

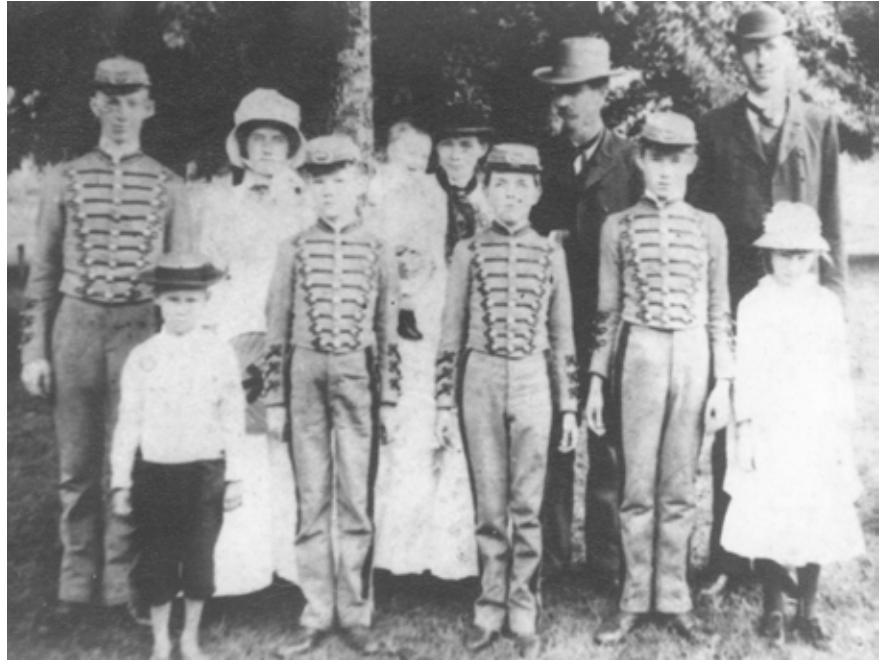
THE MANY WIVES OF HENRY CLAY

Submitted by Marty Everse

Confederate war hero captured three times but never held for long, successful merchant, first president of what would become the University of Montevallo, and friend of Thomas Edison, Henry Clay Reynolds covered a lot of territory in his eighty-two years on earth. Fifty-five and a half of those years he spent wrapped in the pleasures of domesticity though it took three wives to reach that milestone. And in each immersion into the bonds of matrimony, he managed to attract a woman ten years younger than the previous.

Henry Clay first jumped the broom with the 19 year old beauty, Mary Jane Boyd, who was living with her brother, sister, and mother operating a boarding house in Selma, one of the few ways a widow without a large estate could support a family. The Civil War was fifteen days old when the vows were taken on April 27, 1861, and Henry Clay whisked his bride off to a farm near Harpersville. Within a month, Mary Jane was expecting. Sometime near the birth of the first child, Henry Clay joined the army and spent the remainder of the war scouting for the Confederate army though he did find time for a conjugal visit home the end of 1864. Over their 29 years of marriage, the couple had ten children, the last, a daughter, when Mary Jane was 46 years old. She died two years later in June 1890.

Henry Clay spent seventeen months as a widower before getting hitched to Hattie Simpson Meredith. Hattie's early story is the stuff movies are made of. Her father, Leonard Simpson, was the first lawyer in Atlanta and included in his household of six kids and a wife in 1860 were seven others including a prostitute, carpenter, machinist, and stone mason. Leonard missed the Civil War by dying six months before hostilities began. The family remained in their home on Peachtree Street eventually taking shelter in the cellar during the bombardment of the city by General Sherman's army. During the siege, the mother contracted pneumonia. Seven days after Sherman had taken possession of Atlanta, with their mother apparently dying, the children appealed to Union headquarters for a doctor and one was provided accompanied by Sherman himself. According to an account in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, "The pillow of the dying woman was tenderly raised by the Northern General that the death struggle might be less painful, and from its folds there fell a Masonic badge, bearing the inscription, 'A token of esteem to our beloved brother L. C. Simpson, Atlanta Lodge No. 49.' Examining the emblem carefully, General Sherman, who was himself a Mason, declared that the children should not suffer. A coffin was furnished for the burial of the mother, and at twilight next day the body was interred in Oakwood cemetery, with only the Masonic ritual, General Sherman conducting the obsequies [funeral rites]." When the Federal army evacuated Atlanta, Hattie and her siblings were sent to Boston, Sherman's home, and cared for until the end of the war when southern relatives brought them home.



The Henry Clay & Mary Boyd Reynolds family, 1882, courtesy of Carey Heatherly.

If Hattie's early childhood was Hollywood worthy, her later years were pure daytime soap opera. In 1875, she married William B. Meredith, the son of William H. Meredith, a Presbyterian minister and principal of the Montevallo Female Collegiate Institute. William B., a medical doctor, was a dutiful husband for the first five years of their marriage until Hattie's younger sister Stella came to live with them. In Hattie's own words, Stella "was considered to be quite pretty by some. She was well formed, graceful, carried herself well and attractive." And Stella absolutely bewitched the good doctor. The resulting affair was torrid and scandalized the town. Hattie, unable to weather the gossip and humiliation, left her husband in 1885. She eventually divorced him in March 1889 and received \$12 per month alimony.

Hattie had been teaching music at the Furman Academy in Wilcox County when Henry Clay swooped south, wed her, and carried her off to his home just before Christmas 1891. The two had known each other in Montevallo and, in fact, Hattie had confided her marital troubles to him before she left town. The couple had only four and a half years together before she died in June 1896, just months before the opening of the Alabama Girl's Industrial School.

Reynolds final trip to the altar was with Augusta Wade Nelson, a childless widow, in 1898. He was 60, she was 36. Gussie, as she was called, had been a widow for six years and been hired two years earlier to take charge of the dressmaking department at the new Alabama Girls' Industrial School where Henry Clay was president. Obviously fabric and thread were not her only talents. On August 23rd, they were married at 7 o'clock in the morning and just over an hour later boarded a train for an extended honeymoon in the Northeast. The nuptials were a surprise to their many friends throughout Alabama. They remained in Montevallo for a little over ten years eventually moving to Fort Myers, Florida where they owned a citrus grove and became friends with Thomas Edison and his wife. Around 1920, the Reynolds moved to Tampa where Henry Clay died. His body was shipped back to Montevallo where he now rests near his first two wives in the town cemetery. Gussie remained living in Tampa, finally passing in 1949. A small granite stone marks her resting place in Tampa's Woodlawn Cemetery.

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