

MARY ANN FORREST

By

Dr. Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr.

Almost everyone is aware that the Sons of Confederate Veterans will be reinterring the body of Nathan Bedford Forrest at its Elm Springs Headquarters in the summer of 2020. I think it is time we pause for a moment and consider the fact that we are actually burying two people: General Forrest and his wife, Mary Ann.

When you write history objectively, there are often surprises. When I concluded *Bust Hell Wide Open*, my biography of General Forrest, I was surprised at the admiration I had gained for one person in particular, and it was not the general—I admired him before I started writing the book. It was his wife, Mary Ann Montgomery Forrest. She was an awesome Christian woman who was admired by all who knew her. She was the love of Bedford's life and, in many ways, exerted a profound influence on him.

She was born in Franklin County, Tennessee, on October 24, 1826, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. William Hugh Montgomery. Her father died in October 1829, leaving Mrs. Montgomery (who was then 27) with four small children to raise. She succeeded remarkably well and even managed to send Mary Ann to the prestigious Nashville Female Academy, where she received a fine education and learned the social graces.

One bright Sunday morning in April 1855, she and her widowed mother were on their way to church when they tried to ford a creek. They got stuck in the middle. Two young, male spectators were laughing at their plight and their driver's fruitless efforts to dislodge the vehicle when 23-year-old Nathan Bedford Forrest rode up. He waded into the creek, lifted each woman in turn, and carried them to the bank. Then he and the servant put their shoulders to the wheels

and pushed the buggy out of the mud. “Why didn’t y’all help these ladies?” Forrest growled at the spectators. When the pair did not say a word, Forrest snapped: “I suggest that you remove yerselves from this vicinity at once, or I’ll give you a thrashin’ you won’t soon ferget!” They departed immediately.

The two ladies thanked Forrest profusely. He introduced himself and, with the same suddenness and audacity which marked his military campaigns, asked if he could call on Mary. She readily consented, and he visited her the next day. Remarkably, the two spectators from the incident at the creek were also in the parlor to visit Mary! Forrest angrily and peremptorily ordered them to leave, which they did.

Bedford Forrest proposed to Mary Ann on his second visit (their third meeting). She hesitated but accepted on his third visit, contingent upon her uncle’s approval. Reverend Samuel Cowan, a Presbyterian minister, was not at all excited at the prospect of having Bedford Forrest in the family. It was said that Mary was every boy’s dream, and Bedford was every father’s nightmare. He also had none of Mary’s pedigree. She was well-educated, and he was a first-grade dropout. She was a cousin of Sam Houston and a relative of General Richard Montgomery, a hero of the American Revolution, whereas he was the son of a blacksmith. Rev. Cowan pointed out their differences. Mary Ann was a pretty petite, gentle, quiet, well-mannered, pious, Christian, and introverted young lady, whereas Bedford was a rough, extroverted frontiersman who loved to fight, gamble, and curse. To top it off, he was not a Christian. The reverend wanted to know: “Why do you want to marry her? She’s nothing like you.”

I don’t want to marry anybody like me, Forrest retorted. I want to marry a Christian girl. This he did on September 25, 1845, in Hernando, Mississippi. Rev. Cowan performed the ceremony.

What changed Rev. Cowan's mind? Probably it was Mary herself. She already had proof of his respect for and gallantry toward women. He was also well-groomed, a fine physical specimen, and already owned his own business. It appeared that he would be a good provider. The fact that he did not drink (which many on the frontier did) may have also played a role in her decision.

Mary Ann Forrest chose well. Bedford always treated her with the utmost respect. Although an occasional profanity slipped out, he generally did not curse when she was around. He would not allow dirty talk when she was present, nor a risqué joke to be told. He would not tolerate humor that degraded women. He once fired one of his best friends for having sex outside of marriage, saying that he would not tolerate in his army any man who would "do that" to a woman. Trifling with a woman's affections was a felony in Forrest's book. As for adultery—well, that was simply unthinkable.

Bedford's worst vice was gambling, and it did cause some stress within his marriage. Mary Ann considered it a sin and often begged him not to gamble, but he would do so anyway. And he was good at it. On three occasions, he won the modern equivalent of \$50,000 in a single night of playing poker. Once it was \$100,000. On another occasion after the war, Forrest co-signed a note for a friend, who defaulted. The note came due, and Forrest had to pay it, but he did not have the funds. He decided to win the money at the poker table. Mary tried to dissuade him. He told her to wish him luck. I most certainly will not, she replied. She said she would be on her knees the entire time he was gone, her Bible in her hand, praying for his eternal conviction. That evening, he won the required amount and picked up the money to leave. The other gamblers wanted a chance to win their money back and tried to talk him into staying. Forrest refused. "My wife is sitting at home with her Bible on her knee," he declared. "I told her I would quit as soon as I had enough money to pay my debt of honor. I am never going to gamble again." He never did.

The Forrests had two children: William Montgomery “Willie” Forrest and Frances “Fanny” Forrest, who were born in 1846 and 1849, respectively. Fanny died when she was five years old. Willie rode off to war with his father, served as one of his aides, and rose to the rank of captain. He was a Christian and more like his mother than his father. Mary Ann joined the Forrests when the war allowed. She was like a surrogate mother to many of “my boys” and sometimes served as Bedford’s nurse when he was wounded. She continued to pray frequently. Meanwhile, General Forrest killed 30 Yankees in one-on-one combat, was seriously wounded four times, had 29 horses shot out from under him, and escaped death or capture by a hair many times. He later attributed his survival to the prayers of his wife and his mother.

General Forrest was famous for his fierce temper. When he was about to explode with rage, only Mary had the power to stop him. She would touch him on the arm and say: “Bedford!” Then, by manly effort, he would contain his wrath. If she wasn’t around, there was usually trouble.

Bedford and Mary Forrest were, as the Bible says, unequally yoked. For years, Forrest thought Christianity was a fine religion—for women. He wasn’t one and didn’t intend to become one. Once during the war, a friend called upon him to convert to Christianity. Forrest said that he didn’t have time now, but if he survived the conflict, he would consider it. Finally, due to the efforts of Mary, Rev. (formerly Lieutenant Colonel) Raleigh White, and Rev. George Tucker Stainback of his own First Cumberland Presbyterian Church, he was baptized on November 14, 1875.

Nathan Bedford Forrest died of diabetes on October 29, 1877. His last earthly thoughts turned to the one person who had loved and been through it all by his side. “Call my wife,” he said to Colonel Meriwether. He then closed his eyes, never to open them again.

Meanwhile, Willie Forrest married Jane Taylor Cook in 1868, but she passed away in 1882 at the age of 36 or 37. Mary Ann Forrest devoted her latter years to helping Willie raise and take care of her three grandchildren.

Mary Ann Forrest was a fervent supporter of the Confederate cause and a kind, highly cultured Christian lady her entire life. She ascended to heaven on January 22, 1893, at age 66. She was initially buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Memphis, Tennessee, next to her husband.



LEFT: Mary Forrest, 1873, holding her grandchild, Nathan Bedford Forrest II (Photo from Find-a-Grave, posted by Dwayne Sessom, 6/1/2015). RIGHT: Lt. General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

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