RACHEL JACKSON

Rachel Jackson

Nellie Treanor Stokes

The picture of Rachel Jackson on the cover is a replica of the miniature which General Jackson wore daily, and only removed at night, placing it with his Bible and spectacles on a table beside his bed.

RACHEL JACKSON

By

NELLIE TREANOR STOKES
(Mrs. Walter Stokes)

FOREWORD

Historians and biographers who have immortalized Andrew Jackson as a statesman and military genius, have invariably touched on the vital influence exerted on one of the greatest figures in American history by his beloved wife, Rachel.

In the belief that only close readers of history or biography are aware of the full beauty of her personality and character, the Board of Directors of the Ladies' Hermitage Association offers this short biography of Rachel Jackson, by Nellie Treanor Stokes.

Residing in early girlhood at Tulip Grove, a plantation adjacent to the Hermitage, the author was a frequent visitor in the Hermitage mansion during those years, and has since continued an intimate association with members of the Jackson family. Thus, her biography incorporates first-hand knowledge of family traditions along with careful historical research concerning the life of Rachel Jackson.

Serving as Regent of the Ladies' Hermitage Association from 1923 to 1927, and as a member of the Board of Directors continuously since 1921, Mrs. Stokes throughout these many years has remained in constant touch with all matters pertaining to the Jackson family and home, and the work of maintaining the Hermitage shrine, to which she has devoted much of her time, has always been one of her chief interests.

Ladies Hermitage Association

Nashville, Tennessee,
1942.

Rachel Jackson

RACHEL JACKSON was born at the Virginia home of her parents in June, 1767. Thus her distinguished husband preceded her into the world by only a few months in the same year. She was the tenth child and fourth daughter of Col. John Donelson and Rachel Stockley, his wife. She was given the name of her mother. There was another son born after Rachel, making four daughters and seven sons, eleven children in all.

Rachel's parentage was not only substantial but also distinguished. On the paternal side she was the granddaughter of Catherine Davies who was the sister of Rev. Samuel Davies, the eminent Presbyterian Minister who succeeded Jonathan Edwards as President of Princeton University. "Her mother," quoting from Mary French Caldwell, "came from Accomac County on the Eastern shore of Virginia and the story of her people goes back to the earliest days of the colony."

For thirty-five years the family of Rachel lived on the Bannister River in Pittsylvania County, Virginia. Col. Donelson was a surveyor, the owner and master of a large plantation, and the owner of an iron furnace in the vicinity. He was a vestryman in the Church, and an important member of the Virginia House of Burgesses, where he held membership in the Trade Committee which dealt with many of the serious and delicate questions of the day between the Colony and the Mother Country. He helped frame and sign the "treasonable protest" adopted in adjourned sessions following dissolution of the Burgesses by order of the Crown. By doing so he may have placed his liberty in jeopardy in the event of a British victory in the subsequent war for

independence, in which he served with modest distinction. But most noteworthy was his service by appointment of the Governor, Lord Botetourt, to assist John Stuart in negotiating the treaty of Lochaber with the Cherokee Indians. The report of his superior contains the following reference: " . . . I arrived here (Lochaber) the 15th where I found the Cherokee Chiefs with their followers . . . about a thousand in number. . . . I had also the pleasure of finding Col. Donelson here; he was exactly punctual to the time appointed. . . . I beg leave to return to your Lordship my most sincere thanks for having sent a gentleman of Col. Donelson's Discernment and Probity to assist me. . . . I beg leave to refer your Lordship to him in every particular. . . ." William Nelson, temporary successor to Lord Botetourt, deceased, wrote to the Crown: "I have by the advice of the Council appointed Col. Donelson to execute the running of the line in May next, as I think he may be confided in. . . ."

The assignment referred to is significant in the development of the epic story of Rachel because it gave to her father an intimate view of and an undying interest in the great undeveloped country lying to the Westward. Mrs. Caldwell has well said: "He had formally accepted the commission to run the line specified in the Treaty of Lochaber and he went out, not as a nomadic hunter or adventurer, but as the official representative of the British Government. He was a man of fifty-two years, mature in judgment and experience and clothed with the authority which his fortune and prominence in colonial affairs had given him. . . ."

We may fairly conclude that it is not surprising that with such parentage and amid the pleasant surroundings of the Bannister plantation Rachel grew in education and understanding far beyond the aver-

age for the young women of her day. Many were the advantages afforded her.

When Rachel was born some of the older brothers and sisters were already married. There were slaves to tend the crops, and cloth was woven on the place from cotton and wool grown there. It was a busy, self contained, happy household. So it is not remarkable that the baby Rachel was a happy and contented little girl, racing her pony over the hills with her brothers, and hearing stories from an adoring father of the pomp and circumstance of life at the seat of the government, as well as thrilling tales of the Cherokees. Her mother saw to it that this youngest daughter was taught her lessons of reading and writing, as well as to cook, spin, weave and sew a fine seam, so that when she had a house of her own she could train her servants in the way they should go. An authority says: "She was proficient in the household arts, she played the harpsichord, she danced, was an accomplished horsewoman, and was trained in the little courtesies and graces of life. . . ." She was bright and quick to learn and beautiful to look upon. It did seem that this united household should have lived on there by the smooth flowing Bannister.

Perhaps the prospect of more room for the ever growing family, and a first hand knowledge of the beauty and richness to be found farther west tempted Col. Donelson and his sons and daughters, some of whom had families of their own, to risk leaving Virginia and move out to what is now Tennessee.

In 1779 Captain James Robertson set out to establish a colony on the banks of the Cumberland at Fort Nashboro, then a part of North Carolina. His friend, Col. John Donelson of Virginia, was asked to bring the families of those venturesome men who

had cast their lot with his. He accepted this great responsibility. They were to travel two thousand almost unknown miles by water, as that mode of travel was deemed safer than overland through the forests and over the mountains where only a path marked the way, an impossible task for wagons and women and children. Even so the chosen route was beset with savages, as well as all manner of hindrances to be overcome.

This band of pioneers planned to start the journey after the crops were "laid by" in the autumn, and for that purpose they were assembled in a commodious block house on the banks of the Holston River; but there had been a drouth and the water was not high enough to float the boats which were ready and waiting. In early November a terrible freeze took place. These and other factors delayed the departure until just before Christmas. Finally on December twenty-second, 1779, with all families aboard and well provisioned, they set sail. "The Good Ship Adventure" bearing the Donelsons and Mrs. Robertson and family led the way. Other boats followed, each with one or more families aboard protected by a complement of able men to come to the rescue in case of attack.

Thus the twelve-year-old Rachel turned her youthful face toward the land of promise in the setting sun, happily unaware of the web of romance and love, lonely tears and poignant grief, which the unseen hand of fate would weave for her there. But for the present there was only the priceless zest of a trip into the unknown, laden with hope of high adventure. Her stout hearted father was by her side, so she knew no evil could befall her. We may be sure she was a busy little girl, and that her talents and sprightly bearing added greatly to the happiness and morale of the company.

The winter was one of unusual severity. Progress was difficult. They had sometimes to land and wait for the frozen waters to thaw; there were rapids and water falls to conquer; and after a while terrible floods and swift currents laden with trees and drift wood to be avoided. Sickness and attacks by the Indians, who were armed with rifles as well as bow and arrows, beset them; food was scarce because much

The Hermitage, home of Andrew and Rachel Jackson

of the wild life had suffered that winter, and the game which was found was too starved to be of good quality. Even smallpox developed on one of the boats. Among such difficulties it was inevitable that examples of great heroism would arise.

Witness the stoic fortitude of Nancy Gower. She was wounded while steering her boat when the Indians attacked from both river banks. Although she bled profusely she remained at her post of duty;

and not until the party was beyond the reach of the savages did her companions know that she was wounded. In that sort of stern school did the child Rachel learn fortitude in bearing the uses of adversity.

After four months of hardship mingled with bright intervals of sunshine the Donelson party arrived on the twenty-fourth of April at the "Big Salt Lick" near the small settlement of log houses surrounded by a stockade which was called Fort Nashboro, and which is now Nashville.

Captain James Robertson with other heads of families had gone through the country on horseback, and preceded the boat party in time to build cabins for the expected families. Picture the meeting when the boats arrived and families were reunited; imagine the joy of Rachel at reaching the end of a long, tired journey and exploring a new home in a strange and beautiful land. Even now she did not dream that already the invisible figure of history held her firmly by the hand.

Here Col. Donelson prospered; accumulated acres, negroes, cattle and horses. Rachel grew into a beautiful and spirited young woman. On one of her father's trips to Kentucky she was allowed to go with him. It chanced that they went to Harrodsburg, where she met Lewis Robards, the handsome son of one of the leading families. A courtship ensued, and he asked her to be his wife. She had other suitors but none so fascinating as this young man. Her father approved the marriage and after a while he went home alone, leaving Rachel with her husband there at his mother's house in Harrodsburg. There was every reason why they should have prospered in their love together, but Lewis Robards proved to be of an insanely jealous disposition. In the very

unpleasant scenes to which the jealousy of Robards subjected Rachel, her part was taken by all the members of the Robards household. She was then only eighteen. Her brother, Samuel, was despatched to bring her home, which he did much to the regret of Mrs. Robards who held a deep affection for Rachel and who never at any time blamed her for the son's fiery outbursts. No sooner had she gone than Robards wanted her back again and made all manner of promises to persuade her to return.

While Rachel suffered this sorrow her father was killed mysteriously in the woods, and her presence at home was a bulwark to the bereaved family. But this was not for long.

John Overton, a young law student who resided in Mrs. Robards' Kentucky home, planned to come to Tennessee to open a law office. He was prevailed upon to try to bring about a reconciliation. When he arrived in Nashville he took a room at Mrs. Donelson's and was successful in persuading Rachel to make a new trial with Robards. In due time Robards arrived and was welcomed by the entire family. It was not long, though, before jealousy again manifested itself. This time it was Andrew Jackson of whom he was jealous.

Jackon had come out from North Carolina with a commission to be prosecuting attorney for the Mero District. He, with Mr. Overton, occupied one of the smaller cabins at Mrs. Donelson's. The unpleasant scenes to which Rachel was subjected by her husband's jealousy roused a just indignation in the breast of the young prosecuting attorney. Mr. Overton suggested that they move their boarding place, which they did, going to Manskers, near the boundary between Davidson and Sumner Counties. This also was a group of log houses close together for common protection. But Robards was still very unhappy,

and finally he decided to go back to Kentucky, much to the relief of all. Jackon did not move back to the Donelson home but continued to live at Manskers. He had the highest ideals of womanhood, and he did not wish for any act on his part to cast the slightest shadow on the bereft Rachel.

It is unnecessary in this story of Rachel to go into the history of Andrew Jackson before he came to Tennessee, further than to say that his veneration for womanhood originated with his feeling for his mother. Before leaving for Charleston on an errand of mercy, nursing soldiers (an errand in which she lost her life), she committed to writing and left with Andrew one of the most impressive codes of conduct ever written. He kept these last words of his mother and accepted them as the credo of his life. His reverence for his mother was evidenced by the numerous times he referred to her precepts of morals and honor.

To feel that any woman was mistreated filled Andrew Jackson's soul with indignation. When he saw how unhappy Rachel's beautiful eyes looked he could hardly contain himself. Then Mr. Robards let it be known that he was coming to force Rachel to return to Kentucky with him. This she said she would never do. The family thought it best for her to go on a visit to relatives in Natchez, Mississippi. Col. Stark, a friend, was going to New Orleans on business, taking his wife and two daughters with him. It was arranged that Rachel should go with them as far as Natchez. Col. Stark asked Andrew Jackson to accompany them because he was so well known as an Indian fighter. After leaving Rachel at Natchez, Jackson went on with Col. Stark, making some investments for himself in Mississippi. While these events transpired, the wheel of fortune was turning in another quarter.

Mr. Overton made a visit to Kentucky and again stopped at Mrs. Robards' home. While he was there Mrs. Robards had a letter from her son, Lewis, then in Virginia, telling her that a divorce had been granted by the Virginia legislature. When Mr. Overton returned to Tennessee he took the joyful news straight to Mrs. Donelson. She inquired where he got the information, and he replied: "From his mother, who read a letter from her son to that effect."

The entrance hall at the Hermitage

When Mr. Jackson was told of this by Mr. Overton it was natural that he as well as everyone else should believe it. The Virginia legislature had indeed granted the divorce, but Robards failed to record it. Some have believed that he did this purposely. Anyway, Mr. Jackson went as soon as possible to tell Rachel that she was a free woman and that he wanted to marry her. After a short time they were married there in Natchez at the home of

her relatives, the Greens. Mr. Jackson had secured the "Betsy Jane Trotter," the same boat that brought Rachel down the river with the Stark girls. It was made ready for the honeymoon, and on it the newly married couple returned to Nashville. They lived first at Mrs. Donelson's, later at a place called Poplar Grove, then at Hunters' Hill where they were most happy.

Rachel felt a great pride in all the honors heaped upon her husband. He became the first citizen of Tennessee. He gave the state its lovely Indian name. He was made a member of the State Supreme Court. He was sent to the United States Senate. In that period Rachel probably enjoyed the glamor of public life, but that happy enthusiasm was short lived.

After two years Mr. Overton arrived at Hunters' Hill with the news that the divorce had never been recorded; whereupon Rachel and Andrew were immediately remarried. Everyone knew that both were entirely innocent of having done anything wrong. Yet this super legal technicality was used by Jackson's political enemies against him, even to the extent that in the presidential campaign certain pamphlets distributed by the Adams adherents referred to Rachel as an adulteress; and it was the direct cause of the duel in which Jackson killed Charles Dickinson. Through it all Jackson tried to shield Rachel from the calumnies of idle gossips and political foes; but, possessed of an acute understanding, she was aware of it all.

In any study of the Jackson saga one is compelled to the view that the seemingly small incident of the divorce not being recorded and the consequent gossip marked a transition in Rachel. The gentle sprightliness of her radiant nature gave ground before those "Slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,"

and a richer but more restrained sweetness emerged, in which she was drawn more closely to her husband and her God.

And, too, her sadness was quickened by days and months of waiting at home while her Andrew journeyed to wars and the exciting scenes of the political forum. Truly, none but the lonely heart may appreciate the anguish of those long separations. Rachel's letters to Andrew Jackson may contain an occasional misspelled word, but they are eloquent in expressing an all consuming devotion welling from a heart heavy with loneliness. Witness this as an example:

> *". . . you have Been absent monthes at a tim. . . you (could) always tell when you would be at home but now. . . nothing on Erth can give me aney pleasure now But your Letters. I reade them with the tanderness and affection not to be expresst with my pen . . as often as you find a Leasure moment from Every Public business spend that with me as often as I am present with you. . . (May God) in time of dainger send a kind guardian angel to guard your sleepe-ing hours. . . if my prayers and tears Can avail you will be well. . ."*

Shortly following the news of the flaw in the divorce, financial losses came to Andrew Jackson, on account of which he sold the happy Hunters' Hill home and bought the Hermitage tract. There Andrew and Rachel started life anew on a reduced scale. The original Hermitage into which they moved was a large block house with an ell and surrounding cabins. It was there that Aaron Burr paid a visit in 1805. And there also in the year 1809 a new light came into their lives.

Andrew and Rachel adopted a son. The author of this paper asked Mrs. J. C. Symmes, a granddaughter of Andrew Jackson, Jr., to write to her what has been handed down in the family as the true story of how the adoption took place. An extract

from Mrs. Symmes' letter is fully descriptive, and it is quoted as follows:

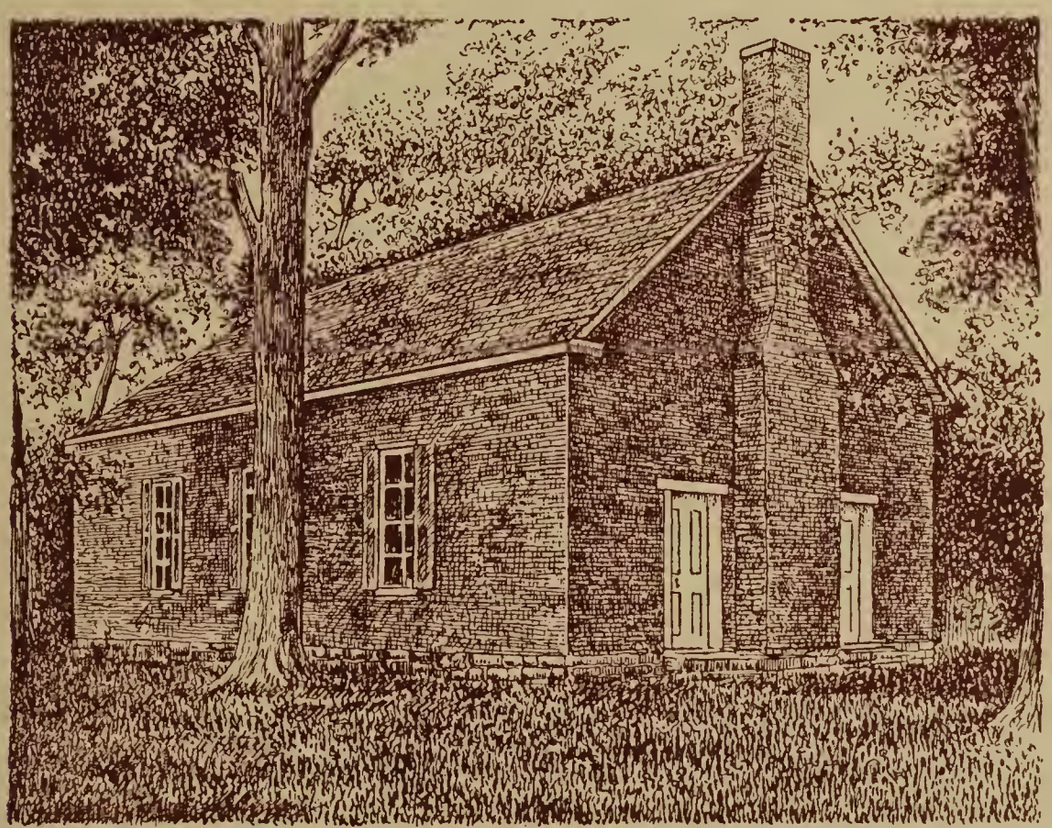
". . . They (Andrew and Rachel) were happy in each other, but there was no child in the house. No little one to call their very own. Rachel had seven brothers. One, the youngest, the seventh son, Severn Donelson by name, had always been her favorite. She had more or less mothered him. At this time he was living with his wife and family on their plantation about a mile or more distant, located back of where the recent 'Old Soldiers Home' was located. One morning in 1809 the old slave servant, (not 'Uncle Alfred') came into their room early at the break of day, as was his custom, to make the fire in the spacious fireplace. As he puffed and blew the embers into flame, he said, 'Marse Andrew, Marse Severn Donelson and Miss Betsy done had twin boys borned last night!' Andrew Jackson roused up as if he had received an electric shock! 'What,' he said, 'twin boys!' Turning to Rachel he said, 'Dear, we must have one of those boys!' "

"No time was wasted. A call to battle could not have been more urgent! After a hasty breakfast the carriage was at the door, and the buoyant couple filled with a great longing and a prayer in their hearts hastened to the home of Severn Donelson. Sure enough there were the two tiny boys!"

"Just what was said is unknown. But in the light of the mother's delicate health, and the father's great love for his sister, Rachel, and their admiration and respect for Andrew Jackson, they consented. A blue ribbon was tied around the wrist of the one of their choice, and with great pride he was named Andrew Jackson, Jr. The parents asked that Jackson suggest a name for the other little boy. He therefore named him Thomas Jefferson Donelson. . . After three days they returned to the home of Severn and Elizabeth Donelson to receive their son, brought him home and enthroned him in their hearts."

"The Legislature was in session at this time in Nashville, Tennessee. Andrew Jackson went immediately and had all legal papers drawn up and signed—legally changing his adopted son's name from 'Donelson' to 'Andrew Jackson, Jr.,' thus making him his son and heir. . ."

The fact of the success of the adoption is attested in all of the correspondence between Andrew and Rachel, which developed while General Jackson traveled far afield as public service made greater demands upon him. Andrew, Junior, was truly a God-send to Rachel in those days, and he grew into a young manhood, clean and strong and dependable. He was only a boy of ten when the first Hermitage mansion house was built in 1819, but he became about



The Hermitage church which Andrew Jackson built for his "beloved Rachel"

the most important part of its life in the eyes of his mother and father. Later, in 1831 after his mother's death and while Jackson was President, Andrew, Junior, married the beautiful young Sarah Yorke of Philadelphia. President Jackson received her as "My Daughter"; and, some time after, this new daughter served with dignity and grace as Mistress of the White House.

When the master was at home in 1819 the Hermitage was the scene of extensive entertaining, and upon the shoulders of Rachel fell the responsibility of reigning as the gracious mistress. Guests were from the most distinguished and cultured circles of the United States, and there were many foreign visitors, notably Lafayette, and the artist, Earl, who lived several years at the Hermitage very much as a member of the family. As a woman of high character and as a devoutly devoted wife, Rachel had not failed to meet the measure of the commanding stature of her husband. It has been fairly and authoritatively stated on this phase of her life:

"One of the most interesting things about Rachel Jackson is that she could hold the chivalrous heart and deep love and devotion to the last day of her life; that she could so live that her distinguished husband could write her epitaph in words of noble and restrained tenderness and grief, through which truth and candor runs like a golden thread in a rich tapestry, is undying testimony of the intrinsic worth and nobleness of the woman so deeply, so tenderly loved and cherished."

But, how was Rachel Jackson as a hostess?

A full and complete answer is found in the words of Thomas Hart Benton, distinguished Tennessean, United States Senator from Missouri, and frequent guest at the Hermitage:

"She had a faculty—a rare one of retaining names and titles in a throng of visitors, addressing each one appropriately, and dispensing hospitality to all with a cordiality which enhanced its value. No bashful youth, or plain old man, whose modesty sat them down at the lower end of the table, could escape her cordial attentions any more than the titled gentlemen on her right and left. Young persons were her delight, and she always had her house filled with them—clever young women and clever young men—all calling her affectionately, 'Aunt Rachel.' I was young then, and was one of that number. I owe it to the early recollections and

to cherished convictions—in this last notice of the Hermitage—to bear this faithful testimony to the memory of its long mistress—the loved and honored wife of a great man.''

No true student of Rachel Jackson can escape the impression that a quality of queenliness in natural grace and dignity hovered about her and made her not unlike the great Victoria in all social and domestic qualities.

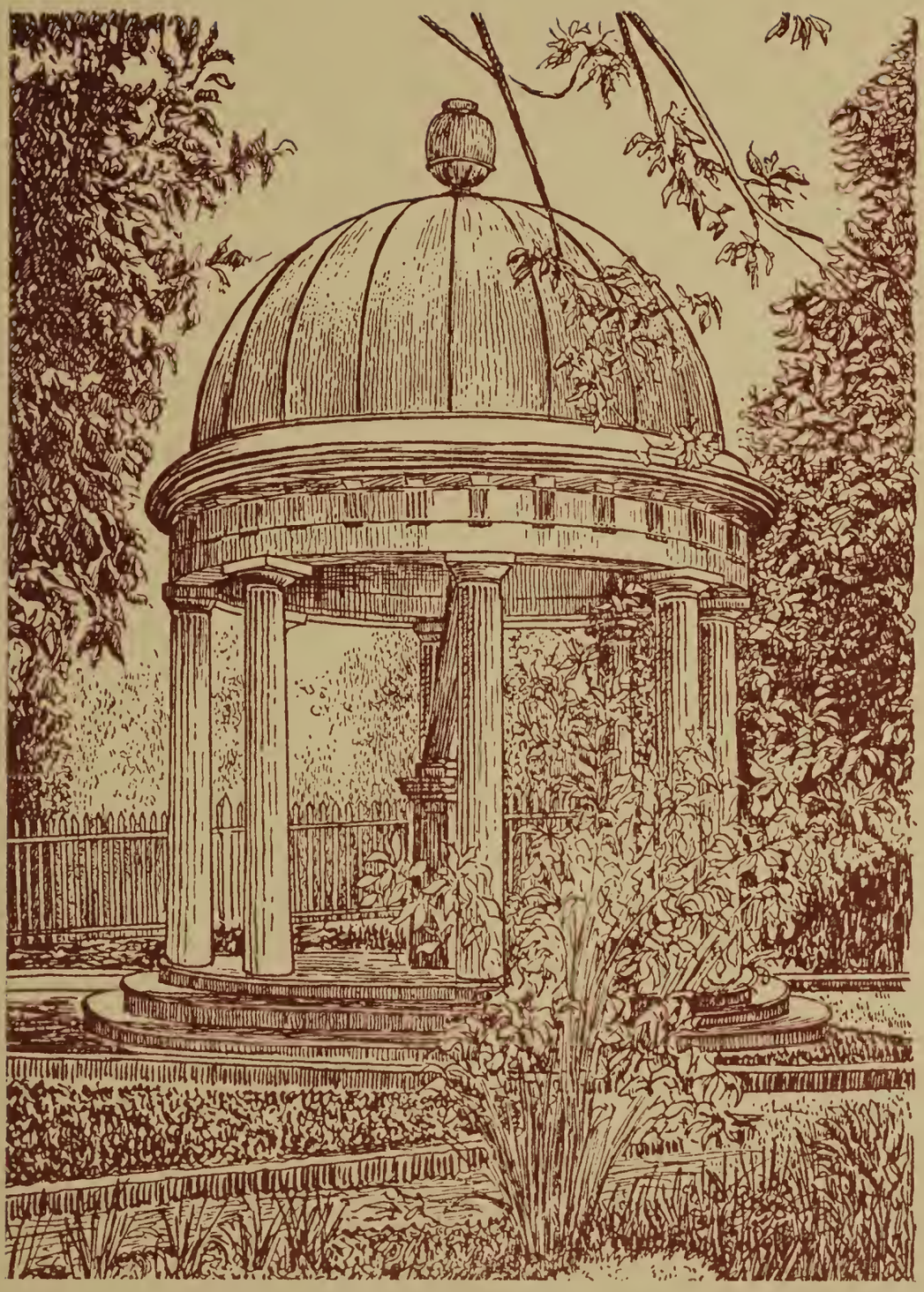
If no other manifestation of the life and character of this woman were left to us today, the little Hermitage Church, which was built for her in 1823, would stand as an everlasting monument to the simple greatness of her inmost soul. She inspired true things and good things, and the beauty of her spirit is reflected in every corner that one searches in the place that was her home. More often than not great deeds of men find their fountain head in the inspiration welling from the being of a beloved and cherished woman. Who shall view the epochal career of Andrew Jackson and gainsay that one sees Rachel, too!

The last chapter of her life was the most trying, but it did not break her spirit. It was engaged with the bitter campaign in 1828 between Jackson and Adams for the presidency. Political opponents dragged out the old divorce question and ridiculed her as an unlettered woman from the backwoods, totally unsuited to be mistress of the White House. Here the thought is advanced that these base and purely politically inspired statements constitute the only basis for the widely accepted version of Rachel as an ignorant and crude personality, a pure fiction that is false to its very core. Through all of this Rachel maintained a calm dignity. She did not like politics, and it was natural that the bitterness of that

memorable campaign should have drawn her closer to her home and her God. She would have preferred the simplicity and peace of private life for herself and her husband, but she accepted both the outrages of the campaign and the final victory with quiet resignation.

On the eve of a victory banquet in Nashville in honor of the newly elected President, she died peacefully in the bosom of her home. Almost her last words with her husband had been to exact a promise from him that he would attend the banquet in spite of her illness, which was not considered as being serious. She died on December 22, 1828, just forty-nine years to the day since trustingly she turned her face Westward on the "Good Ship Adventure." With the same child-like confidence, her great and good soul now passed beyond the veil and the mystery to the eternal home of her Maker. Upon her tomb in the Hermitage garden is inscribed an epitaph dictated by the stricken heart of Andrew Jackson:

"Here lies the remains of Mrs. Rachel Jackson, wife of President Jackson, who died the 22nd of December, 1828, age 61 years. Her face was fair, her person pleasing, her temper amiable, her heart kind; she delighted in relieving the wants of her fellow creatures, and cultivated that divine pleasure by the most liberal and unpretending methods; to the poor she was a benefactor; to the rich an example; to the wretched a comforter; to the prosperous an ornament; her piety went hand in hand with her benevolence, and she thanked her Creator for being permitted to do good. A being so gentle and yet so virtuous slander might wound, but could not dishonor. Even death when he bore her from the arms of her husband could but transport her to the bosom of her God."



The Jackson tomb in the garden at the Hermitage

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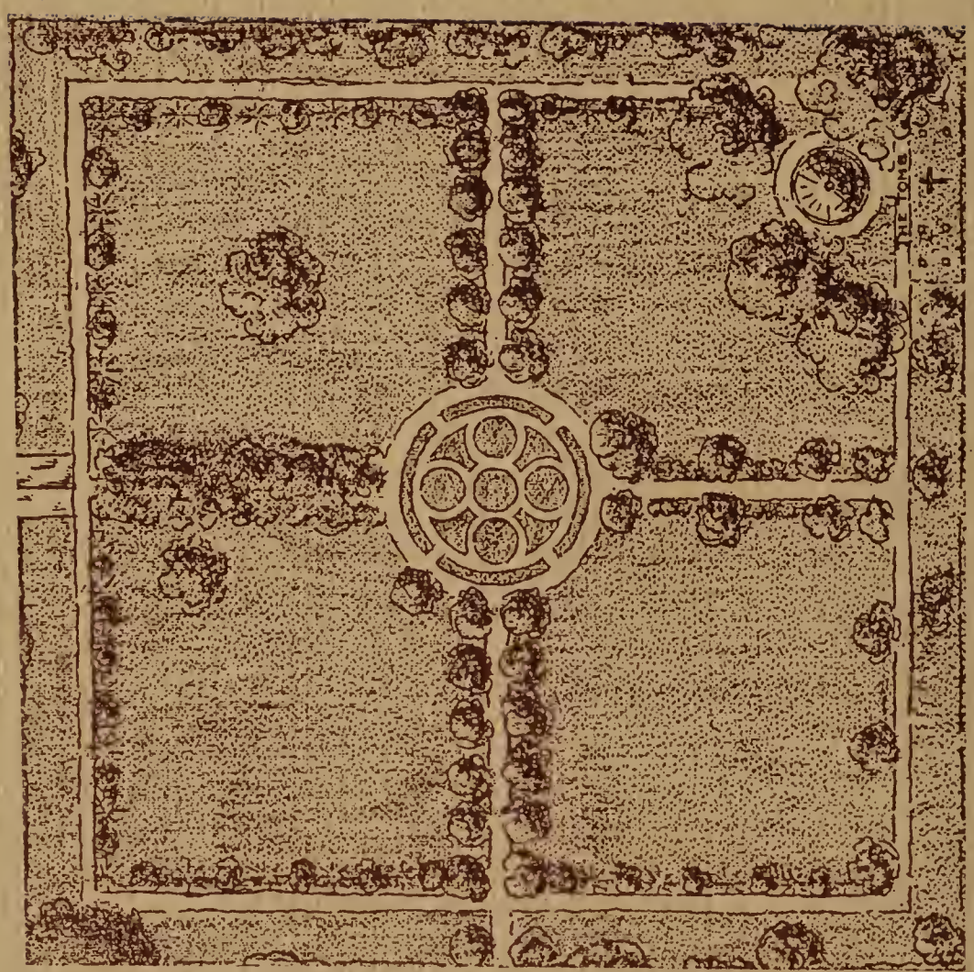

Plan of the Hermitage garden