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Fare Thee Well - From the Papers of John Williams Walker

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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Fare Thee Well

From The Papers of John Williams Walker

EDITED BY JACQUELYN PROCTER GRAY

Among the men who stand out in the early formative years of Alabama is John Williams Walker, who accomplished much and earned incredible respect in the short 40 years of his life. In his 1927 book, *The History of Alabama and Her People*, Albert Burton Moore described Walker as "...one of the strongest men, from cultured home and best education possible, exceptional native ability, trained in classics and law, scholarly..."¹

Walker was orphaned by the time he was nine years old. He went to live with his older brother, Memorable Walker, but John became his brother's keeper when Memorable succumbed to tuberculosis while John was still a very young man. John lovingly took care of his brother during his extended illness, and it is believed that he contracted the illness that would plague him and eventually claim his life as well.²

Born in Amelia County, Virginia³, Walker came to Huntsville via Petersburg, Georgia at a time when many other prominent planters and neighbors from Petersburg settled here as well. In his book *Early Settlers of Alabama*, Col. James Edmonds Saunders stated that Petersburg "was literally depopulated."⁴ These early settlers showed an unusual interest in Alabama politics, and were known by those who disapproved of their ambition as the Georgia Faction or Georgia Clique.

Attorney John Walker was the Speaker of the Alabama Territorial House of Representatives in November 1818 when the Territorial Legislature passed a petition for statehood. John was elected president of the convention that met in Huntsville on July 5, 1819 to write the constitution that enabled Alabama to become the twenty-second state of the union on December 14, 1819.

Although John's name was suggested to become Alabama's first governor, he instead went on to become the first U.S. Senator from Alabama until his resignation in 1822.

The following excerpts are from letters sent to Walker and his wife Matilda, daughter of another Petersburg, Georgia transplant, LeRoy Pope. Most of them are from their daughter Mary Jane, but others indicate the political climate and little-known interesting facts about the Walker family. Mary Jane was sent to an exclusive girls' school when she was 10 years old. These letters allow us to eavesdrop on the most intimate details of one of Huntsville's most interesting families. History becomes three-dimen-

sional with the addition of the emotions felt almost two centuries ago. Grammatical errors and misspelled words are retained as written. The collection of letters these excerpts are taken from, are from a gift to the Huntsville Public Library's Heritage Room. Originals are in possession of the State Department of Archives and History.

The first letter is a rambling, angry plea from Alabama's first governor, William Wyatt Bibb, himself a member of the Georgia Faction, to Senator Walker in Washington City:

"Coosada 21 Feby, 1820

Dear Sir:

I have received one letter from you which is the only communication of any kind that reached me from either of our members. My health is very bad. For three weeks I have not left my room and seldom my bed. I now write in bed, and but for a little matter of interest, should be silent. The object of this letter is to communicate to you the fact that the U-S are indebted to me, in the hope that you may obtain the amount for me. I have never received one cent for office rent, Stationary & c, although the Act of Congress appropriates \$350 a year for those objects. I think I commenced my official duties in November 1817 and they were continued to the signing of the Constitution on the 2d of August 1819, during the whole of which time my private pocket has supplied the Territory with an office, furniture and stationary. That the amounts has exceeded that appropriation I have no doubt, but supposing the appropriation as much mine as the salary, I did not think it necessary to keep an account of the expenditures, nor was I apprized of the requirements by the Comptroller until about a year had elapsed. Not only have I furnished the necessaries for my office, but also for the Secretaries, and were I disposed to present accounts, I should be justly entitled to the salary of the Territorial Secretary during the time I had to perform his duties (there being no secretary) which was at least six months, and when too, more business was done, that would have claimed my attention for years afterwards. I was under the necessity of employing Major Noble to assist me, without ever having a cent from the Government.

Last fall Richard Smith being my Attorney I requested him while drawing for my salary to ask for the appropriation also. He informed me that the Comptroller required a detailed account. I then wrote to him, nearly what I have said to you, and added that

unless a draft was sent on that statement, I should never again mention the subject either to him or the Comptroller, and that is the last I have heard of it. I felt indignant as I still do, but I see no reason why I should support the country from my private funds, and I do think I have been abominably treated. The truth is, that other Territorial Governors have been allowed a certain compensation as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, but I have never applied for it, although the "Secretary of War" informed me of the allowance. And I will venture to add, that this government has been more cheaply administered (so far as the US are concerned) and as ? (so far as my private pocket is concerned) than any other.

All I wish you to do, is, to apply to the Comptroller and you may state what I have said. If he refuses still what is due me, let the subject drop, and he and the Government may go to the devil for aught I care. If payment is to be made, please direct Richard Smith to send me a draft on the St. Stephens Bank for the amount, addressed to me at Fort Jackson. I am so unwell that I cannot write more. Yours sincerely, Wm W Bibb"

He further writes: "...I doubt whether you can make sense of what I have written, but I am not disposed to obtain every cent that has been allowed to other Governors, since sheer justice is denied me. Wm W B"

Although the date of the following event was not disclosed, it illustrates the danger of the time. Governor Bibb narrowly escaped death when he and his personal servant, Peter, stopped to eat and rest at Fort Dale. Just an hour later, hostile Creek Indians attacked Fort Dale and killed the family that had just hosted the governor. Governor Bibb sent troops to protect the fort from the Creeks who were exacting revenge for the treaty that ended the Creek War of 1813-1814.⁵

Walker's brother, James Sanders Walker, wrote to him the next day, revealing some hostility between them:

"Coosada 22 Feby 1820

It would seem my dear brother that we were both studious to preserve silence toward one another. Having held out so far I can contain no longer and perceiving by a paragraph in your letter to the Governor that you promised him answers to many letters he may write I take it for granted. I may expect some return to the same kind. Although I do not claim it as a right, Perhaps if you wish to write oftener to his excellency and occasionally to Mr. Hall

both of whose correspondence I have access to I might excuse you for neglect of me. But I fear you do not write enough to keep up your popularity which I should be sorry to see decline when it may stand you in most stead. The Governor's health is very bad and says he would resign now if any other man was President of the Senate than his brother. He therefore proposes to hold on until the next session of the legislature when the General Assembly may direct how his place will be filled. You are doubtless apprised that I came down with him. If I could have effected sales and otherwise arranged business I should have returned about this time to your house. But I fear I shall not get back before you do and perhaps not until summer, when it may suit you to come down with me in the fall and see the improved appearance hereabouts.

I went to Cahaba the latter part of the sales last month with the view of purchasing a couple of fractions in 18.18 lying between my land and the Talapoosa River over against the fork but the Governor reserved them on the morning of the last day of the sale - and I was obliged to be content with two small fractions adjoining the town site of Fort Jackson opposite Peter's Bluff on my Fraction 3....Adieu my dear Brother, J.S. Walker "

James Sanders Walker stayed in Georgia for some time after John came to Alabama, but eventually moved to Alabama as well. He had hoped to marry John's sister-in-law, Maria Pope, but she instead married John's friend from school, Thomas Percy.

On April 13, 1820, Governor Bibb wrote once again to John Walker from Coosada:

"Dear Sir:

Still confined I can barely say that I have received letter of the 18th Ult. I regret that I ever again mentioned the subject of my expenditures for Stationary, office rent & c; and certainly should not have done it but for an accidental conversation with some friends on my sufferings (which at the moment were as great as I could bear) fretted by pain and reflection, I wrote the letter and am sorry for it. It is now ten weeks since I have been out of my bed room; and I have suffered as much pain during that time as ever fell to the

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lot of any man. Within a few days, I have discharged large quantities of blood in passing urine, which appears to come from near the neck of the bladder, where in September last I was considerably bruised. The pain which I had so long suffered in despite of all remedies, is much lessened, and my physicians say I will not recover. What the result will be, I consider uncertain but I have sufficient fortitude to meet any event.

I am desirous to resign, but my brother Thomas who has been with me several weeks and is still here, together with my friends generally have prevailed on me thus far to continue in office, at least until the meeting of the Legislature, if I should live so long. My family are well, as is your brother. Yours truly, Wm W Bibb”

Governor Bibb apparently recovered enough to be out riding on his horse in the summer of 1820. A thunderstorm erupted and frightened the Governor’s horse, throwing him to the ground. Alabama’s first governor was mortally injured. On July 10, 1820, he succumbed at the age of 40. Thomas Bibb served his brother’s unexpired term and became the second Governor of Alabama.⁶

On November 15, 1820, Thomas Percy, who watched over Matilda Walker and the children while John was in Washington City, wrote:

“My dear Walker,

I mean to make this letter very short - of this I give you warning - for why it is late at night and I have some business writing to do; besides I have spoiled 3 quills in the vain effort to make a pen with which I could write...So before I go any farther I will tell you the only thing I have to tell you in this letter. It is that Charles Henry has been scaring us all with a cursed croup. But thank God we have vanquished it and got the little fellow on his legs again. I was at Oakland this evening and left him merry as a grif. Mrs. W[alker] keeps up her spirits admirably as yet. Not the least symptom of depression...My dear Jack if I had something worth telling you I really could not do it with this damned pen. So fare thee well. Tho. G. Percy...a man named Turner cut his throat in Huntsville a few days ago for love of a damsel named Turner likewise and thereupon found himself much relieved.”

On May 17, 1821 Maria Percy wrote to her sister Matilda Walker. She was apparently traveling with Matilda's daughter Mary Jane Walker, to accompany her to a girls' school in Pennsylvania.

“My Dear Sister,

We arrived at Kins about an hour ago, 8 miles beyond Knoxville all very well in very tolerable spirits....Mary Jane and Charley have proved to be fine travellers they both have fine appetites. Charles has fattened perceptibly and has been the best fellow you ever saw...I have but one drawback on my enjoyment and that is the absence of my dear little Walker. O what would I not give to see him I have wished a thousand times we had brought him with us. I know he is much better off but still, I have some very painful thoughts about him. Do write very often and let me know how the dear little fellow bears our absence. Mary Jane and myself have made an arrangement to write from every town, we take it alternate, so that it falls to her lot to write from the next town which will be Abbington. Mary Jane and myself have become very expert riders and walkers; we walked part of the way up the mountains, and rode the remainder, I carried Charley on my lap and rode a man saddle. So you see what a heroine I am getting to be. The accommodations have been very miserable. This is the second house that has nay thing like comfort about it...Your Maria”

On May 29, 1821, Maria Percy wrote to her sister Matilda from Staunton, VA:

“...The country is by far the most beautiful I have ever seen, affording scenery of the most pleasing kind, mountains and green fields...covered with cows that are literally dripping with milk as they walk along. The most delicious butter and milk I ever tasted, fine spring houses at almost every fifty yards.

My letter has had a considerable interruption from a hailstorm, the most remarkable that has ever been seen here, some of the pieces measured six inches in circumference. It will have one good effect which I am not sorry for, cooling the atmosphere. Mary Jane has improved in her appearance more than you can imagine; her face has plumped out and looks quite round. Her cheeks rosy as two apples. Charles has stood the journey better than any of us, he eats bacon, and drinks buttermilk manfully. Poor little Walker, how

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much I do regret leaving him. I think sometimes I would be perfectly willing to give up my trip to see him. Travelling would have been a great service to him in many respects. Its all folly now to repine; I know he is happy where he is, and I shall love the dear little the better when I get home...I have not seen a strawberry since I left home, it is one of the good things I have wished for every often."

On June 20, 1821, ten-year-old Mary Jane Walker wrote to her mother from Philadelphia. Note that in many of Mary Jane's letters, she left the periods off of most sentences.

"...Oh how glad I would be to see little Charles Henry. I suppose he can almost talk by this time. Oh how I should like to hear him say cow again I suppose he rides his stick horse like he use to. I was very much pleased [to see] the museum and the Academy of fine arts. I saw a great many fine paintings at the Academy. I saw the Mammoth at the museum and the mouse under him as father told me I would. Philadelphia is a very hansom city indeed. I have not seen one ugly street. Chestnut street is a very hansom [street]. Uncle Percy has not yet placed me at school he intends to place me with Madam Sigoigne she has gone to Frankfort to stay all the summer....

Miss Sigoigne is very pretty indeed to tell the truth she is the prettiest lady I ever saw I forget Aunt Louisa when I said this but except her she is the prettiest lady I ever saw....From your affectionate Daughter Mary Jane Walker"

Maria Percy wrote to her sister Matilda Walker on July 2, 1821 from Philadelphia:

"...Now of Mary Jane, she is in fine health and spirits, delighted with every thing. The fruit, the fancy stores, and toy shops are perfectly irresistable to her. We placed her last Monday with Madame Sigoigne...I made some little additions to her wardrobe such as frocks, frills, & c...in the academy [of fine arts] we saw some most beautiful paintings, one very large, by Alston, the dead man in the tomb of prophet, a splended thing. Also Mr. Wests celebrated piece of Christ healing the sick a very imposing picture. The other day we went on board the 74. We were very politely received by the officer's and conducted through every part of the vessel. It is fitted up in a very superb manner, elegant damask sofas, brussels carpets, sideboards, and bookcases, all arranged in

the neatest order. My father [LeRoy Pope] was with us, and filled with admiration of the great vessel.

Philadelphia I think not so gay a city as Baltimore the ladies are much more dressy, and fashionable, and society (it is said) more accessible to strangers....This is not the season for parties, so I have not seen much display in that line all the fine plate and glass ware seems to be shut up, with their drawing room's for winter....New York seems to be the centre of attraction for all southern people, they give it the decided preference...This little village [Bristol] is just opposite to Burlington the residence of Governor Bloomfield. Mrs. Brown talks of making it her head quarters this summer. The said lady is very talkative, very showy, and all that - a little too fond of talking of the Diplomats, people that I don't know or care anything about. Mr. Percy went over early this morning to present his letter to Governor Bloomfield but found them absent on a visit to New York.

I must tell you something of the fashions, though they are so various that it is impossible to say what is most fashionable. Long waist with broad belts are altogether worn. Worked trimmings are still very much used. The latest fashion are tucks, with strips of spotted muslin between reaching nearly to the waist. The tucks are made about three quarters of an inch wide and the strips of muslin the same width that sleeves trimmed in the same manner nearly tight to the arm. The body's are made narrow on the shoulders, a large point in front, sometimes two, one above and below. The backs nearly plain, some cut surplice fashion to correspond with the front, but they are generally worn plain. Plaid ribbons are all the rage the belts with ribbon and large beaus in the backs. Handkerchiefs made of the spotted muslin, worn inside the dress with the quilled ruff. The long india worked scarf very much used. I have purchased a very handsome one and a very neat leghorn hat. I find all the trimmings, and small articles nearly, or quite as high as they are in Huntsville....I was very much shocked to hear of poor aunt Nancy's death, and regretted it most deeply. She had been so long a victim of disease that death was robbed of half its terrors. I hope my mother did not suffer seriously from the fatigue and distress she must have felt...For heaven sake don't exhibit these miserable sketches, they have been made in great haste, just to

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give you some idea of the fashion. Recollect that the muslin is
attached to the skirt first, and the tucks made and sewed on... Maria
Percy”

On July 30, 1821, homesick Mary Jane writes to her mother:

“My dear Mamma,

...Oh how I long for the day when I shall embrace you. Oh
how I long too kiss all my dear little Brothers and see my dear
home again....You must kiss all my dear little Brothers for me a
thousand times and tell them they must work my little garden for
me. Tell Percy he must write to me and tell him he must write to
me by next mail and to except twenty kisses from me give my love
to all my relations....your affectionate Daughter Mary Jane Walker
P.S. Tell the servants that I have not forgotten them.”

Dr. Samuel Brown, who was married to Thomas Percy’s sister until her
unfortunate death in childbirth, wrote to Walker from Saratoga, on
August 1, 1821:

“Dear Walker:

If they say we were killed or had a bone broken or a limb dis-
located by oversetting the state as we came from Albany to this
place I say they lie damnably. We were only bruised and skinned
in a few places and are now all getting well. Percy sustained the
worst injury having his left arm severely bruised by attempting to
make a Pillow of it to save his brains from being dashed out against
a large stone. But he did save his Brains and will not loose his arm
nor a joint of it although to save these I thought it proper to take 50
or 60 ounces of Blood from him at five Bleedings - this happened
on Saturday and now which is Wednesday we are all well enough
to read novel and gossip through the taverns except Percy who
reads and receives talkers in his room because his arm is still too
big for his dandy coat which he hopes to put on the day after to-
morrow. Charley was the only person who escaped - we are all as
gay as larks. Colo Pope, Mr. Saul and Daughter and servant made
our party, nine which lays us in debt to Heaven for that many thanks-
givings which I hope you will assist us to offer up...Love to you all
- S Brown”

Brown's reference to Percy may have been a number of gentlemen including his brother-in-law Thomas Percy, nephew Percy Walker, or any of the many Percys of the next generation. The Charley referred to in his letter may have been Charles Brown Percy, his nephew. Because they named their children for each other, as well as having other names in common, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain who they refer to.

On August 7, 1821, Mary Jane wrote about her brother. Records cannot confirm which child this was, perhaps John T. Walker.

“Dear Papa,

I was very much delighted to receive a letter from you last night saying that I had a new little Brother. You cannot think how much surprised and delighted I was I think from our description of him he must be Beautiful. You describe as being as plump as a Partridge with deep blue eyes and a fine complecction and black hair oh how I should like to see the dear little fellow and love him with kisses.... Your affectionate Daughter, Mary Jane Walker”

In September 1821, Mary Jane wrote:

“My dear Mama, ...I have not received any letters from you or papa for a long time; Uncle received one from papa a few days ago in which he said you were all very well I am sure you cannot complain of my not writing for I write every Saturday....”

Maria (Pope) Percy wrote to her brother-in-law John Walker from Baltimore on September 4, 1821:

“My dear Brother

I have put off writing until the eleventh hour...At all events, I have no notion of being laughed at by you when I get home. I have always been of the opinion that a lady has a right to expect the first letter. Now if you had been so civil as to have written to me, I can't tell how many kind things you might have had from me. Letter writing you know, I never have been famous for, and I fear it is an incurable fault. I have not thought the less frequently of you, nor is it possible for me to express the anxiety I feel to see you all. Crazy, I certainly shall be, if I am not at home soon....

On our return trip to Philadelphia I found Mary Jane in good health, but her spirits a little depressed, she was full of the inten-

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tion of going home with us, her Uncle talked her out of it; and cheered with the prospect of seeing you in the winter, she parted from us in very tolerable spirits....Nancy took it suddenly into her head to leave me, which obliged us to look about for another nurse. I succeeded in getting one, not altogether to my satisfaction. My northern trip has convinced me of one thing, that we in a slave country, are better off than they are here, with all their freedom. Upon the whole, Alabama has gained in my estimation very much, by comparison....But I am tired to death with travelling, and long to enjoy the pleasures of home again. My father we left in New York, very impatient to get home. I met with Archy Stokes there he looks younger than he did fifteen years ago. I made a great many enquiries about our old friends in Georgia. He said he would like to see Matilda very much. I remarked that she was somewhat changed since he saw her, being now the mother of six children. Poor fellow, it was more than he could boast of.

You may tell sister I have executed her commission with regard to the scarf Mr. H and myself were two days engaged looking for one of the first quality, we purchased it first, having the concurrence of Mrs. Blight's good taste. Perhaps she will not be quite satisfied with the price (being only 29 Dols) not having cost as much as you intended it should. She must console herself with the fact, that they rarely exceed 30 dols. Mr. Percy is now very much engaged making arrangements to leave the city tomorrow....The yellow fever is prevailing in some parts of the city, and though there is no alarm in this part of it, still I should like to be clear of the city as soon as possible. Charles health has been exceedingly delicate all the summer, travelling I hope will be of service to him...God bless you my dear brother. Maria Percy”

Mary Jane Walker wrote to her father from Frankford on September 15, 1821:

“...I will endeavor, my dear father, to apply myself to all my studies and to make myself beloved by everybody, for I know it will contribute to your happiness. I am glad to hear that the children amuse themselves, kiss them all for me...”

Mary Jane sent a letter to her brother at the family plantation known as Oakland (Meridianville, Alabama) on September 29, 1821:

“My dear Brother,

I was very glad to hear by Pap’s letter which I received last Monday that you intended to rite to me, being the eldest I will give you the example I hope you will soon follow it. You cannot think, my dear Brother, how much pleasure it will give me, to have a letter from you. Tell me all about Oakland and how you past your time and if the Children ever talk about Mary Jane as for me I often talk of them and think of them still oftener it will give me a great deal of pleasure to hear about their little amusement. Tell Pope [LeRoy Pope Walker] he must work my garden as I left it under his care. You must all kiss little William for me. Tell Father I am very much obliged to him for his kind letter which I will answer next Saturday....I remain your most affectionate Sister”

On November 20, 1821, Silas Dinsmore wrote to John Walker in Washington City, presenting himself for the new job opportunity caused by the death of surveyor Thomas Freeman. Freeman was buried in the family plot of his good friend, Sheriff Stephen Neal. His grave was unmarked for 178 years, ironically near the Huntsville Meridian in Maple Hill Cemetery.

“...The Huntsville paper by yesterday’s mail announced to us the death of our mutual friend Major Freeman, Surveyor of the US lands South of the State of Tennessee. I have for two years past been engaged, under him, as Principal deputy in the land districts east of the Island of New Orleans, I have familiarized myself to the discharge of the duties of the office, the business suits my age, habits and inclination, and as the public service requires that a surveyor should be immediately appointed to take charge of the office at Washington, I beg leave through you, and others whom I presume to call friends, to offer to the President of the United States my services; your good offices to promote my views, are respectfully solicited and will be gratefully remembered....

Take care of your delicate health in that cold and variable climate. Your services will be wanted nearer home, two years hence....”

J.S. Walker wrote to his brother from Montgomery on November 23, 1821:

“...I recd at Tuskaloosa your letter written on the 24th of Oct just before which I wrote you...some account of the duel that it was expected had taken place between George McDuffey and Richard

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H. Wilder. I now learn that Col. William Cumming was the author of Baldwin and I perceive that nothing was done about a month ago when Baldwin thinks it high time that Mr. McD should come forward - or else submit it to be considered a ? fellow. I am also informed that the allusion by Baldwin was to Simkins and not McDuffey - but that a young man by the name of Mr. Walker Carnes, a son of Judge Carnes, has avowed himself to be the author of the 'voice of Georgia' or 'spirit of Georgia.'....

...The Steam Ship Robt Fulton is expected at Mobile shortly from the North. I suppose though she will have to stop at the Point. It is said that Tuskaloosa and Coosawda are the only places spoken of at Cahawba for the permanent seat of Government. Very much will depend upon where they establish the University which I should think ought to be at Wilsons Hill or in the lower end of Jones' Valley. Appropos, my Wig, as soon as possible, 'Poor Tom, a Cold.' Adieu my dear Brother, health attend you and yours. J.S. Walker"

An unidentified friend wrote to John Walker on December 20, 1821. We could surmise from the first statement that it was written by Dr. Samuel Brown, who kept a watchful eye over Pope and Walker while they were at a boarding school in Lexington. We could also guess that he may be expressing sympathy over the death of John and Matilda Walker's son, Charles Henry. Although Charles is not listed among John's children in "The History of Alabama and Her People" by Albert Burton Moore, there is a marker at Maple Hill Cemetery showing that two-year-old Charles Henry, son of John and Matilda Walker died October 1822. There is a discrepancy over the date of the child's death. Either the date on the marker at Maple Hill is wrong, or there was a typographical error when the handwritten letters were much later typewritten.

"My dear friend,

I feel that it is more necessary than ever that I should inform you frequently of the welfare of those dear boys whom you have still left with me and for the first time in my life the thought of writing to you is a source of distress. Anxiety on your account is the constant everyday feeling of my life but when I am to write to you my heart bleeds afresh. What can I say to you that will give you ease or diminish your grief. Alas nothing. The blow you have felt is too dreadful for me to essay anything like consolation. Under such calamities, we can only bow our heads to the Providence which crushes us and hope for mercy....

...Of Matilda I cannot think without the keenest anguish. I often think of writing to her, but when I attempt it the pen drops from my hand. I know not what to say. Could I bare my heart and show her the deep seated anguish which wrings it for her sake I would do it - but words cannot do this - they are vain and feeble and almost I would say impertinent..."

Two-year-old Charles Henry was in the care of Maria and Thomas Percy while Matilda was in Washington City with her husband John. Charles Henry came down with a cold and was prescribed an emetic from Dr. Fearn. His coughing grew worse and he had difficulty breathing, so he was given calomel and castor oil. Two days later, the Percys called Dr. Erskine who applied blisters to the child's chest, ankles, neck, and head. After an illness of six days, he died. Fearing that Matilda would have a breakdown upon learning the news, the letter informing them of their son's death was withheld for two months by a family friend in Washington.⁷

From Philadelphia, Mary Jane wrote to her mother on December 22, 1821:

"...I have not yet had the pleasure of receiving a letter from you and I assure you that I am very anxious to hear from you, and Papa, and hope soon to have that happiness as Christmas is approaching. Madam Sigoigne gives us a weeks Holiday and a Party for our New Years gift and we expect to enjoy ourselves a great deal, but I am sure I would have a great deal more pleasure if you were here today. Mrs. Stocker who lives next door intends giving a party to her niggler Niece and Susan and Myself are invited we are all going to spend the evening at Mrs. Meades next Tuesday....Kiss William a great many times for me as a Christmas Gift give my love to Papa and tell him I hope to get a letter from him and believe me for ever my dear Mother your Affectionate Daughter."

Mary Jane wrote to her father on January 5, 1822:

"...I received your kind letter Monday with ten dollars. It was more than I expected and I thank you very much, it gave me a great deal of pleasure, as I was able with that to make little Presents to my Friends and to the Servants. I spent New Years Day very happily and dined with Mrs. Blight. She sends her compliments to you and Mama. Madam Sigoigne gave us a very pleasant Party Saturday we danced until twelve o'clock. I received Mama's letter

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in which she says she was very near returning to this Place. I want to see little William very much indeed....”

On January 14, 1822, Alexander Pope (probably Matilda and Maria’s brother) wrote from Cahaba:

“Dear Jack, I labored like a galley slave from 20 Aug to 30 Sept in the heat and sweat of crowds of men frightened almost to death with the idea of taking the yellow fever - with their pockets full of onions garlic and other strong scented things much to the prejudice of my olfactory organs while taking in their Declarations and I have been diligently employed ever since and have but just now gotten the first copy of my Abstract of Relinquishments made out which will employ me fully a week or ten days to add up the numerous columns of - I have had two clerks all the while at the abstract for further credits and they are not more than 2/3 done. As you have been such a Champion for the Debtor’s for Pub Lands I have full faith in your best exertions to compensate those who have so much labor to perform for the accomodation of those very debtors. And I shall rely soly on you as I have no acquaintance with Mr. Moore besides having no wish to have any - We understand that Matilda was to have gone on with you and we see by the papers that you are at your post we are thus assured you are both well or at least we hope so. Yrs Truly Alexr Pope”

On January 18, 1822, Mary Jane wrote from Philadelphia to her father:

“...It is three weeks since I have had the pleasure of having a letter from you although I have written every Saturday as you requested. Your Silence makes me very uneasy as I am afraid Mama is sick....I suppose little William is very much grown do give him a kiss for me I long for the month of April that I may embrace him myself....Adieu dear Papa”

On January 25, 1822, she wrote again to her father:

“...Mama wishes to know if I have commenced music tell her that I have not, that Mrs. Sigoigne not knowing if I shall remain with her next summer thinks that it is not worthwhile for me to begin if I go with you in the Spring, for before I could get another teacher, I would forget all I know, and it would only be throwing away money. We have had a most dreadful fire, the Orphans Asylum was burnt last Wednesday there are 23 children missing, poor

little things, I suppose they had died with the cold...your Affectionate Daughter Mary Jane”

On February 16, 1822, Mary Jane wrote to her mother:

“...I received yesterday evening papa’s letter in which he mentions that he will take me away in the Spring. Although I shall feel very happy to be with my Family still I shall be very sorry to leave Mrs. Sigoigne and the Family. I went to Mrs. Banekers last Saturday where I danced and amused myself a great deal. With what joy will I tell you my dear Mamma that I have just gained the prize. I am so delighted that I hardly know what I am writing. Anne Eyre also gained one but mine was the first. We have had a great deal of snow so that every moment we hear slays. Tell father that I will not begin music because Mrs. Sigoigne does not think it worth while....”

She wrote to her father on February 22, 1822:

“...Today being Washington’s birthday we all have holiday and I cannot employ it better than writing to you before I go out....My writing Master gave me a premium the other day and I am trying to get another for good behavior. I went a slaying the other day with Miss Adele and I can assure you I like it very much I went to little Miss Brugiere’s Ball last Monday where I danced the whole evening and amused myself a great deal....Mr. Ware arrived last Sunday he told me you were all very well and he did not think you would be here before May, he says William has grown very much and is a very fine little Boy....”

Addin Lewis, the mayor of City of Mobile, wrote to John Walker in Washington City on March 7, 1822:

“Sir,

...On the Night of the 5th inst. This city was set on fire by incendiaries in three different places, fortunately, however, but one took effect, the other fires kindled went out without doing damage. The property consumed was chiefly Insured, and the loss to our citizens is not very considerable. By the position in which the fires were kindled it is evident that the intention of the villains was to destroy the greatest part of the City. We have three Persons in Prison on suspicion of having been concerned in the hellish Deed....”

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On March 23, 1822, Mary Jane wrote to her father from Philadelphia:

“...I would be very glad if you would write to me in French as that would encourage me a great deal more. You asked me in your letter what was the French for William, it is Guillaume, but they generally say William as it is much the prettiest and I thought as he is so pretty and so good I would call him by the prettiest name...Mrs. Blight set out the day before yesterday for Washington. I did not write to her as I have suffered a great deal with a toothache. I went to the dentist and had two teeth taken out and two Plugged and I can assure you that I did not scream at all and the Dentist says that I have a great deal of courage...”

On March 30, she again wrote:

“...I received a letter last week from Percy, which pleased me very much, he tells me he has been very sick and was bled five times, but that he has now quite recovered...General LeFebore called to see Mrs. Sigoigne last evening. He asked for me and kissed me twice for you and told me to thank you for your kind attention to him while he was in Washington....I forgot to tell you that I went to see an Elephant the other day although I had seen one before. this one being much larger I was a little frightened at first I saw him uncork a Bottle of Wine and drink the Liquor without any Difficulty and eat cakes out of the children’s hands.”

Mrs. O. Blight wrote this interesting letter to Matilda Walker from Grove Hill, Bolecourt County, Virginia on April 19, 1822:

“...In passing thro, this ancient Dominion of our rising Empire, I could not with-stand the temptation to peep at some of my old friends....I called to see Mr. J. W. Eppes (Mr. Jefferson’s son in law) who I met a most cordial reception from...he lives in Buckingham about 30 miles from Carterville, where I crossed the James river....the refined hospitality of virginians make up for every deficiency in their roads - for I never met with such facinating manners - and such charming reception before - its magical to the warm heart of a traveller - and no wonder that Europeans call these gentry the nobility of America....I hope you are pleased at Mrs. Benson’s - with her young Gentlemen &c Mary Jane is quite at home there, dear little warm hearted sprite she is - how I should like to see her flying about like a Bird....”

Matilda Walker wrote to her husband John from Philadelphia on May 5, 1822:

“...I am sure I never walked half as much in my life and I find it has been very beneficial to me, it has increased my appetite and I am much stronger than usual, and the exercise I take during the day makes me glad enough to go to bed early where I sleep soundly without intermission. My nerves are not near as irritable as they were when in Washington, which I attribute entirely to the exercise I have taken here....I visited the museum a few evenings ago with Mr. Ware; I very soon grew tired. I can't say it is a very interesting place to me. I have also seen West's celebrated painting and was sorry I was not amateur enough to admire it very much. I have postponed visiting the remainder of curiosities of this city until your arrival...I hope nothing will retard your movements immediately after the rise of Congress...Little William improves hourly, he is more gay than ever...I bid you adieu my dearest husband, I hope a few days will bring you to my arms....”

William is mentioned in many of the family letters. According to “The Dictionary of Alabama Biography” by Thomas McAdory Owen, he was named William Memorable Walker. He fought in the war with Mexico as first lieutenant of 3rd US Dragoons and during the Civil War, as Captain of 1st Regiment Artillery at Ft. Morgan at Mobile Bay. He died in 1864, whether as a result of the war is not known.

Sam Brown wrote to John Walker from Frankford July 25, 1822:

“...We have all been terribly vexed by your silence, for since you left Baltimore we have been in perfect ignorance of your movements and of your health & that of your family of which so many of us are interested. We did indeed think that a Buletin of health would have been sent back, at least once a week that we might be enabled officially to satisfy your numerous friends both male & female who find no subject which seems to them so likely to please me as Mr & Mrs. Walker. Mary Jane has once or twice looked somewhat dejected at your silence but I have removed her fears by exciting her feelings by some ? which I employed to characterize your indolence & antipathy to writing. She now seems convinced that you are not one of those who write from every Post town & blacken a sheet as often as you wash your face. No I have all the honor of this charming punctuality & it is to maintain this high

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standing ? Literary men that I now write to you; for truly I have spent six weeks here in great solitude....We have made no arrangements for our return to the west. As Milton says I am 'made of sphere metal' & look for a movement to the west as regularly as the seasons return - And as long as you are in Congress you will be governed by the combined influence of the centrifugal & centripatal forces...."

A distressed Mary Jane wrote on August 10, 1822 to her mother:

"...Another week has passed, and no letters from you. What is the reason of your silence? to what must I attribute it? I am very much afraid that some of the family is sick. If nothing has happened to you on the road, you must certainly be at Alabama, and as it is now two months since your departure, you must think how anxious I am to hear from you and my dear little Brothers...."

She wrote to her brothers on August 24, 1822:

"...As I have written to Percy it is now my turn to write to my dear little Pope and John James to tell you how much I love you and how much I think of you...I shall expect to find my garden very flourishing by the time I get home. The bell has just rung for prayers and I must bid you goodnight...."

The Pope that she refers to here is LeRoy Pope Walker, first Secretary of War for the Confederate States of America. In this role, he ordered the first shot fired at Ft. Sumter which started the war. He was 5 years old at the time Mary Jane wrote this letter. LeRoy Pope Walker died at the age of 67 and is buried at Maple Hill Cemetery in Huntsville.

She wrote from Philadelphia to her mother on September 25, 1822:

"...Tell Percy that I am very glad to hear that he is going to learn Latin and that I hope he will make great progress in it...You can see from the date of this letter that we are now in Town....We have had a Fortnight's holiday....I have spent the vacation very pleasantly I went to the Circus the other night with Dr. Brown where I was very much amused after the horsemanship was over they represented a pantomime called La Perouse or the desolate Island. I had my teeth cleaned the other day and I intend to try to keep them so...."

On October 20, 1822, she wrote again to her mother:

“...I went to see a Lioness her Whelps and a Sea Serpent, that was 32 feet long when it was taken, but it is now only 26 on account of its having shrunk so much, it was taken in the Delaware, not far from New York, and it has neither heart, Bones or Brains, but a very large liver, and I assure you that it is quite a curiosity....”

H. Hitchcock wrote to John Walker from Cahaba on December 1, 1822:

“...Your brother James S., left this [place] for Coosada, on thursday last, we had the pleasure of his company for the 10 days preceding - He expected you would write him at this place & on his departure authorised me to receive & open your letter - This I have done & by one recd. last evening I learn that you have resigned you seat in the senate of the U.S. I regret extremely that your ill health has driven you to this measure, The loss of your public services will be severely felt, I regret it much on this account, But I regret your resignation more from the cause which has produced it, you have done right in resigning, and I hope & trust, my dear Sir, that the cause will be soon, if not entirely, yet greatly removed, - Your friends here feel the greatest anxiety for your recovery and among the number I hope [you] will not consider me as luke warm or indifferent....The Legislature has as yet done nothing of a general nature - Messrs McKinley, Bibb, Clay Fram & Moore are spoken of as your successor. One of the 2 first named will probably succeed; - Mr. Crawford I think will succeed Col. King. these are my predictions only, for it is impossible to calculate with certainty....”

William Kelly filled John Walker's unexpired term. On February 8, 1823, Mary Jane wrote to her father:

“...I am glad to hear that you are pleased with my writing without lines, I shall continue to do so....I shall also follow your advice concerning the structure of my T's and I's and try to avoid making them so very similar and the dating of my letters also. I shall in future put the day before the month, the month before the year, the number of the house before the Street the Street before the City and the City before the State. I am very sorry to hear that you think you will not come on in the Spring, but I hope you will think more favorably by and by and that your health will permit you to come and embrace me who longs to see you....”

On February 21, she again wrote to her father:

“...As almost all the southern mails have failed within these two or three weeks on account of the badness of the roads, I have been deprived of the pleasure of receiving your letters for which I am very sorry. I am not uneasy as scarcely any of the young ladies have had letters for near two weeks and I know that it is owing to the roads and waters....Madame Sigoigne wishes to know what you think of Joyce’s *Dialogues on Pneumatics Hydrobates, the Pressure of Fluids, Mechanical Machines &c, &c* as she is not acquainted with the book, but she thinks that is rather too difficult for us to understand, now, and that it is a book calculated more for boys than girls and that they will not be of much use to us; she therefore wishes to know your opinion concerning them....”

L. Newby, a childhood friend of John Williams Walker, lived in Fayetteville, North Carolina. In sorrow, he wrote to Matilda Walker on April 29, 1823 after learning of Walker’s death:

“...Through the newspapers yesterday, I recd. the distressing intelligence of the death of my friend, your dear and lamented husband, and though personally unknown to you, [I] take the liberty of offering you my most sincere condolence on this mournful occasion. Surrounded as you are, by your numerous relatives and friends, you have no need of the sympathies of a distant stranger - but, however numerous may be the friends who mingle their tears with yours, believe me Madam, there are none who more sincerely lament this severe visitation of the Almighty - none who more sincerely sympathize with you and your dear little ones, in the dispensation of His will, than him who addresses you. Your dear and lamented Walker, was the companion of my boyish days....Possessing talents of the first order, he rose to a level with the first men of our Country, at an age when most statesmen have scarce pass’d the threshold of public life. His rapid and brilliant course may be fitly compar’d to the Meteor - its brevity renders the resemblance but too great!...I have just been reading one of his letters dated ‘Twickenham 25 Dec. 1811’....In this letter, he acquaints me with the consummation of his happiness, near two years before, in his union with you, and of the birth of a daughter, Mary Jane, whom he describes with all the freedom of a friend, and all the fondness of a father, as ‘the most interesting child’ he had ever seen - ‘fascinating, intelligent and beautiful’ - and then adds - ‘perhaps you will smile after this, to be told that she is like me’....I beg

to be remember'd to your dear little ones, most affectionately - tell them that he who writes this, loved their dear father, and cannot but love them - and I pray that He, 'who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb,' may not let you 'sorrow as those who have no hope' - but that He grant you a patient resignation to this most severe stroke of His Providence...."

John Williams Walker's health was never robust after his brother's death from tuberculosis. In fact, he had had several hemorrhages and had already resigned his position due to his illness. His headstone at Maple Hill Cemetery records that he died on March 23, 1823 at the age of 40. On December 26, 1823, Walker County was named in his honor.

Evidently, Mary Jane came home as a result of her father's death. Her next letter is dated January 30, 1824, ten months after Walker's death. The remaining letters were written exclusively to her mother from Philadelphia:

"...I intend to read as many of the Waverly Novels as I can procure. I must acknowledge however that I think it will be quite a difficult matter to get any; as I cant bear to ask my northern acquaintances to lend me a novel, as they think it almost a crime to give a young girl a novel to read! But what astonishes me is that at the same time they will give their Children, any book which goes under the simple name of a Tale though it be filled with love and romance..."

On February 8, 1824, Mary Jane, who began calling herself Maria, wrote:

"...Mrs. Sigoigne says that I am a perfect french girl, so you must not be surprised to find me very volatile when I come to the backwoods I say this by way of warning, as I expect all the people will stare. I am glad to hear you are in Huntsville....In short I wish to see the greater part of your letters dated Huntsville, this my dear Madam you must do, or you will incur my short bitter displeasure...It is the greatest torment for me to sit up all day on a chair without talking, without laughing, and as straight as an arrow. I pity those poor Quakers from the bottom of my heart. What a sisible figure they cut with their broad brim hat and long skirted coats! I think if we could establish a half dozen of them in our Corn Fields in the Backwoods, they would be excellent scare Crows. But I must not be satirical and especially on such grave and harmless people. I can say one thing however in their behalf, that is, they are the neat-est people I have seen...."

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On March 13, she wrote again:

“...Now I must tell you what I dreamt the other night, though there is nothing more foolish than telling dreams. I thought the Servant came running up stairs to tell me that Uncle and aunt Pope were come. I was so overjoyed, I could scarcely go down to the Parlour. They both thought me very much grown, and after the usual questions, they gave me a letter together with a paquet from you. After having read your most interesting letter, I proceeded to open the wonderful bundle, but just as I was examining its contents the bell rang for us to get up, I woke thinking I held the bundle but lo! when I looked I found it had fled...”

On March 20, 1824, she wrote to her mother:

“...I was very much surprised to hear of the marriage of Mr. McHenley. He seemed so devoted to his first wife, that I scarcely thought he would replace her so soon, and by a woman much inferior in character, to tell the truth men are curious animals, as changeable as the wind. We women though so much abused, are according to my way of thinking (and to every body else that has common sense) far superior in every thing: their powers of invention are certainly much greater. The men would be mere barbarians if they had not the fair sex to soften their manners and excite their sensibility....”

On March 27, 1824, she sounded rather angry at her mother as she wrote:

“...To tell the truth I did not expect to hear from you this week, as I hear you are pretty lazy about writing affairs and a letter once every other week is as much as you choose (not can) to afford....Master Alexander Pope, shall not escape my vengeance, yes vengeance, as he must know that I am most implacable in my resentments. It has been now three months since I condescended to write to him....I have no news to tell you even the news papers are as dull as they can be the fact is they only talk of the election of the President. I never take up a Gazette without seeing the name of Andrew Jackson in full. You must know that I amuse myself with inventing fables about my geneology....the other night one of the girls was talking about one of her uncles in England and from that circumstance I took it...into my head to tell them that I had an Uncle living in Dorsetshire, and that he had a large family of Chil-

dren their names are Horatio Clement, Charles, Henry, Margaret, Eloise Caroline and Emily. I told them that my Uncle had been brought up in France and had married a french lady of the name of Eloise De Souvit Louis; that after his marriage he had travelled all over Europe and being rather of an ecentric disposition he had named each of his children after the persons he had met in the different countries. Thus Clement was named after a Mr. Harris a gentleman who took great care of my Uncle when an accident happened to him in visiting the mines in Sweden. I gave the name of the green Mansion to my Uncle's place, and to make them believe in the veracity of my recital I told them that I would ask you to be so good as to send me the manuscript of the Green Mansion that we have at home....”

On April 10, 1824, just over a year after her father's death, Mary Jane/Maria wrote:

“...I am my dear Mamma...without exception the gayest and wildest girl in school....I suppose will be no excellent recommendation for me in the backwoods, however I hope that after I have resided there a short time I will reconcile you savages to my french character. My ? is filled with nonsense to day, to tell the truth I can not tell the time when Maria or Mary Jane Walker is not in high spirits or not up for some fun. Some of the still silent northern girls look with astonishment on my southern buoyancy of spirits and my wildness while I stand laughing at their astonishment....Miss Adele intends to make me quit mourning in a week or two as black is so excessively warm in Summer....Tell Lucy, I am very much pleased to hear she is so good a seamstress and that I hope she will be an excellent waiting maid by the time I come home. Remembrance to the servants....”

On September 11, 1824, she wrote to her mother again:

“...I am enchanted with the prospect of a jaunt to Nashville....My pleasure however is very much damped at the idea of leaving dear Mrs. Sigoigne and Miss Adele who have taken Maternal care of me. I have been treated during more than three years as one of the family, and shall always entertain the most lively gratitude towards them....If you do not find me improved it will not be owing to them, as they have done every thing in their power to correct my faults and render me as I ought to be. After this you would not be astonished if I am a partisan of the French, and I shall always defend them against malice....I think the English degrade themselves

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very much by their envy of that nation, nay it certainly is and nothing else I much prefer the openness and urbanity of the french character to the haughty reserve of the english, a reserve which excites my contempt more than my respect....There is nothing I detest more than a would be great man or woman I am always tempted to show my contempt...and certainly would do so if I were not restrained by good breeding. I am very often obliged to fight out the cause of the french....You must not think by this that I prefer the French to the Americans; I am not quite so mean as thatI love my own Countrymen too truly to abandon them for foreigners....LaFayette will be here on monday week, preparations are making to receive him very handsomely, the City is to be illuminated from 6 or seven Oclock in the evening until eleven at night, of which I am very glad. Everything is LaFayette.....A ball is to be given to him in the Theatre. A very splendend one it is to be I suppose. I wonder if he will honour us with a visit to the South....”

On October 16, 1824, she wrote:

“...Two weeks have elapsed since I have heard from you My dear Mamma, which circumstance does not put me in the best humour in the World. I begin to think now that Southern People (myself an exception) are pretty lazy about writing, at least all my Relations. Uncle Percy has never yet acknowledged the receipt of my last letter which I think is rather ungallant on his part; I suppose his present excuse is that I am coming home very soon and therefore it is not necessary....Percy no doubt is much taller than I am, as they say. I am a dwarf for my age, which does not sound very harmoniously to my ear I do not despair however as all the family are very tall....the girls were talking about the Southern people and one of the little Girls spoke rather ungrammatically, and as that always puts me in the Fidgetts I put the pen in my mouth and by that means made such a pretty Salmagundi of my paper. Every day one of the little Girls receives a sermon from me for speaking ungrammatically....”

On October 22, 1824, she wrote to her mother:

“...I expect to set out in a week ? the ? Road and shall be with you (if nothing happens) the latter part of November I shall pass my birth day with you my fourteenth birth day. Tell Grand Mamma she must give me a party on that day This is in jesting, it must therefore be taken as such....”

Apparently, she did not leave as soon as she expected. She wrote again on December 17, 1824 from Philadelphia:

“...I am glad that you are pleased with my letters, and I shall try to improve more and more, as there is nothing more flattering to the heart than the praise of a parent; especially from one so affectionate as mine....So Masters Percy, and John James are going, or rather are gone to the Academy in Huntsville. I suppose it is a good school and I hope the boys will make much progress. I wrote to John James and Pope last Week, but sermonised them so much that I doubt much whether they had patience to finish it....I expect they think that I dont follow all the good advice I gave them; which to be sure is not far from the truth. I really think Master Johnty [John T.] is quite a Gentleman to read Ivanhoe, Walter Scott’s finest Novel....You can’t imagine how much I want to see Richard; it seems to me I should devour him with kisses. Who does he look like?”

Richard Wilde Walker was born February 16, 1823, just over a month before his father, John Williams Walker died. Richard Walker died in 1874. Mary Jane’s brother Percy Walker was born two years after Mary Jane and represented Mobile County in the State legislature. He died in 1880. Brothers William Memorable Walker, LeRoy Pope Walker, and baby Charles Henry Walker were mentioned earlier in this story. No information has been found on brother John T. Walker.

This is the last letter Mary Jane wrote to her mother from Philadelphia, dated December 20, 1824:

“My dear Mamma,

I have only time to tell you that I depart on Monday, at 6 Oclock contrary to my expectations. I was only apprized of it yesterday, and had not therefore made any preparations. Mr. Jackson had promised to let me know ten days before hand, but he seems to have forgotten. I shall not be able to procure as many things as I wished. I do not know yet whether I can bring the Children any thing so they must not expect much. I shall be dressed. Adieu Adieu Love to all”

John Williams Walker’s estate was not settled until 1831. Although he appeared to have much wealth, what was left did not cover the debts. Richard Holding bought the estate after a judge ordered it sold and Thomas Percy paid off the debt that was not covered by the sale.⁸

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Mary Jane Walker, only daughter of John and Matilda, married Richard Lee Fearn, a physician from Mobile. The "Dictionary of Alabama Biography" names their son, who was also an accomplished politician, John Williams Walker Fearn. Mary Jane made a lasting loving tribute to the father she adored.

ENDNOTES

¹Albert Burton Moore, *The History of Alabama and Her People*, 1927.

²Hugh C. Bailey, *John Williams Walker, A Study in the Political, Social, and Cultured Life of the Old Southwest*, (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1964).

³Thomas McAdory Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography, Volume IV*, (Spartanburg, South Carolina: The Reprint Company, 1978).

⁴Col. James Edmonds Saunders *Early Settlers of Alabama*, originally published by L. Graham & Son, Ltd., 1899. (Republished in Tuscaloosa, Alabama: Willo Publishing Company, 1961).

⁵Marie Bankhead Owen *The Story of Alabama, Volume 1*, (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1949).

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Hugh C. Bailey, *John Williams Walker, A Study in the Political, Social, and Cultured Life of the Old Southwest* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1964).

⁸*Ibid.*