

Mary Elizabeth Austell Farris

“... a soldier in forbearance & a lady in manners”

By

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Mary Elizabeth Austell was born May 7, 1836. Her father was William Austell who came to Tennessee from South Carolina in 1829. She and John Kennerly Farris were “joined in matrimony at 9:00 o’clock on Thursday morning, August 27, 1857 by Rev. J. L. Payne” according to family records. John Farris was studying the practice of medicine at the time and had apprenticed himself to Dr. J. E. Hough, a physician in Pleasant Hill, in Coffee County. A year later the couple moved to Arkansas where Farris established his own practice. They lived in Montgomery County, Arkansas for the next two years and it was here that their first child, a daughter named Ella K., was born on September 20, 1858. It was also here that she would die a year later on November 20, 1859 and was buried two days later.

John and Mary returned to Tennessee in the autumn of 1860 and the remains of little Ella were brought with them. Obviously, the grieving couple could not bear the thought of leaving their baby daughter alone in a strange land with no one to care for her grave. According to Dr. Farris’s own records, she “was disinterred on October 15, 1860 (Sunday) and reinterred on November 17, 1860 (Saturday) in Coffee, County, Tennessee.” Mary was

seven months pregnant at the time, so the long journey home must have been an especially difficult one for her.

One year later on November 26, 1861 Dr. John Farris, along with his two brothers, Bud and Sam, enlisted for service in the Confederate Army, Company I, 41st Tennessee. Mary and her one year old son, Sammy (Samuel Jackson) went to live with her father at his farm in Coffee County. She did not know that she would not see her husband again until late December of 1864. Mary's mother had died pre 1850 and during the time prior to her marriage as the oldest female child, she had been the "lady of the house." The 1860 census shows William Austell as being a very wealthy farmer with real estate valued at \$7800 and personal property of \$6000, including three slaves. During the war, William Austell was one of the Coffee County civilians who was arrested and imprisoned by the Federal authorities. Being a staunch supporter of the Cause himself, with a son, two sons-in-law, and numerous other relatives serving the Confederacy, this is no surprise. But what a terrifying experience this must have been for the genteel Mary!

John Farris served the Confederacy as a physician from the time of his enlistment until he took the Oath in March of 1865. He participated in the Battle of Fort Donelson where he was captured and spent the next seven months as a prisoner of war. After being exchanged, he went on to participate in the major Battles of Vicksburg, Chattanooga, Atlanta,

Franklin, and Nashville. During this time he kept a diary in the form of letters to his wife which he inscribed in small journals to be sent home at convenient opportunities. In a letter of November 16, 1862 he instructs her that "...I hope you will bear my absence with fortitude. I want you to be a soldier in forbearance & a lady in manners. ..." And in a letter written on August 30, 1863, he writes: "Today I would like to know where you are and what you are doing. ... Are you sitting now in sorrow, trying to smoke trouble off by the use of the odorous pipe? I hope not. I hope your mind is free from trouble and your lips from the pipe. ..." Following John's return home, and the end of the war, they continued to live at her father's farm where John practiced medicine in the community of Hillsboro and Prairie Plains until 1901.

There would ultimately be six other children, three sons (John Kennerly, Jr., Amos Austell, and William Rice) and three daughters (Sue Jennie, Mary Elizabeth, Jr. and Sophia Cordelia) born to the couple but of these, only one son, John, Jr., would live to a ripe old age of 72. Samuel died at age 49, William Rice, Sue Jennie, and Mary Elizabeth, Jr. would all die in their early-mid twenties, Amos at age 10, and Sophia at one year and all from consumption, which was tuberculosis. On March 21, 1885, not quite 49 years old, Mary herself would die from the disease which had ravished her family for more than a decade.

SOURCES

Excerpts from: "Letters to Mary: the Civil War Diary of Dr. John Kennerly Farris"

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Family Records in possession of the writer.

Census Records of Tennessee, Coffee County, 1860.

