

1/24/74

President Boxley and fellow members of the Athenaeum :

When I was first asked to become a member of the Society, one thing I looked forward to was the opportunity to hear more and more local history. The papers dealing with the many facets of history in Western Kentucky or the Pennyrile have been the highlight of many meetings.

Three papers I remember better than most are Wallace Henderson\*s re-runs on the "Night Riders" and the "Rise and the Fall of the Forbes Manufacturing Co." These were graphic descriptions of local events told by a man that was "on the spot when they happened". He truly saw history being made. It has been about fifteen years since they were presented and we have had quite a turnover in our membership since then. I hope in the not too distant future we can have another rerun on either or both of these enjoyable papers.

One of our younger members, William Turner, also presented a paper about two years ago on Bethel College which was a masterpiece and earned for William the reputation of Christian County's Number One Historian. Of course, after William left the intermediate teaching profession and joined Tom Riley, Brooks Major, Dr. Crane, Neil Ward and other members in that castle of learning on Little River, he began getting a little out of line and was demanding of his students from Todd, Trigg and Caldwell counties facts on the basic history of education in Christian County, including the name of the first pedagogue in Christian - something needed to be done to remind Mr. Turner that he was supposedly teaching Kentucky history - not the history of Christian County Schools. The Community College is a branch of the University of Kentucky, not the College of Christian County. He finally got the

word and is working with his colleague, Dr. Major on giving the true history of the Civil War- and finally letting justice triumph (even if just on paper) and allowing a distinguished Todd Countian, that great statesman - Jefferson Davis - win the war instead of another Kentuckian - Abraham Lincoln.

This has been a rather lengthy opening statement to let you members know that my paper tonight cannot touch the quality or detail of Mr. Henderson's or Mr. Turner's papers, but just a round-about -way of telling you that I will attempt briefly - ( I know you'll like that) to give a short biographical sketch on a little known, but historically significant fellow Elktonian, Benjamin Helm Bristow - "A Little Known Patriot". Quoting Dr. Ross A. Webb, Bristow's biographer: "Few men have left their mark upon these United States of America, yet have been so little remembered as Benjamin Helm Bristow". To quote Webb, "Bristow was a Kentuckian who lived valiantly in stormy times".

Born on June 20, 1832, in Elkton, Bristow was the first son of a distinguished jurist and legislator, Francis Marion Bristow. He was extremely fortunate to have family connections with the socially and prominent Helm and Edwards families.

The Bristows themselves were pioneer newcomers to Kentucky, Bristow's grandfather had been a "hardshell" Baptist minister whose ministry had brought him to this area. Among his most ardent converts had been Benjamin Edwards, a native of Maryland and a man of substance, who had moved to Kentucky to be near his favorite daughter, Mary, the wife of Benjamin Helm, a prominent Elizabethtown merchant, and when Edward's granddaughter "Emily Edwards Helm married Francis Marion Bristow, the fortunes of the Bristows became secure. As a

result of this marriage, Edwards Hall in Elkton became the birthplace of young Benjamin.

While the boy grew up amid all the luxuries of a plantation economy, he also developed a sensitivity for his fellow man. Throughout his entire life, Bristow was torn in his belief in simple democracy

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inherited from his father and his appreciation for the aristocratic heritage inherited from his Helm and Edwards background.

In the 1830's Elkton was a community of around 300 people and in many ways was the cultural watershed of Todd County: to the north were bold God-fearing pioneers who lived in a clannish mountain fashion while to the south resided Virginia and Carolina Settlers who brought with them their slaves, a love of gracious living and devotion to learning. This class separation continued on through the Civil War with the residents of the northern section being ardent Federalists and those in the South ardent supporters of the Confederacy.

As a school boy Bristow was educated first in the Male Academy, Elkton and later in a private school headed by the Rev. W. D. Jones in Hopkinsville. Finishing his basic education near home, young Bristow was sent North to complete it. When he was given the entrance examinations at Jefferson College in Pennsylvania he was admitted as a Senior. In passing all the cultural examinations in Latin, Greek, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, natural philosophy and history there was no doubt at what level he should be enrolled. Following graduation in 1851, Bristow returned to Elkton where he "read law" under the tutelage of his father and was admitted to the Bar with a partnership with his father and future brother-in-law, Hazel G. Petrie.

In 1854, he married Abbie Slaughter Briscoe, considered one of the

"best catches" in Southern Kentucky. Shortly after their marriage, the couple moved to Hopkinsville where Bristow practiced law until the outbreak of the War Between the States. Bristow was now forced to agonize over the decision of what was "Sense and worth". His father, now in Congress had fought hard to avert the family against family strife, but without success. Despite Ben's Southern background, he finally had no recourse but to agree with the Bowling Green Resolves, 1 which his father helped to formulate: That not just cause existed for secession by the Southern States; that Government was ordained of God for the benefit of mankind; and that no government ought to be overthrown or subverted without a just cause for Revolution.

When his father-in-law heard of Ben's intention to join the Union Army, he threatened disinheritance. Hearing of this, Bristow retorted: "I will not sell my country for gold and silver, you may take your property and go to hell."

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Equipping himself with a stout horse and two manservants, Ben immediately joined the Hopkinsville Guards being recruited by Colonel James F. Buckner. Later when that body was dispersed by the advance of a Confederate Army under General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Bristow, Shackelford and others set out to recruit a new Regiment. The 25th Kentucky Infantry was formed with Shackelford as its colonel and Bristow as its Lieutenant Colonel. This regiment served ably and bravely at the Battles of Ft. Donelson and Shiloh. After being wounded at Shiloh, Bristow returned to Elkton to recuperate; however he was soon active in the recruitment of the 8th Kentucky Cavalry which assisted in the capture of the Confederate raider, Colonel John Hunt Morgan. For his military service he was offered a commission as a Brigadier General, but modestly refused.

In 1863 without his knowledge Bristow was elected to the State Senate, and so began a political career that was to carry him to the very doors of the White House. While in the Senate he constantly supported the programs of the Federal Government. Recognizing Bristow's ability, Governor Thomas E. Bramlette sent him to Washington in December of 1864 in an effort to secure better Federal treatment for Kentucky.

On his arrival in Washington he visited the White House and President Lincoln remarked, "Your name is Benjamin Helm Bristow, is it not?" It is, sir" replied the Senator. "Let me give you a good shake of the hand, then", said Lincoln. "Your grandfather was very kind to me when I was a barefooted boy in Hardin County". While Lincoln had a warm spot in his heart for his native state, his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, considered Kentucky to be a pariah among the elect. As State Senator, Bristow attempted to build a Republican Party which would support the national administration. Even though his name is ~~XXXXXXXX~~ not usually associated with its founding, he was truly one of the founders of the moderate wing of the party.

When news reached Kentucky that Lee had surrendered at Appomattox, Bristow returned to the practice of law. However, through the intervention of his father's old friend, James Speed, who was then the Attorney General, he received the appointment as United States Attorney for Kentucky. In this office, Bristow re-imposed Federal law upon Kentucky, championed the cause of the Negro freedman, and hunted down the regulators and instigators of violence. His outstanding efforts to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1866 in Kentucky, caught national attention.

When the post of Solicitor General was created in the summer of 1870, Bristow was President Ulysses S. Grant's first nominee. In this

new job Bristow's responsibilities entailed not only advising district attorneys on legal technicalities, but also to argue the bulk of the Government's cases before the Supreme Court.

After his tour in Washington, Bristow accepted the presidency of the California and Texas Construction Company, a subsidiary of the Texas and Pacific Railway. While scandal was to plague the efforts of the Union Pacific to build a transcontinental railroad with the famous Credit Mobilier Construction Company, no such problems troubled the Texas and Pacific as long as Bristow directed its activities. Although at first Bristow considered his new endeavor a challenge, he missed the practice of law and once again returned to his native state and opened an office in Louisville.

However, he had barely re-established his practice when President Grant asked him to return to Washington - this time as Secretary of the Treasury. Writing to his daughter, Bristow commented on his new job; "I suppose I am in for it again". Scandals had already broken involving the Grant Administration and the president hoped by naming Bristow to the post that he would bring only honesty and respect to an already tarnished administration, but would also add Southern support to his cause as Bristow represented a border state.

Bristow reached the height of his power and influence in his new post as Secretary of the Treasury. Sympathetic to conservative interests, he took the ~~XXXXXXXX~~ lead in securing the resumption of gold payments and favored American Financiers over the House of Rothschild in the sale of Government bonds.

Popularly, he achieved fame by breaking the notorious Whiskey Ring and disclosing the Delano and Belknap scandals. But in doing all of this, he won the enmity of Grant, as the President believed that Bris-

tow was personally attacking him in laying bare the faults of his administration.

Resigning his office in 1876, Bristow became the presidential nominee of the liberal elements of the Republican Party. While his nomination appeared possible on the eve of the National Convention in Cincinnati in June, 1876, in reality he had stepped on too many toes of the party bosses, especially Roscoe Conkling and James G. Blaine. There is little doubt that if the voters could have been heard in 1876 Bristow would have not only been nominated, but elected easily. Obviously a dark horse was needed, a man who had stepped on nobody's toes, and that person turned out to be Rutherford B. Hayes of Ohio.

While Bristow supported Hayes' candidacy, upon Hayes election, the President chose to turn his back on the gentleman from Kentucky, as Hayes considered Bristow a political threat. Meantime, many admirers insisted upon him remaining on the political scene and to seek the office of President in 1880. But Bristow was determined that his political career was at an end. His great love for the law, his desire to spend more time with his family, and his drive to improve his own financial situation led him to the decision to open a law office in 1878 in New York City. Here he became a prominent corporation lawyer, participating in many significant cases, such as the Westinghouse Patent Case, the Bates Refrigerating Case and the Income Tax cases.

Although he disclaimed any interest in politics in these later years, a succession of presidents, both Democratic and Republican, constantly sought his advice. Interestingly enough, his greatest influence period occurred under President Cleveland's Democratic Administration.

Unfortunately his life was cut short. Developing acute appendici-

tis, Bristow died on June 22, 1896. At the funeral there was none of the pomp and ceremony that accompanies the passing of a great man as he had directed that he should be buried in a simple and inexpensive manner.

However, as his body was moved from the Little Brick Church in New York City to its final resting place, a crowd of both great and small paid tribute to a man who, as the editor of the NEW YORK TIMES said: Had been a part of American history and of whom it could be said: he was one of the few men who had really made a great deal of it".

As Bristow's biographer said in the closing paragraph of his book, " his image of honesty and integrity was in marked contrast to the corruption and excesses which followed the Civil War. The real tragedy of his time lay in the fact that sectionalism continued to plague the nation. But if Bristow had had his way, the future would have belonged to youth- to those who propose to live in the stirring present and to be actors in the coming future. This still appears to be the challenge of our age as well as his". THANK YOU.