The Early Years
Comings and Goings about Town

by Nancy M. Rohr

A Presentation to the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at UAH
November 19, 2013

Let's look together at early Huntsville and life around the Square then. The Square and the Big Spring became the center of town and county life. Picture with me those earlier days.

So many people have passed though this town. And Huntsville has always been part of the bigger global world, not just a mere backwoods village. The comings and goings of so many folks confirm it. We're all immigrants, even the Indians after all.

Of course you know about the Big Spring and it's delightful attractions. John Hunt, on his search for a new place to settle, noticed some logs already cut and down on the site and left their by Mr. Davis. Hunt used those very logs to build his own cabin. When Davis returned he said he didn't want to live there any way next to a neighbor who took free with someone else's' timber. It's probably just as well, can you imagine living in Davisville.

Other settlers gathered here quickly, all illegal of course – they were squatters for a few years because the land had not been put up for sale yet. The federal government even erected Fort Hampton at the edge of the county to force the squatters to leave this land owned by the Indians. The first and maybe only fort built to protect Indian rights.

Among the many that were struck with Alabama Fever and flooded in were squires, squatters, and slaves. Do recall in these early times, the squires still wore knee high britches and buckles on their shoes. The squatters in their buckskins also soon became legal land owners like the squires. The slaves who wore chains were dressed in rags and little else and of course owned no property.

These blue bloods, red necks, and black hands quickly began planting and building – watching for the threat of hostile Indians everywhere. After all, their forefathers had always fought the savages – whose land they were taking. Here in Alabama, it was mostly the feared Creek Indians.

And settlers kept coming. The folk from the southern highlands might say, "When I get ready to move, I just shut the door, call the dogs and start" did not always apply. The process for moving a family was more complicated. Men came and scouted the land first and returned with their families to a likely site. These extended groups loaded their wagons up after the crops were harvested at home. Picture if you will: One wagon carried all the people that it could hold, another wagon carried the food and one wagon was filled with rails to make pens at night for the animals when they stopped. The chickens were kept in coops, the horses ridden, the cows and calves were tied to the back of a wagon. And because you cannot lead a hog, one lucky youngster was allowed to sit at the end of

the last wagon and drop corn along the way to keep the pigs following. [Our tradition for barbeque goes back a long way.] At nightfall, these hardy folks camped in lean-tos or makeshift tents near water. This was new, untamed land. The forests were dense and wild animals were never far away, snakes, bears, panthers – who knew what. These pioneers were not far removed from fearing attacks from Indians. After all it was said at the end of sentence, tomorrow God willing and the Creeks don't rise.

There was also fear of lurking Spanish and French adventurers and lawless men loitered to take advantage when they might. Law and order did not arrive quickly. Occasionally, the anonymous Captain Slick and his men took the law into their own hands for a speedy solution. Slick's committee might first issue a warning to the mis/cre/ant simply to leave town. Perhaps he was given a thrashing with a hickory rod to add emphasis. If forced by the committee to leave, he was lucky only to be "fed a supper of Blue plums" from a double barrel shotgun. Apparently Captain Slick's law often "purified the moral atmosphere."

By 1811 our **hamlet** contained a small dry goods store, a grocery, a whiskey shop, a hatters shop and a bowling alley. Then it may have appeared to be a rude little place with card-playing, quarter-racing and hunting, fist fights and free fights in the streets. And, yes, some citizens may have associated with improper women in those early days. Occasionally when court and muster days filled the town there had been stone-throwing. But be assured use of the pistol or bowie knife was a rare test of manhood and does not happen often in good social circles anymore.

In late August of 1813 the attack at Fort Mims near Mobile, occurred with deaths of over 250 settlers, the greatest massacre of whites, ever, until recently in America. People in the entire southlands were terrified.

In 1817, just four years later, that intrepid traveler, **Anne Royal**, wrote about those earlier events, as she had heard them, with the threat of Creek Indian invasion. She wrote: "On October 7th 1813 that panic filled the county and folks fled to Tennessee for safety leaving food on the tables and animals not fed. It appeared that a large body of Indians was within a day's march of Huntsville, coming toward town. The citizens of Huntsville, and the whole of Madison County, were instantly panic-struck, and immediately fled towards Nashville. About a thousand people, all leaving town, were on the road to Nashville." Well that is not exactly true. Apparently two families, she said, decided to remain and fortified themselves in the courthouse. Old Captain Wyatt, in command had only two guns, but was well charged with both whiskey and courage. Fortunately the good Captain was not called into service.

But not to fear, more help was on the way.

The Governor of Tennessee called the volunteer militia, led by Andrew Jackson, to arms. After a forced march the men based their camp at Beaty's Spring, now Brahan Springs. They included Davy Crockett and Sam Houston among their number. As the men marched thru Huntsville, local men joined and they went south to meet the Indians. By spring of 1814 with the defeat of the Creek Indians at **Horseshoe Bend,** all of Alabama felt safe and secure again. This retaliation by the militia, resulting in the deaths of over 800 warriors, women and children, was the largest number of deaths in a single violent incident in the history of our country – ever, until recently.

The returning jubilant Militia marched north again, crossed the River at Ditto's landing and were welcomed as heroes by the local citizenry. A committee, of politicians, of course, met the men with speeches of thanks. We know Mrs. Bunch served a meal at the Bell Tavern on the Square to all the enlisted men. However General Jackson's staff, Generals Coffee and Johnston, and many gentlemen were among the guests at a dinner provided by LeRoy Pope in his newly competed mansion overlooking his town. The dinner was abundant and the utmost harmony, hilarity and joy pervaded the whole assemblage. The full number of toasts were drunk – many of them were cheered and encored with burst of feeling – while the artillery lent forth its deep toned echo. [Are you with me, up there on the hill?]

The "regular" toasts, 19 in number were heartfelt. Do I dare suggest some might not remember all the festivities the next morning? The first toast of course, was to "Our country – may she never want defenders, nor ever forget to honor and reward them" and continued through to the last toast "The Fair – May they greet with the animating light of their smile, and bless with rich reward of their love the gallant defenders of their country's rights."

Among those present that day in 1814 for the ceremonies on Pope's hill in Huntsville were the blue bloods, the slaves who built the fine house, cooked and cleaned and served, and one, today who might be called a redneck. Six counties in Alabama were named for men who probably were in attendance. [Bibb, Chambers, Walker, Clay, Coffee, and Jackson]. Five men went on to become Governors of the state of Alabama. [William Wyatt Bibb, Thomas Bibb, Gabriel Moore, Clement Clay, and Hugh McVay]. And of course, one man who would become President of the United States – all on the lawn up there on the hill.

One might wonder about the **Orange**. How many of you found in your Christmas stocking a tangerine or orange every year? Hold that thought.

In the early autumn of 1816, **James Crump**, a Huntsville merchant traveled south to Mobile to re-stock his store-house on the Square for the coming festive season. From Mobile his purchases were loaded onto a 35-foot flatboat which was then slowly poled **up** the Tombigbee River to Tuscaloosa at the falls of the Black Warrior River, a grueling trip of 20 days.

From there two wagons pulled by four-horse teams each hauled 2000 pounds of goods overland eight days for the 182 miles along Bear Meat Cabin Road to Blountsville, turned north and up to Summit, [you're still with me, aren't you?] along the Brindley Mountain ridge, down off the mountain to old man Ditto's Landing where the goods were ferried across the Tennessee River and up the last 10 miles into Huntsville, Mississippi Territory. The merchandise included brown and white Havana sugars, coffee, rum, wine and 1000 Christmas oranges of which Mr. Crump boasted that not more than half a dozen spoiled.

Can one imagine the amazement of the local citizens and children? Those that couldn't afford to purchase one of those precious oranges must have come just to stare at this exotic fruit, the aroma, the color, and the taste – here on the very frontier.

Now as an aside, I had really worked hard to document this story, and after much work I was delighted with myself. My glee turned almost to dismay when I also discovered that Mr. Crump had died a few years later in the next Indian Wars. I was just heart broken. I shared my story with a friend who kindly put her arm around my shoulder and said, "But Nancy, they're all dead." Only let me say that history is not dead in Huntsville, Alabama, it surrounds us everyday.

In 1818 the **Boardman** brothers arrived in town. John settled in town and soon printed and published a newspaper. Brother Elijah established a nationally known horse-breeding and horse-racing enterprise on what is RSA property today. John was called upon to sell federal government land for a Connecticut charity, but somehow the cash from the sales never arrived at the Deaf and Dumb school in Hartford. Lacking the $37,000 he owed, John Boardman went to Paris for his health. He did return to Huntsville and paid off the debt. By the way, his cabin was where Lily Flagg/Harry Rhett's house is.

President Monroe and his entourage of two appeared on horseback unannounced one afternoon. Hastily a committee of town politicians met him with appropriate speeches and a welcome. Imagine the shock and surprise to all the local citizens. After all Washington City was a long way away.

Distance did not stop some of the local lads in their quest for credentials and a higher **education**. Young men from here made the trip yearly to study at Princeton, Harvard, Yale, the University of Virginia and medical school in Philadelphia. Several of the young doctors went off for further study in England and France.

In 1820 townspeople really were abuzz with the news of the death of the man they knew as **James Cochran**. The first information in the newspaper reported the death of James Cochran and asked for facts about the man who had settled in town recently, with greats amounts of cash, and apparently using an alias. As the story developed it seemed Cochran's real name was Isaac Cushing, and he had begun a mercantile partnership in Marseilles, France. Together the partnership outfitted a ship with their merchandise worth 400,000 francs. While the Frenchman Meinadier stayed home with the shop, Cushing sailed for Chan/der/na/gore, India with their cargo. However the vessel never arrived in the orient. Cushing directed the ship to Rio de Janeiro where he apparently sold the ship, the tackle, and the cargo, pocketing $10,000.

The illicit adventures continued. Cushing had only nominally sold the ship, because by secret agreement, the vessel then sailed to Buenos Aires where he and the captain really sold the ship and split the cargo, dividing $65,000. While there Cushing next purchased a load of jerked beef on the French partnership account and sailed to Havana. There he realized a profit of over $30,000. [Are you still with me here?]

Meanwhile back in France with no news or funds forthcoming, his partner was cast from opulence into destitution and threatened with debtors' prison. To the Frenchman's relief, 23 creditors supplied him funds to pay for his passage to America to hunt for his former partner, Cushing. In the meanwhile Isaac Cushing had gone to Boston to join his family there. Hearing of his now former partner's imminent arrival, Cushing fled Boston, in disguise, across the Great Lakes and eventually down to Huntsville, Alabama. Here he brought property (including the Weeden House) with cash in great amounts, and no questions were asked. It was a nationwide depression at the time.

The newspaper reported his death caused by the sudden stagnation of blood or the nightmares. Indeed Cushing left nothing but a nightmare for the court-appointed administrators of his estate, who found 37 documents and contracts supporting this story in the chest of drawers at Cushing's bedside. Is there a moral to be found here? Later in 1829 the court here in Huntsville ordered Meinadier to receive $127,000 out of the monies, goods, and chattels of James Cochran. [You know I can't make this stuff up.]

As our sons were growing up they said I force marched them with great curiosity to what a street sign called to Blevins Gap Road and up the mountain there behind Grissom. Well the boys went off to college, the ole yeller dog died, and I wasn't getting any younger. I called around to people I thought would know its history. Dr. Frances Roberts and County commissioner James Record had never heard of the Gap much less a road there. A few other calls led me to one man who knew he could help. I asked if I could meet him for coffee sometime. Well…… he really wasn't available just now because he was going on a secret mission for Mayor Joe Davis to Brazil to keep his enemies from putting poison in the water system. I thanked him anyway and did what I should have done in the first place – went to our fine library.

The first account I found was in 1822. For his grand tour Young Lucius **Bierce** walked the long way from Athens, Ohio to Athens, Alabama. On April 6th he stopped for the night past Gunters Landing at our Flint River. The next day, "I went five miles when I came to Blevins gap, an opening in an otherwise impassable mountain, and after wading through creeks and mud holes eight miles farther, I came to Huntsville being the first village I have seen for two hundred and eight miles and containing the first brick dwelling house I have seen since leaving Virginia."

Unfortunately the day he arrived three prisoners in the jail under sentence of death had escaped, and no one would take the young man in for the night. He continued walking eight miles westward, wading the flooded Indian Creek before he found some one who would take him at Mooresville. Walked 29 miles that day.

Now about that jail break that kept Lucius from having an overnight stay in Huntsville. One of the convicted murderers who languished in the jail house was still there two years later under appeal. Mr. Reuben Turner had, after a night of heavy drinking, stabbed and killed Thomas Logwood, after the victim, Logwood, seated on his horse had attempted to raise his horsewhip to Turner. At first the community was outraged by this murder, however later appeals were made. Among those writing the governor were Presiding Judge Clement Clay, 26 lawyers, and 18 other citizens including four of the jurors. **26 lawyers?** [1300 town] Even his jailer wrote to report that during a jailbreak, Turner who initially had fled with the others, returned and woke the jailer to tell him of the escape. At any rate, Reuben Turner, after 3 years was freed, it's a southern thing - he was only defending his honor.

Well as you might guess, god willing and the Creeks don't rise, did happen once again. Soundly defeated, all their land was forfeited and **all Indians** were forced to leave for Oklahoma Territory in **1837.** Most likely the route for many of the thousands of Indians rounded up at detention centers near Huntsville walked through Blevins Gap Road.

Times settled down now here and abroad. Young Mary **Lewis (her house is still standing on Eustis Street.)** was fortunate in 1842-1844 to "finish" her education at a boarding school in Paris, France. Well how do you get to Paris from Huntsville – just go up to Pulaski Pike and turn left. Image the route for her trip –turn left, by stagecoach to Nashville, down the Cumberland River on a boat where she feared for her life because of the size of the bedbugs, to the Ohio River, where she found there was no place on a canal boat to cry, after all she was not quite 17, on up the Ohio River, off near Pittsburgh to a series of trains where a cinder caught her dress on fire, more trains, on Philadelphia, New York City, there she boarded the latest invention of technology, the innovative steam-paddler, The Great Western. Charles Dickens had just arrived on that ship. She and her escorting Family the Calhouns arrived at Liverpool, on to London, across the English channel, and onto France. Alas, she wasn't too sure she could stay in Paris, she had discovered that city abounded with -- naked statues. After all how many naked statues were there then in Huntsville, Alabama? Well for that matter how many are their now?

Mary did stay for her two years. Among the group of travelers, Mrs. Calhoun had brought along her slave, Margaret. Margaret left behind in Huntsville her husband and three children. On one of her errands to the market in Paris, the "equipage" of the future King, Louis Phillipe, passed by Margaret. Although France owned many islands in the Caribbean, blacks were quite a rarity in Paris at this time. The Prince was so amazed to see her that he stopped his carriage, stood and doffed his hat to Margaret the black slave from Huntsville, Alabama. I have always considered it a shame. Margaret, of course had no last name, and none of her descendants will ever know this story.

Not everyone left Huntsville, in 1850, an amateur explorer and writer visited Huntsville. Charles Lanman was delighted with Huntsville, its highly cultivated farms and highly cultivated people. He wrote, "On becoming acquainted with the people of Huntsville, as it has been my privilege, a stranger will find that they are the leading attraction. Owing to its pleasant and healthful location, a large number of the more influential families of the south have congregated here. So that society is all that could be expected from a happy union of intelligence, refinement, and wealth…. Lanman was immediately invited to stay with a local family, "…where I had been treated more like an old friend than a stranger. This is the way they treat pilgrims in Alabama."

I've run out of time, I always run out of time……there are too many people to keep up with, you'll have to fill in the rest, and your grandchildren. I hope they take good notes. I'm not going to finish; but, history isn't ever finished. Our History is out there, I urge you to go and discover some of it, tell the stories, and you too will become a historian.

*Published in the **Huntsville History Collection***
HuntsvilleHistoryCollection.org
November, 2013