

Greene County History Part IV

Greene County During the American Civil War (1861-1865)

Following the election of Abraham Lincoln as the 16th President of the United States in November 1860, southern states began to schedule conventions to consider whether or not they would secede from the Union. These conventions were referred to as Conventions of Secession, in case there was any doubt as to the majority opinion as to their purpose. Each Mississippi County sent at least one delegate to Jackson on January 7, 1861 to determine the State's position. The number of delegates from each county was equivalent to the number of representatives they sent to the state legislature. Greene was one of many counties sending one delegate [Journal of the Mississippi State Convention, ..., January, 1861 (Jackson, 1861), 119-22]. There were 99 delegates in total.

T.J. (Tyra John) Roberts, a slave owner and owner of a ferry across the Chickasawhay River connecting portions of the Mobile to Natchez Road, was selected to represent the sentiments of the Greene County populace. A vote was taken on January 9, following "cordial" arguments for and against secession from the Union. Considerable opposition to secession came from "the Piney Woods (particularly Jones County), the Tennessee River hills, and the Mississippi River counties (Bettersworth, John K., Confederate Mississippi: The People and Policies of a Cotton State in Wartime, Louisiana State University Press, 1943; page 15)."

Ninety-eight delegates cast their vote on January 9, 1861; 84 voting in favor of the Ordinance of Secession, 14 delegates voted against it. As a result, Mississippi became the second state to secede from the Union- South Carolina being the first. The Ordinance of Secession was signed on January 15, 1861 by every delegate except two, who were reportedly absent (Bettersworth, John K., Ed., Mississippi in the Confederacy: As They Saw It, The Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi, Louisiana State University Press, 1961; pages 26, 27, 29, 32). Those who had voted against secession signed as a show of solidarity and state sovereignty.

Crowds outside the Capital Building began to celebrate and men immediately began to volunteer for service. Initially, there were more volunteers than could be properly equipped. Many supplied their own weapons and uniforms. These eager men volunteered for twelve months of service. "The enlistments of the first year of the war early surpassed the quota due the Confederate army from Mississippi. By autumn, 1861, Wiley P. Harris estimated that the state had already contributed between 25,000 and 26,000 troops from her 92,016 males over sixteen and under sixty years of age. Before the end of the war Mississippi swelled its total to approximately 78,000, and by that time all who could fight had been called on, regardless of age, for service. Some had even enlisted despite unfitness (Bettersworth, 1943, pages 251 and 252)."

As the end of the first 12 months of the war approached, many who had initially volunteered were ready to return to their homes and take care of their crops and families. They had served the "Cause" and that should have been sufficient. The War was not supposed to last any longer anyway.

The Confederacy was compelled to pass the Conscription Act of 1862, requiring all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 35 to enlist or face conscription. According to the Act, there were several exemptions to this law – clergy, large plantation owners with 20 or more slaves, overseers of larger plantations, government officials, judges, and newspapermen.

The Conscription Bureau was established by the Confederacy to return deserters to the Confederate forces (Bettersworth, 1943, p. 261). These "units" were comprised of small mounted companies of citizens and detailed conscripts, and the cooperation of the state militia (Bettersworth, 1943, p. 261). Men with wives and children and small farms reluctantly went off to war. "The rich man's war, and the poor man's fight," became a common reaction to the conscription process. It was not unusual for men to leave their military units to return home to plant/harvest crops, thus deserting the Army for short periods of time. Some would return to their units voluntarily, others had to be rounded up by the Conscription Bureau units.

As the War began, Mississippi families were ill prepared to meet their own needs much less the needs of an army. Weather conditions contributed to poor crops in 1860 and 1861. Union blockades of southern ports soon resulted in shortages of salt, other spices and coffee which lead to price-gouging (inflated prices). By 1862 Union raiders and, particularly following the surrender of Vicksburg in July 1863, Confederate deserters were roaming the countryside stealing livestock and anything else they needed, frequently destroying what they couldn't carry with them. The State Militia was left to protect women, children and property. The Militia was also charged with the duty of collecting supplies to feed and cloth the soldiers. As a result of this duty, subsistence farm families did not necessarily look forward to visits from the Militia.

The predominantly sandy soil in the Piney Woods counties of Jones, Perry and Greene produced no more than a quarter bale of cotton per acre. "In 1860, Jones County produced but 633 bales of cotton; Perry, 306; and Greene, 146. Of the 342 farmers in Jones County only 161 planted cotton at all in 1860 and no crop exceeded 22 bales. The contrast is even more striking in Greene County, where but 16 of the 213 farmers raised cotton (Bettersworth, 1943, p. 225)." Not surprisingly, many of the farms in the Piney Woods area were barely large enough to support the needs of the family. Many of the farmers were not interested in fighting for "states rights" let alone slavery. They preferred to be left alone. The issue of disloyalty to the Confederacy or sympathizing with the Union became a problem every county encountered from the moment of secession.

“Although there was some disloyalty in Clark and Wayne counties to the north and east of Jones, conditions were never so bad as in the two counties to the south, Perry and Greene. Even in 1861 Greene County had been terrorized by the McLeod brothers, who declared their support of Lincoln and went about stirring up the [Blacks] and threatening to poison the wells with strychnine. By 1864, when Captain Wirt Thomson went on furlough to his home in Greene County [Leaf], he found that every soldier who entered the region either was compelled to desert or was paroled by the outlaws on condition that he would not pilot the cavalry through the country. Soon the power of the disloyal had become so widespread that government depots were being pillaged; and ginhouses (sic), barns, and bridges---not to mention the county courthouse---had been burned (Bettersworth, 1943, pages 239 and 240).”

Vigilance Committees were established in each county to keep the disloyal in line and prevent slave uprisings. - -“At State Line O.J. Hood, whose Vigilance Committee was having trouble enforcing its decrees, wrote to Governor Pettus for advice.

Feeling a Little Delicacy in Resorting to Extreme Measures

I THUS ADDRESS YOU asking for advice. Will state the object of the advice as succinctly as I can. In this (Green) County live several brothers (McLeod) who have been notorious for using abolition sentiments for a year or two. And since the secession of our State from the Federal compact, have been continually abusing the south, wishing Abe Lincoln a final success &c. The Citizens finally formed themselves into a Vigilance Committee and all of our most prominent men are members,... in fact nearly every body wanted to join. A special committee was appointed to wait on four of the McLeods, notifying them to appear before the committee on 8th June. They appeared & were examined in the Court House, and the public [was] invited to see justice done. Were examined separately. Proof against them all will give you a little of the evidence. Allen McLeod has on several occasions swore that he would not fight for the south. Called Jeff Davis a Murderer, Scamp and Traitor and hoped that Lincoln would succeed in capturing him and take his of, &c, &c. Peter McLeod compares the [Blacks] to the children of Israel (sic) & says they sure to be free has been talking to R.D. M-----'s [Blacks] telling them they would soon be free. Also said there was a company of 7 or 800 men in Choctaw Co Ala (sic) who would fight against the south & slave owners. The Proof against the other two brothers about the same as above. One showed a penitent disposition & was let off. Action on two merely suspended for the present, & Peter was required to take the oath to support the Confederate States of America or leave the State in thirty days. He now refuses to do either. I am chairman of the Committee and feeling a *little* delicacy in resorting to extreem (sic) measures however great the crime might be without some high authority. Have taken the liberty of asking from you a work (sic) of council. Please answer soon as our next meeting will be on 8th July.

----O.J. Hood to Pettus, June 19, 1861, Gov Corr.,
file E-52 (Bettersworth, 1961, pages 293-294).”

Conditions in the State greatly deteriorated following the fall of Vicksburg and Jackson in 1863. Coastal counties were controlled by Union forces early, then the Mississippi River by July 1863.

The Pearl River swamps became a haven for deserters (Betterworth, 1943, p. 240), as did the swamps of lower Greene County. According to a family tradition story by M.H. Ball, writing in the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a dense, wooded island located in the Bear Pond. This Pond is located near what is now the Greene-George County line, close to the Bexley community and the Old Mobile Road. The island served as a “hideout” for deserters, men who came home to see to the needs of their families during the war. When the coast was clear from raiders sent to capture and return the men to the Army, their wives would hang a white sheet out to signal them. Horns or bugles were reportedly used in the Pearl River swamps for the same purpose.

The War comes to Greene County: There was one confrontation between Confederate and Union troops that occurred in Greene County during the waning months of the War. At least three versions or accounts of this encounter were found from research as well as a related account by one of Tyra J. Roberts’ slaves and recorded by a WPA worker circa 1930s.

The “Battle of McLeod’s Mill” was described in a letter by a Yankee soldier to a friend and reproduced by Brent Waller, former Commander of Greene County’s Gaines Warriors, Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), Camp #2215, on August 1, 2012 via the internet. Another version of the “Battle of Vernal” was written by Jim Kirkpatrick and reproduced in W. Howell Jackson’s By the Rivers of Water: History of George County, Mississippi, Vol. II; 1982, pages 469-473. A third version, entitled “The Battle of Sand Creek,” was written by M.H. Ball and referenced Edwin C. Bearss’ Decision in Mississippi; Mississippi Commission on the War Between the States; Pioneer Press, Little Rock, 1962 (pages 501-529).

It was late November 1864 when Union Major General Edward R.S. Canby (headquartered in New Orleans) was ordered to disrupt and or destroy the major supply lines for Confederate General Hood’s Army of the Tennessee. The Mobile & Ohio (M. & O.) Railroad, running south to north from Mobile to Meridian, was the primary objective. At this point in the War, Mobile Bay had fallen to the Union Navy (August 1864), yet the City of Mobile remained under Confederate control with Major General Dabney H. Maury commanding. The M. & O. Railroad from Mobile north to Selma (a major munitions center) also continued to be controlled by the Confederacy.

Major General Canby assigned General John W. Davidson the task of cutting the M. & O. rail lines. Dividing his 4,000-man cavalry in to two divisions, one lead by Brigadier General Joseph Bailey, the other by Colonel Edmund J. Davis; Davidson and his troops departed Baton Rouge on November 27, 1864. They marched through Greensburg and Tangipahoa, where they destroyed public buildings and the rail center for the New Orleans, Jackson and Great Northern Railroads (now the Illinois Central). They captured and occupied Franklinton, Louisiana on December 1, having taken five days to travel the

80 miles from Baton Rouge. By December 4, the Union forces had traversed the swamps and rain-swollen Pearl River to camp at Columbia, Mississippi.

After a brief encampment at Columbia, the Union forces continued on toward Augusta on the Leaf River. They crossed at the old academy town of Enon, about twelve miles west of Augusta. According to the Yankee letter writer, the Union troops met with some mild resistance from Confederate soldiers firing at them from the east bank as they began to ferry across. The Union forces camped at Augusta on the evening of the 8th.

Confederate scouts reported on the Union Army's line of march, leading Major General Maury to move all available troops to protect the M. & O. rail lines, particularly between Buckatunna and Winchester. Confederate Colonel Robert McCulloch, with about 1,200 men and one artillery battery left the Mobile garrison at daybreak on the 8th for Leakesville, where he was to establish his base of operations. He was to be joined there by the 15th Confederate Cavalry and Tobin's Tennessee Battery, who were on route from Blakely, Alabama (Bearss, p. 517).

Couriers for Union General Davidson notified him of the massing of Confederate troops ahead of him. This information was confirmed through one of the Mobile newspapers found in the Augusta post office reporting on Davidson's troop strength, line of march, and probable objective (Bearss, p. 524). Not wishing to engage the Confederates with his entire army, Davidson sent Colonel Asa L. Gurney with the 2nd New York, the 1st Louisiana (Union), and a detachment of the 11th New York on a raiding mission. This maneuver was referred to as a "flying column." The plan was for this smaller force to cross the Leaf River at Moody's Ferry and the Chickasawhay River at Roberts' Ferry; move north to Leakesville and on to Buckatunna or Winchester and the M. & O. rail line. General Davidson would lead the remaining troops down the west bank of the Leaf River to Fairley's Ferry on the Pascagoula River. Crossing the river at this point, Davidson's troops would head east to cut the rail line at Citronelle, Alabama. In the event that Colonel Gurney's raid was unsuccessful, he was to rejoin Davidson at Fairley's Ferry (Bearss, p. 524).

Gurney's troopers left Augusta on December 9 in a cold, driving rain (Bearss, p. 525). They advanced across the Chickasawhay at Roberts' Ferry without resistance, turned north at James Sampson Ball's Tavern (Stand), crossed Skinner Creek at the Robert Cooley Bridge, passing the Vernal Academy, and continued up the Old River Road toward Leakesville. According to the Yankee soldier's letter, Gurney's column spent the night at Roberts Ferry and crossed the Chickasawhay River on December 10 without incident.

Four Confederate pickets had been stationed at Roberts Ferry to warn Colonel McCulloch of the Union advance. Unfortunately, Gurney's cavalry captured them all. Gurney left the 1st Louisiana to protect Roberts' Ferry in the event that he needed to retreat back across the River (Bearss, p. 525). On December 10, the remaining Union forces of New Yorkers advanced unopposed until they came to Ken McLeod's place on

the Sand Creek, four miles south of Leakesville. Here they were met by two crack units of Colonel McCulloch's cavalry, the 2nd Missouri and Willis' Texas Cavalry Battalion.

Colonel Gurney ordered his men to form their battle lines in the open fields on either side of the road. The Confederate troops were positioned on the heavily wooded banks of the Sand Creek. Both sides had light field artillery that went into action before the Union troops charged the Confederate position. McCulloch's men, firing from behind trees, more than held their own. "The Federals were forced to give ground (Bearss, p. 525)." Civilians informed Gurney that McCulloch had 2,500 men and with his troops unable to fight their way through the Confederates at Sand Creek, Gurney decided to extract his men and rejoin Davidson's column at Fairley's Ferry. He sent a courier to inform the 1st Louisiana at Roberts' Ferry to rejoin them. While Bearss' account does not mention the destruction of the ferryboat at Roberts' place, it would seem likely that it was not left operable.

It was a relatively bloodless skirmish with but few casualties on either side, according to Bearss' account (p. 525). There were two known Confederate soldiers and one Union soldier buried on Floyd McLeod's place near the battle, while others were buried along the route Gurney and his men took to rejoin General Davidson at Fairley's Ferry on the Pascagoula River.

Two of the dead soldiers, one Union, the other Confederate, were dragged some 200 yards from the creek and buried together in an old wagon bed. The Leakesville American Legion Post placed stone markers at the site in 1946.

Local folklore tells of residents attending to wounded soldiers from both sides of the conflict. A wounded Union soldier known only as Bennett received care in the home of Roderick McLeod, while a Confederate soldier, Joe Burns, was cared for in the home of Joseph Green. According to the Yankee soldier letter writer, the wounded union soldier's name was Private David Bennett, whom the Union doctor said would not live through the night.

Ken McLeod was said to have taken in a wounded Union soldier, who soon died from his wounds. In order to conceal the act of harboring one of the enemy from the neighbors, the soldier was buried under the front steps.

Juda Dantzler, a former slave for Tyra Roberts, was reportedly eleven years old at the time of the Yankee raid in early December 1864. She recounted in an interview conducted by Lara B. Robinson in the 1930s and reproduced by Ancestry.com in "The Slave Narratives": "A great number of northern men came riding in on horseback to raid the homes of the southerners. They went in and fed their horses and the corn they did not use, they were determined to destroy, so they set fire to the cribs and burned the remainder, while part of them raided the house, turning over beds and searching everywhere for money. They ask where Master Roberts was, said they wanted to kill him for he was the greatest secessioner (sic). They broke into his safe and got the money and papers. He said there was about \$400 in all. One man took the money (the man in

charge) and another took the papers and threw them in the fire. I snatched them out, he jerked them from my hands and threw them in again. I snatched them out again, and he pulled out his bayonet from his belt and said, "I'll cut your head off, you devilish brat." The boss man said, "Let that kid alone."

"By this time some were firing the beds that were on the floor. A man was stationed at each corner of the house ready to set fire to it. Ma begged the boss not to burn the house for that was all that she had left, so he was kind enough to ask his men to stop and not burn any more. I put the fire out that was on the beds. They killed all the livestock that was at home except two or three chickens that were hidden under the house, destroyed all the potatoes and all the bee hives, and when they left they took the prettiest and choicest quilts and made flags of them, went down to the river and destroyed the ferry and the boats, then went to Sandy Branch where they met the 1,000 southern men who were encamped there and had a little skirmish near Roderick McLeod's in which they lost three men, two were killed and one wounded. The two that were killed, one was a sergeant, the other a private. Both were buried in Mr. Jim Davis' yard and later moved I know not where. The wounded man was taken care of by a Mr. McLeod."

"Master Roberts came home in about thirty days and built another ferryboat, which my father ran most of the time. When someone would come and holler to be ferried across the river, many times they would send me to see how the person was dressed before anyone would go to ferry them across the river."

While not the most accurate account of the battle, but certainly the most colorful version, was written by Mr. Kirkpatrick. According to his account, "Colonel Gurney's division crossed the Leaf River at Moody's Ferry and then proceeded to the Chickasawhay River, which they crossed at Robert's Ferry. Before they were allowed to cross the river, Colonel Gurney had to promise the operator that he and his family would not be harmed. This agreement was necessary since the owner's house and the boat itself were on the opposite side of the river from Gurney. Colonel Gurney did live up to his promise but before leaving he did find it necessary to remove the bottom from the boat so they could not be out-flanked.".... "After Gurney crossed the Chickasawhay River he headed toward Leakesville. Somewhere between the ferry and Vernal the Yankees came upon a tavern owned by Jim Ball. Without thinking of the consequences, they drank all the liquor in the tavern!".... "When they were forced to continue on their mission, it was obvious that their morale was low and that they were in no condition to fight. They continued to go on, however, and when they reached Sandy Branch, which is just a few miles south of Leakesville, they met the Confederates and the battle of Vernal was undertaken.".... "The Battle itself ended at Dickerson's Creek. The Union column was left in shambles and they hastily returned to the rest of their division which was positioned along the Black Creek. When they reached the Pascagoula River they attempted to cross at Fairley's Ferry. There, they had to make a deal similar to the one they had to make at Robert's Ferry. They promised Mrs. Alexander Fairley, who ran the ferry, that they would not harm her if she agreed to cook a large amount of sweet potatoes for Gurney's army. She agreed and was left in peace."

Reenactment of the battle/skirmish of McLeod's Mill/Sand Creek/Sandy Branch/Vernal has been held on a weekend approximating December 10 for the past few years. A monument commemorating Greene County soldiers who fought in the Civil War, a large part of whom were part of the 24th Mississippi Infantry, Company A (known as Gaines Warriors), was dedicated on December 12, 2015 in front of the County Courthouse. Captain William Wirt Thomson of Leaf (with Company A, 24th Mississippi) was captured at the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee (November 30, 1864); was paroled and returned home following the conclusion of the War; and later (1874-1875) served as a representative of Greene County in the State legislature. The current Commander of SCV Camp #2215, Gaines Warriors is Kenny Smith of Leakesville.

Some of the soldiers listed on the back of the new monument were part of the 9th Mississippi Cavalry, which was mustered in at Augusta, Perry County. Information pertaining to the history of this group may be obtained through SCV Camp #1748, located in Lucedale, Mississippi.

Part V of the Greene County history series will present the rise and fall of the timber industry in Greene County. Beginning in the mid 1800s, really escalating at the turn of the 20th century, and ending with the "Great Depression" or early 1930s, the timber industry provided a major boom for the economy of Greene County. While the timber industry continues to bolster the local economy, it pales in comparison to this earlier period in Greene County history.