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Love Amidst Tragedy: The Story of Sandie Pendleton and Kate Corbin

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Abstract

You might be having mixed feelings about this Valentine's Day week: maybe you think love is wonderful, or perhaps you are more pessimistic about love and deem it impossible. Whatever the case, it was not entirely wonderful, nor quite impossible for soldiers during the Civil War. Love and war coexisted quite well, as you will read from other posts this week. Yet, as is the nature of both, they can also be tragic. Warning: the story I am about to tell you does not have a happy ending, but it is nonetheless heartwarming. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Love Amidst Tragedy: The Story of Sandie Pendleton and Kate Corbin

February 10, 2016

By Meg Sutter '16

You might be having mixed feelings about this Valentine's Day week: maybe you think love is wonderful, or perhaps you are more pessimistic about love and deem it impossible. Whatever the case, it was not entirely wonderful, nor quite impossible for soldiers during the Civil War. Love and war coexisted quite well, as you will read from other posts this week. Yet, as is the nature of both, they can also be tragic. Warning: the story I am about to tell you does not have a happy ending, but it is nonetheless heartwarming.

This is the love story of Alexander "Sandie" Pendleton and Katherine Carter Corbin.

Sandie was born in Alexandria, Virginia in 1840 and graduated from the Virginia Military Institute in 1857, where he first met Thomas Jackson on staff at the college. When the war broke out, Sandie was working towards a Masters degree at the University of Virginia. He received a commission as second lieutenant of the Provisional Army of Virginia and was sent to Harper's Ferry. While in the Shenandoah Valley, General Jackson asked Sandie to join his staff. By 1862, during the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Sandie became Jackson's chief-of-staff.



Sandie Pendleton. Photo via the Virginia Military Institute Archives.

While on sick leave in August and September of 1861, Sandie was troubled by an engagement he made to Laura Burwell of Winchester the previous winter. He believed he was not truly in love with her but was wary of breaking off the engagement. Perhaps reading Sandie's mind, Laura broke off the engagement herself in October 1862. Sandie wrote to his mother: "I am cultivating the soft tones of my voice, as I intend to fill the void so lately left in my affections. . . . I need something to cling to. But I shall take pains not to cling too tightly another time. I shall only make love & not talk soberly about it." Five months later, Sandie met his future wife.

After the Battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, Jackson's corps sought winter quarters south of Fredericksburg in Caroline County. They arrived at Moss Neck Manor on the night of December 16 and set up camp until March. It was during Jackson and his corps' stay at Moss Neck Manor that Sandie met Kate Corbin. She was the charming and irresistible, "spoilt but nevertheless . . . darling sister" of Richard Corbin, the owner of Moss Neck. Captain J.P. Smith claimed Sandie met "his fate" during the Christmas dinner "in a pair of black eyes." Yet, according to his biographer W.G. Bean, Sandie did not attend the Christmas party. Kate later invited him to tea and, comically, he claimed: "She is agreeable, but not pretty. I don't know but that as I get older & live in the army my critical taste is fast giving way to a general admiration for womankind without any desire to see more of them." In a letter to his family a few days after Christmas, he made no mention of the pair of black eyes he would fall in love with, but instead continued to pine after the woman who rejected him. Kate's correspondence with her friend Sally Munford hints at an attraction forming between Sandie and her. However, according to one letter to Sally, Kate described Sandie as "moderately large, ugly (some say), considered by some conceited, though this I deny, but consider that he has very good grounds for it in view of his intellect." Maybe they both thought each other ugly, but nonetheless an attraction formed in the few winter months of 1862-63. She had nothing but praise for Jackson's officers and claimed her "particular friends are Lt. Smith and Major Pendleton of the Gen'l staff. . . . I feel assured I have succeeded in making them real friends of mine. There are several others I like, but I don't entertain such earnest feelings, if that isn't too strong a word for mere friend." Many officers asked for Kate's hand during their stay at Moss Neck, yet she continually turned them down. Clem Fishburne believed he had fallen in love with Kate, but realized Sandie was "likely to be the successful applicant for her hand and heart."



Kate Pendleton. Photo via civilwarwomenblog.com.

Tragedy struck Moss Neck in March when three of the children living in the Manor house caught scarlet fever and died. One of the children was Jane Corbin whom General Jackson had grown particularly fond of. In the sadness that filled the house, Sandie remained by Kate's side, lovingly consoling her. It is unclear when their engagement was decided, but by the end of March Kate had told Sally, and Sandie had told General Jackson. Within a few months, Sandie's happiness was crushed by the death of his beloved general after Jackson was wounded at Chancellorsville. In a letter to Jackson's wife Mary Anna he said, "God knows I would have died for him."

Sandie and Kate's marriage was postponed multiple times over the course of the year. As the war went on Sandie admitted, "I begin to get afraid of the responsibility of marriage, and have a sort of feeling that, during the war, a man should not run the risk of entailing misery upon a woman he loves." Little did he know he was foreshadowing his death. Finally, on December 29, 1863 Sandie and Kate exchanged vows at Moss Neck Manor. They spent their honeymoon in Richmond and Lexington, Virginia, where they stayed with Sandie's mother and sisters. Despite her concerns with leaving her family and her anxiety over the postponement of her wedding, Kate was incredibly happy, describing her honeymoon as "the happiest weeks" of her life. "We harmonized so perfectly in all our tastes and aspirations; he was so thoughtful of my slightest wishes, so good & true & my soul was so bound up in him." When Sandie rejoined Ewell's staff for the 1864 campaign season, the happiness of marriage burst forth from him. His love letters to his darling Katharine are beautiful:

"Katherine mine, a man does not begin to live truly, & as he ought until he deeply loves; I won't say until he marries. But if he loves he ought to marry as soon as he can. . . . Oh! how life opens before me as I look upon it now. No vision of fame attained by intense and anxious effort, bringing sorrow to many & happiness not even to myself, but a peaceful & happy abode, where love & you, darling, give a charm to every object – where home is enjoyed, and duty performed makes the pleasure sweeter.

Oh! Oh! Oh! Desdemona, Oh!

Oh! Oh! Oh! Katharina, Oh! – Oh! I am so much in love with you that it makes me poetical, & you will see that the inspiration is so great that I write poetry as fine & almost identical in form with Shakespeare's. The manifold influences of the tender passion would form a curious chapter in psychology."

In the early spring of 1864, Kate discovered she was pregnant with Sandie's first child. She moved to Richmond to be with Sandie's sister Sue and her husband Ned. Kate became increasingly anxious due to her condition as well as the war turned against the South. Perhaps she knew tragedy would strike again. On September 22, 1864, at the Battle of Fischer's Hill, Sandie was shot through the abdomen and fatally wounded. He was moved to the closest town of Woodstock and died the next day, just five days short of his twenty-fourth birthday. Conflicting messages reached Sandie's family, and they did not receive word that he had actually died until October 17. He was reburied near his general, Stonewall Jackson, on October 24 in Lexington. A few weeks later on November 4, Kate gave birth to her son, Sandie. For a year, the little boy brought light to the Pendleton family. Sadly, nineteenth century disease brought more

tragedy to the family, and little Sandie died of diphtheria in September 1865. While stricken with grief, Kate fortunately remarried in 1871. She married John Mercer Brooke, a former Confederate naval officer, and they had three children. She and John are buried next to each other, but near Sandie, in the Stonewall Jackson Cemetery in Lexington.

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