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Reminiscences of Mrs.
Louise Cunningham.

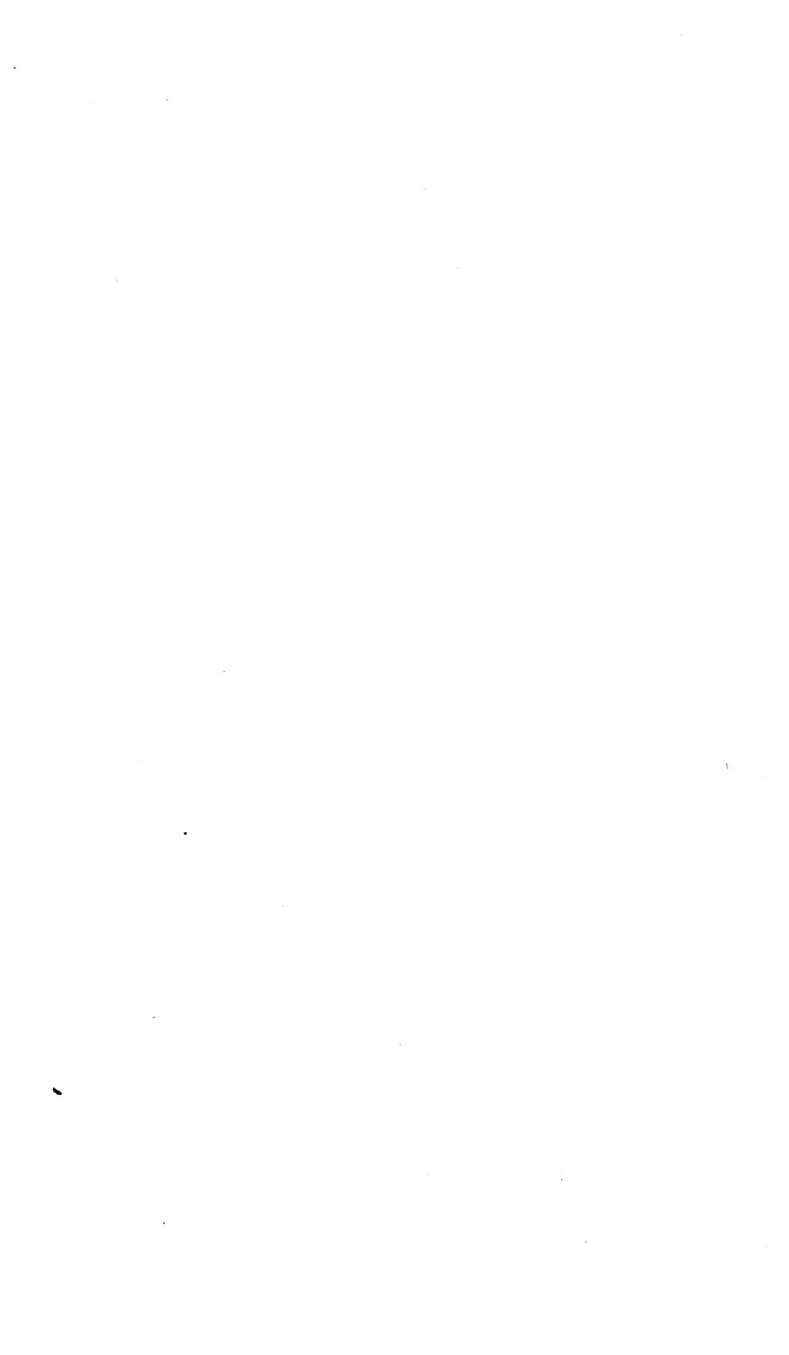
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REMINISCENCES

OF

MRS. LOUISA CUNNINGHAM.

BY EX-GOVERNOR B. F. PERRY.



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REMINISCENCES
OF
MRS. LOUISA CUNNINGHAM.

This accomplished and patriotic lady deserves more than a passing obituary notice, which I have been requested to write by her talented and distinguished daughter, the Regent of the Mount Vernon Association. I knew her well, and enjoyed her warm and disinterested friendship for nearly the half of a century. In the course of a long life, I have never met a lady of higher social qualities, or purer sentiments of duty and patriotism.

Mrs. Cunningham departed this life on the 6th of October last, at her old family mansion, "Rose Monte" in Laurens County, South Carolina, in the eightieth year of her age. She was the wife of Captain Robert Cunningham, distinguished for his wealth, culture and noble hospitality. He lived in baronial style, surrounded by all the luxuries which fortune can give. His house was ever the resort of friends and acquaintances, from the lower and upper country, who always met a most cordial and hospitable reception, and the longer they staid the more welcome they were. He was a gentleman of great public spirit and charity, as well as hospitality and friendship. During the war of 1812 he raised a volunteer company and entered the service of his country. He adopted and educated several of his own and his wife's nephews and nieces. The Hon. William L. Yancey and his brother Benj. C. Yancey were among them.

Mrs. Cunningham was the daughter of Col. Wm. Bird, of Pennsylvania, who moved to Georgia in 1796. His family was one of great social distinction and wealth in Pennsylvania, and ~~three~~^{two} of his sisters married

into the families of signers of the Declaration of American Independence, Reed, of Delaware, George Ross, and Judge Wilson, of the Supreme Court of the United States. The family mansion of the Birds, in Birdsborough, is historical, and was one of the most elegant residences in the Colony. Mrs. Cunningham was born in Alexandria, Virginia, and was six years old when her father, who was a younger son and inherited ~~none~~ of the patrimonial estate, moved to Georgia to seek his fortune in a new country. The mother of Mrs. Cunningham was a daughter of Col. Dalton, of Alexandria, and after her marriage to William Bird, was known as "the pretty bird of Virginia." Her eldest sister, who died young, had the honor of winning the heart and refusing the hand of the immortal Washington, when he was surveying lands for Lord Fairfax and only seventeen or eighteen years old! The second sister of Mrs. Cunningham's mother married Mr. Herbert, ^{thus became connected} who was afterwards ~~connected by marriage with the Washingtons and Fairfax's family.~~ ^{their eldest son married a Washington and resided 6 months each year in Mr. Remond}

Col. Bird, the father of Mrs. Cunningham, had a large family of daughters, who were all remarkable for their beauty and accomplishments, and were great belles in Georgia. General McComb, of the United States Army, very appropriately dubbed the Colonel's residence "The Aviary," by which it was extensively known afterwards, and so called. One of his daughters married Benjamin Yancey, perhaps the most talented and highly gifted member of the South Carolina Bar at that time. He died very young, leaving two sons, whom I have already mentioned as the wards of Mr. Cunningham. Mrs. Cunningham had the reputation of being the most beautiful of all Col. Bird's lovely, talented and accomplished daughters. She was not only beautiful herself, but she had a love and taste for the beautiful. Her passion for flowers was unsurpassed; she collected them from all

one to Judge Wilson - the other to George Ross of the

parts of the world. Her flowers and shrubbery covered acres of ground around "Rose Monte," which she watched over and cultivated with the care of a mother for her infant children. She had the honor of being the pioneer florist of the up country. Soon after her marriage and settlement at her husband's old family mansion, now more than one hundred years old, she had the honor and great pleasure of receiving a collection of rare flowers from Mount Vernon, sent her by Judge Bushrod Washington. Years afterwards, when I saw her flower garden and shrubbery, they were surpassingly beautiful, and laid off with great taste and artistic skill. She was most generous, too, in the distribution of her rare and beautiful flowers and plants amongst her friends and acquaintances. Her nature was kind and generous in the extreme, as well as lovely and spirited. She was also truly pious and religious, and all her life a devout member of the Presbyterian Church. She was sensitive—perhaps too sensitive—to the slightest wrong, and her frank and spirited nature prompted her to give expression to her sentiments and feelings. Indeed, she was, as I have often said, a model lady, wife, mother and friend.

To Mrs. Cunningham belongs the distinguished honor of having suggested, and made the first effort, towards the organization of the Mount Vernon Association, for the purpose of purchasing the home of the illustrious Washington, the Father of his Country, and keeping it as a sacred shrine for his countrymen to visit and there feel the inspiration of patriotism and public virtue. She heard with horror that it was likely to be sold to speculators, and urged her young and highly gifted daughter, Miss Pamela, to write an article on the subject for the newspapers. She did so, and entered into the project with all her mother's zeal, enthusiasm and patriotism. This article was fortunate in attracting public attention. It was signed "A Southern Matron," and every one

supposed it was written by a married lady of mature years. Through the influence of Miss Pamela Cunningham, the Hon. Edward Everitt was enlisted in the cause, and his oration on the Life and Character of Washington, which he delivered all over the United States, brought to the Association sixty or seventy thousand dollars. Private subscriptions, procured by the untiring energy and zeal of the fair "Southern Matron,"² from the South, North, East and West, made up the necessary sum to make the purchase. During all this time, this remarkable and extraordinary daughter was in extreme ill health, and her physicians told her that if she persevered in her labors it would be fatal to her. But she expressed a willingness to die in so noble an undertaking.

When the Association was organized by the ladies of the United States, Miss Pamela, who had accomplished the great work suggested by her mother, was unanimously elected President of the Association, and forced to accept the position. She removed to Mount Vernon, X and received the applause and well done of a grateful people. The civil war came on, and with it bitter sectional prejudices and hatred. There were those in the North, who, seeing a South Carolina lady presiding at Mount Vernon, felt like Haman seeing Mordecai sitting at the king's gate, and vented their ~~own~~ feelings in ~~these~~ calumny and slander. With that proud spirit which belongs to her family and country, as well as her own nature, this true and noble hearted young lady resigned her exalted position and returned to her native home in South Carolina, her health and her fortune wrecked in the cause of her country and her own noble purpose of carrying out the patriotic suggestion of her mother. But history will do her justice, and as I said to her some years ago in the City of Washington, "her name will be associated, in all time to come, with that of the Father of

not until after the war & only then for the temporary purpose of receiving the sum from Felt - & busting it

his Country." This is glory and honor enough to have won for any fair maiden lady of the South.

Little did Mrs. Cunningham think, when she made her suggestion to her invalid daughter, that she was imposing on her a task so herculean, a labor of twenty years, which would bring her to death's door, and leave her almost penniless, with ~~the vile~~ slander of a ~~base~~ ~~black~~ neighbor casting for a time a cloud over her pure and spotless life, her public spirited and patriotic services and her sensitive womanly nature. The mother anticipated nothing of this, but thought only of the national reproach. The grave of Washington falling into the hands of speculators and showmen! She felt, too, for her own family. Their blood mixed with that of the Washingtons who lay in that sacred vault!

Captain Robert Cunningham, the husband of Mrs. Louisa Cunningham, was a gentleman of education and literary taste. He read law with John C. Calhoun, and was one of his favorite pupils. But being a gentleman of very large fortune, he abandoned his profession and devoted himself to planting. Once or twice he served the people of Laurens in the Legislature. It is well known that his family were all loyalists in the Revolutionary war, but as he once said to Col. W. C. Preston, "History does not accuse them." They were officers under the British Government at the breaking out of the Revolution, and adhered to their allegiance. The father of Captain Cunningham was deputy Surveyor-General of the Province, under Sir Egerton Leigh. His uncle, Robert Cunningham, was a Brigadier General in the British service. John Cunningham, another brother, held some appointment under the royal government. In speaking of the Cunninghams of the Revolution, I remember to have heard the Hon. Samuel Earle, who was a gallant Whig officer in the war and knew every landholder above Columbia, say that there were not three more

worthy and respectable gentlemen in the upper country than the three Cunninghams I have mentioned.

But suppose the leaders of the Revolution in South Carolina could have foreseen the present condition of their descendants, living under the government of their former slaves, led on by roguish carpet-baggers and scalawags, would they have rebelled? Sooner would the Gadsdens, Pinckneys, Elliots, Hegers, Marions, Sumters and Pickenses have fallen on their swords like old Romans than have brought such ignominy on their country and descendants.

The death of Mrs. Cunningham was sad in one respect. She had just returned to her desolate home, where in former days there was so much joy and happiness, troops of friends, and all the comforts that luxury could desire. It was deserted, and scarcely a living soul to be seen! No doubt the contrast weighed heavily on her heart, and may have hastened her death. The loss of fortune, the absence of her children and grand-children, with the remembrance of her public wrongs, were too much for her refined nature and feeling heart. Death came suddenly to rescue her from all her troubles and carry her pure, bright spirit to a world of bliss and Heavenly glory. Her daughter was summoned home too late to see her mother die, and now remains there in the saddest affliction, which was once her happy home.

I have said that Mrs. Cunningham was my warm and steadfast friend through life. I now recall, with a melancholy pleasure, the many pleasant hours and days I have spent in her charming society, with her noble husband and fair daughter, at their hospitable mansion, amidst the flowers, books and luxuries of "Rose Monte." And I am happy in having this opportunity of paying an humble though grateful tribute of respect to her memory.



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