

LESSON OF LISTENING TOO LATE IN THE LEARNING

By J. B. Leftwich

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Editorials

In life, she was little known outside her community, but through the caprice of the interstate system and the accident death, Anna Anderson Bartlett became part of the public domain.

Every year, thousands of tourists visit her grave.

Annie Anderson was born March 16, 1816, in the Balckburn's Fork community of Jackson County, met and married Joshua Bartlett and moved to the Buffalo Valley community of Putnam County where they lived until Joshua died in 1881.

Annie and Joshua lived on the eastern side of the Caney Fork River, a son lived across the river in Smith County. It was a visit with this son 11 years after Joshua's death that marked Annie for far more attention in death than in life.

Each year tourists stroll by her grave, read her name on a grave marker, and never realize that in her own family she was a heroine of no small proportion.

Annie's last visit across the river was in June, 1892. A late spring flood came, backing up the creeks and rendering the river impassable except by boat. She became ill, died, and because there was no way to transport her body across the river to her home in Buffalo Valley, she was buried in a small family cemetery close to her son's home.

Joshua's and Annie's life together was not uneventful. According to a family historian, the late Nora Steele, Joshua was outspoken against Tennessee's secession from the Union.

"When it was known that the rebels were in the vicinity, he had to hide out," Nora Steele wrote. "Sometimes he could not come home for a week or two at a time."

But one day the rebels surprised Joshua at home and took him captive. At this point, Annie's true grit surfaced. She stood up to her husband's captors.

Nevertheless, the rebels left with Joshua, leaving the children crying and afraid they would never see their father again.

The episode ended happily for the family.

"Grandpa was gone all day," Nora Steele wrote. "Just before sundown they saw him coming down the road, bareheaded. He said he thought sure they would kill him, and he never knew why they didn't.

"They took his good hat and gave him an old one of theirs, but as soon as he was sure he was out of their sight, he threw that rebel hat away."

Annie asserted herself at least once before when she refused to accept from her family a black girl, whom she regarded as her friend, as a slave.

After the Civil War, Annie and Joshua lived the rest of their lives in relative obscurity.

Joshua's tombstone stands besides Annie's grave marker, but Joshua's body lies across the river in an unmarked grave. Family members thought it appropriate to place Joshua's tombstone in the tiny but well-kept cemetery.

Other than a few descendants, nobody visited Annie's grave until after construction of Interstate 40, which crosses the river only a few hundred yards from her grave.

What brings visitors to her grave is a rest stop on I-40 that services tourist on both sides of the highway. The cemetery is on the rest stop grounds and is maintained by highway officials.

Annie and Joshua were my great-great-grandparents. Their daughter and my great-grandmother, Permelia Bartlett Bates who died in 1938 at age 90, would have told me much more about her parents, but I didn't have the good sense to listen.

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*See J. B. Leftwich stories and Anderson files at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>