EARLY HISTORY OF HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA 1804 TO 1870

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EDWARD CHAMBERS BETTS

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BY
EDWARD CHAMBERS BETTS
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FOREWORD

In the preparation of this work the author is largely indebted to the Department of Archives and History of Alabama, under the capable management of Dr. Thomas M. Owen, who contributed liberally of his time assisting in a search of the files and records of this Department. Especially is the author indebted for the aid received from the letters of Judge Thomas J. Taylor,* dealing with this subject.

In its inception this work was not intended for, nor is it offered as, a literary effort, but merely as a chronicle of historical facts and events dealing with Huntsville. In its preparation, the author has taken care to record nothing within its pages for which his authority as to the source of information is not given. It has value only as a documentary record of facts and events gleaned chiefly from contemporaneous sources, and is as accurate as could be made after verification from all material at hand, which was necessarily very meager.

This work is published with the hope that those who chance to read these pages will derive some benefit and as much pleasure therefrom as did the author in its preparation.

E. C. B.

*Probate Judge of Madison County from 1886 until his death, during his second term, in 1894.

CONTENTS

	Page
Foreword	3

CHAPTER I.

Huntsville and Surrounding Territory	5
First Settlers	6
Life of Early Settlers	7

CHAPTER II.

Land Sales in 1809	11
Laws Extended Over Madison County	14
Courts	19
Purchasers at Land Sales of 1809	21
Establishment and Founding of Twickenham	23
Name Changed to Huntsville	25

CHAPTER III.

People and Events Occupying History's Stage Between 1810 and 1816	28
The Period Between 1817 and 1821	32
Territorial Constitutional Convention	35
Educational	38

CHAPTER IV.

Economic, Political and Social Conditions from 1820 to 1861	45
Commercial Development	45
Historic Landmarks	50
Economic Status of Slavery as an Institution	52
Transportation—Canal Building—Railroads	61
Civic and Public Institutions—Histrionic—Militia	73
Religious and Educational—Churches—Schools—Newspapers	77
Makers of National, State and Local History	82

CHAPTER V.

Civil War and Reconstruction	88
Disunion Sentiment and Secession	92
Conditions, During the War and Resulting from Federal Raid in 1862	95
Prominent Deserters and Tories	100
Conditions Toward Close of the War	102
Freedman's Bureau—Banks	104
Reconstruction	111
Ku-Klux Klan and Cause Therefor	114

Chapter I.

HUNTSVILLE AND SURROUNDING TERRITORY

UNTIL March 3, 1817, Alabama was a part of the Mississippi Territory. Between the years 1795 and 1796 certain land companies purchased this territory from the state of Georgia. The Georgia Legislature granted title to these land companies for a comparatively nominal consideration—the major portion of which the Legislature itself received and withheld from the state.

Madison county was purchased by the Tennessee Land Company; nearly all of North Alabama being included in the grant from the Georgia Legislature.

The people of Georgia, upon being apprised of the grants made by the Legislature of 1795-96, rose with righteous indignation and had the action of that Legislature investigated, revealing what was known as the "Great Yazoo Fraud." This fraud was denominated the Yazoo fraud, for the reason that the Yazoo Land Company was the principal grantee of that Legislature. The succeeding Legislature revoked these grants and declared them null and void. Notwithstanding this, these land companies continued to sell the lands in the granted territory for one dollar an acre.

The state of Georgia was unable to force these land companies to relinquish their hold upon the territory, and in order to accomplish this end was forced to cede this territory to the General Government on April 24th, 1802. Wherever title to any of these lands had been acquired by private individuals, restitution was made by the Government.

In order that individuals might retain and perfect the title to their lands it was necessary for them to file their claims with the Government Land Office, at Nashville, Tennessee, before January 1, 1815. All parties not having done this were forced by United States troops to abandon the land.

Although the Mississippi Territory had been ceded to the Government in 1802, "Old Madison county" never came into possession of the Government till 1807, when it was ceded by both Cherokee and Chickasaw Indians. Both these Indian tribes claimed it as their hunting ground, but it was never inhabited by either.

The territory just referred to as "Old Madison county," is embraced in the present limits of Madison county, but was not quite so extensive.

Madison county is unique among the other original counties of the State, in that it is the only county ever to extend its boundaries, all of the other original counties having had to contract theirs to make room for the creation of new ones, as the growth of the State necessitated.

FIRST SETTLERS

As to who was the first white man to settle in Madison county is yet a mooted question, but circumstances lead to the belief that "Old Man Ditto" was living among the Indians as a trader at "Ditto's Landing," (Cherokee-Old-Fields or Whitesburg) some years before Huntsville was located.

That John Hunt was the first white man to build his hut on the banks of the "Big Spring," is historically settled. Hunt's cabin was situated on the slope of the bluff overlooking the spring, at the point which is now the southwest corner of the intersection of Bank street and Oak avenue, on the property occupied by the residence of Mr. Frank Murphy. Incidents and circumstances attending Hunt's journey to the Big Spring confirm the belief that there were white settlers in Madison county, north of Huntsville, before the arrival of Hunt.

Judge Taylor, in his letters dealing with early life in Madison county, tells us that Joseph and Isaac Criner, accompanied by Stephen McBroom, explored the northern part of the county in 1804[1] and built a hut on the banks of a stream, which is now known as Mountain Fork of Flint river. Isaac Criner was personally known to Judge Taylor, and in his letters he gives us Mr. Criner's narrative of the events of those early days in his own words. In substance Mr. Criner says: In the early part of 1805[2] he and Joseph, his brother, came to Mountain Fork and built a cabin[3] for Joseph's family, then one for himself. Shortly after the erection of these cabins, John Hunt

[1] and [2] These dates seem to conflict, and Judge Taylor does not explain them for us; however, it is very probable that the Criners with McBrooms explored the country and then returned to their homes for their families and supplies, before erecting cabins. This inference is supported by the fact that only the Criners were present when the houses were erected, and also in the first instance no mention is made of the presence of their families.

[3] Mr. Criner was under the impression that his brother Joseph's cabin was the first erected in the county.

and a man named Bean came to their cabins and spent the night, continuing their journey the next morning.

Hunt and Bean came from the north of what is now New Market, along a trail, which is now the Winchester, Tennessee, road. They had heard of the "Big Spring,"[4] and of the abundance of big game in its vicinity. In a few weeks Bean returned and stated that he was going back to what is now Bean creek, near Salem, Tennessee, but that Hunt was going to locate at the "Big Spring," and would return and bring his family later. Mr. Criner also tells us that in 1805 several families came into the county from north of New Market, along the same course traversed by Hunt; among whom were the Walkers, Davises, McBrooms and Reeses.

These early settlers got word back to their former friends and neighbors of the unusual fertility of the soil, the beauty of the country, and of the wonderful "Big Spring," and in 1806, large numbers of home-seekers began to come into the county from Middle and East Tennessee, and Georgia. These pioneers were of the types usually found on unsettled frontiers, "the advance guard of civilization," known as "squatters." They were a very thrifty lot, and at the Government land sales in 1809 many were able to buy the tracts upon which they had "squatted" and made their homes. As a whole they were an honest, law-abiding people, modest in their desires and customs, living peaceably without law or government for some years.

Between the years 1805 to 1809 wealthy and cultured slave owners came into the county in large numbers from North Carolina, Georgia and Virginia. Soon this class outnumbered the pioneers; these later settlers bought large tracts of land at the sales in 1809. In coming into the county, the settlers from North Carolina and Virginia moved along the then western boarder of civilized customs and cultivated lands into West Georgia and Middle Tennessee, till they reached the Tennessee river, which they crossed near the Georgia line.

LIFE OF EARLY SETTLERS

The life of these pioneers was very primitive; they drew solely on the resources of the surrounding wilderness for their necessities and comforts. Their houses seldom had a piece

[4] The Huntsville Spring was known of the Indians as the "Big Spring," and was thus denominated by them.

of iron about them. The floors were of dirt, and in rare instances this was covered with puncheon. Even the hinges of their doors were of wood. The walls of the houses being built of logs.

Instead of fastening the covering upon roofs, with nails, lengthy poles were placed across the boards, and weighted down at the ends. Owing to the scarcity of adequate tools and hardware supplies, the houses were necessarily very small, one-room structures. The small huts served to house families, which, in many instances, were greatly out of proportion to their size, for be it remembered, in those days families were large and in this particular settlement legend records that they were unusually large.

As families increased in size, and necessity demanded, rooms were added to the family hut—but without increasing its exterior dimensions—by the simple process of stringing up another buckskin curtain, which served to partition off the new room. The erstwhile "feather-tick," upon the bed was not one of the luxuries of which these early settlers could boast, at all events, the entire family could not; for the younger children were bedded upon pallets, and as the family continued to increase in numbers, the larger boys slept in the barn loft, and legend has it, even under trees and most anywhere. History in its record of customs and usages, which prevailed in those early days, suggests the existence of a milder climate then, than now.

The prevailing table-ware was constructed of hewn wooden utensils, though some of the wealthy settlers possessed pewter ware.

For some time these pioneers lived a life of freedom from tilling of the soil, subsisting the while in sumptuous complacency upon the abundant provisions of nature. However, after a time they realized the unusual fertility of the soil, and then clearing of land was commenced, and corn was planted.

There being no grist mills at which their corn could be ground into meal, resort was had to the age-old custom, in primitive quarters, of using a crude mortar and pestle, made by hollowing out a hard stump in which they pounded the corn into meal. Little or no wheat was planted, and they lived for a time without flour; however, when the population grew, flour was shipped in from the trading station at Ditto's Landing (Whitesburg).

During the first years of the settlement all supplies received from the outside world were transported in by pack mules from the settlements further north; later, practically all supplies were shipped from these settlements further north, down the Tennes-