

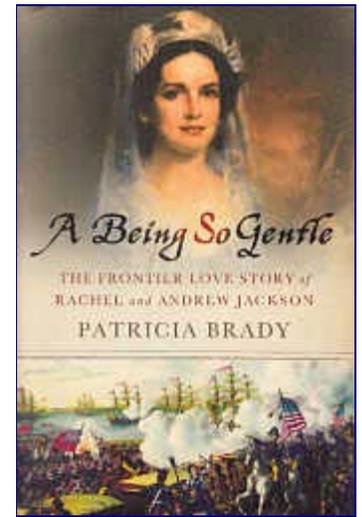
Site Map: [MAIN / A Reader's Journal, Vol. 2 Webpage Printer Ready](#)



*A READER'S JOURNAL*

**A Being So Gentle  
The Frontier Love Story of Rachel & Andrew  
Jackson  
by  
Patricia Brady**

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment  
Published by Macmillan/NY in 2011  
A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2011



Twice in the history of the United States of America, New Orleans played a vital role in helping this country stay out of the clutches of the British Empire. The first time, it was a Banker from the City named Solomon who funded George Washington's rag tag Continental army and put boots on their feet, without which the frigid Christmas Eve surprise attack on the British Army at Valley Forge would have never happened(1). The second time was when a favorite son of New Orleans, Jean Lafitte supplied crucial gunpowder and lead for making bullets to General Jackson's army plus a hearty group of fighting men to man the battle lines during the decisive victory known as the Battle of New Orleans. Much too much has been made of the well-known fact that a Peace Treaty at Ghent had already been signed a month or so before the battle. *Boots on the ground trumps ink on paper any day, any time, any war.* Can you imagine the same country whose troops burnt Washington to the ground earlier would have said, "Sorry, Old Chap, the treaty says we have give you back control of the entire Mississippi River valley we gained from our victory in New Orleans."? The USA's mere 39 years of precarious independence could have flown away like cherry blossoms in a stiff breeze and we could all be British subjects today if Old Hickory had not stood up to the British army and chased them away from *our* Land, their redcoats flapping behind their flailing legs as they ran as far away as possible from General Andrew Jackson.

**[page 145] Cynics then and later dismissed the Battle of New Orleans as insignificant because the Treaty of Ghent had already been signed. But they overlooked the amazing jolt to the American psyche and the probability that the British would not have returned either New Orleans or Mobile to the United States but would have given them to Spain. Large portions of the American Southeast might have been lost, not to speak of the damage to America's international reputation without the victory. Andrew Jackson was deservedly hailed as the Hero of the nation.**

It was with these thoughts in mind that I began reading this book which was given to me on my birthday. I was expecting a romantic love story in a docudrama form, the likes of [Stealing Athena](#) by Karen Essex which I enjoyed so much a couple of years ago. Instead I got an eighth grade history book of cold facts. It was shock to me, equivalent to taking a big bite into a Dove bar and instead of getting luscious vanilla ice cream and chocolate crust into my mouth, hitting a frozen-solid rock of ice cream which can not be bitten off, but only sucked on till it freezes your mouth and melts enough to gnaw off small pieces of goodness. There are delicious bits in this book, mostly from newspaper reports, not from the pen of a skilled novelist. A good collector of historical facts has regurgitated them upon the pages of this book to

reconstruct a man and woman's life. The man was crucial to the life of this country and the woman, his woman, was crucial to his life. This is their story.

The Prologue tells the story of the election's aftermath for Jackson, how John Quincy Adams was to be the last of the string of Northeast Anointed to the Presidency. The Royals in Washington did not take kindly to be kicked out of their digs by an outsider from the territories, Andrew Jackson and his backwoods companions. The shock was almost too much for the city none of Adams' administration showed up, calling in sick.

**[page 4] Despite his deep disappointment and disgust at the electoral outcome and an ongoing physical malaise, President Adams kept up appearances, attending public events and greeting guests at his wife's receptions. Begun by Martha Washington, these so-called drawing rooms were large affairs at the presidential mansion, where the first ladies entertained both ladies and gentlemen. An acute observer remarked, "How strange it is, that every individual of the administration, should be ill."**

The biggest surprise came from Jackson himself who disdained ceremony of any kind and who basically snuck into city unnoticed.

**[page 4] But Jackson surprised supporters and opponents alike. Plans for mass celebrations along his route from Tennessee and a grand parade to greet him in the capital were declined by the president-elect. In fact, he avoided any reception at all in Washington. The death of his beloved wife, Rachel, just before Christmas had plunged him into profound sorrow. Escorted by some ten horsemen, veterans of the American Revolution who had requested the honor, the single coach carrying Jackson and his party rolled into Washington early on Wednesday morning, February 11. Arriving four hours earlier than expected, they eluded the welcoming committee and went directly to the elegant Gadsby's National Hotel on Pennsylvania Avenue, conveniently located about halfway between the presidential mansion and the Capitol. Jackson was in town for hours before anyone knew he was there.**

We have not finished the first page of this book and we know that Rachel, clearly the eponymous "Being so gentle" never made it to Washington but died in Tennessee and was buried in her white Ball gown.

**[page 10] Struck down by a heart attack at sixty-one, she had been buried in the garden at their home outside Nashville on Christmas Eve. Instead of dancing at the inaugural ball in the white satin gown she had chosen, she had worn that gown to the grave. Jackson would live on for another sixteen years, transforming the American political scene. But every day of those sixteen years, he would remember and grieve for Rachel. Their love was the stuff of fables. This is their story.**

All of the charges and recriminations of campaign rhetoric aimed at Jackson and his marriage to Rachel were blown away by her untimely death, and Jackson blew away all the those who had leveled such charges, making a clean sweep of every office where he had the ability and the right — he appointed his own men and began to set aright the government he had been elected to head.

The inauguration was a riotous affair even though Jackson was in mourning — he welcomed those who had elected him and had come from as far as 500 miles away to celebrate the dawn of a new day in a country Jackson had helped to save from the British and expand greatly by conquering lands from the Spanish.

**[page 10] Traditionalists were shocked by the melee, but Jackson's adherents thought the whole affair went off very well. Neither then nor later did the president apologize for the exuberance and rowdiness of that party. He had come much further than they, but these were his people, and he stood for them. Never would he turn his back on these**

**republicans of a free nation. He understood that they were merely celebrating the new day dawning in government. After the excitement of the inauguration, that very night the Jacksonian strangers to the capital began leaving for home. By the following afternoon, Washington had emptied out, as though the people's festival had never been.**

Having lived for several years in Tennessee right out of college, it's hard for me to imagine the state as a frontier territory as it was in Jackson's time. Or Nashville as Nashborough as it was known when Jackson first arrived there, named after a revolutionary war commander Nash. Actually Nashville was an area originally known as French Lick because of its salt licks which were valuable because salt was a dietary requirement for humans and cattle. Rachel's family, the Donelsons, settled the land together with Colonel Richard Henderson.

**[page 23] John Donelson, however, was astute in the land he claimed — a clover bottom. This was a low-lying field of clover with very few trees alongside a river. Clover Bottom, as they called their place was on the Stones River, a few miles east of the new town. Without the heavy labor of clearing a forest, Donelson [was] able to plant fields of corn and the first cotton in Tennessee.**

The rifle of choice for the frontiersmen was the renown Kentucky Long Rifle.

**[page 24] The favored gun was a long-barreled lightweight model developed by arms makers in Pennsylvania. These so-called American, later Kentucky, rifles were easy to carry, accurate at long distance, silent in loading with a hickory rod, and so small-bored that a pound of lead was sufficient to make sixty to seventy bullets in the molds that all pioneers owned.**

Nashville today is the head of the Natchez Trace which is delightful winding road which follows the original road to Natchez followed by the wooden barges which floated down river before steam power and were dis-assembled, the boards were stacked up, and they were carted up the Trace back to Nashville for the next trip. Many of those "barge boards" can be found in old homes in the New Orleans area today(2).

Jackson's love for his wife never faltered and he wrote her often during his long travels away from home. Here is a typical ending of such a letter to Rachel.

**[page 62] May you be blessed with health. May the Goddess of Slumber every evening light on your eyebrows and gently lull you to sleep, and conduct you through the night with pleasing thoughts and pleasant dreams. Could I only know you were contented and enjoyed Peace of Mind, what satisfaction it would afford me whilst traveling the lonely and tiresome road. It would relieve My anxious breast and shorten the way — May the great "I am" bless and protect you until that happy and wished for moment arrives when I am restored to your sweet embrace which is the Nightly prayer of your affectionate husband, Andrew**

Their married life was a balanced and complementary one, each one fulfilling the roles they were best suited to, both by temperament and by availability.

**[page 63] He worked at his profession, entered politics, and traveled on business. He oversaw the plantation, and when employees, like the overseer or craftsmen, or slaves were disobedient, he saw to their chastisement. She kept house, gardened, maintained a closely knit web of family and friends, and arranged their entertaining and social life. Unlike some patriarchal husbands, he also depended on Rachel completely and trusted her to make decisions about money, the plantation, and any other matters of importance during his frequent absences from home.**

Jackson's steely determination in the face of overwhelming odds were obvious during the Battle of New Orleans, but it had its roots in his early life as in this episode when he did alone what a sheriff and group of deputies were afraid to do.

**[page 72] Russell Bean, a big gunsmith of great strength and irascibility, had been imprisoned for cutting the ears off a baby not his own who had been borne by his wife while he was away on a very long trip. He broke out of jail the very first night and defied anyone to take him back. The sheriff and his deputies tried unsuccessfully. Then, seeing Jackson coming down the street to take him in, Bean immediately surrendered to the one man he feared.**

**More colorfully, newspapers reported that Bean, armed to the teeth, disturbed a court session by blustering and cursing outside in the street. Neither sheriff nor posse dared lay hands on the violent giant to arrest him for contempt of court. Jackson then adjourned court for ten minutes and walked up to Bean and a crowd of ruffians gathered about him as he swore defiance.**

**Pistols in hand, Jackson walked into the center of the group and said, "Now, surrender, you infernal villain, this very instant, or I'll blow you through!" Bean looked for a moment into the judge's blazing eyes and then gave up, allowing the sheriff to lead him away**

**A few days later, when asked why he allowed one man to cow him when he had defied an entire posse, he replied, "Why, when he came up, I looked him in the eye, and I saw *shoot*, and there wasn't shoot in nary other eye in the crowd; and so I says to myself, says I, Hoss, it's about time to sing small, and so I did."**

Jackson never *sang small* — he was always looking for a generalship of the army, which finally came to him.

**[page 74] On April 1, 1802, Jackson achieved a longtime goal when he was commissioned major general of the Tennessee militia. Like all westerners, Jackson craved military command. Nothing set the seal on a man's gentility like a military title, and all those militia captains, majors, colonels, and generals were addressed by their titles for the rest of their lives, however short or undistinguished their service may have been. Although he had no experience to speak of, Jackson believed fervently that he was born to command. For years he had been working toward that goal, quietly politicking among the state's officers. When the position opened up, these officers put his name forward "unsolicited." In Tennessee, militia officers were elected, and Jackson was widely admired and imitated by the younger men.**

One cannot drive in East Tennessee today without encountering the name Sevier. Sevier County and the city of Sevierville is the gateway to the Smoky Mountains. Jackson had a running feud with John Sevier for many years. Given a chance to attack Jackson when he was ill, a mob of Sevier's supporters descended on his hotel. What could Jackson do? Sing small? No way.

**[page 79, 80] Rachel was terrified for her husband's safety. As a judge riding circuit, he was required to travel regularly through eastern Tennessee, Sevier's stronghold. Despite her pleas in person and by letter, he went about his business as usual. While on the road to Jonesborough shortly after the exchange in the Gazette, Jackson fell ill with a very high fever. When he arrived in town, he went straight to bed at his hotel. Already alerted that Sevier's supporters planned to "mob him" at the first opportunity, Jackson was hardly surprised when a friend ran into the bedroom to warn him that a group of rowdies under the command of a Colonel Harrison had gathered in the street out front. They planned to tar and feather him — rough frontier justice indeed.**

**Rather than locking the door as his friend begged, Jackson leaped out of bed and threw the bedroom door open. He sent the man down to deliver a message: "Give my**

**compliments to Colonel Harrison, and tell him my door is open to receive him and his regiment whenever they choose to wait upon me; and that I hope the colonel's chivalry will induce him to lead his men, and not follow them." Dismayed by the threat of violence from their intended victim, the group dispersed without entering the hotel. Once again, Jackson had faced down opponents by sheer bravado and unbending will.**

After many of these episodes of courage and fortitude, his men began to compare him to a hickory tree and thus came his sobriquet of Old Hickory. No leader of a country can be better than one who is fearless in adversity and a powerful visionary. And President Andrew Jackson was both.

**[page 153, 154] Jackson's view of the ideal United States was geopolitical. He saw it stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, in other words, the present-day map of the eastern United States. Once that was achieved, expansion to the far West would naturally follow. But in 1816 the reality was a patchwork of competing national claims — several nations of Indians, as well as Spanish colonies, with the British ready to support any or all of them. Such overlapping claims were, in Jackson's opinion, always a potential source of war. He saw the future strength of the United States lying in a consolidated territory under American law.**

Ever noticed how many cities named Lafayette there are? Especially east of the Mississippi. The illustrious French hero of the American Revolution made a famous tour of the United State in 1824, visiting every one of the states in the union at the time. Undoubtedly this led to the naming of cities and towns after him.

**[page 192] General Lafayette, making a lightning tour of the southern and western states, arrived in Nashville on May 4. His goal was to visit every one of the twenty-four states, and he did it despite age and infirmity. Everyone wanted to meet the hero of the Revolution, and his two-day stay in Nashville was another tribute to Jackson's importance.**

When Rachel died, Jackson refused to acknowledge she was gone, insisting that she be bled, even when no blood came from her arm or temple, he remained beside her, alone, in an all-night wake.

**[page 221] Still Jackson refused to believe that she was dead, staying by her side throughout the night, praying that she might awaken. Only when her body grew cold and stiff did he accept the truth. At dawn, friends found him at her bedside, grieving, head in hands, all but speechless with despair. Throughout the day, as funeral arrangements were made, he tightly embraced his wife of thirty-seven years. He left her only briefly while some of her nieces prepared her for burial. They washed the body, arranged her hair and cap becomingly, and dressed her in the white gown that had been intended for the gaities of Washington.**

Jackson had to face the toughest job of his life: he had to leave from a funeral to be inaugurated as President. No doubt he would have given up the presidency if Rachel had only survived. But if he had, the face and culture of the new American nation would have never been same. God Bless Andrew Jackson.

~^~

----- *Footnotes* -----

**Footnote 1.** Apparently that loan to the Continental Army has never been repaid, to this day. Some said

after Hurricane Katrina, "What does this country owe New Orleans?" The right answer is: it owes its very existence.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.](#)

~~~~~  
**Footnote 2.** The Westwego Museum on Sala Avenue in Westwego, Louisiana has barge boards for some of its walls.

[Return to text directly before Footnote 2.](#)

