

The Early Years of Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson
and the Impact on His Life

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One hobby that is pursued by many people today is the family genealogy research. People are interested to learn about family ancestry, if there are any famous relatives and what type of jobs were held by the various family members. However, what often happens is that families learn that past ancestors were not exactly the shining pillars in the local community or possessed great amounts of wealth. Thomas Jonathan Jackson was no different than many people today. The man who would become a feared but beloved military officer, loving husband and father, church deacon and stern professor came from a family that was made up of alcoholics, gamblers and thieves. Just in the first seven years of Jackson’s life, there were more challenges and obstacles that had to be overcome than most people experience in an entire lifetime. What made Jackson a unique individual was not that there were severe obstacles, but instead how the young boy handled each circumstance when handed major challenges.

The first mention of the Jackson family began in Ireland. Great-grandfather John Jackson moved to England with his father and older brothers as a small boy. Soon, the father died and there is no significant mention of John until reaching thirty years of age. Working as an indentured servant for a distant relative, Jackson decided it was time to pursue another line of work and wanted to leave. However before leaving, John also took along 170 British pounds and nine gold lace remnants. Unfortunately for Jackson, the valuables belonged to the relative and the first Jackson ancestor would become a guest of the local jail. In 1749, John Jackson was sentenced to the American colonies for seven years of indentured servitude.¹

Elizabeth Cummins was a fifteen year old runaway who was also working as an indentured servant for the Holland family. Cummins and another teenage girl who was also working for the Hollands decided to leave the servitude lifestyle, but not before taking nineteen pieces of silver, jewelry and gold lace. The pair of teenage thieves were captured and the accomplice entered into a plea bargain in exchange for testimony against Elizabeth. Mrs. Holland interceded on behalf of Elizabeth and begged for mercy which spared the girl from being sent to the gallows. Cummins was also sentenced to seven years of indentured servitude in America.²

As fate would have it, John Jackson and Elizabeth Cummins were both placed aboard the *Litchfield* heading for the colonies to fulfill their obligations. John and Elizabeth met on the ship and fell in love

prior to arriving in Maryland. Both of the young lovers finished the sentences in only six years and married in July 1755. Determined to make a better life together in America than the one they lived in England, the Jacksons purchased farmland in the modern community of Buckhannon, West Virginia. Elizabeth Jackson proved that she was not a traditional housewife of the eighteenth century by purchasing 3,000 acres of land personally. The Jackson family was leaving their mark in the young nation's history.³

Many Americans have several generations of family members that served in the military. The Jackson family was like many other families from modern America. When the American Revolution began, John Jackson along with sons George and Edward volunteered to serve with the Continental Army. Again, Elizabeth demonstrated great courage by taking charge of the family farm in what was later called "Fort Jackson". There is also documentation that while defending the family, Elizabeth proved to be a deadly shot with a musket by killing an untold number of Indians that raided the property.⁴

Following the conclusion of the Revolution, the growing Jackson family moved to Clarksburg, Virginia. John died in 1801 at the age of 86 years while Elizabeth survived for another twenty-seven years. She passed away in 1828 at the age of 105 years when great-grandson Thomas was just four years old.

After the patriarch's death, Thomas Jackson's grandfather, Edward moved the family to Weston, Virginia. Purchasing 1500 acres of land, Edward Jackson helped establish the new but rapidly growing town. Jackson built the two story log family home just one hundred yards from the York River. The house measured 20' by 40' and featured a perpendicular wing. By 1808, the Jackson family also had a grist mill as well as a sawmill that provided valuable lumber to the new town for the purposes of building several frame houses along with other businesses.⁵

Edward's son Jonathan did not inherit the strong work ethic that father or grandfather had. Jonathan was not an independent worker. He received a quality education and became a lawyer. Working in a law office for a cousin, Jonathan was named the county's federal revenue collector. After one year, the accounts were more than \$35,000 in debt. Jonathan sold large portions of inherited land in order to cover all of the debts.⁶

Jonathan met and married Julia Neale, the third of eleven children of Irish settlers. Following their marriage, the young couple moved seventy-three miles away to Parkersburg, Virginia and into a three room brick cottage that boasted a semi-attic as well as an inset porch. This was not a three bedroom cottage, but three rooms.⁷

The family grew soon after. The first child, a daughter Elizabeth was born in 1819 followed shortly by brother Warren in 1821. On January 21, 1824, Thomas Jonathan Jackson was born with Julia's brown hair and Jonathan's blue eyes. Despite the young and growing family, Jonathan did not learn or accept responsibility and returned

to a reckless lifestyle of compulsive gambling and drinking. Jackson bet on everything that the family possessed including the furniture and even the family beds.

In March 1826, typhoid fever ran rampant in the Jackson family. Elizabeth died on March 6, 1826 followed by Jonathan just twenty days later. The very next day on March 27, 1826, Julia delivered her last Jackson child, a little girl named Laura. At the end of March 1826, Julia was 28 years old, a widow with two small boys under the age of five and a newborn infant. Jonathan's death left the small family penniless and unable to cover the mountain of debt caused by a reckless lifestyle. The family accepted the charity of the local Masonic group and moved into a one room house that measured only 12' by 20'. The two young Jackson boys who once had plenty of grass to play on now lived in the alley of a back lot. The father's lack of responsibility and the repercussions that it caused was something that Thomas Jackson never forgot.⁸

Blake Woodson was a local attorney who was fifteen years older than Julia Jackson and had eight children that did not live at home. When the young widow and the much older attorney began courting in the late 1820s, neither the Jacksons nor the Neales approved of the relationship. Knowing that there was no other way to provide for three young children, Julia Jackson married Blake Woodson. Following the marriage, the Jackson children found out that the pleasant, graceful and always smiling attorney was anything but pleasant in the privacy of closed doors. Eventually, Woodson blamed continued misfortune and lack of money on the Jackson children. In anger, Woodson began to beat the children and especially young Thomas.⁹

The only course of action that Blake Woodson saw to solve the financial crisis was to send the Jackson children away to live with other relatives. Older brother Warren was sent to live with the Neales in Parkersburg. Thomas and Laura were sent to live with the Jackson family in Jackson's Mill. When Jonathan's brother Cummins came to the Woodson's home in Fayette County to collect the children, young Thomas became terrified at the strange man and ran into the woods. The reaction was certainly understandable for a seven year old boy who had endured so much in such a short time. When the time came to separate, young Tom tried to be brave as the two children were placed on horseback and sent away from their beloved mother. Sobbing hysterically, Julia ran after the children and hugged them for the last time. Later, Jackson's widow Mary Anna Jackson would write in her memoirs that this was a scene that Jackson would never forget and would carry with him for the rest of his life.¹⁰

Julia Jackson Woodson became ill and sent for the young Jackson children to bid them farewell. She died on December 4, 1831. Blake Woodson could not even afford to purchase a proper gravestone for Julia. The three Jackson children were now orphaned with the oldest, Warren just ten years old. By 1835, Laura Jackson was sent to live with the Neales and brother Warren in Parkersburg as there were no

more Jackson females to raise a young lady. Thomas was just eleven years old and completely alone at Jackson's Mill.¹¹

Tragedy would not end with the separation of the brother and sister at Jackson's Mill. In 1836, Tom visited Warren and Laura in Parkersburg. Like many young boys, the Jackson boys developed a brilliant plan that was destined to bring newfound fame and fortune. The plan called for Warren and Thomas to sail down the Ohio River to sell wood to passing steamboats just as uncle Alfred Neale did for a living. After sailing down the river, the Jackson boys found an abandoned cabin and began their business. Soon, the budding entrepreneurs contracted malaria and barely made the trip home to Parkersburg. Warren would never fully cover from the disease and eventually died as a result of tuberculosis.¹²

Before the age of 18 years, Thomas Jonathan Jackson endured many significant tragedies that included the separation from his family as well as the deaths of both parents and two siblings. However, young Thomas Jackson proved to be resilient. Life in Jackson's Mill helped the young orphan grow up into one of the most admired men in the country.

Growing up in Jackson's Mill allowed Jackson the ability to learn and experience many things as a young boy that proved to be invaluable as an adult. Skills such as how to ride a horse, hunt, shoot and survive in the woods became very useful as an army officer.

Throughout Jackson's young life, he learned lessons the hard way by assuming responsibility and the value of hard work. Thomas knew that nothing was going to come easy and used the same kind of determination that great-grandparents John and Elizabeth Jackson had shown. It was this type of determination that served Jackson as a student at West Point where he lay down on the floor near the glowing light of a fire in order to try and understand the day's assignments, or caused him to sweat so profusely at the blackboard even on cold days that fellow cadets expected the room to flood. It was what caused him to stand in the room at West Point and study so vigorously so that he would not fall asleep.¹³ Determination is what drove a newly commissioned artillery officer in Mexico when during the battle of Chapultepec he rallied the men and turned the tide of battle. Jackson later stated that telling the troops that there was no danger while running back and forth in front of the cannon was the only lie that he ever told in battle.¹⁴ Determination is what caused Jackson as a VMI professor to stand face to wall and memorize his lessons for class the following day. Any time that a cadet asked a question, Jackson stopped and quoted the lesson again word for word from memory. When the cadet asked the same question again, the stern professor viewed the cadet as being insubordinate and dismissed the curious cadet from class.¹⁵

The value of ethics was something that Jackson learned and demonstrated just as a young child in Jackson's Mill. Fishing in the nearby York River, Jackson sold the fish to a local businessman for a

specific price. While on the way to the businessman with the day's catch, Jackson was approached by another prospective buyer who offered a higher amount. Jackson declined the offer and sold to the regular customer for a much lower but already agreed upon price.¹⁶ It was a well developed personal code of ethics that caused the West Point cadet to become infuriated when an issued weapon came up missing during a routine inspection and then was "found." However, this dirty weapon was not Jackson's as he had carved his name into the stock and this weapon did not bear any type of identifying mark. Eventually, the correct weapon was found and the guilty cadet was caught. Jackson demanded that the cadet be punished and expelled. Other cadets calmed down an angry Jackson and the cadet would eventually leave West Point.¹⁷ This was also a man who as a professor during a lecture informed a student that he gave the wrong answer to a question. However, when Jackson arrived home later in the day, he poured over various books to find the correct answer. Finding late at night that the student was actually correct, Jackson set out in the pouring rain and walked to VMI. Arriving at the cadet's room, Jackson woke up and informed the startled cadet of the professor's error and the correctness of the cadet. Jackson then turned and walked back home in the rain. That is the type of determination and code of ethics that Thomas Jackson had learned in Jackson's Mill as a young orphan.¹⁸ The same type of determination showed in Jackson's zeal as he sought relief from chronic medical problems that plagued him for many years.

Thomas Jackson had experienced stomach trouble for many years as a teenager. At the age of fifteen, Jackson was told by a doctor that he would not survive to adulthood. Determined to surpass such a gloomy outlook, Jackson began a lifelong determination to conquer every physical, mental and moral weakness of his nature. When the pain became too intense, Jackson applied a hot mustard plaster to his chest and go on long horseback rides with uncle Cummins Jackson to take his mind off of the plaster. However, Jackson became so uncomfortable from the plaster that he fainted and fell off of the horse.¹⁹

While at West Point, Jackson often took long forced walks to help improve what he considered to be failing health. In his first letters to his sister, he wrote that he had good health. But during his junior year, he had what he thought was consumption or dyspepsia and wrote Laura that "I am gradually recovering." Fellow cadets believed Jackson to be a serious hypochondriac. He often stated that one arm and one leg were heavier than the other and as a result raised his arm straight up to let the blood run back into his body and shift some of the excessive weight. When studying, he stood straight up and not bent over a desk so that the internal organs were not compressed and bring about any disease.

During a time of brief paralysis just prior to entering West Point, Jackson always feared that the condition might return. As a result,

Jackson pumped each arm several times and counted the number of strokes. Severe annoyance resulted if anyone interrupted the count.²⁰

Jackson was a frequent visitor to area spas and mineral baths whenever he had the opportunity as he believed that the spas were beneficial and the hydrotherapy was doing wonders for his body. He wrote to his beloved sister Laura and advised her to go to one that was nearby as often as she could.²¹

Laura often received letters from Jackson offering medical advice. Complaining of vision problems, Jackson suggested that she fill a basin with cold water and soak her face under the water with the eyes wide open for as long as breath could be held. The water had to be just as cold as if it had just been drawn from the well or the spring. Jackson stated that he personally soaked his face up to six times per day. It has been written that Jackson's practice would be the modern equivalent of putting cold compresses on eyes when one is suffering with eye infections.²² Although Jackson had many oddities regarding health and medical practices, perhaps the one characteristic in his life for which the most attention was received was that of his religious beliefs.

One of the first friends that young Tom Jackson had while growing up in Jackson's Mill was Joseph Lightburn. The Lightburn family had an extensive library collection and Jackson made frequent trips to borrow a book. Joseph Lightburn read various books and Jackson was introduced to the Bible. Reading the stories of military campaigns throughout the Old Testament and the love found in the New Testament intrigued Jackson. The Lightburns also began bringing Jackson to the Broad Run Baptist church near Jackson's Mill where the lonely orphan found acceptance and friendship.²³

Jackson became so intrigued with religion, the stories of love, hope and grace that the young teenager considered becoming a Baptist minister. There were only three reasons why Thomas Jackson grew up to become a Virginian general instead of a pastor. First, Jackson was not a member or affiliated with a local formal church. Secondly, the young Jackson believed that a minister should have a better education than could be found in Jackson's Mill. Finally, there was a dreaded fear of public speaking.²⁴

The beginning of interest in religion at Jackson's Mill did not diminish over time. While in Mexico, one of Jackson's commanders was CPT Francis Taylor. CPT Taylor often encouraged the soldiers to develop spiritually and spoke with Jackson about reading a Bible. He began doing so out of a sense of duty. Jackson thought that his mother had been a Methodist while there was an Episcopalian influence with the chaplains at West Point. Entertaining beliefs and practices of religion with an open mind in which to find the one denomination that fit best, Jackson became intrigued with the Catholic Church. One reason for this special curiosity was the close relationship that was shared between the priest and the congregation, something that Jackson had never really experienced after the death of

Julia. After attending mass at a Catholic church, Jackson asked the priest to explain the tenets of the Catholic faith. Esteemed Civil War historian and Jackson expert Dr James Robertson once stated that it was the equivalent of going to the Vatican and asking the Pope to explain what it meant to be Catholic.²⁵ Preferring a simpler form of worship, Jackson continued to search. Jackson was searching for something and somewhere to find a place to which he finally belonged.

After arriving in Lexington, Virginia to teach at VMI, Jackson began searching for a church home. There were five churches in town from which to choose. Several influential people suggested that Jackson attend Lexington Presbyterian Church, the oldest of the five churches. Jackson began attending and found a place in which the little orphan boy could finally belong. On 22 November 1851, Jackson became one of three new members of the church.²⁶

Jackson was the type of individual that when given instructions, it was completed to the best of natural ability. When that happened, there was little that made Jackson change his mind. This is certainly true with the various religious practices and beliefs. Considered a fanatic by many, Jackson did not send a letter late in the week if there was a chance that the mail was still in transit on Sunday. The future church deacon did not discuss political or religious matters on Sunday or even read the newspaper. The entire day was devoted to thoughts only of God and spiritual matters.²⁷

In 1855, Jackson started a Sunday school for slaves because as he reasoned, even slaves had souls to save just as much as the white people. The decision was not a popular one or was it legal. Aided by his wife Anna, the class met in the building next to the church and class started promptly at 3:00 pm. Once it was time for class to begin, Jackson stood up and locked the door. Latecomers were not permitted. The class began with the singing of Amazing Grace and then the explanation of a passage of Scripture. The class grew and continued even after Jackson's death.²⁸

Even on the battlefield, Jackson the soldier did not stop practicing his religious beliefs. Constantly praying before and after a battle, Jackson placed a white handkerchief on a pole outside of a tent that signified that he was in prayer and was not to be disturbed. As was the case with CPT Taylor during the Mexican War, Jackson was also concerned with the spiritual welfare of the members of the Army of Northern Virginia's II Corps. During a meeting with Episcopalian minister Beverly Lacy, Jackson developed the chaplain corps and church services were held at the commander's request.²⁹

Another example of Jackson's concern for the troops' religious training was following the battle of McDowell during the 1862 Shenandoah Valley campaign. General Jackson requested that the II Corps hold chapel services to give thanks to God for the victory over the Union's Army of the Potomac. While visiting the camp of the 44th Virginia Infantry, Jackson came upon a single person that was standing

in the road smoking a pipe. When Jackson came closer and became recognizable, the man who was later identified as CPT Edward Alfriend snapped to attention, saluted and removed his hat. General Jackson returned the salute and asked if a religious service was being held in the camp. CPT Alfriend was unable to confirm the service. The Presbyterian deacon turned Civil War General approached the nervous Captain and asked, "Captain, the next time that I order a divine service to be held, won't you please promise me that you will attend?" CPT Alfriend could not do anything other than answer in the affirmative and go to the service with the General. During the service, Alfriend would closely watch Jackson to see how the great leader would act. As rain started to fall upon the troops, Alfriend took special notice that Jackson continued to stand with his head uncovered, arms folded and head bowed. When discussing the scene before him, CPT Alfriend later stated that it was a sublime exhibition of Jackson's noble religious character.³⁰

Although considered by many to be a religious fanatic, Jackson's consistent behavior made an impact upon even the most unlikely of people. Following a pre-battle planning session, General Richard Ewell stated that nothing would be done until Jackson had first prayed about it. An agnostic at best, Ewell often poked fun at the fanatical Jackson who often fell asleep while attending church services. Following another hard fought victory, Ewell went to give Jackson congratulations. When arriving at the General's tent, Ewell began to hear the fervent prayers of the commander giving thanks for an ever kind Providence in the victory. Ewell was so moved by the consistent Christian example of Jackson that the former agnostic proclaimed that "if that was religion, then by God I've got to have it."³¹

Another example of the impact of the faith and consistent religious practice of Jackson upon the life of others exists even to the present day. There is a stained glass window at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Roanoke, Virginia. The window was designed in 1906 by Reverend Lilburn Downing whose parents were members of Jackson's slave Sunday school class. The window includes scenes from Chancellorsville, the Virginia countryside and Jackson's final words of crossing over the river and resting under the shade of the trees.³²

Despite all of the tragedies in his young life, Jackson did not let them hold him down. All of the people that Jackson had tried to love died throughout his brief life. Such intense and frequent tragedies often devastated people. Instead, he used those hard lessons, determination, personal values and a strong ethical code to become a better man, soldier, husband and father.

Notes

¹Dr. James Robertson *Stonewall Jackson: The man, the soldier, the legend*. (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1997), 2.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 3

⁵ Mary Anna Jackson *Life and letters of "Stonewall" Jackson by his wife*. (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1995), 5.

⁶ Robertson, 6.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lenoir Chambers. *Stonewall Jackson*. (New York: William Morrow & Co, 1959), 12.

⁹ Ibid., 9.

¹⁰ Jackson, 16.

¹¹ Chambers, 29.

¹² Ibid., 39.

¹³ Robertson, 35.

¹⁴ Julia Davis. *Stonewall*. (New York: EP Dutton & Co, 1931), 39.

¹⁵ Interview, LTC Philip Smith (VMI Alumni), 17 January 2013.

¹⁶ Robertson, 15.

¹⁷ Robertson, 39.

¹⁸ Interview, LTC Smith.

¹⁹ Robertson, 20.

²⁰ Ibid., 44.

²¹ Ibid., 88.

²² Ibid., 165.

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Interview, Dr. James Robertson Jr. *The faith of Stonewall Jackson* (Documentary clip, *Gods & Generals*, 2003).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Davis, 51.

²⁹ Robertson, 683.

³⁰ Ibid., 380.

³¹ *The faith of Stonewall Jackson* (Documentary clip, *Gods & Generals*, 2003).

³² Kathleen Shelor. *A memorial to Stonewall Jackson*. (Richmond: Richmond Times-Dispatch, 1936).

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Beth has been married for the past 19 years to her husband, Wayne White who recently retired from the television/broadcast industry. They live in historic Lynchburg, Virginia which served as a major railroad center for the Confederacy as well as the location of

19 hospitals during the Civil War. She has been employed at Liberty University's Military Affairs Office for the past 15 years and recently retired as a Battalion S-3 (Training/Operations) from the Virginia Defense Force with the rank of Major (O-4).

When not working on homework, Beth and Wayne enjoy spending their free time following the many Civil War trails throughout Virginia with a goal of visiting all 519 campaign locations within the Commonwealth. Beth is also working on her first book regarding the battle of Chancellorsville examining the strategies/tactics that were used and a brief history of each regiment that participated in the battle.