

# Who was Hugh Blair Grigsby?

By Matthew Beard

In last issue, Hugh Blair Grigsby was mentioned in a reprint of an article titled, "History Branch receives donation of historical books" from the *Cleveland Daily Banner*. A description of him included that he was the third chancellor of William and Marcy College, preceded by Presidents George Washington and John Tyler. He was also described as a noted Virginian and U.S. historian and a long-time supporter and president of the Virginia Historical Society.

I decided to find out who this man was and if this information was accurate.

According to the online NGFS database, Hugh Blair Grigsby was born 22 Nov 1806 in Norfolk, Virginia to Benjamin Porter Grigsby (1770-1810) and Elizabeth Blair McPherson<sup>1,2,4</sup>. The line continues through James Grigsby / Frances Porter, John Grigsby / Rosanna Etchison, Charles Grigsby / Sarah Wilkerson, and "Immigrant" John Grigsby / Jane Rosser (*note—Rosser is still conjectured and has yet to be proven*).

He married Mary Venable Carrington (daughter of Col. Clement<sup>1,2</sup> or Paul<sup>4</sup> Carrington of "Edgehill", Charlotte County)<sup>1,4</sup> on 19 Nov 1840<sup>2</sup>. Two children are currently known of this line: Hugh Carrington Grigsby (b. 1857) and Mary Blair Grigsby (b. 1861)<sup>2</sup>. The 1870 U.S. Census shows Hugh and Mary Grigsby with two children, Hugh (age 14) and Mary (age 10)<sup>3</sup>. It also shows Mary (Carrington) Grigsby as being 57 years old and born in Virginia, which is not in the NGFS online database. The 1880 U.S. Census also shows all four still living together with three servants<sup>11</sup>. However, the website [www.virginians.com](http://www.virginians.com), lists her birth date as 3 Aug 1813 and her parents as Clement Carrington and Jane (Watkins) Poage. This site also called Hugh Grigsby a child music prodigy. Five descendants of Mary Blair Grigsby line have been (or currently are) members of the National Grigsby Family Society; including 3 generations of the Zimmerman surname.

Hugh Blair Grigsby began as a law student at Yale College and working in a law office, but gave up the idea when he started having problems with deafness. He then became owner and editor of the Norfolk "Beacon" which he ran for the next 6 years. To help improve his health, he started walking persistently and ended up walking on foot to Massachusetts through much of New England, lower Canada, and back Virginia<sup>1</sup>.

In 1828, he represented Norfolk in the legislature and was a member of the state convention of 1829-1830<sup>1</sup>. After his marriage to Mary, he retired from public life and devoted himself to literary pursuits. He had one of the finest private libraries in the state, and a gallery of paintings and statuary not equaled there. In January 1862, just previous to the evacuation of Norfolk by the Confederates, he removed from Norfolk and took up residence in "Edgehill" where they stayed for the rest of their lives. He received the degree of L.L.D. from William and Mary College in 1865. As a historian, he won a high rank, and no mean reputation as a poet<sup>4</sup>.

He was, at his death on 28 Apr 1881, the president of the Virginia Historical Society, of which he had served in that position from 1871<sup>4</sup>. He also served from 1871-1881 as the third chancellor of William and Mary College since the establishment under an American charter. The two previous chancellors had been Presidents George Washington (1788-1798) and John Tyler (1859-1862). There were 13 chancellors under the British Royal Charter which established the college in 1693. Other notables have included Margaret Thatcher (1993-2000) and the current chancellor, Henry A. Kissinger who has served since 2000<sup>6</sup>. He contributed to the "Southern Literary Messenger," and wrote numerous historical discourses, including one on the Virginia convention of 1829-'30 delivered before the historical society in 1853, another on that of 1776 delivered at William and Mary in 1855, and "Discourse on Hon. Littleton W. Tazewell" (Norfolk, 1860)<sup>5</sup>. The two historical discourses have been published and can be found for sale at sites such as [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

Hugh Blair Grigsby also was well known by other famous individuals in the art, historical, and political worlds. According to an article of the Norfolk Historical Society, he became familiar with Alexander Galt, a famous sculptor who has busts in the Virginia Legislature and the U.S. Supreme Court. The article states:

Alexander Galt, one of the best-known American sculptors of his day, was Norfolk's first bid for national artistic fame. Romantically classical by temperament, Galt drew his inspiration from ancient Greece and Rome. One of his works, an ideal bust of Sappho, has an interesting story.

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Commissioned by the Norfolk-born Virginia historian Hugh Blair Grigsby, the bust was shipped from Italy to New York early in 1861. The Civil War had begun when it arrived, and as it was Southern property, it was confiscated and sold to J. Nelson Tappan, a wealthy New York merchant.

After the war, Grigsby went to New York in search of the bust, and when he discovered it and presented Tappan with the evidence that he was the rightful owner, the New Yorker graciously turned it over to him, refusing any remuneration.

The bust was then shipped to Norfolk, where Grigsby installed it in the drawing room of his half-brother, the banker, John B. Whitehead, where it was acclaimed the finest art work in the city until Grigsby sent it to his country home in Charlotte County.<sup>8</sup>

The half-brother described above was John Boswell Whitehead who was twice mayor of Norfolk, a banker, and a promoter<sup>10</sup>. He was the son and one of five children of Nathan Colgate Whitehead and the widow Elizabeth (McPherson) Grigsby<sup>10—pg 818</sup>.

Another excerpt, from a professor of William And Mary College who was giving a presentation at a conference, discussed his world of politics:

On a late February evening in 1856, Hugh Blair Grigsby, a prominent Virginia historian, shook the snow from his hat and overcoat and handed them to the servant who greeted him at the door of Edward Coles' Philadelphia brownstone. Unexpectedly late, Grigsby entered the parlor only to find Coles had already assumed his normal position before the fireplace and was engaged in an animated tale that dominated the attention of all those present. A Virginian who settled in Philadelphia after a fifteen year sojourn in Illinois, Coles frequently hosted gatherings in his parlor where like-minded men exchanged their impressions and opinions regarding the various members of the Founding Generation. As he gazed at the faces around the room, Grigsby recognized among the attendants Professor George Tucker, the recent biographer of Thomas Jefferson, Dr. Robley Dunglison, the University of Virginia's retired professor of medicine and the physician who had attended Jefferson during the last weeks of his life, and Henry Dilworth Gilpin, a Pennsylvania lawyer, author, and recent editor of James Madison's papers. All of these men, Grigsby included, shared an increasingly popular interest in the past, and the legacy of the American Revolution and its leaders in particular. More often than not, however, these men sat silently as they listened to Coles communicate his own personal impressions of America's most revered statesmen. Surrounded by the portraits of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, Coles, "a most graphic narrator, and even actor of the conversations of Mr. J" and James Madison, related anecdotes and facts "touching [on] the rise and fall of politicians" during the nation's first several administrations. Few of the attendees could doubt Coles' heartfelt celebration of these men or his determination to perpetuate his own understanding of the legacy of the nation's early political leaders.

On this particular occasion, Coles related, "with exquisite humour," a story involving one of Jefferson's many trips from Monticello to Washington during his first term in office. Confronted with muddy roads that prevented the use of his carriage once he reached Alexandria, the third president mounted his own horse and proceeded to Washington alone. Within a mile of Alexandria he "overtook a plain substantial Kentuckian" with whom he "chatted freely." Upon learning that his companion was eager to "get sight of Mr. Jefferson," the unrecognized President encouraged the Kentucky native to call at the President's house, assuring him that he "should be well received." After some debate, the Kentuckian agreed to arrive at the President's house the next day. The frontiersman then proceeded to ask his fellow traveler "about the tales told of Mr. Jefferson - his wearing red breeches - his intercourse with Black Sal - and fifty other equally vacuous charges made by the federalists." According to Coles, Jefferson refuted each charge, all the while maintaining his anonymity. Upon their arrival in Washington, the pair parted ways and the Kentuckian asked a passerby if they knew the identity of his companion, who was now making his way up the stairs of the President's house. To his surprise, he learned that his traveling partner was none other than Thomas Jefferson himself. Embarrassed by the tenor of the questions he had asked during their ride together, the Kentucky native called the next day to offer an apology and assured Jefferson that he had "not dream[ed] of his real character." Jefferson received him cordially, laughed about the previous day's conversation, and invited the man to dine with him. For Coles, the moral of the story was clear. His Jefferson was the plainest of republicans. He was a man of the people, an individual whose

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manner and behavior displayed his virtue and revealed a blindness to social distinctions.<sup>9</sup>

Hugh Blair Grigsby sounded like a man worth knowing and full of historical knowledge that he had lived and learned. He would definitely be worth investigating further at a later time.

**Sources:**

<sup>1</sup>—Encyclopedia Of Virginia Biographies, Volume II, Prominent Persons, by Lyon G. Tyler, 1915, pp. 224-225, accessed online at [www.genealogy.com](http://www.genealogy.com) under Virginia Genealogies and Biographies, 1500s-1900s.

<sup>2</sup>—National Grigsby Family Society online database accessed via web pages in the member's only section, [www.grigsby.org](http://www.grigsby.org).

<sup>3</sup>—1870 U.S. Federal Census, Charlotte County, Virginia, population schedule, Walton Township, page 186b, dwelling 557, family 557, lines 2-6, series M593, roll 1640, accessed online at [www.genealogy.com](http://www.genealogy.com) and [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>4</sup>—Death notice of Hugh Blair Grigsby, The New England Historical And Genealogical Register, 1881, volume 35, page 308, accessed online at [www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org) (the site of the New England Historic Genealogical Society).

<sup>5</sup>—Edited excerpt from Appleton's Encyclopedia, 2000, found at [www.famousamericans.net/hughblairgrigsby/](http://www.famousamericans.net/hughblairgrigsby/).

<sup>6</sup>—Website page of William And Mary College listing presidents and chancellors, [www.wm.edu/catalog/1999-00/presidents.html](http://www.wm.edu/catalog/1999-00/presidents.html), located in Williamsburg, Virginia.

<sup>7</sup>—Death notice of Hugh Blair Grigsby, 25 May 1881, page 2, Carolina Spartan / Spartanburg Herald Death Index, found online at [www.spt.lib.sc.us/obits/carspartanherald/eg.htm#G](http://www.spt.lib.sc.us/obits/carspartanherald/eg.htm#G).

<sup>8</sup>—Norfolk Historical Society, Norfolk Highlights 1854-1881, by George Holbert Tucker, chapter 39, summary found online at [www.norfolkhistorical.org/highlights/39.html](http://www.norfolkhistorical.org/highlights/39.html).

<sup>9</sup>—Managing Memory: The Cultivation Of Elite Authority in Jacksonian America, by Suzanne Cooper Guasco, William And Mary College, SHEAR Conference, July 20-23, 2000, Buffalo, New York, located online at [www2.h-net.msu.edu/~shear/s2000.d/pa/GuascoSuzanne.htm](http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~shear/s2000.d/pa/GuascoSuzanne.htm). Footnotes are listed to correspondence of Hugh Blair Grigsby.

<sup>10</sup>—Genealogies of Virginia Families V, R-Z, The Whitehead Family In Southern Virginia, page 819, located online at [www.genealogy.com](http://www.genealogy.com).

<sup>11</sup>—1880 U.S. Federal Census, Charlotte County, Virginia, population schedule, Walton Township, page 347b, dwelling 119, family 120, lines 25-31, series T9, roll 1360, accessed online at [www.genealogy.com](http://www.genealogy.com) and [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).