

REV. HEZEKIAH GILBERT LEIGH

Virginia Leigh Refo

The most famous ancestor in my family was Rev. Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh. He was one of the founders of Randolph-Macon College. He was born Nov. 23, 1795 in Perquimans County, NC, the oldest child of Richard and Charlotte (Spruill) Leigh. He was named for his two grandfathers, Hezekiah Spruill and Gilbert Leigh. I imagine Hezekiah got first billing because he was a more prominent person. Also he was alive at the time, whereas Gilbert was dead. In 1801, when Hezekiah was 6, his father, a carpenter and builder like his father, built the home where they lived, which stands much altered today in Perquimans County on the west side of New Hope Road about ¼ mile south of New Hope Church. Printed sources disagree on Hezekiah's early life. He was probably educated in Edenton, and possibly Murfreesboro, and all sources agree he taught for some time. Some say he enlisted in the War of 1812; some say he studied surveying—I can find no evidence of either.

When he was twenty-two Hezekiah attended a Camp Meeting on the grounds of Nags Head Chapel (now New Hope Church) and was converted to Methodism by Rev. Henry Holmes. Immediately after his conversion he offered his services to the Virginia Methodist Conference (at that time North Carolina was part of the Virginia Conference). He was accepted in February 1818, on trial, and remained active in the Virginia Conference until the creation of the North Carolina Conference in 1836. He rode circuits in Bedford, VA, Wake Co., NC and Henderson, NC. He held pastorates in Norfolk, Petersburg, Gloucester, and Raleigh. He was an Elder in the Meherrin District, James River District, Petersburg District, Raleigh District and twice Agent (read “money-raiser”) for Randolph-Macon College. For the last six years of his life he was unable to hold a position due to poor health. He suffered severely from rheumatism. However, he continued to preach when his health allowed at the college and local churches. Although he dedicated his life to God, he dedicated much of his energies to promoting education, in particular to Methodist sponsored higher education and education for women. In addition to his work to found Randolph-Macon and where he served on the Board of Trustees until his death, he was active in the formation of what was to become Trinity College in North Carolina (later known as Duke University) and the Greensboro Female College.

By description of contemporaries, he was a strikingly handsome and charismatic man. Rev. John E. Edwards describes him as he was in 1836 “He was, I should say 5’10” in height, perhaps six feet.... His face was radiant, and of a very handsome cast and mold; his nose a striking feature; his eyes clear, calm, and full of expression; his head magnificent; his hair rich and lustrous, inclining to ringlets; his complexion ruddy and bright; his whole physique perfect; his voice unsurpassed in melody, intonation and compass.” He was an accomplished, eloquent and powerful speaker. It is said that after one of his sermons in Franklin Co., NC sixty souls were converted. Often when making a point he would pause and give a slight sniff before continuing. This became known as “Uncle Hezzie’s snort”. His intellect was strong, and many contemporaries and peers considered him one of the greatest minds of his age. Dr. Bennett from *Memorials of Methodism in Virginia*: “Perhaps no man ever left a deeper impression on the hearts of

the people among whom he labored. In every city where he was stationed, in every district, in every circuit there are thrilling recollections of his preaching....He was not simply an eloquent preacher, he was a wise, skillful, practical workman in the vineyard.” William A. Smith, third President of Randolph-Macon: “Dr. Leigh had few equals in the pulpit. He filled a large space in public attention, and wielded a wide and undisputed influence among his brethren in the ministry”



Reverend Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh

On January 5, 1830 Rev. Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh married Mary Jane Crump, youngest daughter of Col. Richard Crump of Northampton County, NC. He bought land in Mecklenburg Co., VA close to the site of Randolph- Macon College where they raised their family. They had six children who grew to be adults. Richard C. W. Leigh graduated from Randolph-Macon and was a lawyer in Columbus, MS. He was killed at the Battle of Corinth, MS in 1862. Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh, Jr., after graduating from Randolph-Macon taught there and at a female school in Aberdeen MS before going on to

medical school. He was a doctor for many years in Petersburg, VA, and had four surviving children. Louise Leigh married Judge John B. Sale of Aberdeen, MS, had one daughter and died in 1864. Joseph Edward Leigh graduated from Randolph-Macon in 1857 before his mother moved the rest of family to Columbus, MS. He was a lawyer in Columbus and never married. Mary Alice Leigh married Capt. James W. Craddock in Columbus and had three children. Frank M. Leigh attended University of North Carolina, married Mary Beverly Matthews and was a merchant in Columbus. They had many children, six, I believe.

Rev. Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh died on his farm in Mecklenburg County, VA on September 18, 1853 after a long illness and apparently several strokes. He was buried in the cemetery at Randolph-Macon College in Boydton. I looked but was unable to find the site of his grave in the Boydton Cemetery. In doing research for these articles I learned his remains were moved to Ashland in 1935, and I was able to locate his grave there at Woodland Cemetery. I have looked without success for the site of the farm and the home he built there in Mecklenburg County. It was standing in 1917, but I fear it has either burned or is under water as a result of the Kerr Dam.

After her husband's death Mary Jane Leigh sold the property in Virginia and moved to Columbus, MS in 1860. Rev. Leigh had invested in land there in the 1840's, and Mary Jane had relatives there. She died in Columbus April 14, 1881. The house she bought in Columbus from her niece and nephew stands today and is on the Columbus House Tour. Today it is called "Rosewood Manor". All of the family stayed in Mississippi except Dr. H.G. Leigh, II. He returned to Virginia and married his cousin, Martha Alice Moody. My father was Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh, IV, in a direct line, and had I been a boy I would have been Hezekiah Gilbert Leigh, V!

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