



Hannah Lee Corbin 1728-1782

Westmoreland County, Businesswoman and Women's Rights Advocate

Virginia's earliest known proponent of voting rights for women was born on February 6, 1728, in Westmoreland County. Hannah was the oldest daughter and third child of Hannah Ludwell Lee and Thomas Lee, a prominent member of the House of Burgesses and later acting governor of the colony. The Lee family lived in Stratford Hall, an elegant mansion on the Potomac River, where Hannah received an education far superior to that of most young women of her day, studying alongside her brothers in Stratford's small brick schoolhouse. Intellectually curious, she read everything she could find in her father's library on law, politics, history, literature, and religion.

In 1748, Hannah married Gawin Corbin and moved with him to Peckatone, a large plantation about twenty miles downriver from Stratford. Gawin died in the winter of 1759-1760 leaving Hannah a widow at age thirty-two to manage Peckatone and raise their daughter, Martha. It seems Peckatone was left in good hands, as the plantation records reveal that she was a skilled businesswoman whose brothers often sought her advice on business matters.

In 1760, Hannah became swept up by the religious revival movement known as the Great Awakening and joined the Baptist church. Her conversion from Anglicanism, the only faith recognized by Virginia's colonial government, to what was considered a dissenting religious group proved disconcerting to her family and neighbors. Because marriages performed by Baptist ministers were not legal in Virginia until 1780, Hannah's union with local physician Dr. Richard Lingan Hall, which produced two children, was never recognized by the state.

When the American Revolution began in the mid-1770s, Hannah, again a widow, was enthusiastic, as several of her brothers were political leaders; two of them - Richard Henry Lee and Francis Lightfoot Lee - signed the Declaration of Independence. Like Massachusetts' Abigail Adams, Hannah expected the Revolution to prompt a change in the law regarding the status of women, particularly the position of widows and single women. In March 1778, she wrote indignantly to her brother Richard, then a member of the Continental Congress, complaining that independent women suffered from taxation without representation as well. If women were not to be granted political rights, she believed they should be exempted from paying all property taxes. Richard expressed sympathy with her position, but did not see how she could be excused from paying for government services through taxes. He did, however, agree in principle with her contention that women should be able to vote for the county officials who levied local taxes.

Hannah died in the summer of 1782. Although her story was overshadowed in history books by the accomplishments of her brothers, her quiet attempt to remind Virginia's political leaders of women's rights deserves to be remembered.