

AUNT POLLY WILLIAMS
THE FIRST LADY OF THE CUMBERLAND RIVER

(Cumberland Tales by Mark Dudney)
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Aunt Polly Williams of Gainesboro became a legend in her own time during the Upper Cumberland's post-bellum period.



Aunt Polly Williams

A hotel operator reminiscent of the "Granny Hawkins" character in "The Outlaw Josey Wales," she wore men's clothes and a man's hat and smoked a long-stemmed corncob pipe. Tough, profane and irrepressible, she adopted a completely egalitarian approach to life and people. Widely known for both her eccentricity and her charity toward others, Polly made certain that the poor and the hungry, the sick and the hurt were never turned away from her dinner table or her lodging. She treated everyone like a paying customer.

The young girl destined to become Aunt Polly experienced a brief childhood. Born Mary Ann Christian Lock on May 5 1839, Polly was raised on the river. Jim Lock, her father, owned a farm and operated a ferry just opposite where the Roaring River drains into the Cumberland. Polly learned to swim and operate the ferry and, by the age of 10, she could pull the ferryboat across both rivers as quickly as any grown man. At 13 she married her first husband, James Eaton, and gave birth to a child the next year. Polly continued to help her father with the ferry for three years, then moved with her family to Gainesboro. She born Eaton nine children, several of whom did not survive infancy. Eaton was the love of Polly's life, and she candidly told her later husbands that she could never love them the way she had loved Eaton.

Eaton served as a Confederate officer during the Civil War. During his absence, some Union men appeared at Polly's door. She had some whiskey stored, which she was using to treat a sick and teething daughter. When they started for it, Polly grabbed her gun.

"The first one to touch that whiskey is my man," she warned.

"Why, we could shoot you," one of the men replied.

"You'd better be damned quick about it," she snapped back. The Union soldiers then left Polly and her whiskey alone.

After the war Eaton drowned while fording the Caney Fork River. Polly's second husband, a man of dubious reputation named Norman Frost, was shot to death in Gainesboro only two years after they married. In 1881 she married her third husband,

Thomas Jefferson Williams. A Confederate veteran, Williams ran the barbershop next door to Polly's hotel. He and Polly had one child, a daughter. Aunt Polly operated the Gainesboro Hotel, located on the North side of the town square. In addition to the guest rooms, the hotel housed a large room where "drummers," or traveling salesmen, could exhibit their wares. It also contained a livery stable and a large dining room. When the courts were in session Aunt Polly would sometimes feed 200 or more a day, whether they could pay or not. Two of the country lawyers who boarded and ate at the Gainesboro Hotel would later win renown on a larger stage – Cordell Hull and John J. Gore. Hull would serve as FDR's secretary of state and Gore would be appointed Middle Tennessee's first federal district judge. Like everyone else who knew Aunt Polly, they feared, respected and liked her.

In 1904 fire destroyed part of Gainesboro, including the Gainesboro Hotel. Polly immediately bought and began to run a second hotel on the opposite side of the square. A black man named Andy Gee operated her livery stable at this second hotel. Gee was a good man but of limited intellect. In late 1908 he was charged with selling whiskey and sentenced to six months in jail. Evidently several white men had persuaded Gee to sell the whiskey. When the sheriff refused to release him, Polly prepared a petition seeking executive clemency on Gee's behalf. She enlisted several prominent citizens as signatories, including Hull and Gore. Polly then boarded a steamboat to Nashville and went straight to the top.

Gov. Malcolm Patterson's secretary entered his office and announced, "Sir, there's a woman here who's smoking a pipe and wearing a man's hat and says she wants to see you."

Patterson immediately replied, "Send Aunt Polly in." Polly was predictably blunt with the governor, whom she addressed by his nickname.

"Ham, they've got my negro, Andy, in jail and I want to get him out." Patterson asked what the charges were: Polly replied that Andy was charged with selling whiskey.

"Is he guilty?" asked the governor.

"Why yes, he's guilty as hell, but that's not the question," she shot back. "I can't run my business without him."

Polly returned to Gainesboro with a full pardon for Andy Gee, signed by the governor.

Polly sold her hotel to a Mr. Harley in 1917 and retired the next year, moving with her husband to Carthage to live with their daughter. In 1919 she suffered a stroke that rendered her unable to speak; she passed away three weeks later on Feb. 9, 1919, just shy of her 80th birthday. Polly was laid to rest in the Lock family cemetery, across the Cumberland River from where she pulled the ferry across as a youngster.

In one sense, Polly's story is the story of the Upper Cumberland. Born to a hard life when the nation was young, Polly endured tragedy and loss, war and reconstruction. The prime of her life coincided with the heyday of commerce and culture on the Cumberland River, in which she played a significant role. She lived life on her own terms, displaying courage, compassion and her ever-present, earthy sense of humor. Once, as she sat on the porch of her hotel, a stranger arrived in a wagon, obviously lost. It was during a rainstorm and the unpaved streets were flowing with muddy water.

"Can you tell me how to get to Gainesboro?" the man asked.

Polly puffed on her pipe and replied, "Step down off that wagon and you'll be up to your ass in it."

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"Cumberland Tales" is a service of the Cookeville History Museum. The editors, Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, invite anyone to submit a story of 800 words concerning the history/forklore of the Upper Cumberland region. Send stories to the editor at History Department, Box 5064 TTU, Cookeville, TN 38505. E-mail addresses are cdickinson@tentech.edu and birdie@tntech.edu

**'AUNT POLLY' WAS AN INFLUENCE TO EVERYONE
IN UPPER CUMBERLAND REGION**

(Cumberland Tales by Vonda Dixon)

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No story of the Upper Cumberland region would be complete without mention of Aunt Polly Williams. Well-known in her adult life for the two hotels she ran in Gainesboro, many influential people became her friends as her establishment was a favorite stop for food and lodging in the 1800s.

When Polly rang the bell signaling dinner was ready, court would adjourn to go and eat. Regular guests included Judge John Gore and Cordell Hull, whose residence in 1910 is listed as a boarder at Aunt Polly's Hotel. She was a good-hearted lady who never let anyone go hungry whether or not they had money to pay.

Always ready with a quick answer, once a stranger came to town after a heavy rain, over roads that were turned to mud. When he stopped and asked her where Gainesboro was, she replied, "Step down from that wagon and you'll be up to you knees in it."

Ever popular and esteemed also by the Gainesboro Tobacco Company, they named a line of their tobacco after her. The "Aunt Polly Natural Leaf Smoking Tobacco" was sold in two different sized packages.

At one time, the black man, Andy Gee, who ran her livery stable, was jailed for selling moonshine. Aunt Polly boarded a steamboat with a petition signed by many Gainesboro citizens and headed on down to Nashville and right to Governor Malcolm (Ham) Patterson's office. Seated in the waiting room, the governor's secretary entered his office and said, "Governor, there's a woman here that wants to see you and she's wearing a man's hat and smoking a pipe." The governor's response: "Send Aunt Polly on in!"

When finding out Aunt Polly wanted her manager released from jail, the Governor asked if he were guilty. She replied, "Why yes, he's guilty as H--. That's not the question. Ham. I can't run my business without him." She returned to Gainesboro on the next boat with the governor's signed pardon in hand.

Her life began the 5th of May 1839 as Mary Ann Christina Lock; no one seems to know when or by whom her more famous nickname "Aunt Polly" began. She was born to James W. (1817-1882) and Elizabeth D. Bennett Lock (1819-1860) on their farm near the confluence of the Cumberland and Roaring Rivers, where Mr. Lock also ran a ferry. A big and strong girl, she learned to swim and could "pull" the ferry across the river at the age of 10. She married quite young; at age 13 she became the bride of James Eaton (1830-1878) and to this union, nine children were born, some not surviving childhood.

When Tennessee seceded at the start of the Civil War, James joined the Confederate army. He served a time with the 8th Tennessee Infantry and later rode in Colonel Hamilton's Battalion, Tennessee Cavalry. With James gone much during those hard years, Polly had the full responsibility for their young family. Once, Yankees came to her door and tried to take her whiskey. She needed that whiskey for a teething baby, and she grabbed her gun and warned, "the first one to touch that whiskey is my man."

"Lady, we could kill you," came the reply. "You'd better be d—quick about it!" she responded – leveling her gun. They left her and her whiskey alone! Once when James had a furlough and tried to see his family, he found northern Tennessee under Union occupation and hid out in the caves near town. When Polly received word of his whereabouts she crawled through the darkness on hands and knees, carrying a small pail of food in her teeth to feed her husband.

Some years after the war ended, James had a dream one night that he drowned while crossing the Caney Fork River. When relating this to Polly, she laughed and told him not to worry, he was a strong swimmer. But his dream became a reality – he was thrown into the river when his mule stumbled while fording the river and was drowned. His body couldn't be found for days, and Polly was sent for to join in the search. She threw his shirt into the river and told the searchers he'd be found where the shirt hung, and so he was.

Although she married twice more, she told her new husbands she could never love any man as much as James Eaton, but she could love well enough to make a life together. She was married for a short time to Norman Frost, a man of dubious reputation, who was shot and killed Gainesboro, making her a widow again. She married on the 30th of March

1881 her last husband, Thomas Jefferson Williams, a Confederate pensioner, who ran the barbershop beside her hotel. This changed her name to Polly Williams, the name she is best known by. Eventually poor health determined that she give up the life of a small town innkeeper, and she and T. J. moved to Carthage in Smith County and spent their last days there in the home of their daughter and son-in-law, Mattie Lou and Floyd Robinson.

Teased by her son-in-law, G. W. Hampton, that if she couldn't talk she'd die, she eventually fulfilled his prediction. Suffering a stroke that paralyzed her throat, she died three weeks later. Her body was carried back to Jackson County, where she was buried in the Lock Family Cemetery off Big Bottom Road not far from the river where she ran the ferry as a youngster.

There are many colorful anecdotes from her extraordinary life, repeated over and again in Upper Cumberland area. Her picture hangs in the Jackson County courthouse.

The episodes during the War prompted the local "Order of Confederate Rose" chapter to be named "aunt Polly Eaton Williams." This is the auxiliary of Son of Confederate Veterans Camp #1685, the "Gainesboro Invincibles," the same nickname adopted by the infantry company that Polly's husband, James, joined back in 1861.

"Cumberland Tales" created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tntech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu

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