



Jonathan Hunt Chapter Lenoir

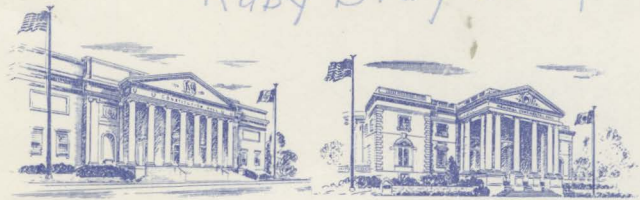
National Society
Daughters of the American Revolution

This a Lenoir story that
is not in our book.

It was written by an
Elkin native Sarah (Sallie)
Gwyn, daughter of Richard
and Elizabeth Hunt Gwyn.

She married the grandson
of General William Lenoir

Ruby Bray Canipe



FORT DEFIANCE

By Mrs. Rufus Theodore Lenoir, Sr.
Daughter of Richard Gwyn and Elizabeth Hunt Gwyn

This ancestral home, called by many of its friends "The Fort," is located in a lovely little valley some twenty miles from the source of the Yadkin river. This valley stretches along the river on either side for five miles or more and nestles among the slopes and foot-hills, sleeping, as it were, in perfect peace and security, while the blue mountains guard and keep watch over it on every side, its beauty ever changing--dark and grand in storm, brilliant when bathed in the golden sunshine, soft and fleecy when the purple mists hang over it; even the seasons vie with each other in bringing their own peculiar and precious gifts.

It was to this favored spot that General William Lenoir came soon after the Revolutionary War, and in time became possessor of almost the whole of it, giving portions of it to several of his children as they in the course of events married and left the ^{roof}~~tree~~-tree.

On account of its many natural charms and because of the congeniality and unity that existed between these families, the gayety and happiness of the younger members--of whom there were a goodly number--one of its lovers many years ago called it "The Happy Valley," and the name still clings to it. General Lenoir built his mansion in 1784-85, and one can hardly realize in this age of architecture that it was a wonderful structure in that day, the people in the surrounding country coming long distances to behold and admire it. He chose a site near an old fort, from which the place takes its name, and it is of this fort that I write, quoting in this article a description of the old home as it was a quarter of a century ago.

This fort was built on the east side of a table-land, on the very edge of a precipice. It was built of logs, in the early history of the country, when the Indians were numerous and ~~troublesome~~ ^{troublesome} ~~troublesome~~. The women and children were often hurried into this refuge, while the fathers, husbands and sons defended them. The family cemetery, a beautiful and quiet spot, commanding a view of a great portion of the country, is on the site of this fort. The first one laid to rest there was a little child who died while in the fort. Many arrow-heads have been found about the place, hurled there, no doubt, from the bows of the warrior who made a desperate effort to hold the dark, deep forests which he loved and of which he had been lord so long, claiming them as his own by prior right; and stout and brave hearts they must indeed have been who contended with this relentless and obstinate foe. Whether the red man has been wronged we do not stop here to enquire, but he has been driven far westward, and his Happy Hunting Grounds are now broad and fertile fields. His bones and relics mark his retreating foot-steps. Across the river from the fort is an Indian burying-ground, in which have been found many curious treasures buried with their dead. Two very large and heavy battle-axes were found in the creek below the fort many years ago, and one other relic worthy of mention, said to be the finest specimen of the kind known--a rare and beautifully polished stone eighteen inches in length, slender and shapely and tapering from the symmetrically curved head to the end, smooth and black as ebony--thought by those versed in Indian lore to have been held by the ruling chief as a badge of authority when sitting in council. Many others, showing wonderful ingenuity in workmanship and ideas of proportion and finish, are still preserved in the old home.

If these hills and streams and fields and mountains could speak, what tales would thrill us, of hardships, sacrifices and sufferings of the whites

and what cunning and cruelty of the red man, so exasperated by his wrongs! But I must not digress, but pass on to the old mansion, and by permission of the author of "Hand in Hand Through The Happy Valley," I will give a description of it in her own words, as it was at that time. Mrs. Oertel says: "The home to which I would lead my readers is known by the very belligerent and bristling cognomen of 'Fort Defiance.' The name is far, however, from giving any idea of the spirit that prevades it or its inmates, but is derived from an old fort of that name, which in the early history of our country did service in the line of defense erected against the Indians. It was located here, just behind the spot where the residence now stands, upon the edge of a steep set-off, at the foot of which a creek flows. The former site of the fort is now the grave-yard, where a goodly family group, members of four generations, are quietly waiting for the resurrection. A strange fascination clings about this curious old house. It is so quaint in construction and the air about it seems so thick with memories that we cannot help loving it. In the center of the building a spacious room running through the entire house, from which a stairway with heavy oaken banisters leads up to the second floor, is called 'The Hall.' A large fire-place with panel work above and around it fills up one end. In the corner the grim old clock stands, ruthlessly ticking away the hours and days and years--ticking slowly and solemnly, as if it had upon its beating heart a remembrance of the many lives it has seen come and go in this old home, whose hours of birth and death have been numbered from its dial, as if it had gained through all these years, watching the fleeting human shadows which have passed before it, a sense of its own steadfastness and of the importance of its mission."

This "Hall" has been largely used as a dining apartment, although the family dining-room is at present to the right of it. If its walls could speak, what tales they could tell of merry times in the long ago, of the family reunions, the birthdays and the wedding feasts!

The antique sideboard which has so often groaned beneath the dainties piled upon it still keeps its place near the old clock; there seems to be a kind of comradeship between them, as if they could say "You and I" to each other, and a sort of stately, old-time spirit lingers about them both. There are doors, front and back, leading from the "Hall" into the open air. Behind the smaller dining-room is a bed-room and from it a second stairway leads to a suite of rooms above, from which again a second stairway rises to the old garret, a perfect curiosity shop in its way, being filled with all the paraphernalia, the waifs and strays of a family life a century old.

To the left of the "Hall" is the parlor, with a room attached to it, and a third stairway enclosed and winding, with odd little drawers in the wall all up the sides. There is no connection with this parlor part of the house and the rest except by way of the piazza, which stretches the whole length of the house, festooned with trailing vines, grapes and roses. Neither is there any connection on the second floor between the apartments to which the three stairways lead. The modern ideas of convenience find no place here in this respect. The kitchen and servants' room are detached from the house, as is the usual custom in the South.

"Roses either side the door, are
Growing lithe and tall,
Each one set, a summer warder,
For the keeping of the hall--
With a red rose and a white rose
Leaning, nodding to the wall."

From the central door a wide walk leads out through the garden. It is bordered on each side with spacious beds of flowers that seem to flourish here as nowhere else. Surely never anywhere else do leaves unfold and buds bloom where they meet with such a gracious, loving welcome as here. All the sweet old-fashioned flowers find plenty of room. The old spicy pink, the sweet william, tulips and hyacinths, the hollyhocks, the jump-up-johnnies, the blue corn flowers, sweet-peas and poppies and great clumps of annunciation lilies are not crowded out, though they stand in close proximity to many of the new

and more pretentious blossoms; and in the winter the cold-pit is full of the newest triumphs of floriculture.

At the end of the walk is a secluded nook, covered and shaded by century-old cedars and surrounded by the old-fashioned box, dark and cool at the hottest midday, jocosely called by the family "The Lovers' Retreat." Indeed, it has been said that in the course of events several engagements have taken place in this romantic and cosy corner. Around the entrance roses and lilac bushes flourish, while in the early part of the day on every side the eye is gladdened by the clean, pure faces of the morning-glories which run riot over everything.

Of course, to those who have lived here so long this garden is haunted ground, peopled to their loving ken with forms that others see not. Among them there is one, a--

"Little maid with wondrous eyes,
Not afraid, but clear and tender,
Blue and filled with prophecies,"

as she looked dreamily out at "life's unlifted veil," whose lovely, happy life was interwoven with its flower-life like warp and woof. Looking out beyond the garden bounds, on to the mountains, green pastures, rich harvest fields, and quiet, solemn woodlands lie. To the right the ground descends rapidly to the same little stream of water before spoken of as running down below the family burying-ground. It flows through the barn-yard, giving drink, bright and fresh and clear, to the many full-uddered cows gathered therein. It is like the sweet idyl--

"The lovely laughter of the wind-swept wheat,
The easy slope of yonder pastoral hill,
The sedgy brook whereby the red kine meet
And wade and drink their fill."

Beside this stream there stands several large old beech trees with great overhanging branches and white roots, with their multitudinous arms stretched and intertwined in the most fantastic way. They have a weird, elfish look, especially by moonlight.

"On the left the sheep are cropping
The stout grass and daises pale,
And the apple trees stand dropping
Separate shadows to the vale;
Over which, in choral silence,
The hills look you their 'All Hail'!"

Just behind the house, between it and the garden, stands a huge catalpa tree. The old giant has basked in many a summer sun and braved many a storm. An aged grape vine throws its snake-like form up the trunk and around its branches, and gracefully intertwines its leaves and sprays with the large plain leaves of the tree.

Several smaller houses are grouped about, in one of which stands the loom, where wondrously fine fabrics are woven by hand--not only jeans and linseys, but the fine dimities and table and bed linen and tasteful carpets. Though in these days of steam machinery goods could be bought cheaper than they can be thus manufactured at home, and very much trouble be saved, still so many of the poor people around have been in the habit of depending on the old home for their subsistence in these various industries, that the present mistress feels it her duty to keep up the old customs.

In front of the house is a circle of grand old spruce pines. They are strong and vigorous and are magnificent in form and solemn and stately in their intensely dark green foliage.

The mansion was built by General William Lenoir nearly one hundred years ago, the work of construction being commenced in 1785. It was a laborious undertaking in those days. The frame is of heavy oaken timber and still in a state of excellent preservation. General Lenoir lived at that time in a smaller house on the opposite side of the river. The nails were made by hand by the blacksmith on his plantation, and the most of the heavy lumber was sawed with a whip saw.

The cornice which still adorns the eaves, the looking-glasses and other articles, were ordered from Liverpool. They were received at the port of Charleston and hauled all the long way in road wagons.

General Lenoir was born in Virginia. His grandfather was a French Huguenot--one of four brother who were expelled from France at the time of the revocation of the Edict of the Nantes. He came to America in his own vessel, and in one of his voyages to or from his native country afterwards, his vessel was lost in a storm, carrying him to seaman's grave. General Lenoir was rather a stern man, dignified demeanor, but it has been said of him that his manners towards the fair sex were like those of the knights of the olden time. He was exceedingly kind to the poor, and his doors were always open to receive the traveler, as there were no taverns in the country in those primitive days. Perhaps the best account that could be given of his life is contained in the epitaph upon his tombstone. The matter of the inscription was left to his friends and associates in public life. This is their estimate of him--their tribute to his memory:

HERE LIES
ALL THAT IS MORTAL OF
WILLIAM LENOIR,
BORN MAY 8th, 1751.
DIED MAY 6th, 1839

In times that tried men's souls he was a genuine Whig. As a lieutenant under Rutherford and Williams in 1776, and as a captain under Cleveland at King's Mountain, he proved himself a brave soldier. Although a native of another State, yet North Carolina was proud of him as her adopted son. In her service he filled the several offices of Major General of the Militia, President of the Council of State, member of both houses of the Legislature, Speaker of the Senate, first President of the Board of Trustees of the University, and for sixty years Justice of the Peace and Chairman of the Court of Common Pleas. In all these high places he was found faithful. In private life he was no less distinguished as an affectionate husband, a kind father and a warmhearted friend. The traveler will long remember his hospitality, and the poor bless him as their benefactor.

Of such a man it may truly be said that his highest eulogy is the record of his deeds.

A very interesting incident in connection with the battle of King's Mountain is related by the family. When the call came for recruits, as Major Ferguson of the British army was coming up the country with his command,

intending to embody and organize the Loyalists beyond the Wateree and Broad rivers, and to intercept the mountain men who were retreating from Camden, every man who had a horse started for the scene of action. William Lenoir was then living in Wilkes county and joined the forces under Cleveland. He was made a captain, and his two friends, Herndon and Jesse Franklin, afterwards Governor of the State, had also some official appointments. These three made a compact together that they would stand by and succor each other in whatever circumstances they might be placed. As the command was going up the mountain there came a man beckoning and calling, "Back! Back!" and he pointed out another way, which they took, and that proved to have been the only way by which Ferguson could have escaped. That man was quite unknown, had never been seen by any of them before and was never seen afterwards.

General Lenoir always said it was a providential interference---that it was God's will that the Federal forces should be triumphant, and so He led them by the right way to cut off the enemy's only chance of escape.

There is also treasured up in the old home an English officer's sword that General Lenoir picked up and brought home with him from the battlefield. It has a fine, keen blade, upon which is engraved this legend in Spanish:

"Draw me not without reason,
Sheathe me not without honor."

His wife was of an aristocratic English family and a thorough church-woman. She was so situated in life that she was cut off from all church association. But though true to her church and never uniting with any of the denominations around her, she had a large and loving heart, full of generous impulses, giving out its affection to all who called themselves Christians. She was so amiable and good that her children used to say "Mother not only forgives an injury, but really and truly forgets." She was a cripple and walked with crutches for the last ten years of her life, but she was always contented and cheerful.

Mrs. Oertel closes her description of the old place by saying: "A grandson of this worthy couple is now owner of the venerable home." This grandson, the youngest and last of his father's house, is still spared to it, strong and hale enough for one only two years from fourscore.

One is gone---a gentle sister, so closely allied to the old home and The Happy Valley--the "Aunt Sade" of all the connection and friends whom she loved--so faithful and so loyal to all the "family traditions."

"Life's work well done,
Life's race well run,
Life's crown well won."

She has been called the peace and blessedness of Paradise.

Three generations bearing the same name--Rufus Theodore Lenoir--now live in the old mansion, and the happy frolics and joyous laughter of four-year-old Rufus Theodore III echoes through the halls that were for a time so quiet. The house has been necessarily remodeled and much of the quaintness and the "savor of the olden time" has given place to comfort and convenience.

Other changes there are. The old sun-dial that in the old, old time stood in the middle of the garden, surrounded by sweet-fringed pinks and thyme and camomile, is gone, and the old-time flowers are supplanted by others. The rows of lavender that so delicately perfumed the linen closet are "sweet memories of the past." But the dark old spruce pines, tall and stately, planted more than a century ago by the hand of the first master of the house, still stand around and woo the whispering winds. And the tulips, jonquils, crocuses, snow-drops and hyacinths, sweet heralds of spring--"the same fair things lift up the same fair faces"--coming forth out of their winter's sleep, perfume the air and gladden the hearts of all beholders, as they have done, year by year, since they were planted by dear hands a century ago. But the restlessness and aggressiveness so apparent everywhere has found its way into this "Happy Valley," and the sound of the falling of giant trees on the mountain sides, the noise of the ruthless saw and the steam whistle are heard on every side.

But God's works remain. His mountains stand around unchanged in form, the same soft mist hangs over them, the balmy breezes blow, the bird-songs thrill the air, and the same quiet peace--foretaste of God's perfect and eternal peace--broods over all. May the same peace abide ever in the hearts of all those who know and love "The Happy Valley," ever bearing in mind that this same favored spot, this sweet vale that no works of man can destroy, is a precious heritage from the old Revolutionary soldier and hero, General William Lenoir.