

Humble Reflection

by Ben House

Have you ever had the experience of being afraid to walk down a certain street because a bully there intimidated you? Or maybe you avoided some parts of the school playground so as not to run into big kids who would pick on you. I have long since outgrown those fears and experiences, but I am still intimidated.

It is not a street or a part of the playground that intimidates me, but it is the past; it is history that intimidates me. I dread the 19th century, the 18th century, the 17th century, and so on. Like a gang, like bullies, all too many figures from those centuries threaten me and belittle me.

In short, as a new school year approaches, I confess that Sandie Pendleton intimidates me. Sandie Pendleton—his full name was Alexander Swift Pendleton—is in all respects a very minor historical figure. I was reminded of him last year when I watched the movie “*Gods and Generals*.” Without digressing too far into a movie review, “*Gods and Generals*” was an outstanding look into the faith and courage of the men who fought in the War Between the States. Men on both sides wrestled deeply with the issues of the war and then fought bravely for the cause they chose. Surprisingly, this movie very favorably portrayed the Southern cause and the strong religious commitments of so many Southern soldiers. Richard Weaver’s contention that the Old South was the last bastion of Christendom was reinforced by the movie. The specific example of Southern Christian civilization that the movie highlighted most was the life and death of General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. As a husband, as a soldier, as a believer, Jackson epitomized Christian manhood.

On Jackson’s staff was a young man named Sandie Pendleton. In the movie, like in real life, he played a subordinate and little noticed role. Pendleton’s father, William Nelson Pendleton, was an ordained Episcopal minister with a military background. Armed with sword and Bible and prayer book, he served in the Confederate army. He held the title of Chief of Artillery in Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, and he, like fellow minister Robert L. Dabney, preached to the troops on all occasions. Pendleton was sometimes mistaken for Robert E. Lee in looks, but sad to say, not in military ability. His daughter Susan Pendleton Lee wrote

a laudatory biography of her father, but apart from the judgments of a devoted daughter, few have found reason to praise Pendleton's military skills. I refrain from further hinting at a criticism of one who served in the Army of Northern Virginia.

General Pendleton's son, Sandie, joined the Confederate army in 1861 at age 21. Perhaps due to his college education and perhaps aided by his family connections, he obtained a position as an ordinance officer in the famed Stonewall Brigade of the Army of the Shenandoah. Soon he was promoted to chief of staff under General Jackson, who like the Pendleton's, had lived in Lexington, Virginia before the war. He had a brilliant, but short career as a staff officer. In 1864, just a few days before his 24th birthday, Sandie Pendleton died from wounds received at the battle of Fisher's Hill. A few months after his death, his young wife gave birth to a son who was given his father's name, but died the next year.

As fascinating as his military career was, Pendleton's intimidating challenge to me precedes his short, tragic, but brilliant service as a staff officer. In 1853, Rev. William Nelson Pendleton accepted a call to serve as rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Lexington, Virginia. Like any family moving to a new town, one of the first tasks was to enroll Sandie in school. Rev. Pendleton took Sandie to Washington College (now called Washington and Lee University) where he was enrolled as a freshman. This was not simply a matter of bringing along a copy of his school records, an ACT score, and writing a check as in our day. Most of his education had consisted of being homeschooled by his father, with some time spent in a private school for boys. (Sandie was the only boy in a house full of sisters, so his parents wanted him to have opportunity to develop manly qualities.) So before he could matriculate (be enrolled) as a freshman, he was given a "rigorous examination in Greek, Latin, and mathematics" by a group of professors.

One of the examining professors asked Rev. Pendleton why he sent this "delicate looking child to face us alone." The father replied, "I knew that he was well prepared, and my son must learn to depend upon himself and not on me. I wish him to be a good scholar, but still more a strong, self-reliant man."

As I said, I am intimidated, I am bullied, I am afraid of this "delicate looking" college freshman in Lexington, Virginia from the year 1853. Sandie Pendleton was age 13 when he entered Washington College.

If this 13-year-old stepped out of the past and walked into my office to face me alone, I could not give him a rigorous examination in Latin, Greek, and mathematics. I say that not as a college freshman, or as a 13 year old, but I say that as one whose years are multiples of 13, as one who has a college undergraduate degree, a Master's degree in education, many hours beyond a Master's degree, over two decades of teaching experience, and a personal library of several thousand volumes. I am, in our modern dark age, a well-educated man, or at least I have been told that.

I could not teach this kid anything, except maybe 20th century history—in English. He could not be enrolled—matriculated—in my school, even though we pride ourselves as a Classical Christian school on our academic standards. I would have to give him an application to teach here, not attend here. In this classroom, this teenager could challenge me in almost any area and make mincemeat of my state teaching certificate.

I would not be so bothered if Sandie Pendleton were the lone, or at least rare, case of genius. We all read of those rare and gifted people who can calculate incredible square roots in their heads or who can memorize whole passages with one reading, but Sandie Pendleton was no genius. He was smart; he was gifted; but he was not unusual for his time.

Turn any corner in the past centuries, step into any classroom, glance at any textbook or writing assignment, check out any list of assigned readings, and the same patterns appear. Ministers, teachers, politicians, doctors, lawyers, military officers, and many a common laborer and farmer had educational experiences that make our modern degree factories look like kindergarten.

Even though 13-year-old Sandie Pendleton intimidates me, I keep stepping back into those centuries, knowing I am going to be humiliated again. For many of us who are teachers and pastors today, one of our main callings is to call attention to how far we have fallen and make a few steps on the journey back. My hope is for children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren who can regain what Sandie Pendleton once had.