

"BEAUTIFUL MARY" OF EBENEZER

The story of "Beautiful Mary" of Ebenezer is a favorite one of this area. Her full name was Mary America Avery Toland and she was said to be the most beautiful woman in South Carolina.

Born ca. 1818, she was one of seven children of Col. Edward and Mary Elizabeth Vaughn Avery, residents of the small village of Ebenezerville, now a part of Rock Hill.

Colonel Avery, a Virginia native, was well-to-do and could afford the best for his lovely daughter. The breathtaking beauty made her debut in 1849 at the annual State House Ball held at the governor's mansion. It was the social event of the year.

At the ball, Mary's dark blue eyes and long black lashes set in a perfectly shaped oval face attracted the attention of Dr. Huger H. Toland, a wealthy and prominent citizen of Columbia. Dr. Toland told a friend that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and that he intended to marry her.

They were married after a short courtship. Apparently Mary had some health problems. Dr. Toland, decided that she needed a change of climate and that they would go to California. The recent discovery of gold had brought California much attention as the "land of milk and honey."

Dr. Toland outfitted a caravan for the long, overland trip. Mary's mother was frightened at the prospect of her delicate daughter making such an arduous journey. Toland promised her that if anything should happen to Mary that he would bring her back to Ebenezer cemetery.

Dr. Edward T. Avery, Mary's brother, accompanied the Tolands on the long trip through unsettled country. It took six months to reach the west coast. They camped on the outskirts of San Francisco.

The first night in the camp Mary contracted cholera. She died three days later, September 22, 1852.

Dr. Toland took Mary's body into San Francisco and had her embalmed. Then he ordered the construction of a vault for her body. Some old accounts say that Toland kept her casket in his office; others say it was kept in his home. In any case, it is certain that the body was not interred while in California.

For 25 years Toland built a thriving medical practice. He founded San Francisco's Toland University. He also remarried and had a son, Arthur Toland, who became a famous actor.

In 1877, 25 years after the death of Mary, Dr. Toland decided to keep the promise he had made to Mary's mother to return her body to Ebenezer. By that time both of her parents were dead; the mother died in 1862 and the father a year later.

In the 25 years since Mary Toland's departure in a covered wagon many changes had improved American transportation. Transcontinental railroad lines were in place. The body was shipped by train to Ebenezer, placed in "seven coffins." Dr. Toland and his second wife accompanied the body.

Dr. Toland said that Mary was "as beautiful as on the day she died." Others testified that this was true.

Toland composed the inscription for her tombstone:

"No one so beautiful as she,
Fairest of form and face,
A queenly mien with modesty,
Crowned every other grace."

In 1971, the late U. S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, a relative of Toland, came to Ebenezer and visited the grave of the "most beautiful woman in South Carolina."

This story originally appeared in *The York Observer*, August 25, 1991.