

OUR ILLUSTRIOUS COUSIN

HUGH BLAIR GRIGSBY

1806 - 1881

by Elizabeth M. Nicholson

Hugh Blair Grigsby - a leading literary figure of his era - is probably the most famous member of our far-flung clan. He was the grandson of James, the oldest son of "Soldier John" Grigsby. James Grigsby married three times. One of his sons by the first marriage was Benjamin Porter Grigsby who was born in Orange County, Virginia and later traveled to Norfolk with "his sole personal possessions in a pair of saddle-bags".<sup>1</sup> Benjamin married Elizabeth McPhearson and later became the first pastor of the first Presbyterian church in that area. He served in that capacity until he was struck down by yellow fever in 1810 when his son, Hugh Blair, was only four years old.

Although his mother remarried seven years later to Dr. Nathan Whitehead, Hugh Blair must have felt the lack of a father during those early years. He developed a very close relationship with his Uncle Reuben Grigsby. Reuben was the youngest son of "Soldier John" Grigsby by his second marriage. He was actually Hugh Blair's great uncle, although they were separated by only 26 years. Reuben treated Hugh Blair as a member of his own large family, giving him advice in his early years and exchanging political and philosophical views as Hugh Blair grew to maturity.

One of Hugh Blair's first great achievements was to serve as Norfolk's representative to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1829 and 1830, and also during that term to participate in the Virginia Convention of the same year - one of the last gatherings of many of the great names in Virginia history. Reuben must have been terribly proud of his 23 year old cousin, but at the same time he maintained the fatherly role as seen in this letter of September 5th, 1829.

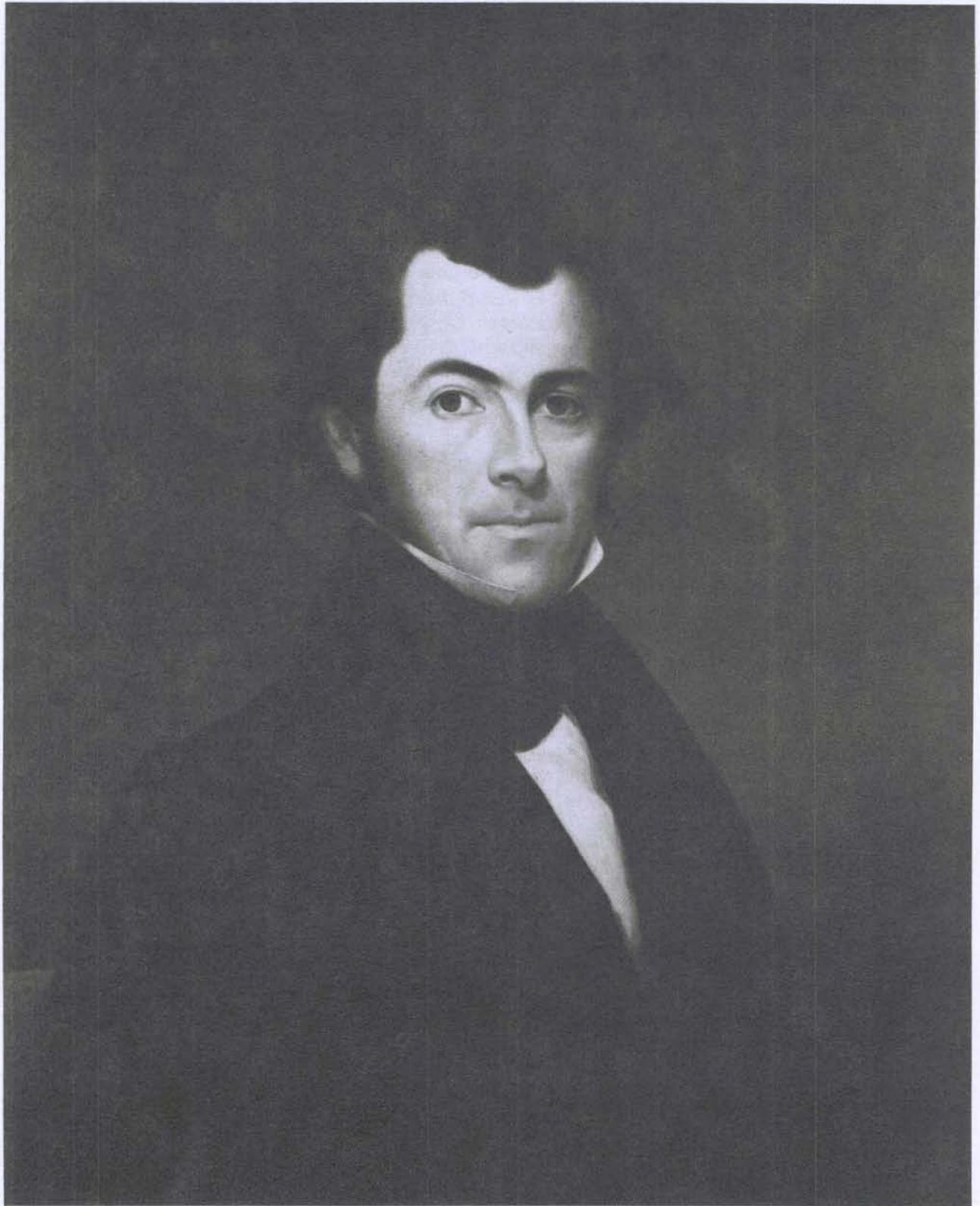
"Fix your view on objects worth attaining; pursue them constantly rather than eagerly, and I prophecy that you will realize an ultimate possession of them.

"Who is to preside over the destinies of this nation 40 years hence? But I will not pursue a new subject, seeing I am so near the bottom of my page . . .

"P.S. Take some pains to improve the legibility of your handwriting, especially that the signature of your name be neat, plain, and uniform. Remember to give our respects to all friends."

R. Grigsby<sup>2</sup>

(Having spent many long hours transcribing letters by both Reuben and Hugh Blair, I can testify that both of them could have used more care in their penmanship!)



Hugh Blair Grigsby 1806-1881 Portrait as a young man. Copied from the original in the possession of the Virginia Historical Society.

Just as he received advice from his Uncle Reuben, Hugh Blair willingly gave it to Reuben's children. Various members of Reuben's household corresponded with "Cousin Hugh", using English as well as Latin, and took pains that their letters would be as correct and as stimulating as they could make them. (See "Life at Hickory Hill", Memorabilia, Vol. I.) Hugh Blair was even given a namesake in Reuben's family, George Hugh Blair Grigsby.

Hugh Blair was a tireless and fascinating correspondent. The written word was a natural medium for him and must have become increasingly important as growing deafness made it difficult for him to carry on conversations.

A letter that Hugh Blair Grigsby wrote to his Uncle Reuben after hearing of his Aunt Verlinda's death gives ample evidence of his literary ability as well as his warmth and concern.

Your letter by the last mail, my dearest uncle, was the only one that ever came from your hand that did not come to me like a shower on the parched earth, waking into life and action the most delightful feelings of the heart. And yet there was one ray of light to me even amid the gloom and darkness that it brought along. In the midst of your calamity, so overshadowing as it is, you thought of me. Would that I were worthy of your regard, and that my sympathy, and that of my wife, who grieves to think that she can now never see one of whom I have spoken to her so much, and whom she knew and loved, although unseen, so well, could avail you in your dread bereavement. Time alone can bring any alleviation in his course, with the aid of such reflections as I know you are capable of, on the wisdom and goodness of an overruling power, which parcels out our allotment of joy and sorrow as it seemeth good in His sight. I know, too, my dear uncle, deeply as you lament her who was so long the pride of your heart, the light of your house, and the wise model of what woman in her true sphere ought to be, your good sense, to say nothing of a higher and nobler quality, will remind you, that, though she be dead, yet that dear one yet liveth and speaketh in the children she had given you, and who engrossed all those affections which were not sacred to you. They live for you, and you must live for them. I know well you will not look to them in vain.<sup>3</sup>

Since his earliest days, Hugh Blair suffered from a delicate constitution and poor health. He had studied law at Yale, but was unable to go into practice because of his progressive loss of hearing. Instead, he went into journalism, becoming the editor and owner of the Norfolk Beacon. His six years in this position were so successful that he was able to retire from the paper with the comfortable sum of \$60,000.

He dealt with his physical ills with the same hard work and determination which he applied to all aspects of his life. He devoted himself to athletic exercises, and became a competent boxer and "pedestrian" or hiker, as we would say today. He traveled on foot all the way from his native state, up to Massachusetts and several New England states, then into Canada, and finally home again.

In 1840, he married Miss Mary Venable Carrington, daughter of Col. Clement Carrington of "Edgehill" in Charlotte County. They took up residence on her family's

plantation, "Edgehill", and it was here that he spent most of his life - studying, corresponding, writing, and managing the estate.

Hugh Blair was a progressive farmer, far in advance of his time. As a friend and neighbor related: "In planning and executing improvements, constructing a dyke some three miles in length, arranging the ditches of his extensive low-grounds, so that a heavy rainfall could be easily disposed of, and bringing all into a high state of cultivation, he set an example of industry and energy which every farmer would do well to emulate. He had ample means, and we have sometimes heard his efforts characterized as fanciful or Utopian. But the result shows method, skill, and industry; the process was necessarily laborious, but the result was grand."<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to his Uncle Reuben in 1843, Hugh Blair showed a gift for seeing into the future and the role of agriculture in the west.

"My crop has fallen short of my expectations of what it would have been at one time; but freshes (floods) and fire have curtailed me mightily. I lost 9 hogsheads by two freshes. The low prices of tobacco are ominous, and I do not look for a rise to the old standard of prices again. The West, especially Missouri, have done for us, who live upon the long cleared lands south of James, and I may add, east of the Alleghany. But we must exercise patience, and practice economy, and do as well as we can. The star of empire is trending Westward. Were I cast upon the world again, I would follow its course, and seek to guide my bark by its auspicious ray. As things are, I will stick by the old Commonwealth; all is here, and I am afraid that I would lose fully as much as I would gain by removal."<sup>5</sup>

Although Hugh Blair Grigsby's historical awareness helped him see into the future, his greatest ability was the appreciation of personalities and events from the past. He is most frequently cited for his authorship of three important works on the history of Virginia: The Virginia Convention of 1829-30, The Virginia Convention of 1776, and The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788. All three of these discourses were presented in the 1850's and demonstrate his familiarity with the history of his state and the contributions of such celebrated Virginians as Jefferson, Madison, Patrick Henry, George Mason and others.

Hugh Blair Grigsby delighted in possessing objects of scholarly, artistic, or personal significance. For example, his library contained over 6,000 volumes and was housed in a separate building. The previous owners of many of these books were themselves objects of Hugh Blair's affection or respect - he must have enjoyed thinking of them each time he referred to one of their volumes. He also had a collection of canes that could call up various fond memories depending on whether he chose the one that had once supported Uncle Reuben or the one that had known the touch of Hugh Blair's friend, Governor Tazewell.

Undeniably, Hugh Blair Grigsby was what we would today call an intellectual - a man of ideas. At the close of the Civil War, he was once again able to correspond with the Massachusetts Historical Society, of which he was an honorary member. This letter of 1866 shows his thirst for scholarly communication, and his high regard for artistic and intellectual works.

My Dear Sir, -- Five years and fourteen days have elapsed since I received a letter from you, -- a period of time that will ever be

memorable, not only in our own history, but in that of the human race. In all that interval, I did not see a single company under arms, though more than a million of men were engaged in the fearful affray on one side, at one time; for it was reported, at the time of the surrender of General Lee, that General Grant told that officer that he had a million of men under his command. Yet, though secluded on my farm in this county, and taking no part in the struggle, I suffered in my estate most severely. I lost fifteen valuable horses at a single raid, and of course all my servants, -- at least one hundred in number. Other losses to a great amount I suffered; and now, when old age is approaching, I am required to exercise a degree of thrift and economy, which -- at no time, from my simple habits of life, very uncongenial -- is not more pleasant because it is necessary. Should matters remain as they are, I shall have enough left to educate my son of ten, and my daughter of six years, and give them a fair start in the world. As these are my only children, and all I ever had, and as I was immured on my estate during the whole war, I met with no loss of life in my family. The health of my wife was as good as usual during the war; and thus my household remains as it was at the beginning.

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We literally know nothing of what occurred in literature during the last four or five years. I have not seen the "Edinburgh" or the "London Quarterly" for five years; or the "North American." Respecting Mr. Choate, I would like to know whether his friends have published his writings. I have Mr. Parker's book, but would like exceedingly to get anything from your great advocate, whom I very much admired. I trust that Mr. Hilard still lives, and Professor Parsons, -- gentlemen whom I do not know personally, and only through their writings.

The latest edition of Judge Story's Miscellaneous Writings I would like to procure; and the proceedings of the Historical Society on the death of Mr. Quincy, Chief-Justice Shaw, and Judge White, and of any other prominent members who have died recently.

All Mr. Everett's works published in volumes I possess; but, if his contemplated work on the "Laws of Nations" has been published, I would wish to obtain it. I presume that Mr. C. F. Adams, being engaged abroad, has published no life or works of his father. Mr. Quincy's work I possess.

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I have said of public affairs either in the South or elsewhere; and will only add, that, if on any point you may wish to obtain any information which I am able to give, I will write to you in detail, to the best of my knowledge in the case. I will say only that it is by affection, not by force, the unity of dissimilar communities is to be consolidated.

I saved my books, statuary, paintings, etc., though they suffered slightly by exposure. I have had all my paintings, my busts, etc. in the

woods, covered with leaves from time to time, as a raid approached. My manuscripts and some precious books were from time to time buried; and, on one occasion, the rain came for several days in torrents, and the water rose in the graves to which they were committed, and soaked them thoroughly: but I dried them by hot fires and a hot sun, without material loss.

I need not say that any literary production of yours will be most acceptable. I have your volume of Speeches printed in 1852; and have bound, in a handsome form, those which you were so kind as to send to me, and which I value highly.

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I left in my dwelling in Norfolk, in 1861, my statue of the "Fisher's Daughter," by Pettrich, where it remained during the war, and I got possession of it in November last, when my house was restored to me. It was taken because I was absent at my residence in Charlotte, to which I removed in 1861. My painting of "The Shunammite" was also in my Norfolk dwelling, and it was most pleasant to see it after a lapse of four years. It is large, six feet by five, and perhaps larger, as it could not be accommodated in any of our rail cars, and was left behind in consequence of the inability of the cars to hold the box containing it. But alas! you may say, to think of paintings and statues and books, when our country is in its present condition! It may be that this is the cause of my trifling.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the hiatus of the civil War, the Massachusetts Historical Society did not forget Hugh Blair Grigsby. The warm relationship was sustained through those difficult times and into the future decades. Upon his death in 1881, the following comments were made by the President of the organization, the Hon. Robert C. Winthrop.

No one of our honorary members on either side of the Atlantic has ever exhibited so warm a personal interest in our proceedings, or has so often favored us with interesting letters, which have been gladly printed in our successive serials or volumes.

A Virginian of the Virginians - President of their Historical Society, and Chancellor of their oldest college; bound to the Old Dominion by every tie of blood and of affection; proud of her history, with which he was so familiar; proud of her great men, with so many of whom he had been personally associated in public as well as private life; sympathizing deeply in all of her political views and with all her recent trials and reverses -- he was never blind to the great men and great deeds of New England, never indifferent to our own Massachusetts history in particular; on the contrary, he was always eager to cultivate the regard and friendship of our scholars and public men. No work from our press seemed to escape his attention. There was no poem of Longfellow, or Whittier, or

Holmes, or Lowell, no history of Prescott, or Bancroft, or Palfrey, or Motley, or Frothingham, or Parkman, which he did not read with lively interest and discuss with discrimination and candor.

In the little visit which he made us ten year ago, he formed personal friendships with not a few of those whom he had known only by their works, and they were a constant source of pleasure and pride to him. For myself, I look back on more than twenty years of familiar and friendly correspondence with him -- interrupted by the war, but renewed with the earliest return of peace -- which was full of entertainment and instruction, and which I shall miss greatly as the years roll on, and as the habit and art of letter-writing is more and more lost in telegraphic and telephonic and postal-card communication.<sup>7</sup>

Although deafness must have limited Hugh Blair Grigsby's relationships with the outside world, he was not content to live a life of scholarly isolation at his beloved "Edgehill" in Charlotte County. From 1871 until his death in 1881 he served as Chancellor of the College of William and Mary - George Washington and John Tyler having been the only other Americans to hold that position.<sup>8</sup>

He was a long-standing member of the Virginia Historical Society and was elected president of that organization in 1870. Since he gave valuable aid in the Society's search for a repository for its various documents and treasures, it is fitting that "Battle Abbey" - as the VHS Hall is fondly known - has become the home for his papers as well as those of his Grigsby cousins, past, present and future.<sup>9</sup>

Hugh Blair Grigsby was an extraordinary man that any family would be proud to claim as kin. His character was aptly summarized at the Convocation of the Board of Visitors and Governors of the College of William and Mary in July of 1881. "In the death of this noble man, the Board, the College, and the community at large have sustained an irreparable loss. A man of the highest character, the most uncommon cultivation, with a mind to grasp the truth, and a heart to love, defend and live it, he was among us a leader in everything true and noble, a guide in everything wise and judicious."<sup>10</sup>

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Editor's Note: For more information on Hugh Blair Grigsby and his family, please see page 356 of Memorabilia I for the profile of Mrs. Susan Duane Galt Robinson, his granddaughter.

### Bibliography

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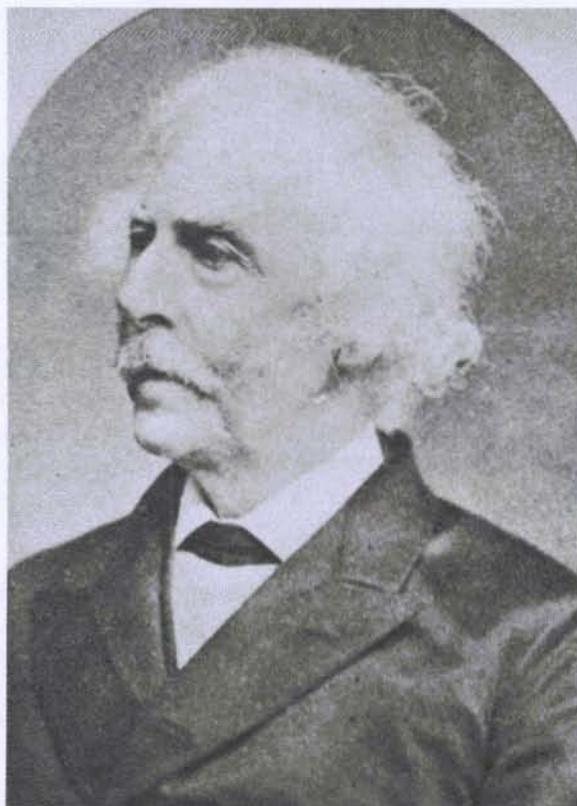
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The National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol. 19, p. 379.

### Footnotes

1. Grigsby, Hugh Blair, The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1778, p. vi.
2. Memorabilia, Vol. I, p. 91.
3. DeGolia Papers, Letter from Hugh Blair Grigsby to Reuben Grigsby, Sept. 19, 1846.
4. Grigsby, Op. cit., p. x.
5. DeGolia Papers, Letter from Hugh Blair Grigsby to Reuben Grigsby, Oct. 24, 1843.
6. Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, March 30, 1866, p. 191.
7. Grigsby, Op. cit., p. xxiii.
8. National Cyclopedia of American Biography, Vol. 19, p. 379.
9. Ibid., p. 379.
10. Grigsby, Op. cit., p. xxvi.



Hugh Blair Grigsby in 1875 (Photograph courtesy of Camellia Denys.)



Elizabeth Markham Nicholson and Richard Galt Zimermann: the gr., gr., gr. granddaughter of Reuben Grigsby and the gr. gr., grandson of Hugh Blair Grigsby, at the time of the 1979 Grigsby Family Reunion in Rockbridge County, Virginia.