

Elizabeth Trentham Story

Oral history as told to
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April, 1942


Thomas Trentham III, though not of royalty lineage himself, had a connection to the royal household. Sometime in the 1520s or 30s, his grandfather, Richard Trentham, as well as his great-uncle, Robert, had careers as esquires in the royal household of Edward VI when he was the Prince of Wales. Richard was able to obtain lands in Staffordshire [whether through purchase or gift, we do not know]. It appears they had land and businesses in Shrewsbury as well as holding minor political offices before Richard's descendents settled in Staffordshire.

When approaching the Thomas Trentham III estate, in the village of Rocester, Staffordshire, in the midlands of England, in the year of our Lord, fifteen hundred and sixty-three, a traveler would first see a steeple rising from the trees, and then farmhouses and cottages set unevenly along a single straggling road. ^{set back from the road and behind a hedge} Traveling further along this road, the manor house would appear with its red roof and dark timbers.

The large house had originally been Rocester Abbey founded in 1146 but recently rebuilt. The lord of manor's estate consisted of cultivated lands and barns, stables and dwellings for his steward and manorial servants.

In 1562, Thomas Trentham III married Jane Snead [also spelled Sneyd.] This was a good marriage for Thomas since his wife's father was a

knight, Sir William Snead, who was a wealthy landowner in northern Staffordshire. Sir William also practiced law in Chester, the western coastal port to Ireland.

In 1563, Thomas and Jane Trentham welcomed their newborn daughter, Elizabeth. Other children yet to be born were Francis (who would be the heir), Dorothy, Katherine, and Thomas IV. 

Squire Thomas had learned estate management through his grandfather, and realized a healthy income from ownerships of houses and farmlands. By combining the Trentham and Snead families and their like interests, not only cemented their friendship, but they also became business associates, buying and improving land. This involved removing timber, making the land more conducive to farming. A side business involved cutting up the timber for lumber. When farmers moved in, Squire Thomas increased his fortune by collecting rents.

One of Thomas' first gifts to his beloved wife was the newly published Geneva Bible, the first Bible ever translated into English. Over the years, Thomas Trentham purchased many more books and by the time his last child was born, he possessed a credible library for a country squire.

Elizabeth was enthralled with the beautiful pages of the Bible, and could be seen tracing the artistic lettering with her tiny fingers while still a babe in her mother's arms. Through her mother's tutorage, Elizabeth memorized many Bible verses in both English and Latin, entertaining her father by lispng verses by the age of three.

When Elizabeth's brother Francis was of an age to begin his education, Squire Trentham hired Mr. Regiers, a French tutor. Since her mother had been taught to read and write, there was no question Elizabeth would be included as one of his students. Elizabeth had already learned to cipher by pestering the steward when she demanded to be told what the symbols meant he was writing in his ledgers. From there, he taught her simple addition and subtraction.

Elizabeth soaked up knowledge like a sponge, sending Mr. Regiers back to his books to find answers to her excessive questioning. By the age of ten, she had learned to read and write Latin and Greek, transcribing many sections of her father's books into English. She also studied astronomy, geography, history, math, logic and rhetoric. She had an ear for foreign languages, and in addition to French, she learned Italian and Spanish. Much to her deeply religious mother's chagrin, Elizabeth found Greek mythology fascinating to the extent of wanting to learn to play the flute, like Pan. Always a favorite of her father, he indulged Elizabeth when he ordered a flute made of ivory as a gift to her on her tenth birthday. If the truth were known, Elizabeth's singing voice was like a quill pen scrapping on slate, and her father was pleased when she substituted her singing with flute playing.. Her musical ability nourished her flair for verse, learning meter and rhythm. It was her love of language and the music of words that captivated the young girl, finding pleasure in recitation and writing. She memorized Chaucer's poem, "Gentillesse," which introduced her iambic pentameter, the most common meter for poetry at that time.

An event all of the Trentham children looked forward to was the observance of traditional religious holidays. Strolling player would highlight these celebrations by performing various stories of the Bible, including Jonah being swallowed by the big fish, Daniel in the lion's den and the birth of Jesus.

Greatly influenced by these actors, Elizabeth had dreams of joining the troupe and traveling from town to town. It was a great disappointment when she learned it was wicked for females to appear on the stage, or to bring notice to themselves. She offered a solution, saying she could wear a mask – in fact, all the players could wear masks, but her father would not buy into her outrageous notions. Angered that her brothers had all the advantages, she made up her mind that even though she was a girl, she was to be treated as if she were born a boy.

Elizabeth's love of writing stories, along with her ability with the flute, writing poems and sonnets became a natural transition. The family's evening entertainment often centered around Elizabeth when she read one of her new poems, played a tune she had composed, or acted out all the parts of a play. Her wit was sharp, her humor keen, and her ear in tune to the nuances of language variation. She was much in demand by her family and friends to tell stories, using various travelers and town folk as characters for her dramas.

Determined to know as much as her eldest brother, Francis, who had recently been admitted into Cambridge, she studied the same books he was being exposed to, including Chaucer, Plautus, St. Augustine, Terence, Seneca, Horace, Cicero, Lucretius and Juvenal.

One may have thought Elizabeth, with her advanced education, would be a snob to the town folk, but this was far from true. She learned humility from her mother by serving the poor. In doing so, she learned the human body is made up of humors corresponding to the elements of fire, air, water and earth. She worked with herbs and extracts, and other forms of rudimentary tonics. She became a friend to servants, kitchen maids, farm and stable hands, participating in their duties, providing it wasn't too boring. She enjoyed watching the sawyer and turner whenever a new building was being constructed. The warrener and fowler could barely do their jobs of snaring rabbits or birds for their table, with out having her underfoot. Even though she detested housewifery work inside the manor, she loved gardening, learning both the common and Latin names of plants, herbs and flowers.

Thomas Trentham was also an avid hunter. He raised falcons including a pair of peregrine falcons. When she turned twelve, Elizabeth was allowed to participate, learning the vocabulary of a falconer and the method of hunting with the birds.

There were occasions when travelers would stop on their way to and from Scotland. In exchange for a night's food and lodging, travelers would bring the family up-to-date on court gossip and politics from both Londoners as well as from the Scottish court. The family would also take summer trips to Chester, to visit Jane's parents, siblings and cousins.

Elizabeth often rode her horse over the moors to a rocky outcropping near a stream to play her flute, dream and write. She enjoyed the rainy days,

writing in the room she shared with her sisters, or playing music with her mother and sisters. Besides the flute, Elizabeth also played the psaltery, lyre and lute.

When Elizabeth turned thirteen, Squire Trentham knew she was restless and bored living in their semi-isolated home ~~on the moors~~^o. Her education had advanced as far as it could. She seemed to know as much, if not more, than the tutor her father had hired for his other children. Thomas knew she was nearing a marriageable age, but finding a suitable husband would be difficult. His desire to have all his daughters marry into nobility was his major concern and for this reason, he arranged for Elizabeth to leave home and live with her grandfather, Sir William Snead, in Chester. Since his father-in-law still had influence in the Court of Queen Elizabeth, Squire Trentham had hoped Sir William could find a suitable husband for his favorite child.

Chester is located just north of Wales on the River Dee that feeds into the Irish Sea. Even though Chester was not as cosmopolitan as London, it was still considered a busy and prosperous seaport with trading routes to Ireland, Scotland and to the continent. Chester is located on the Great North Road to Scotland from London and was the chief port of embarkation for the officials who governed Ireland. The Romans first settled the area in 79 AD where they built a walled fortress and an Amphitheatre. A great cathedral of St. Werburgh, Chester's patron saint, was built in the 11th Century.

When Elizabeth arrived at her grandfather's estate, she felt thrilled to be introduced to a new lifestyle. She found delight in exploring the ancient city,

spending time on the docks with her cousins, listening to the tales of the seamen as they related their harrowing experiences alluding pirates. She became acquainted with the vicar and his children. The vicar told her grandfather that he had never met an adult with as much knowledge of the Bible as this young girl; she even surpassed his ability to read and speak Latin.

She learned about the ghosts that inhabited the old Roman ruins, and wanted nothing more than to spend the night there to see if she could witness the eerie event ^{for} herself. However, she was too well supervised to have ever have that happen, but her imagine was put into full gear when she wrote a story about a war between the Vikings and Romans, ^{the} creating a ghostly apparition which ordered troops to battle.

Her experiences in the town of Chester were to end the following year. Sir William, to the surprise of everyone, was planning to leave his position as Mayor of Chester to take up residence in his old family seat of Bradwell Hall in the Borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire where he wanted to invest in land. The only matter which he would *have to* leave unsettled were *legal matters* concerning the management of his *property holdings* and *collection of rents in Chester*.

Elizabeth overheard his conversation with his wife as to what to do, when she spoke up. She had *thought of a way to stay in Chester* for a while longer. She reminded him that not only had she assisted her father's in his *business dealings*, but she had spent enough time with her grandfather by then *to learn the nuisances of property management and foreign investment*. He had

taught her the Common Law of England as well as civil law of other European countries. He hadn't yet tried to arrange a suitable marriage for Elizabeth because he thought her still too young and he was too loath to have her leave his home. Besides, she had become an asset in his law practice.

Sir William knew Elizabeth, although a girl, was the most intellectually advanced child he'd ever known, and she knew Latin as if she were Caesar's wife incarnate. He acquiesced to her arguments without too much opposition. However, he decided his wife should stay behind to look after Elizabeth, along with his steward and a cadre of servants. Elizabeth's brother Francis was removed from school for a few months to work along side of Elizabeth as they managed their grandfather's affairs in Chester.

By the time Elizabeth turned sixteen, she was once again at her home in Rocester, but found time to ride the (twenty-five miles) west to Bradwell Hall. She had blossomed from a pretty girl, to an attractive woman. Her red hair had darkened to auburn, and her eyes were blue like the morning sky. Tall and slender, she could run like a deer with the grace of Diana. She was now solidly into the marriageable age, and men sought her affection; however, she became adept at turning down proposals. "Men are such asses," she was fond of saying. Her superior intellect and the ability to win verbal duels, she found no trouble reducing lovesick men to simpering fools.

Thomas Trentham had done more than his part in arranging suitable marriages for his other two daughters, but when it came to Elizabeth, he had a battle on his hands. When a traveling noble man asked to her to become his

mistress, she was so insulted by this base proposal, she told her father to never again try to arrange a marriage for her. She was determined to never marry.

The squire felt it unfortunate Elizabeth was unable to participate in affairs of state as she deserved praise for her accomplishments, but he knew her only choice was to marry. He had arranged excellent suitors for her, but none of them met with her approval. He knew it was within his authority as her father to have her marry whether she wished it or not.

Elizabeth was overheard saying: "Why must I be the chimney for a man's smoke? It tis not right, father. I cannot marry a stupid man. They like my looks and think, because I am not of a royal lineage, I can be bought. My labor's lost upon such fools that come to call. Should I scatter all my spices on a stream that goes nowhere? Must I come to every Faulkner's call?"

The squire did not want to see his lovely daughter enter into a loveless marriage like so many girls of royal lineage. There was still talk in London of the political marriage of 13-year old to a 63-year old nobleman. He would never do that to his daughter. But his patience with her was becoming thin.

Unbeknownst to Elizabeth, Squire Thomas consulted with Sir William over Elizabeth's most recent rejection of a proper suitor. He wanted to know how best to secure a position for Elizabeth in the queen's court, knowing this would put her in the best possible position to secure a marriage with a man of high regard. Sir William, with his connection at court, and Elizabeth's intelligence and looks, knew she would be perfect to serve as one of the queen's

maids of honor. He was prepared to offer a goodly monetary amount as an inducement.

Elizabeth was thrilled with the prospect and readily agreed to the plan. However, her motivation was not to find a husband, but rather to be apart of the intrigues of court – plus, get her hands on the queen's extensive library.