

DRAFT

## History of Greene County Part II

By  
Brooks Ball

### Early Settlement

Following the end of the Revolutionary War, when families were returning to their pre-war activities/routine, an interest in finding new, more fertile land to cultivate, or to seek greater opportunities to start a new life, or to make a better living began to manifest among the population of the eastern seaboard states.

Agricultural lands had been exhausted from years of planting the same crops, season after season. Ignorant of the concept of crop rotation, it was more profitable to buy new land and repeat the process elsewhere.

About this time, late 1700's and early 1800's, lands to the west were beginning to be made available for settlement. These lands in the southwest, which would be referred to later as the "Old Southwest," had previously been claimed by the French, the English, and most recently by Spain before Georgia and, finally, the United States. Earlier settlers had claimed lands from these countries and had, in many cases, documented land grants from one of them. In what was to become the Mississippi Territory, British claims covered the most valuable lands (Claiborne, J.F.H., Mississippi As A Province, Territory, And State, Reprint of the 1880 edition by The Reprint Company, 1978; p.295). Spain was processing land claims until the United States forced them to vacate the lands they occupied (the Natchez district) in 1798 and, what was Spanish West Florida in 1812-1813.

The State of Georgia, formerly a British colony, in 1785, laid claim to these southwestern lands from the 31<sup>st</sup> parallel in the south, to the “Yazoo line” (mouth of the Yazoo River) to the north and to the Mississippi River on the west and the Chattahoochee River on the east. This area of land was established as Bourbon County Georgia. In 1789 and again in 1795, the Georgia legislature sold land in this area to at least three “favored” land companies (Haynes, Robert V., “The Disposal of Lands in the Mississippi Territory,” The Journal of Mississippi History, Vol. XXIV, 1962; as included in A Mississippi Reader: Selected Articles from The Journal of Mississippi History, Edited by John E. Gonzales, 1980; p. 5). As it was learned that all but one of the Georgia legislators owned interest in these land companies, corruption ruled the day. Legitimacy of these land claims was made even more questionable when land companies sold their claims to other land speculators. This debacle was later referred to as the “Yazoo Fraud.”

While Winthrop Sargent, first appointed governor of the Mississippi Territory, was attempting to organize a government; old settlers with primarily British land claims were becoming restless and newcomers were being forced to squat on public lands, settle on Indian lands, or move into Spanish Territory (Haynes, p. 6). Uncertainty regarding who had a legitimate claim to their land was later thought to be one of the key factors delaying settlement of the Mississippi Territory and subsequently delaying the establishment of statehood.

Congress passed a land act on March 3, 1803, which helped settle British and Spanish land grants as well as established two land districts for the Mississippi Territory. Each land district was appointed “two land commissioners who would dispose of the lands and decide on conflicting claims, a register to record all grants, and a surveyor general who would supervise the resurveying of all land claims and the laying off into townships and half sections any land subsequently acquired from the Indians (Haynes, p. 9).”

Jean Strickland and Patricia N. Edwards provide a brief but thorough account of how lands were distributed by the United States

government from territorial times through statehood in the introduction to their book, Who Lived Where: Greene County Mississippi, Book of Original Entry published in 1989. A copy of this book is one of many resources available in the Greene County Museum.

Prior to the establishment of the Mississippi Territory, settlers had migrated into two primary areas- the Natchez area on the west and the lower Tombigbee River settlements above and west of Mobile. The Natchez area far exceeded the lower Tombigbee settlements in population in 1800. There were approximately 4,500 people including slaves living in the Natchez area and only approximately 1,250 combined free and slave populating the lower Tombigbee area. At the time Greene County was established in 1811, the total population of the western portion of the Territory, including Greene County, was 31,306- nearly half, or 14,706 of whom were slaves (Lowery, Charles D., "The Great Migration to the Mississippi Territory, 1798-1819," originally published in The Journal of Mississippi History, Vol. XXX in 1968 and included in A Mississippi Reader: Selected Articles from The Journal of Mississippi History; pages 68-88).

The seat of government of the Mississippi Territory had been moved from Natchez to Washington, a small town six miles east of Natchez, in 1801. It was here that the land claims office for the western or Natchez district of the Territory was established. The Natchez District was comprised of land west of the Pearl River and east of the Mississippi River.

The eastern district office was established at St. Stephens, originally a Spanish fort and outpost (Fort San Esteban) established on the west bank of the lower Tombigbee River 67 miles north of Mobile in 1789. There were reportedly 190 white settlers and 97 slaves living around the fort by 1796. The Spanish relinquished the fort to the United States as a result of the Treaty of San Lorenzo (1795) on May 5, 1799. A government trading house was erected here in 1802 for the purpose of providing goods for sale to the

Indians of the area (Lewis, Herbert J. "Old St. Stephens". Encyclopedia of Alabama. Auburn University).

The land claims office at St. Stephens was active from 1806 to 1817, when it was relocated to Augusta in Perry County- thought to be a more centrally located site to serve claimants as far west as the eastern banks of the Pearl River. This was also the year that Mississippi established statehood with an eastern boundary line placing St. Stephens in the Alabama Territory.

According to J.F.H. Claiborne, prior to 1805, when treaties between the United States and the Cherokee, Choctaw, and the Creek Indians were negotiated, settlers traveling by land into or through the Mississippi Territory typically followed one of several primary Indian paths/trails. "One of these trails ran from Knoxville, in East Tennessee, through the Tombigbee settlements to Mobile. One from the shores of Lake Pontchartrain to the Tombigbee. One from the Ocmulgee [R]iver to Fort Stoddart. One from Natchez to Fort Stoddart, on [the] Tombigbee, and thence to Pensacola. And one (the most traveled), from Natchez to the Grindstone ford, on Bayou Pierre, thence through the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations, to Colbert's ferry on [the] Tennessee [R]iver; thence to [the] Duck [R]iver and Nashville.... It was not until 1807 that the first wagon road from St. Stephens, on the Tombigbee, to Natchez, was located and opened...(Claiborne, p. 263)."

The treaties of 1805 stipulated that the three Indian nations "conceded the privilege of opening roads through their respective districts (Claiborne, p. 263)." The Federal Road from eastern Georgia had a southern and a northern route- the northern route, initially called the Georgia Road, passed through Cherokee Indian lands and connected Savannah, Georgia with Knoxville, Tennessee. Settlers could travel south from Nashville, Tennessee via the Natchez Trace or, by 1820, via Jackson's Military Road.

The southern branch of the Federal Road began at Fort Wilkinson close to Milledgeville, Georgia and ran through the Creek Indian Nation to Fort Stoddert, established by the United States in

July 1799, on the upper Mobile River. Trails branched off this road south to Mobile and north to Fort St. Stephens [Whitaker, Beverly (Genealogy Tudor), "The Federal Road," 2006]. The Three-Chopped Way was reportedly established in 1807 and connected Natchez with St. Stephens east to Burnt Corn. While not clearly documented, apparently the Three Chopped Way was incorporated into the Federal Road by 1811.

There was also a trail running from Mobile, which intersected with the Three Chopped Way/Federal Road. It was this road that Andrew Jackson and his men took from Mobile to New Orleans in late 1814. According to General Jackson's aide, Major Howell Tatum, who kept a detailed account of the expedition, on November 23, 1814 the troops halted for the night at Jordans Ferry on the Dog River. On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the expedition crossed the Dog River and marched three miles where the road forked. Taking the left fork five miles brought them to the Federal Road (running from St. Stephens to the Pearl River). Another three miles brought them to a fork, which branched right to "Gattins" Ferry on the Chickasawhay River. "Gattins" Ferry was located approximately ten miles north of where the Chickasawhay and Leaf Rivers join to form the Pascagoula River. The morning of November 25, the expedition crossed the Chickasawhay River, marched seven miles to "Otebbayboy Creek," traveled down the creek a mile to Hogans Ferry on the Leaf River.

Major Tatum did not mention any settlements along the route General Jackson's troops encountered on their march from Mobile to New Orleans in November 1814. Based on Major Tatum's account of the Chickasawhay and Leaf River crossings, the first may have been where the Roberts' Ferry operated prior to and during the Civil War. The latter crossing could well have been where the community of Leaf, also known as Salem, is located. Leaf was originally settled in 1847 and is located six miles south of McLain.

Two descendants of early families who settled in the area of "Lower Greene" County, Tommy Brown and Joe James, graciously took this author on a short hike behind what was originally the Pine Grove Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) Church (currently the Pine Grove

Missionary Baptist Church). This property lies where the Vernal River and the Ford James Roads intersect. They pointed out an old, sunken roadbed, which they understood, from local lore, to be part of the old Jackson Military Road.

However, upon further research on the matter, the “official” Jackson Military Road passed through Wayne County north of Greene, then on to New Orleans. Based on the location of the old roadbed behind the church and cemetery, it is more likely that it served as part of the Federal Road General Jackson and his troops traveled between Mobile and New Orleans in 1814. This stretch of roadbed is also located in close proximity to where the Mobile-Natchez and Federal Roads would have intersected. The area surrounding this intersection would become the Vernal Community with one of the three post offices in Greene County in 1846.

Settlers migrating to the Mississippi Territory from the eastern seaboard states of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia traveled by way of boat, horse, wagon, and foot. Those traveling by land were encouraged to obtain “safe passage” through the Creek Indian Nation. The Creeks controlled most of the eastern portion of the Mississippi Territory from the Oconee River to the Alabama River. Passports were granted upon request from the Governor of Georgia. Records of these passports are available for those seeking information on their ancestors through the Georgia State Archives or Bryan, Mary G., Index to “Passports Issued by Governors of Georgia, 1785-1820;” National Genealogical Society Quarterly, 1977; Vol. 45: 158.

The Federal Census for 1830 recorded a total population of 1,854 for Greene County. A very modest increase in total population was recorded in the 1850 Federal Census of 2,018. How many of these two totals represented slaves were not delineated, although there were a few Greene County settlers who were known to have slaves.

Part III in this series pertaining to Greene County history will take a look at the population dispersion of the early settlers. Some of

the earliest towns/villages and communities where they tended to congregate will be located and described.

