

### ***Corinth teacher stood toe to toe with Union Army***

Everybody remembers that one elementary school teacher who was as tough as nails. I don't mean that mean teacher from Third Grade who scared you so bad, or that middle school English teacher who never gave you better than a C-. No, I'm talking about the teacher who would stand up for her students and her school, the one who taught you to stand up for yourself and what you believe in. In the early days of Corinth, that teacher was Mrs. Susan P. Gaston. How tough was she? She stood toe to toe with the Union army and never blinked an eye.

Susan P. Moore was 16 years old when she married the Reverend Leroy Buford Gaston. They settled in Oxford, Mississippi where he became minister of the College Hill Presbyterian Church and she raised a trio of boys. It was their dream to organize a school for girls and the dream became a reality in Corinth.

On July 15, 1857, the Corona Female College opened their doors to educate young ladies using "Southern" principles. Though Leroy was the president of the college it was Susan who was the headmistress and backbone of the institution. He was described as "mild, unambitious, and too lenient," by one young student who acknowledged Mrs. Gaston was the "power behind the throne."

The 1860 term began with seven teachers and a student body of 29 girls between the ages of ten and nineteen. Politics and the threat of war had dropped enrollment down from the average of 90 students and within months all of the girls had been dismissed to their homes. Confederate troops had come to Corinth to take advantage of the strategic railroad crossing and almost overnight camps of instruction sprung up around town.

With the soldiers came sickness and disease and the Gaston's, patriots that they were, gladly turned over the college to be used as a hospital. Their living quarters had been in the college and they moved into a nearby cottage in the Corinth suburb known as College Hill. For months they helped with the sick and watched as the army prepared to meet the enemy.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of April, 1862, the Battle of Shiloh commenced eighteen miles to the northwest. Susan remembered the scene well. *"The sound of the guns first reached us on Sunday morning. We hurried from the breakfast table to the yard and listened to the continued roar. 'Twas like far away sea waves when they strike the shore."*

The sick were sent south on trains and were replaced by the thousands of wounded. The citizens of Corinth were directed to evacuate the city but the Gaston's ignored the order and continued with their duties. Eventually the Union army drew close and the sound of rifle and cannon fire was a daily occurrence.

By the end of May the Confederate commander, the dashing General Beauregard, had come to the conclusion he couldn't defend the city any longer and began to move his army down to Tupelo. The night of May 29<sup>th</sup> was one Susan would never forget. *"A noise of passing crowds, but not a word, in silence, in darkness. Marching as with muffled feet our regiments went by. More than one time I rose from my sleepless couch, pushed back the lattice, and listened to the continued movement, so quiet, so strange. On, on for hours, not a word of command heard, but on the thousands went, now, for the first time called on to fall back and give place to the invading foe. The dawn of the day revealed to us the desolation of our condition."*

Again, the Gaston's chose to remain behind and look after their beloved school. A yellow flag floated over the building, and as it was the accepted symbol of a hospital the couple hoped this would keep the enemy from ransacking the place. Susan gave refuge to a number of soldiers who had remained

in town and hid them among the sick and wounded. She even took time to offer breakfast to the last squad of Southern cavalry as they rode out of Corinth.

Later in the day Brigadier Gen. Thomas J. Wood and his staff came into the cottage while they awaited reports from their scouts. Wood's division was in pursuit of the retreating Confederates and he and his staff questioned Mrs. Gaston as to the whereabouts of Beauregard's army. When they asked her which road the Southerners had taken she told them there were so many of them, over 100,000, they took every road. General Wood smiled, knowing she was pulling his leg, but a young Colonel continued to interrogate her. *"Madam," with his finger in a theatrical manner to the road leading south, "Where does that road go to?" "What road?" I said, looking with as much interest as though it were a new road. "That road is on the south side of town and leads to little places south of us." And turning to the north, "There is the north side of town and so, that road leads to places north of us, and so on with the other points of the compass. I am very green about these roads (just now) and could not trust myself to go too miles on any one of them."* General Wood was almost laughing out loud while the matron dressed down and scolded the young colonel as if he was a child.

A few months into the Federal occupation Mrs. Gaston procured a pass, a wagon and broken down horse she called "Old Fed." Her pass allowed her to travel the ten miles to Danville and no further. With a paroled Confederate Officer as an escort she ignored the limits placed on her travel and made her way to Tupelo. When she was about to return to Corinth she learned a warrant had been issued for her arrest as a spy. She had been to General Sterling Price's Headquarters so the charges were undoubtedly true, but it marked the end of her stay in Corinth.

After the war the couple ministered a church near Boonville (yep, the little community of Gaston is named for them) and then eventually made their way back to Oxford. The College had burned down in 1864 and there was no reason to return to Corinth. Her days as a teacher and defender of the cause were over.