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AN ORTHODOX THE FIRST AMERICAN

by Nicholas



CHRISTIAN FIRED SHOT IN THE CIVIL WAR

Chapman

Days before going to press, Nicholas Chapman sent *Road to Emmaus* this intriguing account, saying, “This is about as unlikely a title for an article on American Orthodox history I ever expected to come up with! ... It underscores for me how essential it is to research the history of Orthodoxy in the Americas within the wider context of the relationship between the “Great Powers” of the world stage from the fifteenth century to the present.

In 2011 we are remembering the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Civil War, which is generally dated to April 12, 1861. This was the day the Confederates opened fire on the Union-controlled Ft. Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina. Others reckon the date back to January 9, 1861 when the ship “The Star of the West” was sent to re-supply the Union forces in Charleston harbor and was driven away by Confederate fire.)

According to Southern folklore, it was the young daughter of the governor of South Carolina who was given a lighted taper to fire the first cannon by her father. (Some versions place this in January, some in April 1861.) What is well documented is that the governor of South Carolina was Francis W. Pickens, who became governor only weeks before South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union on December 20, 1860. His daughter was also given the name Francis, although she was more commonly referred to as Douschka—Russian for “Little Darling”.) The little girl’s Russian connection is also suggested by her full legal name: Francis Eugenia Olga Neva Pickens.

So what was Francis W. Pickens doing before he became the sixty-ninth Governor of South Carolina? (As an aside, it is interesting to note that Philip Ludwell I is officially listed as the ninth.) Pickens was the U.S. Ambassador to Russia. While there, he and his third wife, Lucy Petway Holcombe, became intimate friends of Russian Czar Alexander and his German-born wife, Marie of Hesse. Such close friends that when the Pickens’ daughter was born in the Winter Palace they agreed that she would be baptized as an Orthodox Christian, and the Czar and Czarina stood as her godparents. It was the Czarina who insisted she take the names “Olga” and “Neva.” The Czar simply took to calling her “Douschka.” The baptism took place in the Imperial palace in St. Petersburg in 1859.

I have found no evidence thus far to suggest that Governor Pickens or his wife Lucy embraced Orthodoxy. However, they are said to have studied the differences between Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant doctrine. There is also a very beautiful account of their attending the Easter night service in St. Petersburg.

Lucy Pickens went on to be known as “The Queen of the Confederacy” and she is the only woman depicted on the currency of the Confederate States of America. The “Holcombe Legion” of the Confederate Army was named after her and she reputedly funded it by the sale of diamonds given her by the Russian Czar. Douschka likewise went on to live a colorful life and became known as “The Joan of Arc of Carolina.” This was for her leadership in the post Civil War “Red Shirt” movement which fought openly to defeat Republican political candidates and limit the civil rights of the newly freed black population. All very ironic, given that it was her godfather, Alexander II, who liberated the serfs in Russia!

To conclude, here is the Douschka Pickens Civil War story as recounted in a book from the beginning of the twentieth century:

“It is said that General Pickens on the twelfth day of April, 1861, at Charleston, took his little daughter in his arms and placed in her tiny hand the lighted match that fired the first gun of the war on Ft. Sumter. Mrs. Pickens held all through her life the friendship of the Imperial Family of Russia, and on the marriage of their daughter Douschka, a silver tea service was sent to her by the Imperial Family.”¹ †

1 (Logan, Mrs. John A, *The Part Taken by Women in American History*, Wilmington, Delaware: The Perry-Nalle Publishing Co., 1912.)