

A REMARKABLE WOMAN

Submitted by Marty Everse

Now all but forgotten, Sally Brooks Wood has rested in the Montevallo Cemetery for 159 years, her exquisitely carved marble marker broken and overrun with fire ants. The only other physical evidence of her sojourn here is believed to be a small brick springhouse on the Cleveland place in Wilton. Yet, her story should be recalled. She was one of the most fascinating women to ever trod the muddy streets of early Montevallo.

Sally was extraordinary. In a time when frontier rigors and unrelenting childbirth cut many women's lives short, Sally buried three husbands and married a fourth, twenty three years her junior. In a time when women were expected to remain hearthside and only capable of domestic pursuits, Sally supervised her farm riding a white mule while knitting just as fast as she could knit. E. B. Teague, a notable Baptist preacher, wrote, "Aunt Sally Woods, as we called her in late life, was a remarkable woman, managing her business, complicated by the decease of several husbands, with great skill." Sally did find time between funerals and business to birth seven children.

Sally was born Sarah Brooks on May 31, 1787 in Virginia, and when she was about 18 married Robert Sterrett there. Soon she and her new husband struck off for the bluegrasses of Kentucky. Not satisfied, they wandered down to Tennessee, then Madison County, Alabama and finally drifting further south to the uncharted forests of what would become Bibb and Shelby Counties. Here, Robert promptly died leaving Sally alone with three small sons, Major, Alfonso and David. His marble grave marker, twisted off its foundation by roots and stained with red clay lies just off the Marvel Road and reads, "In Memory of Robert Sterrett who moved to Alabama in 1816 and died March 1817. Aged about 31 years."

Appointed administratrix, Sally held a sale at her dwelling to raise money to settle her husband's debts. None other than Jesse Wilson, Montevallo's founder, was the auctioneer that day. The recording clerk, the registrar of the Montgomery County Orphan's Court, Henry Stevens, must have been enchanted with Sally during the proceedings. Within a year, he became her second husband, moving to her place in Bibb County.

In 1823, Sally and Henry contemplated moving to the bustling new village of Montevallo. Henry purchased planks, studs, weatherboarding and flooring and hired Blassingame Nabors, Pleasant West, and Jehu Ferrington to construct a house. Then Henry got sick. After a week-long illness, he died. So Sally was once again a widow but hardly alone. She now had six children, the Sterrett boys and Andrew, Mariah, and Margaret Stevens.

After Stevens' death Sally remained a widow for several years until, as Preacher Teague put it, "she attracted the attention of Judge Allen so as to terminate in their marriage" in 1827. The new husband was a Kentucky man folks called "Long John" Allen. It would be her shortest marriage. John was dead by the spring of 1828 but not before siring Mollie, a very tall girl who had to stoop to get through doorways.

Three husbands planted in the ground and now 41 years old, with seven children, Sally's prospects for attracting another husband were not promising. It took her four years, but she did beguile a fourth and final spouse, Richard Wood. This marriage raised a few eyebrows. Wood, a Baptist minister, was twenty-three years her junior. By the 1850s, whatever



No image of Sally exists. Her daughter, Margaret Stevens [above], married William P. Browne, one of the earliest coal mine operators in the Montevallo area.

wedded bliss existed evaporated. Sally was accused of "inhuman treatment to her husband, Richard Wood" at the Cahaba Valley Baptist Church. At the time, Wood was the church's pastor. She faced the problem head-on at the next session and "came forward with an acknowledgement and proof sufficient to satisfy the church" and the charges were dropped.

However, Sally and Richard's relationship remained rocky until the end. Her estate papers contain a lawyer's bill for "services and advice in several matters connected with the disposition of her estate and her difficulties with Mr. Wood." Richard is granted nothing in her will.

Sally died on January 24, 1860. Her family spared no expense with her funeral, spending \$112 for her burial case, a very large amount for the time. Perhaps the best way to conclude her story is in the words of her friend, Preacher Teague. "Let her, though late, have due credit; such energetic characters are always criticized. I honor those who do something, though the strain of great trials leave scars on the mind and heart that make character less lovely than it might otherwise be."

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