

## **Bell, Martha McFarlane** <sup>[1]</sup>

### **Bell, Martha McFarlane McGee**

By Joseph R. Suggs, 1979; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, July 2023

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#### **1735–9 Sept. 1820**

Martha McFarlane McGee, one of the heroines of the American Revolution, was born in [Orange County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>. No positive record of her parents' names has been located, but her maiden name indicates that she was of Scot-Irish ancestry. From her childhood she possessed a strong mind and will and manifested devotion to the country of her birth.

In the year 1759 she married Colonel John McGee, a widower with two children, Samuel and Elizabeth. McGee was a commissioned officer in the British army who had come to North Carolina with his parents as a permanent settler. In 1753 he had been granted a large tract of land in [Orange County](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, and there he established a [gristmill](#) <sup>[4]</sup> and ordinary at the headwaters of Sandy Creek along the trading path from settlements farther west to markets in Virginia. He soon became a large landowner. He was the originator of the "Presbyterian Society" located at the "Head of Sandy Creek," which was one of the earliest religious meetings of the area.

Five children were born to John and Martha McGee: John; Andrew; William, who married Anna King; Jane or Jean, who married John Welborn; and Susannah, who married Elisha Mendenhall.

The McGee Ordinary, homeplace, mill, and trading post was an exchange center for colonial news covering a large area. McGee's commission no doubt made him disliked by the "Regulators" who lived in this community, but from all accounts he remained as neutral as possible.

His untimely death in 1773 left Martha the richest widow in that frontier region. She was sought after by many widowers and bachelors; she was accustomed to a hardy life, however, and carried on by herself the business she had inherited. On 6 May 1779 she married William Bell, an ardent patriot who shared her own zeal for the cause of freedom from Great Britain. He operated a gristmill in the Deep River community, which became a part of the new Randolph County formed the same year. Bell was elected the first sheriff of the county 13 Dec. 1779 and later became clerk of court. His mill was a gathering place for [Whigs](#) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Mattie Bell traveled many miles day and night, serving as nurse and midwife to people in the surrounding countryside. Her name became revered in every household for her assistance in time of need.

Her greatest fame is based on General Cornwallis's visit to Bell's Mill after the Battle of Guilford Court House on 15 Mar. 1781. Cornwallis moved southward to the mill in order to rest, regroup, and care for the wounded. He also needed provisions and wished to use the mill for grinding corn meal to feed the troops. Family annals state that she regarded Cornwallis as a perfect gentleman even though he was an unwanted guest. She extracted a promise from him that he would do no harm to the home or mill in exchange for her hospitality. Legends persist about the events of the two or three days Cornwallis stayed at the mill. Martha Bell's diary, which is quoted by the family, has disappeared from sight, but there can be no doubt of the courage and spirit she showed as she endured the presence of enemy troops in her own home.

As soon as Cornwallis left Bell's Mill, General Harry Lee arrived. Mattie Bell served as his guide to the next campground of the British general, and her knowledge of the countryside enabled Lee to stage a successful counterattack with his small cavalry force. Her services as a nurse kept her in touch with events, and she was often able to penetrate enemy lines and report on troop movements.

Before the cessation of hostilities she rode horseback with Mrs. Mary Dougan to Wilmington, N.C., in an unsuccessful attempt to see her son, Colonel Thomas Dougan, who was a prisoner aboard a British ship in the harbor.

Because the Bells were such active [Whigs](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, Colonel [David Fanning](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, leader of the Loyalist troops in the area, made many attempts to catch William Bell at home. This constant danger forced Bell to hide out or stay with patriot forces for months at a time. While he was away, Martha assumed responsibility for the home, children, mill, and farm. On one day in 1781 Fanning came to the mill intent on killing the Bells, but the family's display of strength caused the attacking party to leave without killing anyone or burning the house.

Martha Bell was instrumental in founding Old Union Methodist Church, where some of the first [camp meetings](#) <sup>[7]</sup> in North Carolina were held. Two of her sons were ministers (John a Methodist and William a Presbyterian), and her other descendants have included educators, attorneys, and legislators.

Martha Bell died a year before her husband, whose death occurred on 22 Oct. 1821. They were buried in the Bell-

Welborn graveyard near New Market School in Randolph County<sup>[8]</sup>. A marker at the site of the Battle of Guilford Courthouse<sup>[9]</sup>, placed there by the Alexander Martin Chapter of the DAR in 1929, honors her memory. The tribute reads, "Loyal Whig, Enthusiastic Patriot, Revolutionary Heroine."

## References:

Bell family papers and reminiscences (Randolph Public Library, Asheboro)

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## Image Source:

"The Martha McFarlane McGee-Bell Memorial," Photo courtesy of Flickr user When lost in.....". Available from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/whenlostin/5558162009/><sup>[10]</sup> (accessed April 5, 2012).

## Subjects:

Biographies<sup>[11]</sup>

Colonial period (1600-1763)<sup>[12]</sup>

Medicine<sup>[13]</sup>

Nurses and Nursing<sup>[14]</sup>

Women<sup>[15]</sup>

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## Origin - location:

Orange County<sup>[17]</sup>

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