

Mrs. Phoebe E. Button
(1840 - 1892)

Written by
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Sometimes a person's service is measured, not so much by details remembered or recorded about the person, as by a movement started, the spirit put into the service, and the later results of the movement. Such is the case with Mrs. Phoebe Button.

In 1837, when Rowan County, Kentucky, was so torn by feuds that it was known as "Bloody Rowan," Mrs. Button and her son Frank came to Morehead, the county seat, to establish a school for the purpose of building up the spirit of good will that would eradicate the desire for "feudin' and fightin'."

The Rowan County "War" was one of the deadliest feuds ever known in Kentucky. It lasted three years; "it cost the lives of nearly twenty men, the happiness of hundreds, the peace of mind of several counties, and the state of Kentucky thousands of dollars."¹

Two men were willing to try out the theory that the right kind of education could do away with the feud spirit. General William Temple Withers of Lexington was willing to help finance the venture, and Judge Thomas F. Hargis of Louisville a little later gave several acres of ground and the money for the first school building. At first there was serious doubt that anyone would be willing to try to establish such a school.²

But it was frail Mrs. Button and her twenty-one year old son who really came to grips with the difficult situation in the very midst of the region so dangerous that "a match might set off the powder keg." In fact, soon after their arrival, when Frank Button went to see a man whose name had been given to him, and while they were talking, "firing began on the street, and they had to take refuge behind an old stone chimney, until the fusillade was over."³

Evidently there was early opposition to the school, for, in October, 1837, General Withers wrote to Frank, "I am not surprised at the opposition to your school; it is only what might have been expected. This very opposition will, no doubt, result in bringing your school before the public--and that is what you want."⁴

1. Clarence F. Turner, "Morehead Normal School."
2. Ida Withers Harrison, Memoirs of William Temple Withers, p. 141.
3. Ibid., p. 142.
4. Ibid., p. 143.

At first there was not even a building, but the Buttons conducted the school in their small rented home. The first day, in October, 1837, there was one student. Mrs. Button wrote to friends, "We start without school buildings or anything else, except our few books and what few household things we have. General Withers thinks that the only way to exert a good influence on that country is by educating the children. The school will be a school suited for beginners and also for the teachers of the county to review their studies."⁵

Evidently the influence of the Buttons was felt immediately, and we know it increased with the years. A detached newspaper clipping, which must belong to the first or second year, reports the following: "The Blade says such a quiet, orderly Christmas holiday has never before been known in Morehead, Kentucky...There was a Christmas tree in the Union church, and the reign of terror that had formerly prevailed there on account of bloody feuds which caused many violent deaths, seems about extinguished."⁶

Some of the older members of the feuding families may have kept bitterness in their hearts, for thirty years later a student was cautioned not to seek first-hand information from some of the still-living participants, lest the old animosities come to the surface again. However, the younger people were growing up without the old hatreds.

From the beginning, Mrs. Phoebe Button had the right idea of teaching students so that they in turn could teach others. At the end of seventeen years the school had prepared three hundred teachers, and the number was increasing.

Mrs. Button (Phoebe Phelps) was born in Oquawka, Illinois, August 11, 1840. In 1850 she was married to Marion F. Button, and they had two children. After the death of her husband and little daughter, Mrs. Button, having been educated at Monticello (Illinois), taught in the public schools in Oquawka until she went to the Female Orphan's School at Midway, Kentucky, about 1875, and from there was called to Morehead.

We have few details of Mrs. Button's actual procedure in teaching, but one homely example may show how practical and resourceful she was. She had an arrangement with a local butcher to reserve, for her use in teaching physiology, the heart of the beef he killed. She recognized the need for good reading material, as shown in a letter to friends, "We will be so isolated that we will miss all the nice papers and periodicals

5. Newspaper clipping, probably from the Oquawka Spectator.

6. Detached newspaper clipping, furnished by Mrs. Morris Shankland, granddaughter of Mrs. Button.

that we have enjoyed...., and will not have much company. I hope to enlist all our old friends in Oquawka in helping us by sometimes sending us papers or any kind of good moral reading, temperance, religious or secular."⁷

As Mrs. Button and Frank worked on, they became more aware of the problems of the mountain boys and girls who desired an education. It was simply out of the question for many of them to pay their own way. Even ten dollars a month for room and board was beyond the means of most. The school came under the management of the Christian Woman's Board of Missions of the Disciples of Christ, who helped to work out (to) means of assisting worthy students. They started industrial features, such as a printing plant and a broom factory. They established "scholarships" by which worthy young men and women of promise received their schooling while working for part of their expenses. In all the years of the school, known as Morehead Normal School, the equipment was meager, and strict economy was practiced. These very limitations enabled the students and graduates to fit themselves into life in their home communities much better than if the school had surrounded them with luxuries and superior equipment.

The fact that Mrs. Button carried on all her numerous school and community activities under limitations that would have hindered a less courageous woman is indicated in a letter to friends, "I cannot stand the exposure that I could before I was hurt. I cannot walk any distance yet and still have to use my crutch in getting out of a buggy or to help me over rough places."⁸

How well she succeeded in her service in Morehead is indicated in this tribute by one who knew her well: "As a teacher in the school, Mrs. Button was faithful in the discharge of every duty, and painstaking in all her work. Her pupils felt the warmth of her motherly love; her associate teachers experienced from her naught save the truest courtesy and friendly aid. Unswerving faith, perfect devotion to the cause, fervid piety, ran, like golden threads, through all her work. Her social nature endeared her to many families in this community. Her name was a household word, and her memory will ever be cherished there. Her visits to us from Morehead were ever pleasing. We sought the doorway to recognize her kindly face at the window of the coming car, and return her glad salutation."⁹

Another intimate friend said, "She is one of the best women I have ever known; I have never seen her superior or her equal. In her movements among the people, in their homes, by kind words

7. Newspaper clipping, probably from the Oquawka Spectator.

8. Ibid.

9. Lizzie Corbin, "Phoebe E. Button."