

John LaRue Helm (1802-1867)

By Steven Lindsey

In recognition of his service during the revolutionary war, Thomas Helm was granted a parcel of 1000 acres on Beargrass Creek near the Falls of the Ohio. He moved his family to this location in the fall of 1779, but after several children and Negroes died of spotted fever, he decided to move his family to the south. The Helm family migrated to Severns Valley in the spring of 1780. Andrew Hynes and Samuel Haycraft, along with several other families, were in his company. Helm, Hynes and Haycraft built stockade forts on the hilltops overlooking Severns Valley and marking the future location of Elizabethtown. George Helm, the son of Thomas, was just six years old when his family arrived in Kentucky.



In 1784, John and Mary Brooks LaRue emigrated from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and settled along the Nolin River near the present day Hodgenville. Their daughter, Rebecca, was only a baby when her family brought her to Kentucky.

Andrew Hynes donated 30 acres for a new village. In honor of his contribution, it was named after his wife, Elizabeth. The streets of Elizabethtown were laid out in 1797.

George Helm and Rebecca LaRue were married on May 14, 1801 and their first child, John LaRue Helm, was born on July 4, 1802, probably at Rebecca's parents' home near present day Hodgenville. John was a naturally bright and inquisitive child. He attended various schools in Hardin County until he was 14 years old. Due to financial difficulties within his family, his education in the public schools ended at the 8th grade and he went to work on the family farm. George Helm removed to the Texas frontier in an effort to restore his financial condition and died there in 1822. As the oldest child, John became the head of the family and responsible for the \$3,000 debt left by his father. The same year, John became the Deputy County Clerk under the eminent Samuel Haycraft, Jr.

While serving in this position, John became the apprentice of the prominent Elizabethtown attorney, Benjamin Tobin. A year later, John

was admitted to the bar and began practicing law in Elizabethtown. In 1824, John was appointed County Attorney for Meade County (a new county that had been formed from parts of Breckinridge and Hardin counties on December 17, 1823). A year later, he was elected to the lower house of the Kentucky Legislature on the Whig party ticket. Helm would remain in the state government for the better part of his life.

Around this same time, John met Lucinda Barbour Hardin, the eldest daughter of Benjamin and Elizabeth Pendleton Barbour Hardin of Bardstown. Lucinda was born on February 2, 1809. John and Lucinda met by happenstance when she was just 14 years old. Lucinda, like many young ladies of that day, was educated by her father and did not attend public schools. During a meeting between Helm and her father, Lucinda entered the parlor of their home to show her father a map that she had been working on. 7 years later, on August 10, 1830, John and Lucinda were married at Edgewood in Bardstown. On June 2, 1831, Benjamin Hardin Helm, the first of their 12 children was born at Edgewood in Bardstown.

In 1831, John was able to purchase his grandfather's homestead from his uncle Benjamin. This purchase included his father's home several miles outside of Elizabethtown. John sold his father's house and some 500 acres to Reverend Charles J. Cecil and the Sisters of Loretto. They used the property to create a girls boarding school known as Bethlehem Academy. John and Lucinda began construction of their new home, "Helm Place", on the site of "Helm Station", the stockade fort built by his grandfather.

Helm served in both houses of the State Legislature from 1824 until 1850. He was one of the youngest representatives ever elected Speaker of the House. In 1844, he was elected to the Senate and in 1848 as Lieutenant Governor on the ticket of John J. Crittenden. Helm became the 18th governor of the Commonwealth on July 31, 1850 when Governor Crittenden resigned to take the post of Attorney General in the cabinet of President Millard Fillmore. Helm completed the term that ended on September 5, 1851.

Helm could best be described as a Constitutionalist. He believed that the "organic law" was paramount and that all differences among the citizens could be resolved by careful and thoughtful interpretation of that law. During his term as governor, the legislature decided to rewrite the Constitution of Kentucky. Helm was ardently opposed to this. He argued that the few problems with the constitution could be

repaired, but that it was unnecessary to rewrite the entire document. When the bill was submitted for his approval, he vetoed it. Subsequently, his veto was overridden by the legislature. Once the new constitution was adopted, Helm accepted it as the "organic law" and defended it with all the zeal that he exhibited when he fought to prevent the rewrite.

On March 5, 1850, the Legislature granted a charter to the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company, authorizing the company to raise funds and build a railroad to connect Louisville and Nashville. Helm had argued that such a road should be constructed from as early as 1830 when the Louisville Nashville Turnpike had been built. Surveyors identified two routes where the road could be built. The first through route passed through Bardstown and Glasgow and another Elizabethtown and Bowling Green. Helm became a commissioner for the railroad in Hardin County and fought ardently for a bond issue that would be subscribed to the company. At the same time, Benjamin Hardin, Helm's father-in-law, argued against a bond issue in Bardstown. Coupled with the success in having a bond issue for \$300,000 from Hardin County subscribed to the railroad and a \$300,000 issue from Warren County, the company decided on the Elizabethtown/Bowling Green route. Financial difficulties plagued the company from the beginning. By 1854, several hundred thousands of dollars had been spent, but less than 8 miles of track had been laid and work on the road had been suspended. Disgruntled with the apparent lack of progress, the Board of Alderman in Louisville demanded that the first president, Levin L. Shreve, resign and he did so on June 24, 1854. Having been elected to the board of directors on July 17, 1854, John L Helm was elected President of the company on October 2, 1854. Helm worked tirelessly to complete the road and on October 27, 1859 a special train departed Louisville bound for Nashville. In all, the main line was 187 miles long and had cost more than \$7,000,000 to build. Helm had been a proponent of the Memphis branch, a connection that would allow the L & N to extend its domain to Memphis, Tennessee and ultimately to New Orleans. However, a dispute erupted between Helm and several Louisville stockholders regarding the Memphis Branch. On February 2, 1860, two members of the Board of Directors joined these stockholders in accusing Helm of mismanagement. On February 24, Helm capitulated and resigned as President of the company. Ironically, the succeeding president, James Guthrie, continued where Helm left off and completed the Memphis Branch in March 1861.

With the Dogs of War about to be unleashed, John L. Helm urged restraint. He argued that the states did not possess the right to secede, but that the Federal government had no right to seize the property of any citizen without due process. On January 8, 1861, he chaired a meeting in Louisville in which the Commonwealth declared its neutrality in the coming conflict. Of course, positioned between the opposing forces, neither side observed this declaration. By the fall of 1861, the state had become a pawn of war, both sides counting Kentucky as a member state. Many Kentuckians joined both sides, among them Helm's own son, Benjamin Hardin Helm. Benjamin had married Emilie Todd, the half-sister of Mary Todd Lincoln in 1856 and was a close friend of the Lincolns. Being a graduate of West Point, President Lincoln called Benjamin to Washington in the summer of 1861 to offer him the position of Paymaster in the Union Army. After three days, Benjamin declined the offer and returned to Kentucky where, in the fall of 1861, he joined the Confederate Army.

John Helm was an outspoken critic of the Lincoln Administration. Due to his public criticism of Lincoln, his son's rank of General in the Confederate Army and his son-in-law's position as Representative from Kentucky in the Confederate Congress, John Helm was vilified as a southern sympathizer and rebel. In September 1862, Colonel Knox arrested him near his home in Elizabethtown. Throughout the war, the Union forces harassed the Helms. When Benjamin was killed at the Battle of Chickamauga on September 20, 1863, the news came as the crowning sorrow for his father.

When the war ended, Helm returned to the Kentucky Senate and served on the Committee for Federal Relations. He fought ardently for an end to sanctions imposed on former confederates and to improve the condition of the former slaves. In February 1867, he was nominated for Governor on the Democratic ticket. He campaigned vigorously from one end of the state to the other and in August, was elected Governor by a margin of more than 3-to-1 over the nearest opponent. Additionally, through Helm's efforts nearly every seat of both houses of the legislature, as well as many local positions, was filled with candidates of his party. However, the campaign had left Helm weak and exhausted. He returned to his beloved Helm Place in late August 1867. Due to his illness, Lucinda requested that the inauguration be moved to Elizabethtown rather than Frankfort. On September 3, 1867, John L. Helm became the 24th governor of the Commonwealth and the only Kentucky governor ever inaugurated outside of Frankfort. Sadly, just five days later, Helm succumbed to his

illness and died. He was buried in the Helm family cemetery on September 11, 1867.

Lucinda continued living at Helm Place, with several of their children, until her death on Christmas Day, December 25, 1885. She was laid to rest next to her husband in the family cemetery. When the last of their children, Mary, died in 1913, the Helm mansion was sold. Today, it still stands as a marker and tribute to this remarkable son of Elizabethtown.