely by slave labor and was run by the family slaves.

James Breckenridge married and produced 2 sons, the eldest named Cary, the youngest John. The lands of James Breckenridge were divided between the 2 sons upon his demise. With the death of James' widow in 1843 and the loss of brother John in 1844 the family holdings fell to Cary Breckenridge. He moved his family into the former home of his father at Grove Hill.

Cary Breckenridge was a large and silent man. He was educated at William & Mary College. In 1822 he was appointed as a Justice of the county and in 1849 received a commission by the governor appointing him as county Sheriff.

Rather than pursue a career in public office as his father had done, Cary instead concentrated on running the Grove Hill estate and attendant businesses. In the 1850s Cary led the family business in the production of [tobacco](#), corn, livestock, and the milling operation producing flour and cornmeal. He was the second largest slave owner in the county, holding 131 slaves. At that time there were only 4 other landowners who owned over 50 slaves in Botetourt County.

Cary ran the business, a feat requiring much of his time and efforts. The running of the family and home fell to his wife, the former Emma Walker Gilmer of Bedford County, Virginia. Cary and Emma had wed in 1831 and had soon started construction of Catawba, a home modeled after Grove Hill. It was their home until the passing of George Breckenridge and his wife, at which point Cary and Emma became resident of Grove Hill.

Lucy Breckenridge

This is the world into which Lucy Breckenridge was born. She, along with 5 brothers and 3 sisters, father Cary and mother Emma were the inhabitants of Grove Hill. The decade of the 1850s were a time of growth and economic boon to the

Breckenridge clan. The next decade with the attendant secession of Virginia from the Union and the war wrought huge changes in the fortunes of the family.

This book is the actual journal kept by Lucy Breckenridge from August 11, 1862 until December 25, 1864. She began the [journal](#) as a way to alleviate the boredom of everyday life, having no one to visit or to receive, and nothing to read but the Bible and the newspaper. It is the journal of a young woman in a society torn by the [Civil War](#). She was but 18 years old when the war began.

The journal details the daily happenings as well as the thoughts and dreams of a young woman of some position in the 19th century South. While the sons were educated at college, the girls were largely educated by tutors at the family home. The girls were avid readers, consuming periodicals, novels, and newspapers of the day as well as being exposed to classical literature. They could hold a discourse on religion, ethics, literature and a wide variety of other subjects.

Lucy confided to her diary, a tome she fully intended to destroy, her thoughts, dreams, and frustrations at the role she was forced to occupy by Southern society. She had a low estimation of the male gender in general while expressing admiration for certain individual members. She generally found women to be superior in morals, strength, and courage. While being an unashamed flirt, she viewed marriage with little enthusiasm.

"A woman's lot after she is married, unless there is an immense amount of love, is nothing but suffering and hard work."

The girls were expected to keep busy. They spent their days doing needlework, sewing uniforms and making bandages for the Confederate troops. They also knit and make gifts for the smaller children of the family. Lucy often notes of days spent reading, or playing games, or riding horses. She was an expert horsewoman as well as a marksman with firearms.

In large part, her journal is more concerned with the comings and goings of relatives and guests than with historical events. She does note news of battles won and lost, as well as other events of interest to historians. Her interests fell more to people rather than places or things.

She was engaged at least twice. The first engagement ended with no fanfare or apparent suffering on her part. She doesn't recount the reason for the end of the engagement, just that it had ended.

Her second engagement was to a Lieutenant in the [Army of the Confederacy](#), one Thomas Jefferson Bassett of Texas. The courtship was sporadic, being interrupted by her "Tommy's" frequent absences due to his duties. These absences, coupled with Lucy's ambivalence toward the institution of marriage, made for a slow pace toward the altar.

During these engagements Lucy found no harm in flirting with male visitors to Grove Hill. She was fairly merciless, leading these men into infatuation with her before inevitably enforcing limits to her involvement. To her credit, the men allowed themselves to be enticed, as men of every era are wont to do.

Lucy realized the narrow role her male dominated society forced her into, and often resented it. She recounts how it would be a good thing for women to take up arms and fight, that it was no better for their men to suffer the ravages of war than themselves. Her journal gives voice to her sentiments:

"I do not think our prospects for peace were ever so dark...I wish that women could fight...Their lives are not more precious than the men's, and they were made to suffer- so a leg shot off or a head either wouldn't hurt them much. I would gladly shoulder my pistol and shoot some [Yankees](#), if it were allowable."

Therein is contained her willingness to fight and the recognition of the strictures placed upon her.

The commentary is made by the editor that women of the period were placed upon a pedestal. That [pedestal](#) was and was meant to be a prison, holding them within a narrowly defined role.

The men were no less free, being required to fulfill their own role as leader, protector, and defender whatever their personal leanings or natures might have been. If southern women were viewed as the flower of womanhood, growing in a stately garden, then the men were the guard dogs of that garden, enforcing the boundaries at the cost of injury or their own death. For every Guinevere there was an Arthur who must hold the sword and wield the spear. In the society of the South it develops that no one was free, just that the chains of some were more apparent than those of others.

The Civil War made demands on the clan Breckenridge. Father Cary, while too old to serve in combat, supplied and maintained a [cavalry](#) company at his own personal expense. The 5 sons each answered the call to duty, a call which cost 3 of

them their lives. The first to fall was young John Breckenridge, a loss which hit Lucy particularly hard. She often recounts how she misses her "Johnny", and spends time alone alongside his grave at Grove Hill.

Grove Hill was located to the southern end of the [Shenandoah Valley](#), location of so much fierce fighting. It was on the fringe of action instead of in its direct path. Often the people at home simply waited for word of their loved ones and prayed for their safety. A great amount of time and effort were expended in writing to friends and relatives. Lucy recounts of days where she wrote a half dozen letters and received as many addressed to her. It is striking to note the difference between then and our present time with instant communication.

Lucy recalls the sicknesses of herself and her family and friends. To be ill was not an uncommon occurrence, and her writing is rife with mention of sickness from [croup](#) to [typhoid fever](#). In the 19th century to be sick from certain illnesses all too often meant to soon be dead. Lucy lists deaths from illness as well as from everyday events such as childbirth. She noted these deaths while not dwelling on them, except for the death of her brother Johnny. She understood that life was fragile and that the end was but one disease, one infection, or one injury away. She and her family were Christians, spent time in reflection and prayer, and ultimately put their trust and faith in their Lord.

Lucy personally agonized at times over her human failings, castigating herself in her attitudes and lack of devotion. She realized her human limitations and mourned them while having an inner urging to do and be a better person.

She also had some skill as a [nurse](#), sometimes being responsible for the health care of children in the family as well as the slaves. She was justifiably proud of her skill in diagnosing and treating various ailments.

She was a woman of her time and culture, often decrying the institution of slavery not so much as an injustice to the slaves as an imposition and burden upon the masters. When Grove Hill was briefly occupied by Union troops, Lucy expressed resentment at the actions of some slaves who took the opportunity to slip away. She and her siblings often had friendly relationships with some of the slaves, and attended social occasions such as weddings among the slave population.

Lucy was capable of being horrified at mistreatment of the slaves. Upon witnessing the beating of a slave she wrote:

"I find I am a true [abolitionist](#) at heart-here I have been crying like a foolish child for the last half hour because I saw Jimmy chasing poor, little Preston all over the yard beating him with a great stick, and Sister not making him stop but actually encouraging him. I shall never forget Viola's expression of suppressed rage-how I felt for her! My blood boiled with indignation. I never saw such a cruel-tempered and wicked child as Jimmy. I guess *my* sons had better not beat a little servant where I am! I am so thankful that all of us have been properly raised and never allowed, when we were children, to scold or strike a servant."

The story of Lucy Breckenridge does not have a happy ending. Finally conquered by the love of her Tommy as well as the role demanded by her station, she became a wife. She and her soldier husband had but a short time together. Lucy Breckenridge died of typhoid fever a scant five months following her marriage. She was laid to rest at the young age of 22 at home, at Grove Hill, where she was buried beside her beloved brother John Breckenridge.

Postscript

Lucy's widow Tommy left Grove Hill and returned to his native Texas. He, along with a brother, became bankers. He remarried and became the father of 4 daughters. His esteem for the Breckenridge family is exhibited by sending his daughters to Grove Hill for their education.

The end of the war brought the end to an era at Grove Hill. Father Cary soon died (1867), leaving wife Emma in charge of the family. She adapted, forming a school for the education of young ladies in the Grove Hill tradition. Over time the holdings diminished, and by the turn of the century the property consisted of a few hundred acres, the homes of Grove Hill and Catawba. It passed into the hands of Hunter Breckenridge and was tragically destroyed by a fire in 1909, ending a significant chapter in the history of the Breckenridge family, Botetourt County, and Virginia.

This book should appeal to persons with an interest in the Civil War period, life during the mid 19th century, and those with an interest in women's issues of that period. The editor seems to have been very sparing in making changes, preserving the exact words of Lucy to include occasional wrong spelling. It is a faithful recreation of her journal, and stands as an example of accuracy. Other journals and records of the time have been severely edited, often by the writers themselves, to

put things in a more favorable light. Though Lucy was a name dropper *par excellence*, dropping them by the bucketful into her records, the story she tells stands up well under the weight of those names. I'd recommend the book to history buffs or just to the casual reader who wishes to catch a glimpse of the Civil War South.

taken from: <http://everything2.com/user/kanoodle/writeups/Lucy+Breckenridge>