

Early Settlers of Geneva County

Among the interesting early settlers we've found in our research is Juan Ortis, who might have been the first white man in this section. Neil McKinnon was the man who directed the Scotch settlement of the renowned Euchee Valley and helped to found the Valley View Presbyterian Church. From it came the churches at Geneva, Hartford and Immanuel, east of Slocomb.

From the enchanted Euchee Valley many settlers came to the western section of the Wiregrass. This accounts for the many Mc names in the western section of Geneva County and for other Scotch names. Gum Creek or Ebenezer Church at Glendale and Eight Mile Church were derived from these settlers.

Most of Geneva County's early towns were on rivers, as is Newton, Geneva, Elba, Eufaula, Columbia and Gordon. Riverboats supplied their necessities in the early days. Richmond, near Wiggins Church, was the first county seat for Henry and Dale Counties, but when Dale was formed, Daleville soon became its county seat. But the first court was held at the home of Crede Collins, west of Daleville.

The early settlers in the east end of Geneva County came largely from the Carolinas and Georgia and crossed the river at Eufaula. Among these were the Dowlings, Sconyers, Broxsons, Sellers and Smiths, some of whom helped organize Claybank Church and Providence at the flowing well. The Byrds were most prominent in this movement.

The Pate Creek Settlement was led by the Pates, Sellers, Kinsauls and Tindells. Jeremiah Pate was with Jackson at New Orleans. John Kinsaul, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, helped to organize Mt. Gilead Church. All were prominent in the early churches while Thomas Sellers opened one of the earliest schools in the Wiregrass, organized the Tindell School at County Line.

Today these pioneers, Jeremiah Pate, John Kinsaul, Thomas Sellers, Jerry Tindell and Ben Thomley are all buried near each other in Mt. Gilead Cemetery in the community they founded. Also buried there is Euastus Justice, grandfather of Dr. B. R. Justice, pastor of Enterprise Baptist Church for some 25 years.

Another famous settlement is the Big Creek Community now in Houston County, originally Beat Two, Geneva County. This was established under the leadership of James W. Smith, whose son, Daniel U. Smith carried on the pioneer work. Among his sons were Henry, Bill, Levi, Aaron, Frank, Daniel and others who had as their work, the post office, school, church, polling place and several stores. Today nothing much remains but Big Creek Church and its well kept cemetery.

To the west is New Hope Primitive Baptist Church where many of the Smith family sleep peacefully. Elder H. A. Smith was an able minister of that faith. In the old days about three-fourths of the voters in Beats Two and Four were named Smith or belonged to the famous clan. When Houston County was formed in 1903, Beats One and Two were added to the baby county of Alabama.

Perhaps the earliest settler in what is now Geneva County lived in Geneva. Henry Yonge became its postmaster in 1836.

Aunt Polly Turner, a noted slave owner was born in 1822 and married John A. Hughes, Sr., as Mary Bass and became the mother of the famous Hughes family of Hartford. She lived with her husband in Selma until 1848 when he died and then she moved back to Geneva where she married Love Turner. She is another of the famous early members of Mt. Gilead Church and was known far and wide as she rode her pony over her extensive farms. She is buried at Mt. Gilead.

James B. Ward was a noted confidence man among the Creek Indians and married a charming maiden of that tribe. He did much to keep peace. He was born in 1796 and as an adult worked in Savannah, Natchez, Wakefield and Daleville. He worked untiringly as he labored with both Indians and whites for peace. He and his Indian wife sleep peacefully beneath charming shrubbery on the Purvis Farm north of Malvern. The farm is now owned by Randall Collins, whose mother was a Purvis. Many of their descendents occupy positions of renown in the Wiregrass.

Submitted by: Book Committee

Sources: This article appeared in The Geneva Reaper and was written by Mr. J. J. Collins, now deceased.

Indians In Early Geneva County

The first whites that settled in the area in now Geneva County had as their neighbors the Creek Indians. In 1814, the Creek nations ceded to the U. S. Government the territory that is now Geneva County, but many Indians remained on the land as ordinary citizens. Through treaties with other Indian nations, three-fourths of Alabama was open to white settlers by 1820. However, it was not until March 1832 that the Creeks signed the Treaty of Cusseta relinquishing their last lands in Alabama. These lands belonging to the Upper Creeks and none of the land that is now Geneva County lay within the Upper Creek nation.

The Treaty of Cusseta provided that certain lands within the Upper Creek nation would be provided for the Indians and white settlers restrained from settling on such

tracts until after the Indians had moved away. The U. S. Government was trying to persuade the Creeks to move to new territory in the West, but they were reluctant to give up their ancestral hunting grounds.

Soon after signing the Cusseta Treaty, the provision protecting the Indians from white encroachment was violated by some white settlers. This led to hostilities that spread over into the region that is now Geneva County and lasted until May 1837, when the Government forcibly moved all the Indians, except a remnant that fled to Florida out of the state.

Then encroachments by the whites violated the Cusseta Treaty, the U. S. Government tried to enforce the provision protecting the Indians, but the white settlers resented the effort and were ready to take up arms against the Federal Government. A peaceful settlement seemed hopeless. Governor Gayle presented the whole matter to the Alabama legislature and the state seriously considered leaving the Union. So serious was the matter that the President of the United States sent Francis Scott Key, author of the Star Spangled Banner as commissioner to Alabama to try to reach an understanding. A satisfactory agreement was reached, but it had little influence on the white settlers and the growing strife continued.

After much fighting in the Upper Creek nation, the Indians began spreading out as they fell back before the white troops. One large unit sought refuge on the head of Pea River, but they did not remain there long before General Wellborn's army routed them. The Indians went in many directions so as to confuse the whites and evade capture.

One large band of Indians came toward the region that is now Geneva County and ten miles north of where Samson was later built, they wiped out a whole family of Harts except the wife of a Geneva County citizen named Marlow. A great granddaughter of this couple now lives three miles north of Samson. She is Miss Minnie Marlow.

Continuing toward Florida, the fleeing Indians crossed Pea River where Boyenton Creek runs into the river two yards up stream from the bridge on Highway 12. This is three miles west of Samson. About a quarter of a mile west of the bridge is Moates Bay, Highway 12 divides this big swamp in halves. The Creeks hid in this dismal swamp to rest and recuperate. When the whites discovered them the Indians had submerged their bodies in the murky water with only their noses protruding enough to breathe. Routed there, they scattered in small groups and headed for Florida.

Shelly Spears, a Geneva County Citizen who lives five miles south of Samson, had a great uncle to fall victim to the Creeks. He was riding his horse near Sandy Creek with a

small colt following. Spears failed to return home and a searching party found his body stuffed in a hole made by a fallen tree. The horse was killed and pushed over a high bank on Sandy Creek and the colt carried away by the Indians.

Neal McDuffie, one of our earliest pioneers and the progenitor of one of the largest groups of descendants in the state, lived on Pea River five miles northwest of Geneva. His century old home still stands on Sandy Creek. One day while his boys were plowing near the river, they heard Indian quills blowing in the swamp. Realizing, that this meant trouble, they cut the horse traces and dashed for home. A snack of food was hurriedly eaten and all parties pulled out for the fort of Pollard, Alabama. A year later, the McDuffies returned home and found one plate on the table and one old hen in the yard. The house had been spared.

A few families living where Samson is fled to a small fort up Pea River near where Old Town Cemetery is located. *Written by Tatum Bedsole*

Submitted by Danny McDuffie, Rt. 2, Samson, AL Source- Geneva County Reaper, December 9,1971

"Pioneer Life of the Early Settlers"

Ed M. Johnson, editor of the Geneva County Reaper in 1902, wrote an article praising the early preachers who softened roughness of pioneer life. The article is as follows:

Among the early settlers of the Wiregrass portion of Alabama, life was primitive in the extreme. Everything was made at home and women spun all the cloth that was used and game was plentiful, there was not reason to accumulate property.

Indians had kept the underbrush burned off and there was splendid grazing for cattle in the tall grass in the summer and in the cane breaks in the winter.

Of social life there was none at all. The people were generally illiterate, living in one room log cabins and often far separated from each other.

Even at the time of the Civil War, the population of this area was sparse. The men living here did little else but hunt, fish and drink whiskey, so an old resident said. Liquor could be purchased for 40 cents a gallon and there was plenty of it to be had. The outdoor life, however, seems to have neutralized the effects of indulgence in intoxicants as the men generally lived to a ripe old age.

Cattle and hogs became wild and the sheep were driven up only once a year to be sheared. There were many wild turkeys, bear and other game. A man could go out and shoot a deer as easily as getting a drink of water.

Nevertheless, we are told that every man paid his debts and though there was no law, there seemed to have been no need of law.

It was a common thing for both men and women to go barefoot. I heard a man say some time ago that the proudest moment of his life was when at the age of 18 he put on his first suit of 'store bought' clothes. He also said that he had a pair of boots which he never wore except when in town or at church, and when on the road he would go barefoot with his boots slung over his shoulders until he came nearly to the church. He would then wash his feet in the branch and walk proudly into church with his red top boots on, the envy of every young man there.

Fiddlers were common in the country and young and old would go for miles to a dance, after the news became 'norated.' It would seem that dancing would be beyond them as many of the houses had only a 'puncheon' (rough-dressed split logs or timber slabs) floor and few were without flooring.

The family lived crowded together in one or two small rooms in which the cooking was also done. Yet it is marvelous that many families of 10 or 12 children were raised up in one room and had perfect health all the time. A house of two rooms with a hall between, called a 'double-pen' house, marked the home of one of the upper ten.

Upon Saturdays there was a great migration to the store or town though it might be 12 miles off. The day would be spent in having a good time. This is, the men would fight and quarrel and spend the day so as to become better acquainted, and often the women took part in the hostilities. Seldom, however, was there any weapon used and generally but little damage was done to the participants.

The spinning wheel and loom occupied an important place in the home. The women made most of the clothes for the family. These are just a few of the burdens the pioneer women bore.

The people bought very little food, for they raised most of what was needed. Coffee and salt were two items necessary to import. The farmer's swine, cattle and chickens furnished the family with meat and could be supplemented by wild game, which was plentiful. Vegetables of almost any kind flourished and the winters were so mild that some things would grow the year around.

There was not much in the way of recreation to occupy the people's leisure time. For the men there was hunting and fishing. Shooting matches were common occurrences with turkeys or other prizes given to the winner. Gregarious desires too often were restricted to loitering in villages or around the stoves of country stores.

When a farmer had work to do, which required outside labor, he would ask his neighbors for help. Life was more monotonous for the women than the men for they had more work to do, and were tied more closely at home. If they had neighbors close enough, visits were exchanged, and they would converse while they sewed, knitted or quilted.

On Saturday, there was shopping to be done, the whole family often made the trip to town.

The young people found relaxation in giving parties, which often took the form of candy drawings, or some other combination of work and pleasure. Local fiddlers furnished music for square dancing, which was engaged in by both the young and old. Life was crude, but the people seemed to have been satisfied to continue living in their own narrow orbit.

The people were not prepared for the shock of war or for the sacrifices that come with war. They wished to be let alone, and could see nothing in their way of life for others to object to or wish to change. *Submitted by: The book committee*

Big Creek Pioneers

A history of Geneva County would not be complete without the history of the portion of Houston County, designated and described by General Coffee in his survey of the public lands, completed in 1824, as township 1, range 26, which from the formation of our county in 1868, until the formation of Houston County was a part of our county. Through this township, runs a stream of water known as Big Creek, which is still shown on the map. A settlement was known to exist in this part of the township as early as 1750 and that it was composed of a hardy band of pioneers or colonists who came to this country from the County of Cork in Ireland.

From this band of pioneers, the east end of our county was settled as well as that portion of Houston, formerly a part of Geneva County. The descendants of these hardy pioneers are now scattered through out the world. It was not possible to secure the family names of all these colonists, but it is sufficient to name a few.

The Ward family was among them, but the earliest recorded name was James B. Ward, who entered lands in 1853 near Big Creek or along its borders. Dempsey Taylor the founder of another family and whose descendants named Taylor, Alabama entered lands in this tract on October 29, 1830.

Samuel Branton, who entered land in 1852 and who was reputed to have had a large family of girls and whose name does not remain for his descendants, but whose blood flows through numerous citizens of our county.

The Hinson family was one of the original family emigrating to this country, and whose descendants are still numerous.

The Stokes family one of whom John O. Stokes, an ancestor of our present Stokes family, was born near Big Creek in 1830, and entered lands in this tract, August 27, 1855.

Bamba Watford, born in what was then a part of Georgia near Big Creek in 1808 and entered lands January 27, 1834, and whose descendants are still residents of Geneva County as well as Houston County.

One of the larger families in our eastern end of the county was the Register family. Certain it is this family was among the early settlers, since John Register was born in the year 1809 and entered lands in this tract on May 26, 1831. His son, Elias Register, entered lands on October 22, 1856 and is the immediate ancestor of the Registers now residing around Fadette in this county.

On the map of Alabama in the southwestern corner of Houston County may be found a circle with the words Big Creek designating this a settlement. Near this circle is a line of a creek also designated as Big Creek, no doubt was really considered a Big Creek in the early days since it was noted on the Coffee map as well as the settlement known as Big Creek settlement in 1824. Georgia, having ceded to the United States the lands west of the Chattahoochee River, and Alabama having been admitted as a state in 1819, this land became public domain and was later opened to settlement. Those who were residing on these lands were known as squatters rights. The government recognized these rights and permitted these lands to be entered by those who resided on them. Since the lands to be entered were occupied by forties in the settlement, it was necessary for these settlers to enter other lands, some of which did not join their original tracts in order to obtain the total of 160 acres of land, this explains the long delay in the entering of these lands.

At this time what is known as beat three and four in Geneva County did not have any settlers, it was not until 1851 that the first settler entered on lands in Range 25, which is a part of the present county.

From the Moore History of Alabama, we learn that there were several Smiths among those in the settlement of Big Creek. These Smiths had their origin in the County of Cork in Ireland, and the first to come to this section of our country settled near the Chattahoochee River on the east side of Houston, near Old Columbia, later at least one of them came to Big Creek. It is recorded that the first known of this name to be born at Big Creek was James M. Smith. He was born in what was then Georgia, June 9, 1778. He was the father of Daniel U. Smith who was born at Big Creek February 10, 1820.

Daniel U. Smith was the father of 12 children. Four of his sons were soldiers *in t he* Confederate Army, one being killed in the Virginia campaign. Another of his sons was Henry M. Smith, who was a Confederate veteran with four years of service. Henry M. was born at Big Creek on May 7, 1844. His children were born in Geneva County near Malvern. Alabama. Jennie, who married Joseph Whitaker, lived at what was known as Whitaker, in the southern part of Range 25. Callie married Jasper Barnes, of Dothan, Alabama, Henry A., known far and wide as H. A. Smith, Elder of Primitive Baptist Church, moderator of his association, Fannie who first married Wash Robins and resided near Fadette on lands entered by him, until his death later marrying Alonzo Chancey, and moving to Florida near Graceville, Sarah who married William T. Collins, and upon his death married Charlie Stokes, one of the descendants of the Stokes previously mentioned. Anthony, now resides near Caryville, Florida. The baby, Rose, married a Whitaker. All of these children lived to a ripe old age, three of them still living. Fannie, Sarah and Anthony, and all being in their 80's. *Source: This article appeared in the Geneva Reaper, ?, and was written by Mr. J. J. Collins, now deceased. Submitted by: Book Committee*

Some Geneva County Elected Officials

Probate Judges: Thomas H. Yarborough 1869; Erastus J. Borland 1880; Jere Merritt 1892; Edmund Roach 1898; P. C. Black 1905; W. H. Morris 1911; D. G. Roach 1923; P. C. Black 1929; R. S. Ward 1953; J. P. Faulk, Jr. 1965; Harold B. Wise, 1977; Harry O. Adkison, 1995.

Circuit Clerks: Henry C. Yarbough 1869; William H. Morris 1871; M. M. McAlily 1874; Elisha Martin 1880; Sidney Latimer 1884; Rufus J. Purvis 1892; John W. Draughn 1904; Gordon C. Grantham 1922; Fred Grantham 1938; Well Draughn, Sr. 1942; Earl Ward; Veleria Thomley; Gayle Laye, current Clerk.

The Big Ole Oak(1)

If anyone in Geneva said the "big ole oak", everybody knew he was talking about the big oak at the junction of the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers, located at what is now known as Robert Fowler Park. The trunk of the picturesque tree has a grandeur limb spread of 168 feet. Measured on November 13,1981, this tree is thought to be the largest live oak tree in the world.

The lower Creek Indians lived in this area until 1800's where Henry A. Yonge came, settled and named the small village, Geneva. At this time, the area around Geneva was heavily covered with pines and large oaks. Main Street of Old Town, as it was referred to after being moved to the present location, ran parallel to the Choctawhatchee River with loading docks for the boats located at the point of the junction of the two rivers.

The Big Ole Oak(2)

The huge old oak was said to have stood in the back yard of William H. Morris. Some of the other people who once owned the big tree were: W. W. Benson, H. H. (Hill) Brown, Judge P. C. Black, and James Hughes. The oak tree has been deeded to the City of Geneva three times. In 1907, W.W. Benson deeded a strip of land between the junction of the rivers to the town of Geneva for the general public to use as a park and a pleasure ground forever! This strip included the large oak tree. This deed is on file at the Geneva County Courthouse.

Descendants of H.H. (Hill) Brown have confirmed that their father gave to the tree a deed to the site prior to his death He wanted to make sure that nobody cut it down. A search of the Courthouse records has failed to turn up the deed; however,searchers did not know how to so about looking up a deed given to a tree. On February 5, 1973, James and Mary Hughes again deeded the tree to the City of Geneva. This deed is also on file at the Geneva County Courthouse.

Miss Rebekah Keenan, Geneva Librarian, called the great oak "Charter Oak" because it reminded her of the famed oak in which the State of Connecticut's Charter once was hidden.

Many events have taken place under or around the ole' oak. Members of the Home Guard and other men and boys gathered there soon after Christmas in 1862 when they learned that Union forces were trying to make off with the steamer, "Bloomer". The Union forces made good their escape with the steamer down the river to the Navy Yard at Pensacola, Florida.

It was the custom for many years to celebrate the Fourth of July with a barbeque at Old Town. Fishermen, boatmen and lovers frequented the area. Sometimes explorers and picnickers also. During the 1930's, at AEA time, we did not go to the beaches or Washington D.C., take a cruise, or tour Europe. We would just take off after answering roll call and head for the Junction. Along the way, we would pick up bread, bananas, mayonnaise, vienna sausages and crackers. The rest of the day was spent at the junction exploring the woods, boat riding, picking violets and drinking that cold water from the flowing well.

The day would end with everyone climbing the "Big Ole' Oak". One year, no one who had been at the Junction, except one, showed up for classes on Monday. Even the seventh grade teacher, Virginia Lee, was home with a case of poison ivy from climbing the tree.

A few years ago, hundreds gathered under the tree in support of the Choctawhatchee-Pea Rivers Association in an effort to get navigational improvements for the rivers. Senator John Sparkman was the guest speaker.

Today, we have returned to Old Town Festival on the Rivers, sponsored by the Club and the Geneva Chamber of Commerce. The annual Festival starts when the River Rats meet Billy Bowlegs with his flotilla from Fort Walton, Florida, on Friday.

On April 28, 1984, The Big Ole Oak, in a dedication ceremony with C.W. Moody, head of the Alabama State Forestry Commission, Montgomery, Alabama, was placed on the Historical Register, State of Alabama, by the Alabama Historical Commission, as a Historical Tree for its beauty, size and age.

The tree is also registered with the International Association of Live oak Trees. The tree species is *Quercus Virginiana* Mill, 19 feet, 9 1/2 inches in circumference with a limb spread of 168 feet, is estimated to be over 200 years old.

On September 16, 1987, ceremonies were held at the Robert A. Fowler Memorial Park making our tree a Constitution Tree for the State of Alabama, one of only two recognized in the State. Geneva Chamber of Commerce, President Mike Kelly presided. City of Geneva Mayor, Hugh Herring, Jr., received a bronze plaque honoring the occasion from the United States Forestry Department

We pay tribute to our great oak, which has withstood many floods, storms and generations of children playing upon, as well as, under its great branches.

Source: Geneva, Alabama-A History by the Geneva Woman's Club. Submitted by the Geneva County Heritage Committee