



Mary Mead Hall Hardie

Insofar as we are aware, The Thornhill Foundation is not the subject of any investigation, but it has been suggested that we are a little too “patriarchal” in our focus on John Hardie. After all, we are as equally descended from his wife, Mary Mead Hall.

According to Lillian Martin’s book, *John Hardie of Thornhill and His Family*, Mary Mead Hall was born on October 19, 1812, in Suffolk, Virginia. Mary’s mother was also named Mary and her family name was Mead, according to most sources, but we have no further information about her mother’s origins. Mary’s father was Isaac Hall, a Methodist minister, whose origins are equally unknown. Mary was ten years old when her family moved to Florence, Alabama, in 1822, about four years after John Hardie moved from Richmond, Virginia, to Huntsville, Alabama. The Hall family included six children when they left Virginia for north Alabama. Elizabeth was twenty-five years old, Martha was twenty-two, Isaac was fourteen, Sarah was twelve and Joshua was eight.

The Tennessee river valley in Alabama was contested by Indians at the end of the eighteenth century, but it was opened to settlers when John Hunt of Virginia settled Huntsville in 1805. In 1813 congress claimed that the present state of Alabama was included in the Louisiana purchase, and it became subject to the jurisdiction of the United States for the first time. The Creeks in Alabama were hostile to the whites who were encroaching on their traditional hunting lands, and it was not until 1814 that the danger from Indians was eliminated. Alabama became a state in 1819. Clearly the Halls were bringing their young family to the frontier.

The last Hall child, James, was born after the move to Florence, and he died in infancy in Florence in August 1824. The remaining Hall children were orphaned when their mother died in 1824 and their father died in 1825. Mary at age thirteen and her sister Sarah, who then was fifteen, went to live with their older sister Martha and Martha’s husband Joshua Willis in Triana, Alabama.

In 1828 Joshua Willis introduced his sister-in-law Mary to John Hardie. She was only sixteen, and John was thirty-two. One imagines that Joshua and Martha were happy to have a burden lifted, and Mary was probably as happy to be away from her sisters. In any event, we know of no objections to the marriage based on the difference in their ages. They were married on November 28, 1828, in Triana which is ten miles down river (west) from Whitesburg where John Hardie and his partner James White had operated their store since 1820. John and Mary set up housekeeping in Whitesburg, and their first child, John Timmons Hardie, was born a year later on November 29, 1829.

Whitesburg (originally Ditto’s Landing) was located in Madison County, Alabama, and was one of many landings and trading posts along the Tennessee river in Alabama that were lost when the river was dammed and flooded by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Triana remains as a small town on Wheeler lake in the southwest corner of Madison County.

Two more Hardie children were born at Whitesburg: James White on May 19, 1831, and Joseph on June 26, 1833. It’s hard to imagine what their life in Whitesburg was like. John’s partner went to Virginia each year to buy the stock for their store, but John and Mary seem never to have left. John’s plan to return to Scotland for a visit never came to fruition, so John and Mary probably contented themselves with visits to her sisters and other settlers and traders along the river. Money was an important concern as John Hardie’s letters home indicate, but the store seems to have prospered sufficiently for the family to move to Talladega County and establish a farm and store.

Mary was not yet twenty-four years old when she and John and their three children moved to Talladega County in 1835. Talladega County was created in 1832 with land purchased from the Creeks. John and Mary started with about 700 acres and lived in a small house while "Thornhill" was being built. The farm grew in time to 1700 acres. As Lillian Martin explains in *John Hardie of Thornhill and His Family*:

So we see that in 1835 John Hardie became a large land owner and a planter. On his plantation his "money crop" must have been cotton, but he also raised vegetables, beef, pigs, poultry, to feed all of the fifty to sixty people who lived on the plantation. All of the milk, eggs, and butter used at Thornhill were produced there. All of the articles of clothing for the family and for the fifty slaves were spun, woven, and sewn into garments there. Yes, *slaves*. For John Hardie, the pious Scotch Presbyterian who had abhorred the idea of slave holding, had found no other satisfactory source of labor, and he became the owner of fifty human beings.

John Hardie also set up a store in Mardisville, a town about a mile and a half south of Thornhill on the Sylacauga road.

Mary Hardie's sister Martha Willis died in 1836 less than a year after her husband's death, so Mary took in their two children, Cornelia and Persia Willis. The household also increased as John and Mary had more of their own children: Belle on November 5, 1835; Rob on February 7, 1838; Willie on December 9, 1840; Alva on April 10, 1844; Annie Eliza on July 6, 1846; and Tommie on January 10, 1849.

Can we really imagine the life during those years? Idyllic, perhaps, to one influenced by Rousseau's image of nature. There were cycles of planting and harvest with inevitable anxieties about the weather. A late freeze might destroy fruit trees; a dry spell might stunt corn or cotton. Animals were bred, raised and butchered. The winters were cold with very little heating; the summers were hot with no cooling. Sickness must have been frightening.

Then, after thirteen years at Thornhill, Mary's husband died. She was thirty-five years old and pregnant with her ninth child, and her oldest child was only eighteen. Nevertheless, she had no choice but to assume full responsibility for the family. John Hardie's sister Helen and her husband and their five children moved to Talladega County in the fall of 1848, only a few months after John's death. Mary's sister Sarah, who had moved to Talladega County in 1845 after her first husband's death, married the Reverend Oliver Welch in October. Then in January 1849 Sarah's daughter Mary was married in Talladega. Tommie was born less than two weeks later. Would these events have been any less a strain on Mary than they would be on a young widow today?

Mary not only survived these events, but she managed the farm and store and supervised the education of her children until they left home. James was the first to leave; he married in May 1851 and went to live in Jackson County, Alabama, in the northeast corner of the state. John T. left home for New Orleans in the spring of 1853 at age 23 after settling up the store in Mardisville. Joseph was away at college (first the University of Alabama and then Princeton) between 1850 and his graduation in 1855, and he then moved to Selma where he was married two years later. Belle was only twelve when her father died, but she was probably called on to help until she and Taul Bradford were married at Thornhill in February 1856. They lived in Talladega where they started their own family a year later. Willie left home for New Orleans in 1858 when he was seventeen years old. Rob, who was older than Willie, evidently stayed home with the younger children, Alva, Annie Eliza, and Tommie.

We know nothing of Mary's feelings when the Civil War began in April 1861, but it shouldn't be too hard to imagine that she was unhappy to see six of her sons join the Confederate army. She was

left at home with Tommie and Annie Eliza, and Belle and her children were also in Talladega, possibly at Thornhill for the duration of the war. James was also at Thornhill recovering from his wounds after the battle of Rocky Face ridge in May 1864. We are also ignorant of the relationship between master and slave at Thornhill, but we do know from contemporary sources that there was a general fear in the South that the slaves would rebel, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation. Therefore, it's not had to imagine the anxiety at Thornhill throughout the war as Mary worried about her children and tried to fulfill the Confederacy's demands for food, horses, and other commissary supplies. Everyone in the Talladega valley suffered privation during the war. Most farms were shorthanded because their slaves were impressed for government services like the construction of fortifications at Mobile. Toward the end of the war, Talladega was invaded by Union cavalry raiders. "They fed their horses at Mrs. Hardie's and consumed a large quantity of her oats, corn, bacon, etc." according to a contemporary newspaper quoted by Lillian Martin.

After the war nothing would ever be the same. Mary Hardie found it necessary to lease the land surrounding Thornhill rather than try to farm it herself. She explained her predicament to John Hardie's brother William in Scotland:

The farm is leased out to a farmer. I could not manage it myself now since the negroes are free. I have the dwelling house, yard, garden, & orchard. One of my old servants stays here when we go away and she takes care of everything. She was a slave but is so much attached to me & my children that she has no wish to leave us. I know that you all think slavery a dreadful thing, but there are thousands that were once well and happy that are now dying of want.

In a letter to Joseph and his wife Maggie, Mary shows still more cynicism about the situation created by Reconstruction:

The Darkees have become dissatisfied, they all expected to get rich this year, and they are just beginning to find that they were mistaken in their calculations. They supposed they were to have all the corn but 100 bushels. John Walker has become disgusted with farming & come to Taul to hire him for next year.

By 1868 Tommie was off at college, and Mary lived alone at Thornhill after Annie Eliza's marriage in November 1869. Mary enjoyed a level of prosperity most survivors of the war could not match. She visited her children, and they visited her at Thornhill. She was in New Orleans for the birth of Annie Eliza's first child in December 1871, and she returned to Thornhill in time for the birth of Belle's eighth child on January 30, 1872.

Over the years, family letters often spoke of an illness, and Mary wrote of coughing in church, so it is likely that she suffered from tuberculosis. Evidently she was aware that her death was near, for all of her children were at Thornhill when she died on February 18, 1872, at age 59. She had outlived her husband by almost twenty-five years, and in that period she had raised their nine children, managed the farm and endured the crushing destruction of the Civil War. She was survived by all of her children and nineteen grandchildren. There are now over 700 living descendants of Mary Mead Hardie. She was a remarkable woman who was aptly described in eulogy by her minister as "modest, meek, unassuming, yet self-possessed, conscientious and firm."