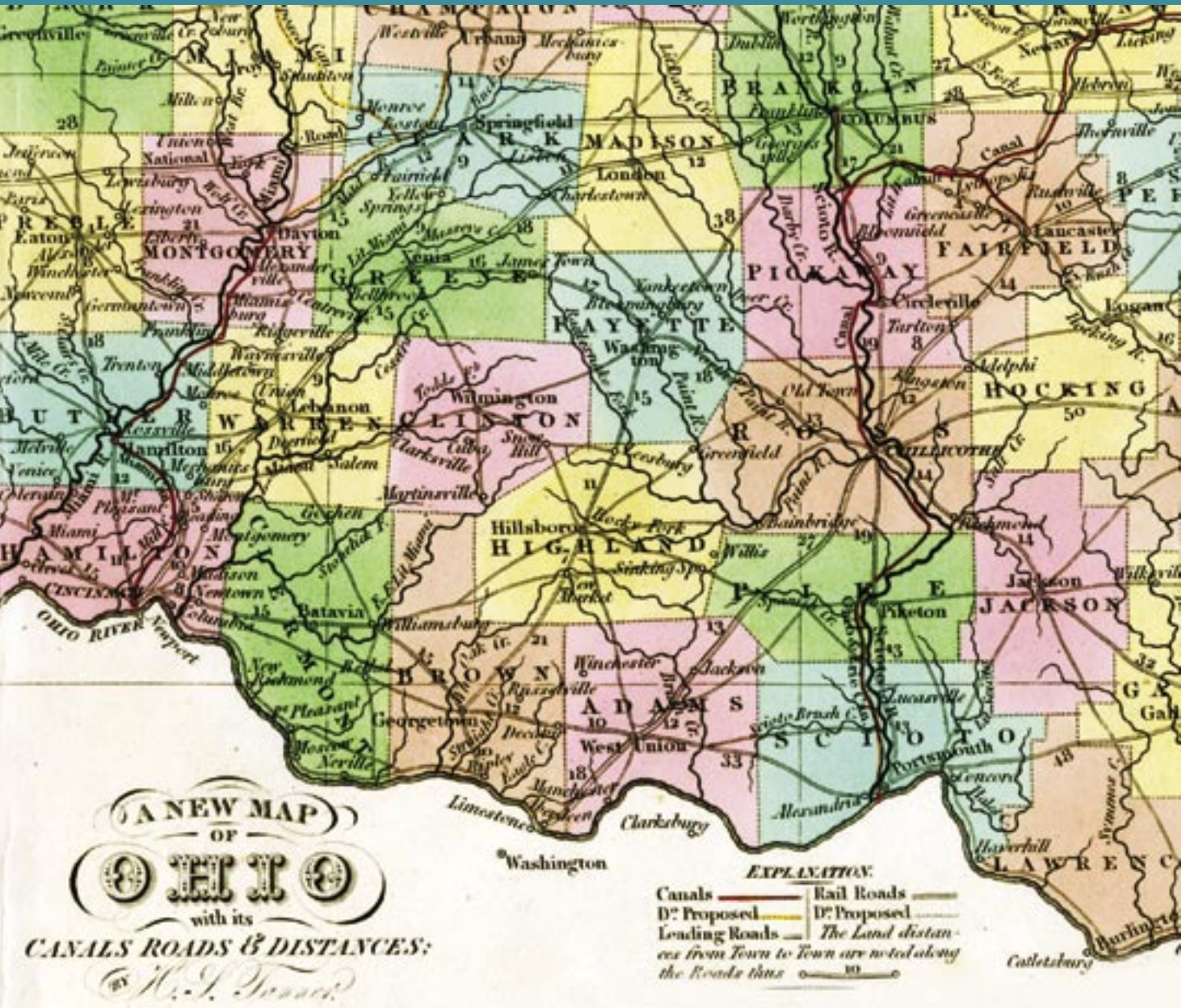


OHIO VALLEY HISTORY

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Marriage, Mayhem, and Presidential Politics: *The Robards-Jackson Backcountry Scandal*

ANN TOPLOVICH

Far too heavy for her five-foot frame and short of breath, the woman paused to rest after a fitting with her seamstress for a ballgown. Ahead of her lay a dreaded move to Washington City, for despite her personal wishes her husband had pursued and won the presidency. She had told a friend that she would rather serve in the house of God than live in that palace, the White House,¹ but events in November 1828 revealed a different fate. Now, in December, she sat sheltered in the newspaper office owned by a kinsman while she waited for her servants to bring the carriage round. At her elbow lay a pamphlet, and idly she picked it up to pass the time. To her shock, she found descriptions of herself as a Jezebel, an adulteress, a bigamist, rehashing all the horror of her marriage to Lewis Robards and her flight with Andrew Jackson. Why had these attacks been kept from her? Rachel Donelson Robards Jackson felt her chest tightening from the blow. Fleeing Nashville in the carriage, she had her driver stop at a creek to wash away her tears. This effort to keep her grief from her husband triggered a severe cold on top of the trouble within her breast. It was December 18, and she and Andrew were to leave for Washington on Christmas Day. But four days later, she was dead from a heart broken by the heartless attacks of Jackson's enemies.² Buried in the white satin gown intended for the Inaugural Ball, Rachel's tombstone would say in part, "being so gentle and so virtuous, slander might wound but could not dishonor."

Since James Parton's masterful biography of Andrew Jackson appeared in 1860, most studies of Andrew Jackson's life have paid attention to the impact on the 1828 presidential campaign of Rachel Donelson's 1793 divorce from Lewis Robards. Although research over the past thirty years has raised doubts about the Jackson party's account of the divorce, new historical examinations of marriage and divorce in the late colonial and early American republic periods suggest that the Jacksonians used the changing moral views on personal, romantic choice of a mate between 1790 and 1830 in order to shape their story to their advantage. Indeed, Rachel Donelson's



Rachel Donelson Roberts Jackson. Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, Cincinnati Historical Society Library

marriage to Lewis Robards on the Kentucky frontier, the circumstances of her elopement with Andrew Jackson to Spanish Natchez, and the return of the new couple to the Cumberland settlements offer insight into how divorces were handled, sometimes extra-legally, in the early American republic. Moreover, when considering the Robards side of the story, the Robards-Jackson scandal provides evidence of the power of politics in the 1820s, already capable of rendering presidents bigger than life while reducing men like Lewis Robards almost to obscurity.

In the fall of 1780, John Donelson took his extended family and thirty slaves from the Indian-beleaguered Cumberland settlements to a slightly more secure Davies Station, located near Crab Orchard, Kentucky.³ The move ended a journey that had begun a year earlier when Donelson sold his plantation and iron foundry in backcountry Virginia, carried his family into upper East Tennessee and, after leading an adventurous voyage down the Tennessee and up the Cumberland River, set up what proved to be a temporary camp near the future town of Nashville. Donelson, a robust man in his fifties, was a surveyor and former member of the House of Burgesses, an Indian negotiator for Virginia, and an agent of Richard Henderson. By one estimate, Donelson's sale of land and foundry in Virginia would have been worth nearly one million dollars in today's dollars.⁴ Donelson and his wife, Rachel, and eleven children all moved west, including their youngest daughter and tenth child, Rachel, who was thirteen when the Donelsons arrived in Kentucky. They immediately assumed their place in the backcountry elite, with extensive political and land speculation connections. Crab Orchard lay at the junction of the Wilderness Road and the Cumberland Trace, placing the Donelsons on the main route for travelers between Virginia and Harrodsburg and between the Nashville settlements and Kentucky. Through most of the 1780s, settlers still lived "forted up" together as protection from Indian attacks, and the settlers at Crab Orchard would encounter most of the new people moving into the region. In early 1784, one such family came down the Wilderness Road on their way to Harrodsburg: the Robardses of Goochland County, Virginia.

Lewis Robards was born into a kin network of the Virginia planter elite that was even more influential than Rachel Donelson's. Born in 1758 and raised among the large plantations between the Tidewater and the Piedmont, Robards was the seventh child of planter William Robards, Sr., and the first child of William's second wife, Elizabeth Woodson Lewis. The couple would have seven more children in later years, giving Lewis thirteen full and half-siblings in all, including eight brothers. The Robardses had emigrated from Wales to Virginia in 1710; Elizabeth Lewis's family lines were all prominent in the founding of the Virginia Colony. Besides his planter interests, William Robards had served as a militia lieutenant during the French and Indian War and as a member of Goochland County's Committee of Safety in 1775.⁵ When

the American Revolution began, the five Robards boys of age followed their father's example by serving in the Virginia Regiment, Continental Line, most rising to the officer ranks. Lewis enlisted as a private in 1778 and by January 1781 he was a captain. That year he fought at the burning of Richmond, skirmished near the James River, and was at the siege of Yorktown.⁶ And at the war's end, like many veterans of the day, Robards looked west for his fortune. He and his brothers, George, Jesse, and Joseph, spent much of 1782 and 1783 "in the wilderness [of the Kentucky district] clearing their land for cultivation, and helping rid the land of Indians."⁷ The main plantation was located on 400 acres on Cane Run in the future Mercer County. Because of the threat of Indian attack, the Robards boys lived at Fort Harrod, a few miles from the homestead.

Like his sons, William Robards planned to move his second family to Kentucky in late 1783 and divided his Goochland County land among the children of his first wife. However, the family patriarch died unexpectedly that November, leaving his wife Elizabeth a life interest in the acreage, dividing his twenty-nine slaves and two mulatto indentured servants among his wife and her children, and leaving her boys almost eleven thousand acres in Kentucky. Lewis Robards received two slaves and more than 1,800 acres from his father's estate. In early 1784, Lewis and his younger siblings, some married, moved with his widowed mother and the slaves to Mercer County, living first at Harrodsburg and then their complex of log buildings on Cane Run.⁸

The circumstances of the first meeting of Lewis Robards and Rachel Donelson are uncertain. Robards might have met her while traveling to Virginia through Crab Orchard, perhaps as early as 1782, or possibly Rachel visited the Cane Run neighborhood in 1784 when a Presbyterian meetinghouse opened there. A Robards family tradition holds that John Donelson's wife, Rachel, lived for a time with her younger children in one of the Robards's log houses, throwing the younger Rachel and Lewis together.⁹ In any case, the



"Oldest Brick House in Kentucky" postcard, built ca. 1782. Crab Orchard, Kentucky. The Filson Historical Society

courtship accelerated when John Donelson decided to move his family back to the Cumberland settlements in 1785. Rachel was then seventeen, and she may have been reluctant to leave her friends in Kentucky. A marriage to the twenty-seven-year-old Robards, who had wealth and a large, influential kin network in Kentucky and Virginia to match that of the Donelsons, would certainly have been advantageous to both families. After John Donelson registered his permission for Rachel to marry Robards the previous month, on March 1, 1785, the couple married at Harrodsburg.¹⁰ They lived with the Robards's widowed mother, along with several other Robards siblings and their young children, boarders, and a large slave community. Rachel's own family moved to Nashville that summer. When in the fall John Donelson was killed, the newlywed Rachel thus became fully dependent on her new family for support.¹¹



First school at Old Fort Harrod, Kentucky postcard, built ca. 1775-1776. The Filson Historical Society

Lewis's father had selected his younger brother, George, as executor of his will, hinting at an unstable financial personality. Arguments over his father's estate and land holdings ultimately estranged him from his brother, George; indeed, George's wife, Elizabeth Sampson, would support some of the more damning stories about her brother-in-law in the Nashville Committee affidavits of 1827, claiming that he was violently jealous and that he frequented the slave quarters at night.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Rachel may have had difficulty adjusting to her new life. John Bassett wrote that the young Rachel "is described as a woman of a lively disposition, by which is meant that she was not that obedient, demure, and silent wife which some husbands of the day thought desirable."¹⁵ A woman who is not obedient and demure would not fare well with a jealous husband.

Problems in the marriage soon became apparent to those outside the family.

In the early months of the marriage, the Robards found their lives troubled, marital and otherwise. Lewis flourished initially in Mercer County. In 1786 he was a captain of militia and may have been a merchant,¹² as the numerous debt petitions that he filed in court suggest. But the debt cases that he lost suggest, too, that he was having money troubles.¹³

In 1787, Peyton Short became a boarder at the Robards's place about the same time as fellow Virginian James Overton. Short was a graduate of William and Mary, heir to a plantation fortune, and his brother, William, was secretary to Thomas Jefferson, then ambassador to France.¹⁶ Overton's brother, John, would later write of Short's involvement in the Robards's marital problems:

I had not lived [at Harrodsburg] many weeks before I understood that Captain Robards and his wife lived very unhappily, on account of his being jealous of Mr. Short. My brother [James], who was a boarder, informed me that great uneasiness had existed in the family for some time before my arrival. . . . The uneasiness between Captain Robards and lady continued to increase, and with it great distress of the mother, and considerably with the family generally; until early in the year 1788 . . . I understood from the old lady, and perhaps others of the family, that her son Lewis had written to Mrs. Robards' mother, the widow Donelson, requesting that she would take her home, as he did not intend to live with her any longer.¹⁷

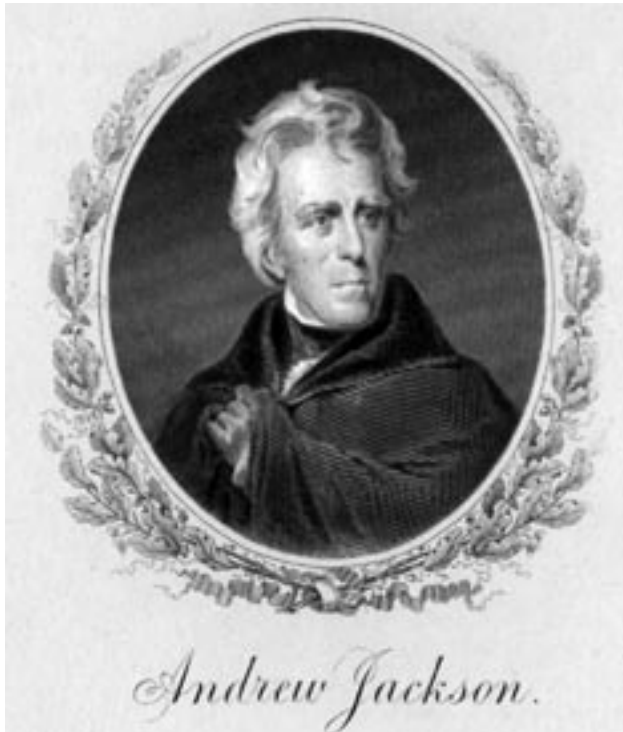
Robards appears to have had grounds for his suspicions. Short later confessed to his friend Henry Banks that he had great "sympathy" for Rachel and determined to marry her after her separation from Robards. He planned on converting his inheritance into money or slaves "and if Mrs. Robards would accept him as a husband[,] to go with her to the Spanish Dominions on the Mississippi; and there to settle himself for life."¹⁸ As fate would have it, Robards intercepted the letter from Short that held this offer and pursued Short to Virginia. In Richmond, Short offered Robards either the satisfaction of a duel or a payoff with money. Robards settled for a thousand dollars.¹⁹

In late summer 1788, Rachel's brother Samuel came for her and they traveled together to Nashville.²⁰ Although Robards family accounts say Rachel had simply gone on a visit to her family,²¹ Jackson family accounts claim that Robards had thrown her out. John Overton states that he effected a reconciliation between Robards and his wife after Overton moved to Nashville in February 1789 and boarded with the Donelsons.²² Yet in July 1788, Robards had bought almost 1,700 acres in the Cumberland, including a 640-acre plantation near Rachel's mother's,²³ thus supporting the position that Robards intended to settle permanently in the area with Rachel and that they had not separated when she came south later that summer. The couple was already together at the Widow Donelson's before Overton came to Nashville.

Whichever version is accurate, one thing is certain: when Overton arrived in Nashville, Andrew Jackson was also boarding there.²⁴ Jackson was then a twenty-one-year-old district attorney for the state of North Carolina, and he had tenuous connections to a few North Carolina politicians and speculators, including Richard Henderson's brother,

Tom, and his law teacher, Spruce McKay. Jackson's parents were Ulster Scot immigrants to the Waxhaws District of Carolina; his father, a subsistence farmer, died worn out from work before Jackson's birth and by the end of the Revolutionary War he had lost both his mother and his brothers. Lack of family, of course, hurt the social status of parvenus like Jackson. Because kin networks underpinned individuals' honor codes in the South, he alone needed to protect his reputation and seek vengeance against any who might besmirch it. "Without relatives one was helpless," writes one historian of southern honor, "in contrast, those with numerous kinspeople were assumed

to have moral stalwartness unless they proved false in some way."²⁵ Although Jackson had made acquaintance with several prominent men in the Mecklenburg and Guilford counties' section of North Carolina while reading law, favors and patronage rather than kinship formed the basis of his relationships.²⁶ By the standards of the Virginia planter elite he encountered in the Cumberland settlements and central Kentucky, Jackson was a virtual unknown.



Andrew Jackson (1767-1845). Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal, Cincinnati Historical Society Library

By the summer of 1789, Rachel's apparent friendship with Jackson caused local gossip to commence immediately. Indeed, Robards heard soon that Rachel was involved with Jackson and that Short married another woman.²⁷ Witnesses reported stormy arguments that summer between Robards and Rachel as well as altercations between Robards and Jackson. While serving as a guard party for Rachel and other ladies as they picked blackberries, Robards remarked to

others that Jackson was too intimate with his wife. When the comment was reported to Jackson, he sought out Robards and threatened to "cut his ears out of his head" if he spoke of Rachel that way again.²⁸ In another encounter, Jackson stopped Robards near the Donelson orchard "to remonstrate with him respecting the injustice he had done his wife." Angered, Robards made a show of whipping Jackson; the latter snidely predicted that Rachel's husband was not strong enough to do it, but offered to "give him gentlemanly satisfaction."²⁹ Robards appears to have refused.

Other activities of Jackson's during that summer suggest ulterior motives toward Robard's wife. In July, Jackson traveled to Natchez, Mississippi Territory, where on July 15 he took the oath of allegiance to King Carlos III of Spain. Americans could trade along the Spanish Mississippi, but under a December 1788 royal order, they were subject to a 15 percent duty, reducible to

6 percent at the discretion of the governor of Louisiana, Estevan Miro. The oath of allegiance was not needed if traders were willing to pay the duties, but the oath did confer citizenship rights, the promise of land grants, and protection from legal actions that emanated from U.S. territory.³⁰ Jackson's action begs the question of when his plans began for an elopement with the then-married Rachel.

Here the story becomes blurred, both by contemporary politics and later historians. Assertions of Jackson supporters during the 1820s sought to cover up the events that followed the summer of 1789. The accepted tale still holds that Robards left for Kentucky, vowing never to see Rachel again, while the innocent and wronged Rachel went to Natchez in a large party that happened to include Andrew Jackson. Jackson, back in Nashville, heard in 1791 that Robards had obtained a divorce and he hurried immediately to Natchez to marry Rachel. The Jacksons then returned to Nashville as an accepted couple.³¹ However, in the 1970s, historian Robert Remini did a masterful job of piecing the actual story together, showing that the Nashville Committee changed the dates to a year later, in time to cover the Jacksons' tracks in regard to Robards's divorce action.³² No credible evidence of a marriage ceremony in Natchez has ever surfaced. Indeed, evidence of the Jackson elopement occurred even earlier than Remini assumes. The couple returned with a group from Natchez in the summer of 1790, contrary to either Remini's March 1791 date or the Nashville Committee's contention of fall 1791. Hugh McGary, a Mercer County military leader, was among the travelers with Jackson and he gave Robards an account of Jackson and Rachel "bedding together." Mercer County records show that McGary could only have been traveling with them in July 1790, the date given in the fall 1790 divorce petition charging Rachel's act of adultery.³³

Given Rachel's compromised reputation from her friendships with male boarders and the lovers' young age (then each only twenty-two), their elopement was most likely a matter of passion, although they might also have been seeking an extralegal solution. If they were capable of calculation (and Jackson certainly was), the couple also realized that the vivacious Rachel shed herself of a problem husband while the orphaned Jackson gained an heiress and an influential kin network. Jackson had already proven his willingness to stand up to Robards, his courage (or perhaps impetuosity) thus offering Rachel a strong protector from a man she feared. For an ambitious but poor man like Jackson, with patrons, friends, and kin being so essential for support and especially for political advancement, the opportunity to better a privileged rival could also advance a man's standing.³⁴ On the Natchez and Tennessee frontiers of 1789, Jackson and his bride might have hoped for community acceptance of their new union. However, they could not anticipate how the arrival of "civilization" and its mores by 1800 would alter people's

views of the elopement.

The political attacks during the 1824 and 1828 presidential campaigns centered on whether Lewis Robards abandoned his wife or whether she deserted him. Remini and Andrew Burstein, following Remini's contention, conclude that Jackson carried off Rachel in order to provoke Robards to begin the process of divorce,³⁵ a claim that presupposes a widespread understanding of provocative grounds as a means of obtaining one in 1789.³⁶ In truth, until 1753, English law (which applied to the American colonies until their independence) recognized marriages that couples had made without ceremony or even witnesses. Yet at the same time, divorce was barely tolerated; between 1670 and 1857, Parliament granted only 325 full divorces, and only four of those went to women. Divorce from bed and board was a little easier to get; the couple was legally separated, the woman received financial support to live elsewhere, but neither spouse could remarry. The process for a complete divorce called for three steps: first, one filed suit for damages against the wife's lover in civil court; second, this was followed by a suit for separation in an ecclesiastical court; and finally, Parliament completed the divorce action if it found success in the prior two suits.³⁷ Divorce was, then and now, primarily a tort, with claimants seeking recompense for a willful injury.

Legal marriage with its formal contracts regarding assets was mostly the purview of the landed, moneyed, or titled classes. For them, the transfer of wealth and bloodlines required strict control from one generation to the next. Yet the difficulties of dissolving marriage could combine with older folkways to create a variety of extralegal solutions for infelicitous unions. For centuries, some among the lower classes of Great Britain had formed unions, dissolved them, and formed new marriages; what mattered most was whether the couples involved and the community they lived in accepted the actions. For these groups, the desertion by one spouse ended the marriage with both then free to "wed" another. Women were as active in deserting spouses as men. Bride-stealing and wife-selling were other methods of shedding (or acquiring) a spouse. In the case of the former, both voluntary and involuntary abductions occurred. In some cases of wife-selling, husbands accepted cash for the wife.³⁸

Such customs arrived with British settlers in the American colonies of the seventeenth century, and they flourished most in the backcountry, even in Puritan strongholds like Massachusetts. Through the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries, religious and political authorities sought to rein in the sexuality of the colonists, succeeding largely in the recognition of legal unions and the forbiddance of dissolutions of marriage in only the most egregious of circumstances. However, self-determination in marriage, and the ending thereof, was especially pernicious in the western borderlands of the South well into the mid- and late-eighteenth century. Visitors to the backcountry of the Carolinas, including the Waxhaws, especially condemned these practices.

John Urmstone was “shocked to discover migrants abandoned legal spouses and then entered adulterous relationships or bigamous marriages when settled in Carolina.”³⁹ Charles Woodmason, too, noted “colonists formed and dissolved cohabitational relationships without observing martial formalities.”⁴⁰ So long as the community accepted their unions, backcountry folk cared little for these condemnations by Anglican ministers.

By the births of Robards, Donelson, and Jackson in the southern backcountry, legal marriages quickly supplanted these folkways as more people of means entered the territory and, more important, as local magistrates became more prevalent and available to issue marriage bonds. By the 1780s, the American Revolution resulted in other factors affecting marriage and divorce. Among these were the concepts that an individual had as much right to overthrow an intolerable social contract as did a colony or a king, and that the states could now create their own statutes regulating sexual unions. A ferment of revolutionary social theory regarding the rights of individuals rammed into the new republic’s desire to mold a pious, ethical, and patriotic populace.

Just as Rachel Donelson married Lewis Robards, in the 1780s the new states began to address the riddle of divorce. Thus their attempt to end their marriage occurred against an equally tumultuous backdrop. As in other states, the formation and ending of unions outside of law continued to be a significant concern to the governments of Virginia and North Carolina, which had jurisdiction respectively over the Kentucky and Mero districts where the Robardses and Jackson lived. As early as 1778, the North Carolina state assembly passed a law regulating the “rites of matrimony” in an attempt to curtail extralegal, self-declared unions.⁴¹ Divorce was extremely rare; state assemblies heard petitions for divorce with no authority given to the courts unless the assembly so directed. In a further effort to regulate irregular unions, in 1788, the year North Carolina district attorney Andrew Jackson met Rachel Robards, the state assembly resolved that legislation was needed “to punish bigamy and polygamy.”⁴² Spruce McCay, Jackson’s legal mentor, recorded the conviction of bigamy against a man in his community of that year, but he questioned whether the crime was “punishable in this state.”⁴³ The assembly subsequently passed a law in 1790, the year the Jacksons returned to Nashville as a couple, “to restrain all married persons from marrying again whilst their former wives or former husbands are living” and denouncing the “many evil-disposed persons going from one part of our country to another, and into places where they are not known” to enter bigamous marriages



Andrew Jackson. Undated photograph by Mathew Brady. The Filson Historical Society

knowing fully that their legal spouses were alive.⁴⁴

Was Jackson aware of these moves on the part of North Carolina? In addition to McCay, Jackson had three friends closer to home, any of whom could have informed him of the new measures against bigamy. Donelson family friend James Robertson served in the North Carolina assembly through 1789.⁴⁵ More extraordinary is that Rachel's brother Stockley Donelson and her brother-in-law Robert Hays represented Tennessee's counties in that body from 1787 to 1789, and they were present at the legislation's debates.⁴⁶ Rachel was living with Jane Donelson and Robert Hays at the time of her elopement with Jackson,⁴⁷ calling into question claims that the issue of bigamy was not broached. Conveniently, North Carolina had ceded Tennessee to the Congress in late 1789 and Congress established the "Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio" in May 1790. What conclusion may be drawn from Andrew and Rachel fleeing to Spanish Natchez in December 1789, before news had reached Nashville of North Carolina's cession of Tennessee, and their return in June 1790, just weeks after Nashville entered federal control? Although North Carolina would not legally recognize their illegal and felonious union (crucial to Rachel inheriting slaves and money from her father's estate), the nation's Congress had not yet taken up matters of marital reform.⁴⁸

Henry Clay (1777-1852),
ca. 1812. Engraving. *The
Filson Historical Society*



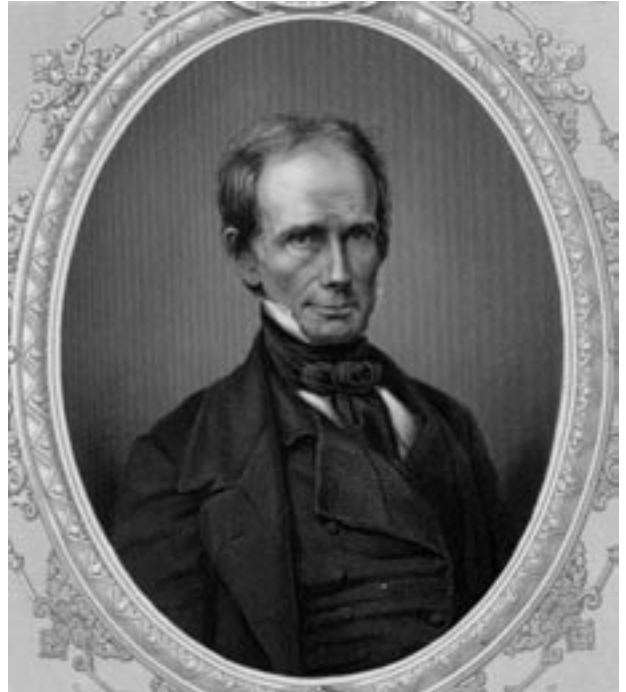
Meanwhile, what was the status of divorce in the Kentucky District, where Rachel's husband, Lewis Robards, resided? In 1785, the couple had legally married in Mercer County, then part of Virginia. Virginia followed the English parliamentary model of hearing divorce petitions in the legislative body and making decisions on an ad hoc basis, without consideration of application on a wider basis. Between 1786 and 1827, when the legislature changed the statutes, the Virginia assembly received 268 petitions for divorce, and only granted forty-two bills of divorce, just more than fifteen percent.⁴⁹ Robards and his wife parted in Nashville in the fall of 1789 and by December Rachel was on her way to Natchez with Jackson. Lewis Robards's response to his wife's elopement is somewhat puzzling. If the Jackson accounts are to be believed, he took no action other than petitioning for divorce, hardly the violent outburst one would expect from a jealous spouse. Yet

the Robards family versions insist that Rachel was "stolen from her husband's hearth" by Jackson, and one Robards descendant relates a tale of Robards physically pursuing Jackson as he carried off Rachel on horseback.⁵⁰

When Hugh McGrary reported to Robards, he found the eyewitness that he sought to Rachel's adultery in July 1790. That fall, Robards's brother-in-law, Jack Jouett, a member of the Virginia assembly from the Kentucky District, sponsored Robards's petition for divorce.⁵¹ Only one petition before Robards's had found success, that of Anne Dantignac in 1789.⁵² The assembly passed a bill in December 1790 that would allow Robards to sue for divorce in the Kentucky District court, that read: "A jury shall be summoned who shall . . . find for the plaintiff or in case of inquiry into the truth of the allegations contained in the declaration, shall find substance, that the defendant hath deserted the plaintiff, and that she hath lived in adultery with another man since that desertion, the said verdict shall be recorded, and, thereupon, the marriage between the said Lewis Robards and Rachael Robards shall be totally dissolved."⁵³

Robards would not move toward the jury trial until 1792, providing fodder for the Jackson supporters' claim that Rachel and Andrew thought that a divorce had taken place and were surprised to learn otherwise. The claim, however, ignores the fact that they had eloped a year before the Virginia bill was passed. Another jurisdictional obstacle loomed, posed by the Kentucky statehood conventions. Ten conventions took place in nearby Danville between 1784 and 1792 as Kentucky sought independence from Virginia; statehood loomed in 1785, then again in 1787 and 1789, before being achieved in June 1792.⁵⁴ The process likely forced delays in the Robards divorce proceedings as jurisdiction bounced back and forth.

Despite the ongoing divorce action, Robards yet saw himself as having rights over Rachel's property, and indeed the Virginia law of coverture gave him such rights. In January 1791, Robards wrote his brother-in-law, Robert Hays, claiming he would depend on Hays and John Overton to make sure no advantage was made in his absence from Nashville where his rights to John Donelson's estate were concerned.⁵⁵ Regardless, when the estate was divided in April 1791, the woman termed "Rachel Jackson" received two slaves, livestock, a bed, and "35 hard dollars."⁵⁶ In fact, the divorce statute passed in Tennessee eight years later, in 1799, stated that a divorced spouses could not marry their partners in adultery and "a divorced woman who openly cohabitated with her lover was declared incapable to dispose of her real estate whether during her life or by a will."⁵⁷ The timing of the affair again worked to the Jacksons' legal advantage.



Henry Clay. Undated engraving. The Filson Historical Society

Without laws to the contrary in place, Robards lost Rachel's inheritance. He soon placed the required notices of divorce action in the *Kentucky Gazette* of February and March 1792, summoning Rachel Robards to court "to answer a charge of adultery exhibited against her."⁵⁸ She did not choose to attend the trial, which took place in August and September 1793. That Robards actually won a divorce may be attributable to him having retained U.S. senator John



John Quincy Adams
(1787-1848). Undated.
Engraving. Cincinnati
Museum Center at Union
Terminal, Cincinnati
Historical Society Library

Brown as his lawyer, and having Kentucky war hero Hugh McGary as his witness.⁵⁹ Twelve jurors found "the Defendant Rachel Robards hath deserted the Plaintiff, Lewis Robards and hath and doth Still live in adultery with another man. It is therefore considered by the Court that the Marriage between the Plaintiff and the Defendant be desolved [*sic*]" as of September 27.⁶⁰

Clearly, how to pursue a divorce was a confusing prospect in the early American republic, especially in a borderland where territorial standing and statehood were under negotiation. So why should Robards have done so, rather than simply enter into a new extralegal union of his own? And why would Rachel Donelson and Andrew Jackson have returned from Natchez to Nashville? For Robards, honor was the issue. For Donelson and Jackson, it was community acceptance. For a man,

especially one living in a hierarchical, slave-owning southern society, a deserting wife represented a loss of control over his family and thus a loss of honor and status in that society. Indeed, the historian Thomas Buckley has presented persuasive evidence in Virginia that for a male plaintiff, the public nature of seeking a legal divorce allowed the community to discuss the separation and maintain or restore the petitioner's social status regardless of the assembly's action.⁶¹ Even as late as the mid-nineteenth century, Southern courts favored men over women in divorce suits, as a disobedient wife was seen as eroding male honor and altering male prerogatives.⁶² The community's judgment was given higher place than individual autonomy and the legislative process itself could be seen as terminating the marriage, even if the legislature denied the petition. This was partially attributable to the number of signatures from the community that would be attached in support of petitions, sometimes as many as seventy or eighty.⁶³ Robards seems to have recognized that the community had set him free before the Kentucky courts did; Robards quietly married Hannah Winn in Jefferson County in December 1792 while his divorce was still in process in Mercer County.⁶⁴ They would remarry legally in Mercer, in November 1793.⁶⁵ Robards and his second wife had ten children; he died in

1814 after an uneventful life following his marriage and divorce from Rachel Donelson.

Unlike men, women did not have recourse to the divorce process as a means of recovering honor. If her petition failed, a woman's husband would still control her life because of coverture; a wife had no legal entity separate from her husband. And if she won, a woman's character suffered damage. Marriage to a man to whom she had been linked before the divorce was seen as a confession of illicit sexual relations.⁶⁶ That a woman of Rachel Donelson's status chose the extralegal recourse of desertion to end her marriage is extraordinary. Elite women were expected to tolerate outrageous behavior on the part of their husbands, seeking separation only when violent behavior placed their lives in danger.⁶⁷ Moreover, in the early republic, women embodied the ideals of decorum, self-control, and sexual virtue, and were expected to hold their sexually self-indulgent mates in check.⁶⁸ Society generally regarded any woman who sought comfort from the sufferings of her marriage in a relationship with another man with contempt.⁶⁹ Indeed, the issue was so morally weighted that in 1796 the General Conference of Methodists instructed ministers "not to receive any person into society who had put away a wife or husband and married again, no matter what the crime that caused them to part."⁷⁰ Other denominations also often preached about the subject from the pulpit and at camp meetings.

October 1828 campaign circular for Andrew Jackson. The Filson Historical Society

The divorce and trial were undoubtedly the talk of Kentucky and Tennessee, as gossip traveled fast following a marital scandal.⁷¹ (Indeed, the Robards family was still talking about it over a hundred years later.)⁷² Although the Donelson family and members of their sphere of influence embraced the extralegal union of Rachel and Andrew Jackson (a marriage that became legal in January 1794), there is clear evidence that members of the wider Tennessee community saw Rachel as a fallen woman and Jackson as a rake for many years afterward. As Jackson rose in prominence, the history of the marriage effected their public reputations. John Sevier's contempt of Jackson as a seducer was central to their duel correspondence of 1803, and Rachel's virtue, or lack thereof, was a subtext of his duel with



Charles Dickinson in 1806 and perhaps with Thomas Hart Benton in 1813. In his summary of these events, the historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown states of Jackson: “Over the subsequent years, affairs of honor, engagements in war, and other dramatic events did not dispel the insecurities in the Jackson household.”⁷³ The Jacksons were likely not surprised that Rachel’s divorce and remarriage would become a flashpoint when he sought the presidency. For Jackson, the ultimate vindication of his honor would be the presidency, for his election would prove that the public accepted his and Rachel’s actions.

John Quincy Adams’s presidential campaigns in 1824 and 1828 would, in part, target Jackson’s passion and his lack of self-control, making it central to the argument that he would devastate the integrity of the Republic and its institutions. Jackson’s elopement with the married Rachel Robards was a perfect example of his rampagous personality, and the nature of the marriage became a wedge issue for the elections. The campaigns—and the public—soon entered into a debate on marital fidelity as a symbol of national unity, adultery as political chaos, and whether private acts should be drawn into the public arena.⁷⁴

In the 1824 election, Rachel’s divorce was mostly whispered. Most references show up in private correspondence rather than in editorials or political broadsides. Jackson and his supporters attempted to spin the tale by placing all blame on Lewis Robards, and in one narrative of the first marriage they made Rachel the agent who sought the divorce. Pro-Jackson congressmen shared the campaign’s talking points with influential persons. Eleanor Custis Lewis, active in Washington’s “parlor politics,” wrote to a friend in February 1824 that U.S. representative George Tucker had given her the true story, exonerating the Jacksons:

I am happy to assure you my Friend that Gen’l Jackson is not the wretch he is represented. [Congressman] Tucker has conversed with several persons of great respectability and well acquainted with every circumstance, within the last week. He left us this morning, and this is declared to be the real state of the case. Miss Donaldson ran away with, and married, her first husband at 14 years old. Genl J had lived a long time with her Parents and was under obligations to them. He did not see the Daughter for two years after her marriage during which time she endured the most cruel treatment from her husband, he frequently beat her severely, forced her to fly for refuge to a neighbours house. She was persuaded to return several times and was obliged to leave him as often, at last Gen’l J happen’d to witness this conduct and was called on, as her Parents friend, for protection. He interfered, and threaten’d to chastise the husband if he was ever guilty again. He still persisted, and she was obliged to sue for a divorce. A considerable time elapsed after this before she

married Gen'l Jackson. Her first Husband was never a soldier under J – and has been dead many years. Mr T adds that the circumstances and the case gained Jackson the esteem and approbation of the whole neighborhood in which they occur'd. Col Gadsden [??] always speaks of Mrs J as an excellent woman and he is devoted to Gen'l Jackson. [Sen. Robert] Hayne assured me that no man was ever more vilely calumniated than Jackson – and these are most honorable and very correct evidences.⁷⁵

The Jackson spin was not enough to offset the John Quincy Adams-Henry Clay alliance, and Adams won the presidency through Congress's vote in early 1825. Remini observes that the scandal held “enough ammunition to kill a regiment of presidential candidates.”⁷⁶

The 1828 presidential campaign would be different in that the Jacksonians would undertake a more organized and legalistic defense of Rachel's divorce and remarriage, this time with Rachel in a passive role, while the Adamsites would come out with guns blazing in print. On March 23, 1827, Charles Hammond fired the first salvos in the *Cincinnati Gazette*, implicating Henry Clay in Hammond knowing the facts of the Robards divorce. (In late 1797, Joseph Robards, traveling home from Virginia, claimed that Clay, then a young lawyer, had spent several days with the Widow Robards.)⁷⁷ Until Jackson, Hammond thundered, the nation had been a place:

where no man can succeed to a place of high trust who does not respect female virtue: or who stands condemned as the seducer of other men's wives, and the destroyer of female character . . . [should we] give sanction to conduct, which is calculated to unhinge the fundamental principles of society? . . . Let all inducements to the maintenance of conjugal fidelity be broken down: let all veneration for the marriage state and covenant be destroyed; and let me then ask, what there is in social life worthy of regard? . . . Show to the world your abhorrence of a man, who disregards the laws which even savages revere.

The Robards case was “an affair in which the National character, the National interest, and the National morals, were all deeply involved . . . a proper subject of public investigation and exposure.”⁷⁸ Tongues wagged about whether Rachel was suitable to be “at the head of female society in the United States.” As one critic charged, no “intelligence mind [can] doubt that Mrs. Jackson was unfaithful to her marriage vow with Robards . . . [or] believe that she would have been guilty of the great indiscretion of flying beyond the reach of her husband, with a man charged to be her paramour, were she innocent of the charge” upheld in her divorce suit. Instead, they charged, Jackson must have been at fault, for a caring husband “would never consent that the wife of his bo-

som should be exposed to the ribald taunts, and dark surmises of the profligate, or to the cold civility or just remark of the wise and good.” Instead of running for president, he should have shielded the “bruised and broken flower.”⁷⁹

Papers throughout the country took up the charge. Among them was the *Massachusetts Journal*, which editorialized in 1828 that if Jackson, “the Great Western Bluebeard,” persisted in placing his wife

among modest women, he shall meet a firmer resistance before he fights her and his own way into the presidential mansion. . . . Who is there in all this land that has a wife, a sister or daughter that could be pleased to see Mrs. Jackson (Mrs. Roberts [Robards] that was) presiding in the drawing-room at Washington. *There is pollution in the touch, there is perdition in the example of a profligate woman.* And shall we standing in a watch-tower to warn our countrymen of approaching danger seal our lips in silence, in respect to this personage and *her paramour*, great and powerful as he is and captivating as he renders himself with his “bandanna handkerchief,” “his frock coat,” his amiable condescensions, and the fascinations of his *bar-room* and *public table talk*.⁸⁰

Jackson partisans parried the attacks as best they could, given that all the legal documents showed that a jury had found Rachel guilty of being an adulteress. In 1827, the Nashville Committee published the key piece of Jackson’s defense, entitled *A Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, in Answer to One from a Similar Committee, at Cincinnati, upon the Subject of Gen. Jackson’s Marriage*. The Committee, created in 1826 to build a plausible argument, quoted affidavits such as that from Mary Bowen: “Not the least censure ought to be thrown upon any person but Mr. Robards. . . . This was the language of all the country, and I never heard until now that there was any person living who had entertained a different opinion, except Mr. Robards himself, in whose weak and childish disposition, I think the whole affair originated.”⁸¹

Among the other counterattacks from the Jackson camp was a tract entitled *Vindication of the Character and Public Services of Andrew Jackson in Reply to the Richmond Address, Signed by Chapman Johnson, and to Other Electioneering Calumnies*. Published in 1828, it castigated Adams for harming a defenseless woman as well as the moral sensibilities of the Jacksons. The assaults on Rachel were intended to be an assault on Jackson, wounding him twice: for her sake and for his honor. The Adamsite charges invaded “the inmost recesses of his family, the honor of his wife . . . and his domestic peace . . . to serve the purposes and prop up a falling party . . . no man has been more foully slandered.”⁸² Jackson partisans hoped to reverse the wife-stealing charges against Jackson to charges of wife-slandering. Because the author of the tract was Henry Lee, notorious in Virginia for his

own adultery with his wife's sister, one has to wonder how much vindication the tract could deliver.⁸³

The respective campaigns, of course, politicized the incident, each presenting it and its social implications through different, thoroughly partisan lenses. The Adams campaign presented marriage as a social contract that extended beyond individuals into the national polity and argued for strict government control over domestic relations. Its leaders took a cue from the evangelical movement of the Second Great Awakening, which found the lack of sexual self-discipline morally repellent and demanded a firm delineation of the unbreakable boundaries of marriage. In this trope, the campaign portrayed Adams as a responsible, self-restrained Christian gentleman and called upon women to defend their chastity actively.⁸⁴ In contrast, the Jacksonians presented marriage as a private and romantic arrangement where chivalry and heartfelt sentiment should have sway over restrictive legal forms. The choices of private individuals were weighed against rigid moral prescription, and political secularism was preferable; marriage should be a matter of individual choice and local concern. The ideal Jackson man was brave, chivalrous, and self-sufficient, and his masculine strength would shield weak women who were never active enough to desert a marriage, but rather were generally deserted. Jackson and his friends went to great lengths to mold the Robards divorce narrative in such a way that Lewis left Rachel so stranded, she had no choice but to turn to Jackson for protection.⁸⁵

These partisan views were so different in their competing narratives of the Robards affair—challenging beliefs about manhood and womanhood, passion and restraint, divorce and remarriage—that they significantly contributed to the re-emergence of a two-party system in the United States.⁸⁶ The prevailing fear in the late 1820s that America was losing its republican virtue led the Jacksonians to attack Adams's creeping aristocracy, while in turn the Adamsites attacked Jackson's rampant democracy. To his enemies, Jackson's personal history proved that as the advocate for the common man, Jackson himself was all too common.⁸⁷ Voters were urged to consider the seriousness of Jackson's sins of passion and the insignificance for the presidential office. Would such sins become the order of the day if he were elected?⁸⁸ Jackson would ultimately prevail in incorporating the nation's cultural shift to separate public and private spheres.

From the founding of the American republic, the new states wrestled with their citizens' desires to free themselves from failed marriages. Political phi-



*Andrew Jackson.
Cincinnati Museum
Center at Union Terminal,
Cincinnati Historical
Society Library*

losophers such as Thomas Paine argued that as a people could break the social contract with an oppressive government, so should an individual be able to break a marriage contract with an oppressive spouse. Yet others saw marital virtue as the glue that held the Republic together, and any movement toward sexual permissiveness as a step toward anarchy. In the late 1700s, most state legislatures tried to hash out these issues by debating divorce petitions, like that of Lewis Robards, but many Americans in the backcountry still took matters in their own hands through extralegal means, as did Rachel Donelson and Andrew Jackson. And although the debate still burned, by the 1820s, most state assemblies passed laws delineating strict grounds for divorce and turned over decisions to the judiciary.

The presidential campaigns of the 1820s had no choice but to address the narrative of Rachel Donelson's divorce. Ironically, although divorce scandals fascinated the public, the Adamsites may have pressed too hard in their attacks, ultimately rendering the Jacksons as sympathetic figures. The wronged husband, Lewis Robards, was long dead and could not make his own case. In the face of hard legal evidence that Andrew Jackson had eloped with Rachel while she was still very much married and that they had indeed lived in adultery, the Jackson partisans prevailed with their position that marriage should be "romantic and private with a distinct preference for heartfelt sentiments over precise legal forms."⁸⁹

Although Rachel Donelson and Andrew Jackson did in truth flaunt the moral and legal codes of their times, today they stand as legendary lovers. If his most determined critics admire Andrew Jackson for anything, it is his devoted marriage to Rachel and his vigorous defense of her reputation. She is now a stick figure in the story, a passive belle tossed away by one man and swept up by another. Lewis Robards is hardly more than a name, although in 1790 he was the frontier nabob when Jackson was little more than a knave. Yet by an effective campaign strategy, the "American Jezebel" and the "Great Western Bluebeard" come down to us as the most romantic pair in presidential history. ♠

1. Henry A. Wise, *Seven Decades of the Union* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1872), 113.

2. James Parton stated that the attacks on Rachel Jackson "aggravated her disease [and] shortened her life" in his 1861 biography. Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Mason Bros., 1861), 3 vols. vol. 2, 154. The story of Rachel's surprise at the attacks is first found in Wise, *Seven Decades of the Union*, 113, and expanded in John Spencer Bassett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: The McMillan Co., 1916), 405-406. Bassett heard this version of Rachel's death from Elizabeth Blair Lee, daughter of Jackson's ally Francis P. Blair, Sr.; she got the tale from William B. Lewis, the staunch Jackson friend responsible for the affidavits of the Nashville Committee. The Nashville, or Jackson, Committee was the original core of a dozen or so men who organized what became the national Jacksonian party in the 1820s. These allies assigned Jackson cronies

William B. Lewis to gather affidavits in defense of the Jackson marriage and published a report, which John Overton crafted carefully in 1827. The apocryphal account has appeared in Jackson biographies as recently as Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981), 150. Jackson's partisans were immensely successful in branding the proponents of John Quincy Adams as Rachel's killers.

3. Donelson placed claims on about 2,300 acres on Cedar Creek near Davies Station, and he may have established a home there. Willard Rouse Jillson, *Old Kentucky Entries and Deeds* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1999), 28-29. See also Charles Monty Pope, "John Donelson, Pioneer" (M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1969), 35.

4. Larry G. Aaron to Ann Toplovich, September 2, 2004, in author's collection.

5. See Ann Toplovich, "The Life and Marriages of Lewis Robards," paper presented at Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Pikeville, Tennessee, March 19, 2004.
6. James Harvey Robards, *History and Genealogy of the Robards Family* (Franklin, Ind.: W. R. Voris, Printer, 1910), 26.
7. *Ibid.*, 53.
8. *Ibid.*, 133-36.
9. *Ibid.*, 54.
10. In Sam B. Smith, ed., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 6 vols. To date (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), vol. 1, 423.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Michael L. Cook, compiler, *Mercer County Kentucky Records*, 2 vols. (Evansville, Ind.: Cook Publications, 1987), vol. 1, 8, and George M. Chinn, *The History of Harrodsburg and the Great Settlement . . . 1774-1900* (n.p.: G. M. Chinn), 76.
13. See Cook, *Mercer County Kentucky Records*, 16, 23, 31, 34, 47, 62, 77.
14. John Downing to J. H. Eaton, December 20, 1826, Jacob McGavock Dickinson Papers, Tennessee Historical Society Collections, Tennessee State Library and Archives [hereinafter cited as TSLA], as quoted in Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977), 44.
15. Bassett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, 17.
16. William Barlow and David O. Powell, "Heroic Medicine in Kentucky in 1825: Dr. John F. Henry's Care of Peyton Short," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 63 (April 1989); 244-45, vn3.
17. John Overton, "Report of Nashville Committee," in Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 1:148.
18. Marquis James, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1940), 854-56vn64.
19. *Ibid.* The letters from Henry Banks to John Overton are now among the Nashville Committee Correspondence, Jacob McGavock Dickinson Papers, Tennessee Historical Society Collections, TSLA.
20. Mary French Caldwell, *General Jackson's Lady* (Nashville: Kingsport Press, Inc., 1936), 110.
21. Mary Powell Hammersmith, *Hugh McGary, Sr., Pioneer of Virginia, Kentucky, and Indiana* (Wheaton, Ill: Nodus Press, 2000), 170-71; see also Robards, *History and Genealogy of the Robards Family*, 55.
22. Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 1:149.
23. Smith, ed., *Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 1:84.
24. Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 1:149.
25. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 43-44.
26. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 62-64. For a discussion of Jackson's embryonic legal and political relationships in North Carolina, see Hendrik Booream, *Young Hickory: The Making of Andrew Jackson* (Dallas: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2001), 167-200 passim. Booream argues that, by the age of twenty-one, Jackson had good connections in the older counties of North Carolina, and notes that in 1815 Jackson told his first biographers that his trip to the Tennessee country was intended to be "experimental." Booream, *Young Hickory*, 193.
27. James, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 854-56v64.
28. Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 1:168-69.
29. *Ibid.*, 150.
30. See Robert V. Remini, "Andrew Jackson Takes an Oath of Allegiance to Spain," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 54 (Spring 1995), 2-15.
31. Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 1:148-53.
32. See Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire*, 57-69.
33. McGary was a member of the Mercer County Court; court records show his only trip to Natchez in this period was in the spring and early summer of 1790. See Hammersmith, *Hugh McGary, Sr.*, 164, 171.
34. Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 66-67.
35. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire*, 65; Andrew Burstein, *The Passions of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Knopf, 2003), 245.
36. For views on divorce in the early American republic, see Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Norma Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828," *Journal of American History* 80 (December 1993), 890-918; Basch, *Framing American Divorce: From the Revolutionary Generation to the Victorians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Thomas E. Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life: Divorce in the Old Dominion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Richard Godbeer, *The Sexual Revolution in Early America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); Lawrence B. Goodheart, Neil Hanks, and Elizabeth Johnson, "An Act for the Relief of Females: Divorce and the Changing Legal Status of Women in Tennessee, 1796-1860, Part I," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 44 (Fall 1985), 318-39; and Honor R. Sachs, "The Myth of the Abandoned Wife: Married Women's Agency and the Legal Narrative of Gender in Eighteenth-Century Kentucky," *Ohio Valley History* 3 (Winter 2003), 3-20.
37. Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, 23-34.
38. For a discussion of wife-stealing as a backcountry custom, see David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 669-71. On wife-selling, see Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, 38.
39. Quoted in Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 119.
40. *Ibid.*, 120.
41. *Ibid.*, 149.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Quoted in *ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Robert M. McBride and Dan M. Robison, *Biographical Directory of the General Assembly, Vol. 1, 1796-1861* (Nashville: Tennessee Historical Commission and Tennessee State Library and Archives, 1975), 629.
46. *Ibid.*, 207, 349.
47. Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson*, 1:148-53.
48. The North Carolina assembly heard only fifteen petitions for divorce between 1779 and 1800; it granted only one.

- The assembly passed first divorce statute for the state, placing divorce before the courts, in 1814.
49. Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life*, 24.
 50. Robards, *History and Genealogy of the Robards Family*, 58; see also H. D. Pittman, *The Belle of the Blue Grass Country* (Boston: The C. M. Clark Publishing Co., 1906).
 51. Captain John "Jack" Jouett, a well-known hero of the American Revolution in Virginia, was a delegate to the Virginia legislature in 1787 and 1790, represented Mercer County in the Kentucky legislature in 1792, and Woodford County in 1795-1797. He married Sarah "Sally" Robards in August 1784. Lewis Collins, *Historical Sketches of Kentucky* (Maysville, Ky.: L. Collins, 1847), 381-82.
 52. Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life*, 17-18.
 53. Smith, *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 1:424.
 54. John E. Kleber, ed., *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 848-49.
 55. Lewis Robards to Robert Hays, January 9, 1791, in Smith, ed., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 1:424-25.
 56. Davidson County Wills and Inventories, no. 1, 96-201; Davidson County Court Minute Book, 1783-1809, p. 424, both in Smith, ed., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, 1:425-27.
 57. Goodheart, Hanks, and Johnson, "An Act for the Relief of Females," 321.
 58. *Kentucky Gazette*, February 4, 11, 18, 25, and March 3, 10, 17, 24, 1792.
 59. James L. Harrison, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of the American Congress, 1774-1949* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1950), 900; Kleber, ed., *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 597
 60. Court of Quarter Sessions Book, 1792-96, p. 105, Kentucky State Library and Archives, Frankfort.
 61. Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life*, 24.
 62. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 284.
 63. Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, 39.
 64. *Jefferson County Virginia-Kentucky Early Marriages, Book 1, 1781-July 1826* (Louisville: The Filson Club, 1980), 17.
 65. Alma Ray Sanders Ison, *Marriage Bonds and Consents, 1786-1810, Mercer County, Kentucky* (Harrodsburg: by the author, 1970), 95.
 66. Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, 178.
 67. Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life*, 56. For additional discussion of southern women and divorce in the antebellum period and the expectation that a woman should stay with an abusive husband, see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 80-85. Bertram Wyatt-Brown observes that "the Southern cultural emphasis upon total masculinity, total femininity encouraged male abuse and female submission that stimulated even more violence. . . . Convinced from childhood that she was always to defer, being less worthy [than men], and dependent first on father, then on husband, the woman felt duly chastened by a beating" even if resentful. Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 283.
 68. Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 196.
 69. For discussion on early republic views of women's role as keepers of virtue, see Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, 25-28, and Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 266-96, 337-38.
 70. Godbeer, *Sexual Revolution in Early America*, 149.
 71. For a discussion of the public's appetite for printed references to scandals (including divorce), see Basch, *Framing American Divorce*, 149.
 72. This is best evidenced by the inclusion of the Robards view of the Jackson elopement in Robards family members' obituaries. See obituary of Lewis Robards, Jr., *Louisville Courier-Journal*, January 27, 1891, and of William Johnston Robards, *Louisville Herald*, February 20, 1905.
 73. Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture*, 75.
 74. Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828," 893.
 75. Patricia Brady, ed., *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly: The Letters of Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis to Elizabeth Bordley Gibson, 1794-1851* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 145-46.
 76. Robert Remini, *The Election of Andrew Jackson* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1963), 152.
 77. Robards, *History and Genealogy of the Robards Family*, 88.
 78. Quoted in Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the 1828 Election," 901.
 79. Quoted in *ibid.*, 905.
 80. Quoted in *ibid.*, 905
 81. *Letter from the Jackson Committee of Nashville, in Answer to One from a Similar Committee, at Cincinnati, upon the Subject of Gen. Jackson's Marriage* (Nashville: Hall and Fitzgerald—Republican Office, 1827), 14-17.
 82. Quoted in Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the 1828 Election," 899.
 83. For an assessment of the Henry Lee scandal, see Buckley, *The Great Catastrophe of My Life*, 114-16. Lee and his wife lived at the Fountain of Health resort near the Jacksons in the late 1820s, and Henry Lee briefly worked as Jackson's biographer.
 84. Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the 1828 Election," 896.
 85. *Ibid.*, 910-11.
 86. For the role of gender in defining national politics in the early republic, and especially the impact of the Jackson presidential campaigns, his administration, and the Eaton Affair, see Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 147-238 *passim*.
 87. *Ibid.*, 193-94.
 88. Basch, "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the 1828 Election," 902, 915.
 89. *Ibid.*, 894.