

Just outside Lexington, Kentucky in the state's lovely blue-grass country is a simple stone building that is Mt. Horeb Presbyterian Church. The state historical marker provides information about the significance of the congregation.

This church was organized April 21, 1827, at nearby "Cabell's Dale," home of Mary Cabell Breckinridge, widow of John Breckinridge, U.S. Senator and Attorney General in Thomas Jefferson's cabinet. The original brick church, constructed in 1828 on this site, burned in 1925. The present building of similar design was dedicated in 1926.

Mary Hopkins (Cabell) Breckinridge, nicknamed Polly, was born in 1769. When she married John Breckinridge, she was sixteen years old. When he died in 1806 during his service as U. S. Attorney General for Thomas Jefferson, she started wearing a black mourning cap that she wore until her death in 1858. The cap was her mark of recognition for the younger Breckinridge family members because they called her Grandma Black Cap.

The organizational service for Mt. Horeb held at Cabell's Dale included among its attendees members of the Breckinridge family that would be influential for American Presbyterianism in their own and succeeding generations.

One person seated in Polly's parlor was her youngest son, the only male member of the new church and its first elder, William Lewis Breckinridge. In a few years he would become a minister with one of his last calls to the presidency of a Presbyterian school in Mississippi named

Oakland College. For education, William stayed in Kentucky to attend Transylvania University, but his three brothers went east to Princeton University (then called the College of New Jersey). William's brothers helped him with social connections enabling his marriage to Frances Prevost, granddaughter of Princeton's seventh president, Samuel S. Smith. President Smith succeeded John Witherspoon as president and married his daughter named Ann. There was another Breckinridge connection to the college because a second Smith daughter, Mary Clay, was the widow of Polly's eldest son, Joseph Cabell Breckinridge (1788-1823). Joseph had managed the family estate when his father died but was still able to complete studies at Princeton. Joseph did not become a minister but instead entered politics and served in the Kentucky legislature and as secretary of state. Another of Polly's sons, John, was present for the organizational service. He was educated at Princeton University then moved to the seminary for theological studies. He married seminary professor Samuel Miller's daughter Margaret. At the time, John was the minister of Second Church in Baltimore. His brother, Robert Jefferson, would become the next senior minister of Second Church shortly after John's resignation. Robert would be influential in 1837 when the Old School excluded the New School from the Presbyterian Church. Robert was not in attendance for the Mt. Horeb Church organization, however his wife and second cousin Ann Sophonisba Preston Breckinridge was present. Ann's father was General Francis Preston, and her mother was the daughter of General William Campbell who commanded the troops that defeated

the British forces at the Battle of King's Mountain.

Those gathered in the Breckinridge home included two of her three living sons and four daughters in law. The four sons were eldest to youngest—Joseph Cabell, John, Robert Jefferson, and William Lewis. It must have been a blessed occasion for Grandma Black Cap as she united with her family members for the organization of a new Presbyterian Church.

Not only were her sons and daughters in law present but two ministers that were members of the commission to organize the church. The first minister was Joseph Cabell Harrison who was Polly's nephew and a relative of William Henry Harrison. Rev. Harrison was married to Sophia Rice, a granddaughter of the minister considered to be the father of Kentucky Presbyterianism, David Rice. Sophia was also related to the fourth president of Princeton University, Samuel Davies. The second minister was Charles Phillips who does not appear to be related to the Breckinridge family.

Finally, Robert Jefferson and his wife Ann had a daughter named in honor of his mother Mary Cabell who grew up to marry William Warfield. They had two sons, Ethelbert Dudley and the eldest, Benjamin Breckinridge. The former son was an influential educator and college president as well as a board member of Princeton Seminary for many years; the latter was professor of New Testament for Western Seminary before serving as professor of didactic and polemic theology at Princeton Seminary until his passing in 1921.

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A New Acquisition

The PCA Historical Center is pleased to announce an historic nineteenth century oil portrait of Mary Hopkins Cabell Breckinridge was donated in May 2022. The donor acquired the portrait several years ago at an estate sale and decided to find it a home in a proper archive for historical preservation. By searching the Internet, the donor came across a post about Mrs. Breckinridge by Barry Waugh, the text of which is like the account shown on the other side of this brochure. When contacted by the donor, he referred the inquiry to Wayne Sparkman, director of the PCA Historical Center.

The donor commented regarding donation of the portrait.

It gladdens my heart to know that Mrs. Mary "Polly" Cabell Breckinridge has a permanent home where she will be given the respect and honor she very much deserves.

Other Breckinridge Material in the Historical Center

For some years now the PCA Historical Center has worked to gather materials well beyond just the PCA and its immediate history. In addition to our congregational history materials, denominational records, and manuscript collections, we have been building a research library that helps to provide context for our collections and give added resources for our patrons. Two collections in our research library will be relevant for the portrait of Mary Cabell Breckinridge:

To view the index for our Robert J. Breckinridge Collection, go to:

pcahistory.org/ms/breckinridge/index.html



To view the index for our Benjamin B. Warfield Collection, go to:

pcahistory.org/ms/warfield/index.html



Mary Hopkins (Cabell) Breckinridge

Presbyterian Founding
Mother



Presbyterian Church in America
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