

DRAFT

History of Greene County

Part III

Early Settlements

By
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Typically, early settlers to the Mississippi Territory claimed land along navigable waterways and where major trails crossed. Land suitable for farming or for grazing livestock was also a major factor. Large, extended families, along with their neighboring families would frequently migrate together, claim land and clear it and thus establish a new community. As the availability of land in the more desirable locations was claimed, later settlers made their claims further inland. Where did the earliest families settle in Greene County Mississippi?

Remembering that the boundaries of Greene County changed over the years since it was first established in 1811, some of the following towns would have been located in Jackson County and, since 1910, George County. Between 1822 and 1 May 1910, places such as McManus, Merrill, Avent, Bexley, Rocky Creek and Lucedale were located within the boundaries of Greene County.

One of the earliest settlements found on record was Greene Courthouse, located on Boise Bluff or Courthouse Bluff on the east bank of the Leaf River near the present day town of McLain.

The Paulding and the Mobile to Natchez Roads intersected at Boise Bluff. The Paulding Road ran south from the early trading settlement of Paulding (now in Jasper County) to Mobile. The Greene Courthouse settlement served as the first seat of government for Greene County, which, at the time, stretched from the east bank of the Pearl River to the west bank of the Tombigbee River. The first Greene County Courthouse was built there in 1811. Once the County boundaries were reduced in 1820, a new, more centrally located site was established at Leakesville along the Chickasawhay River in 1827.

McManus-now extinct, was named for Archibald McManus, who, with his family, settled along the Pascagoula River in 1811-1813 at what is now known as Big Eddy (Rev. Jackson, page 113). Mr. McManus owned land in Jackson and Greene Counties as well as a mercantile store just below where the town of Merrill would be located some years later. He served as Clerk of Court for Jackson County in 1815 and in 1819 was appointed Justice of the Quorum Court (a position like our present day County Supervisor). He also represented Greene County by serving as “the first member of the Lower House in the state legislature (Rev. Jackson, page 113).” A post office was established at McManus about 1825 with Mr. McManus its first postmaster (Cyril E. Cain, Four Centuries on the Pascagoula, Vol. I, USA, 1953; pages 6, 14, 71, 72, 162).

McManus would be one of three towns in Greene County with a post office in 1846. The other two were Leakesville and Vernal. According to Mr. Cain (page 162) the post office at McManus was discontinued in 1852, which might also represent the end of McManus as a settlement. A post office was later established at Cochran in 1893, with the town changing its name to Merrill in 1898 (Cain, page 160).

Once the United States took possession of Mobile and established a post office there in 1813, the town of Leaf River, located close to McClain on the Leaf River, had the first post office in Greene County by 1814. This post office was discontinued in 1842 (Cain, page 164).

According to Dr. Byron E. Green, Jr. in Glimpses of the Green Family of Greene County, Mississippi, excerpts of which appeared in the Greene County Herald and now available online, “the first two settlements of note in Greene County were Salem (Leaf) and Scotland [or “Little Scotland”] (Vernal).” The town of Salem was established in 1838 by such families as McKay, McLeod, Thomson and Cowart (Dr. Green). Leaf is located about six miles south of McLain on Hwy 57. Mr. Cain (page 164) lists the town of Leaf having its own post office by 1874, remaining in operation until 1986. The unincorporated community of Leaf was a stop on the Mobile, Jackson and Kansas City (M.J. & K.C.) Railroad, later to become part of the Illinois Central rail system.

The Salem Camp Meeting was first held in 1826 and has met at the Salem Camp Ground the first week in October, with few exceptions, every year since (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, page 591). The Salem Academy was founded at Leaf around 1845 and closed in 1862. According to Rev. Jackson (Vol. II, page 203), “Salem School, near Leaf, was given a staggering blow by the Civil War and finished off by Yellow Fever.” The Salem Presbyterian Church was organized about 1850 (Jackson, Vol. II, page 682).

Another settlement, now extinct, was called McLeods, which was located on the east bank of the Leaf River. A post office was established there in 1838 with Norman McLeod its first postmaster. The post office was discontinued in 1867 as all

mail was being routed through State Line by way of Mobile after the Civil War ended.

State Line, located in the northeast corner of the county, about two miles from the Alabama line, was already considered the primary trading center for Greene County by the time of its founding in 1856. The town was incorporated in 1875 and currently straddles the Greene-Wayne County line. Its continued importance was assured by the opening of a post office that same year, which, by the 1870 Federal Census, served the entire county. Perhaps more importantly, the Mobile & Ohio (M. & O.) Railroad ran through it by the mid-1850's. Protection of this rail line led to the only documented skirmish between Confederate and Yankee forces in Greene County during the Civil War.

Vernal, the oldest settlement in Greene County according to Rev. Jackson (Vol. II, page 38), is an unincorporated community located about 12 miles southwest of Leakesville at the crossroads of the Federal Road and the Mobile to Natchez Road. It was named for one of its Scottish settlers and had previously been referred to as "Little Scotland" during the 1850's. McLeod was a prominent family name in this community. John Riley Bliss McIntosh and his wife Rachel McInnis owned and operated a store in the Vernal Community in the mid-1800s (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, page 475).

As of October 1, 1846, Vernal was one of three locations in Greene County with a post office. In 1893, Dan Norman McLeod was appointed postmaster at Vernal. He built a separate building out of lumber. A picture of this post office, which reportedly still exists, may be found in the Greene County Museum collection. The post office was phased out in March 1956.

The Vernal Presbyterian Church was organized in February 1880, with their first church building dedicated on 27 August 1882. Charter members included such family surnames as McLeod, Pipkins, McInnis, Cowart, Woodard, Box, Brown, and Hillman. According to Rev. Jackson, Dr. J.H. Thompson was the founder of the church and was head of the Salem Academy at Leaf until the Civil War (Vol. I, pages 72-73). The current building was built between 1906-08 and was added to the National Register of Historic Buildings in 2002.

The Vernal (Springs) Male and Female Academy was founded and incorporated in 1860 by the Rev. Richmond McInnis (1817-1881) (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, page 43). He brought Rev. James B. and Kate Smith of Illinois to operate the school. "Its career, though brief, was prosperous. Average attendance, about fifty; about one-fifth bo[a]rders. There was a small patronage from Alabama and Texas. (Goodspeed's, Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi: Vol. II, Part II. Goodspeed Publishing, Chicago, 1891; page 334)."

The Vernal School was mentioned in a Greene County Herald article appearing on January 8, 1904, indicating that public education was being provided in Vernal beginning in 1900-01 (Rev. James T. Dunnam, Volume II, Greene County Herald: 1904-09; January 2009). However, the Vernal School had its beginnings as early as 1895 when Rev. A.G. Ferguson came to preach and teach at Vernal Presbyterian Church.

The Vernal Consolidated Rural School was built, initially as a two-story building, in 1913. The second floor was removed in about 1933. Students were provided an education from grades one through eight. Once a student completed the eighth grade, they could attend Leakesville High or the Greene County Agricultural High School located in the Pine Level Community.

The school closed following the 1956-1957 academic year. The school building was designated a Mississippi Historic Landmark on July 18, 2002. Annual reunions continue to be held at the school the first Saturday in May (Patterson, Dorothy Mathis, Vernal Public School: History and Memories, 1913-1957; 2010).

The Bear Pond School was said to be located in Vernal, opening by 1907. According to Rev. Jackson (Vol. II, pages 101 and 109), the school was located on the Greene and George County line and served students from both counties. Evidently, the school closed following the 1912-1913 academic year as it was not listed among the Greene County Schools in the Herald after that time.

Just below Vernal was the Ball community, named for the concentration of Ball families who settled the area in the early to mid-1800s. However, one of the earliest settlers in the area (1808) was Colonel Josiah Skinner, for whom Skinner Creek was named (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, page 12). The creek runs under the present day Vernal River Road and behind the Pine Grove (now Missionary Baptist) Church.

James Sampson Ball claimed land in the area as early as 1835 and was operating a “stand” along the Mobile to Natchez Road during the Civil War. A stand served as a rest stop for travelers along the roads of the day. Travelers along the Natchez Trace today will see signs indicating where stands existed in years gone by. The Ball Stand, or tavern according to one author’s account, will play a role in the day and night before the skirmish between Confederate and Yankee forces just up the Vernal Road toward Leakesville in December 1864.

The Pine Grove Methodist Church was built in the Ball community in 1887 with the Tyra Augustus Ball family donating

an acre of land for the building. Charter members of the church included the Tyra Augustus Ball, William Washington Ball, and John Jefferson Ball families (all sons of James Sampson and Sarah Roberts Ball who had survived military service during the Civil War); the James Monroe Ball family (son of Tyra A. and Martha Stringfellow Ball), the Randle McInnis family, and the D. S. Williams family. In 1952, an additional half-acre was donated by Griffin Clanton Ball, youngest son of Tyra A. Ball, for a cemetery (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, pages 617-619). Services were held at the church until the congregation merged with the Methodist Church of Merrill in 1966. The combined congregations then established Grace United Methodist Church, which is located at the corner of Highway 98 and Vernal River Road. The Pine Grove Cemetery is now referred to as the Pine Grove/Grace Cemetery.

There was a post office in Ball, according to Rev. Jackson, which was near the spot in a picture of the “old Military Road running through Vernal...(Vol. II, page 557).” Rev. Jackson’s identification of the roadway as the “old Military Road” rather than the Federal Road was hopefully clarified in the previous article. The Ball Post Office operated from 1903 to 1912.

The last remaining Ball living in the community today, to my knowledge, is Mavis Ball Dungan, whose late husband, George L. Dungan, preserved the old post office and enclosed it in a building. This places the structure in close proximity to the Pine Grove Church and the Old Federal Road.

Buck Creek was represented on an 1863 map of Mississippi railroads and was located in the Washington/Neely vicinity. There was a post office there from 1856 to 1893.

The first settlers in the area that would later become the town of Leakesville were the John J. McInnis family. Leakesville, close to the Chickasawhay River and Paulding Road (one of the first federal roads to traverse the Piney Woods), was established as the new and present county seat in 1827. It was named for Walter Leake, who served as Governor of the State of Mississippi from 1822 to 1825 and later as a US Senator for the state. According to J.F.H. Claiborne's "Trip Through the Piney Woods" in 1840, there was no town other than the courthouse and jail.

The first Greene County Courthouse (in Leakesville) and all the County records were destroyed by fire on March 23, 1873. The second building was also lost to fire prior to 1899, when the third courthouse was constructed. A picture of this structure is also available in the Greene County Museum collection. The third building was demolished in the late 1930's to make way for the construction of the present courthouse, which was completed in 1939. The fourth floor of the Courthouse served as the County jail until a new jail was built behind the Courthouse in 1991. The fourth floor and former jail now serves as home to the Greene County Museum, which opened in 2004.

A post office was located at Leakesville in 1817, with Norman McDuffie serving as its first postmaster (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, page 49). Again, it was one of three locations in Greene County with a post office in 1846. A picture of an early Leakesville Post Office may be found in the Greene County Museum collection.

Leakesville was incorporated in January 1904 and was reported to have 123 residents at the time. The previous year 1903 saw the first railroad connection established when the Vinegar Bend Lumber Company extended their line to Leakesville, which subsequently connected to a line running to

Pascagoula. The Leakesville High School was scheduled to open in the fall of 1904 according to the Greene County Herald (Rev. Dunnam, Vol. II, p.8).

Access to Leakesville from the east necessitated crossing the Chickasawhay River. According to Rev. Jackson, John McInnis had the first ferry there (Vol. II, page 19). A ferry service between Leakesville and Vernal was begun by John Rory McLeod about 1860 (Rev. Jackson, Vol. II, page 20).

Old Avera was established prior to 1860 by Powell Avera and was located about a mile from the present town of Avera along the Chickasawhay River. Avera is located about 15 miles northeast of Leakesville and was formed in 1880. There will be more about Avera in a future article. The Avera Ferry was located four miles below the Avera store, at a place that would become Adamsville.

Adamsville was located on the west bank of the Chickasawhay River, half way between Leakesville and State Line. It was named for Dr. Bodo Otto Adams, who had a store at that location (Rev. Dunnam, Greene County Herald, Vol. 1, p. 8). An 1863 railroad map of Mississippi identifies a place called Adam's Store, and on an 1891 Mississippi County map it was referred to as Adamsville. A post office was established there in 1854 and was abolished on Sep 30, 1909 (Rev. Dunnam, Vol. II, p. 114). The Adamsville School continued to be listed in the newspaper as late as 1925-26.

Establishment of sawmills led to the development of many small towns and communities in Greene County during the late 1800's and early 1900's. These frequently short-lived towns will be presented in another chapter of Greene County history when

we take a look at the logging and timber industry and its impact on the county.