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Spring's Green Peas, Nocturnal Thieves, and Other Family Lore about Susanna Smith Preston

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Scarce primary sources exist to provide enlightening analysis about Susanna Smith Preston, wife of Colonel William Preston. However, some stories survive in various institutions across Virginia and Wisconsin that illustrate a familial admiration and possible mythology of the Preston family matriarch. The following recollections show the esteem in which later generations of the Prestons regarded her qualities of strength and compassion even if concrete conclusions may not be supported.

In light of the fact that Colonel Preston's wife, his "Dearest Sucky,"¹ outlived him just 39 days shy of four decades, it disappoints that more of her personal correspondence and her presumed business transactions have not been archived or possibly survive to this time. Meager public records remain: a few letters, farm supply orders, and her last will and testament. Interestingly, five of the six items uncovered show her signature without the letter "h" at the end of her given name.

Susanna Smith Preston's wintry birth in 1739 to Elizabeth and Francis Smith of Hanover, Virginia made her a third generation American. As an educated young woman, she met William Preston, fell in love and married him, left the Hanover area to move with him to the frontier, and had twelve children with him.

As with any family's lore, the following stories offer potentially idealized and possibly inaccurate versions of her life. These remembrances must be absorbed with caution since they may contain errors given that the recollections may be up to four generations removed from her lifetime.

What does a well-cherished mother and wife, an accidental defender of the state's treasury, and a reluctant yet gracious hostess look like? According to three female descendants she appears to be the matriarch of their family: Susanna Smith Preston. Their reminiscences of her derive their power from the reverence, sentimentally exaggerated or not, in which her family continued to hold her memory. Enjoy the following archived anecdotes assembled for the first time in this volume of *Smithfield Review*.

Let us share in the fond memories preserved by a daughter. Feel the weight of the responsibility of guarding the state's treasury while Colonel Preston remains absent. Dine with Susanna Smith Preston at the moment that British soldiers question her trustworthiness, and experience the way in which she graciously handles their discourteous actions. Lastly, consider all three women's memories as crucial commentary about their family's matriarch.

Letitia Preston Floyd's Recollections

In the mid 1800s, the Prestons' tenth child and sixth daughter, Letitia Preston Floyd, provides accounts in a lengthy letter reprinted in the weekly *Richmond Standard* about early settlement life in southwestern Virginia. Floyd reveals the love shared by Susanna and William Preston. Additionally, she offers some information about her mother's upbringing and education. Caution must be used when evaluating Floyd's stories since the accuracy of some of her remembrances has been questioned.²



Image courtesy of Ben Smith (fourth-great-grandson of Susanna Smith Preston)

In 1843, two decades after her mother's death, Floyd responds to a request and writes a letter to her son recounting some of what she recalls from early Preston family history. In turn the *Richmond Standard* reprints her recollections in three June and one July editions in 1880.³ Despite being too young to be an eyewitness, Floyd recalls her mother's father "as a rich man [who] had an extremely beautiful daughter by the name of Susannah, who was educated by the Rev. Patrick Henry, uncle to the future Virginia governor of the same name. Colonel Preston was soon attracted by her beauty and manners. He addressed her, and was married the 17th of July 1761."⁴ Floyd describes her family's arrival to southwestern Virginia, and the presumed strength of her mother considering what must have been a challenging environment, when she records, "in March of 1774 Colonel Preston removed my mother and her children to Smithfield. There was a fort and stockade around the house. Several of the neighbor's families came into it for safety because the Northwestern Indians made constant attempts on the settlement."⁵ She also provides insight into the love shared by her parents with two recollections. She recalls that her father "had a well-cultivated intellect and a fine taste for poetry. I remember reading several beautiful productions of his addressed to my mother, in praise of her domestic virtues."⁶ Lastly, she retells as her father lay dying, "Mrs. Preston was sent for, who immediately came. Colonel Preston's reason had not been staggered by the conflict; he caught his wife's hand, kissed it, shed tears" and passed away in the night.⁷ All of these anecdotes introduce the themes of strength and compassion that become the hallmark of family stories about Susanna Smith Preston.

Lucy Preston Beale's Remembrances

Lucy Preston Beale, a great-granddaughter of the Prestons, adds to the mythology when the Wisconsin Historical Society recorded her recollection of how Susanna Smith Preston heroically saved some portion of Virginia's treasury being stored at her home.

Beale travelled in 1922 to Wisconsin to review the Draper Manuscripts. The Society records that it

was recently honored by a visit from Mrs. Lucy Preston Beale of Virginia, the great-granddaughter of Col. William Preston, whose papers constitute a portion of the Draper Manuscripts.... Mrs. Beale had family recollections ... which she related for the Society's benefit and which add to this bit of frontier life. She also gave an interesting account of how Smithfield, the ancestral home of the Prestons, acquired

its name through the bravery of its first mistress, Mrs. William Preston, nee Susannah Smith.⁸

In an anecdote entitled “How Smithfield Plantation Got Its Name,” the following retelling relays Beale’s notion of her great-grandmother’s bravery and how Colonel Preston rewarded her following an attack by thieves:

My great-grandfather, Col. William Preston, many years later, built an old-fashioned house on the site of the fort. It was on a summit of the Allegheny Mountains, surrounded by several thousand acres of beautiful country.

There were still no banks in the country, and the state money was kept in Colonel Preston’s home, the best house in that part of the state. Colonel Preston was a surveyor, and often used to be absent from home all week, generally returning on Saturday night. This left his wife, nee Susannah Smith (a woman from Henrico County), alone, save for the protection afforded her by the slaves.



Image courtesy of Ben Smith (fourth-great-grandson of Susanna Smith Preston)

One Saturday evening, before Colonel Preston arrived home, his wife was called to the front door by two men riding large mules and astride saddlebags. These bags, which were full of gold, had been sealed with the state seal at Richmond and directed to Colonel Preston, to be kept by him in safety. His wife refused to accept them, saying her husband had not returned and the money would not be safe. But the men persisted, saying, "the risk would be ours if we took the saddlebags anywhere else. We were ordered to bring them here, and here we will leave them." After much remonstrance she told the men to bring them upstairs, and she hid them between two feather-beds in her bedroom.

That evening the slaves were to have their usual Saturday evening dance, and they asked their mistress if they might prolong it until the master came home, since with him was their best banjo player. Their request was granted and my great-grandmother made preparations for the night. She bolted the front door, consisting of two parts [that] overlapped. In her bedroom was a bell rope which ran through the house and to the outer end of which was attached a large bell which could be heard a mile off. It was ordinarily used to summon the slaves to dinner, but it also served to call them to the aid of their master and mistress when necessary. She saw that this rope was within her reach, and also that a large sword (which had been carried through the Revolutionary War) was near at hand. Then she went to bed, while the party was in full swing.

About eleven o'clock she was awakened by a robber standing beside her bed. No one knows how he managed to unbolt the door and get in, but he did. He said, "I have come to get that money. It is known that you have two saddlebag loads of state money in this room." Another robber was waiting outside.

"Never will I give up that money without a fight." She reached for the sword, but the robber had it in his hand.

Holding it in front of her he said, "If you don't give me the money I will kill you."

Being a powerful woman she tried to fight him, but she was at a disadvantage because she was on the bed. She raised herself and said, "I will summon my slaves." But the robber had cut the rope.

She then told him that her husband was due and would soon arrive to help her. But the robber replied, "No, it is a very still night. I can hear two horses coming miles away. Your husband is not within two miles of the place."

Just as he seized her by the shoulders she knocked the sword out of his hand. It fell under the bed, with just the sharp point sticking out. As the robber stooped for the sword, my [great] grandmother raised to

her full height, seized the remaining part of the bell rope, and rang the bell. Immediately between fifty and one hundred slaves rushed into the house and up the stairs, to rescue their mistress. She sat back on the mattress, and the robber, seeing the odds were against him, dashed from the house. Soon he and his comrade were heard fleeing on their horses, having been foiled in their attempt to secure the state money.

Meanwhile Colonel Preston had met with delay because his horse had cast a shoe. Determined to reach home that night, because he felt his wife was not sufficiently protected, he mounted the inferior horse of his trusty, and left the slave behind strongly protesting because he would not get back in time to "fiddle." Great-grandfather said that when he came over the hill, in full view of the house, and saw the brilliant lights (burning pine knots) and the yard full of slaves, he thought Judgment Day had come. He hastened his horse, and when he reached the house he heard the story of how his wife had heroically saved the money, and his own reputation as a keeper of the state funds. The next day he named the estate Smithfield, in her honor.

The news of the attempted robbery was carried to Blacksburg,⁹ and the next morning a man from that place arrived with a wagon and four horses. He and [great] grandfather accompanied by several trusty slaves, took the money to Christiansburg, where it was locked up in a big desk in the courthouse of Montgomery County.¹⁰

Beale's story focuses on her great-grandmother's strength. She portrays her as a larger than life defender of the money entrusted to her husband's safekeeping. Beale claims these qualities motivate Colonel Preston when he christens the family's homestead Smithfield. This great honor parallels the importance of "this home [that] was the center of their lives."¹¹

Janie Preston Boulware Lamb's Re-Creations

Lastly, Janie Preston Boulware Lamb, a great-great-granddaughter, writes in second person, adding amplification to her admiration, of an encounter Susanna Smith Preston experienced as a less than enthusiastic hostess to British soldiers. Her re-creation of the occasion illustrates the personal strength Preston summoned and showed the unsolicited intruders. Lamb writes:

English officers rode up to your [Susanna Preston's] porch, demanding forage and food for themselves and the soldiers with them. You say to them coldly, but politely, — a dignified lady in her own home speaking

to unwelcome guests, — that you can have dinner prepared for them within an hour's time. Meanwhile, "will you gentlemen retire to the guest rooms and make yourselves ready?" You yourself dress in your best damask gown, and later, sit at the table to entertain the intruders. It is late [S]pring outside, in the Alleghany Mountains, and your faithful slave gardener, Uncle Norton, has gathered the first delicate, bright green peas for your pleasure. Now they come in on the butler's tray, steaming hot and smelling deliciously. The British Captain gives the dish a suspicious stare, and exclaims in a loud angry voice: "What very green peas, madam! I believe you mean to poison us! That is the meaning of all your fine airs!" You turn to the butler, standing aghast behind your chair, and speak in a quiet tone: "Tell Mammy to send Miss Elizabeth to me." In a few minutes your pretty little daughter comes running in and stands beside you. She is somewhat bewildered by so many strange men but rather intrigued with their bright uniforms, and gives them a shy smile. Lifting the child on your lap, you feed her a generous portion of peas. Looking up with your great dark eyes full of silent contempt, you say in your musical, deep voice: "You may feel safe now, gentlemen. Whoever sits at my table, invited or uninvited, has my best care. My husband, my young sons, my brothers, are all in our Army, fighting against you, — and I pray God for their success and your defeat, — but you will receive no harm from me in my own house." It is a gracious, an arresting figure, you present, Susanna, sitting, in your flowered, damask gown, with your lovely child on your lap, in the early American dining room, surrounded by British officers in red coats, — with red faces. Cool mountain breezes are stirring the window curtains, blowing the white candles in the silver candelabra on your Hepplewhite table."¹²

Once again Preston's portrayal as a gracious and strong woman saturates Lamb's imagining of events surrounding her hospitality.

All of these anecdotes center around a well-loved matriarch. Clearly, for at least the four generations following her death, her family members shared stories reflecting the admiration and affection the family maintained for their beloved mother and grandmother. These stories give life to Susanna Smith Preston's qualities of strength and compassion as an iconic matriarch of a frontier plantation family.

Endnotes

Jennie Hodge lives and works in Blacksburg as the Director of Micah's Backpack, a weekend feeding program for low-income youth. A graduate of the University of Virginia

and Hollins University, this is her second article for the *Smithfield Review* (see Volume 14, "Mother Dearly Loved Flowers"). She admires the women of the Preston family.

1. William Preston, McDowell (Mss1M1485a1), Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Va. Colonel Preston sent this letter dated July 9, 1777 from Fort Henry to Susanna Smith Preston.
2. Jim Glanville and Ryan Mays, "The Mysterious Origins of James Patton, Part 1," *Smithfield Review* 15 (2011): 40, and Richard Osborn, "William Preston: Origins of a Backcountry Political Career," *Journal of Backcountry Studies* 2 (2007): 1, <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ojs/index.php/jbc/article/viewFile/40/82>, accessed November 21, 2011.
3. Letitia Preston Floyd, "Incidents of Border Life in Virginia," *The Richmond Standard*, G.W. James, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, the University of Virginia, np., also transcribed in Anna Kenney Papers (Ms91-022), Carol Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Va.
4. Floyd, 2.
5. Floyd, 9.
6. Floyd, 14.
7. Floyd, 14.
8. Joseph Schafer, ed., "Society and the State," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 6 (1922 – 1923): 109.
9. The frontier settlement surrounding Smithfield was called Draper's Meadows at time of this event. It later became known as Blacksburg in 1798.
10. Lucy Preston Beale, "How Smithfield Got Its Name," Joseph Schafer, ed. (Menasha, Wisc: George Banta Publishing Co., 1923), np.
11. Richard Osborn, "Smithfield: More Than a Home for the Prestons," *50th Anniversary Smithfield Homecoming*, August 14, 2010, Smithfield Plantation, Blacksburg.
12. Janie P. B. Lamb, "What of Time," Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities, Montgomery County Branch. 1958 – 1983. Records (Ms 62-001), Carol Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg.