

DAVID BOWERS

(A Vintage Vignette by John P. Rankin, September 26, 2010)

The family of David Bowers, pioneer of Madison, is an illustration of the need for thoroughness in historical research. David's eldest daughter Sarah in 1864 married John W. Farrald, but the Madison County on-line marriage index gives her maiden name as Powers. The error in the records could be from a phonetic misunderstanding, a transcription error, or a lack of sufficient ink in the nib of the pen used to write an intended "B".

A close check of probate records coupled with census records proves that Bowers is the correct name. The 1860 census lists David and his family near Benjamin Word, Nathaniel M. Gooch, and John Bibb, who all resided near the site of today's Bob Jones High School. David was a farmer, age 43, born in North Carolina. His wife was Susan, 37, Kentucky born. Sarah at age 19 was the oldest child, born in Alabama. Other children were Edward L. (13), David E. (15), Nancy M. (11), John G. (9), William D. (7), twins Mary E. and James L. (5), Martha T. (3), and Jesse (6/12). All of their children were born in Alabama.

The 1850 census shows David (33 NC) and Susanna (28 KY) with children Sarah (10), Edward L. (4), and Nancy M. (2). The family then was living on land that today is in the northeastern portion of Redstone Arsenal, as revealed by their neighbors including Abraham Beadle and several other families known to have occupied lands there. The Bowers family was not found in the 1870 census, but land records for that year show that David Bowers bought land in Madison from George R. Sullivan, a noted physician of the town. In the 1880 census David was shown on page 10 of the Madison precinct as age 63, born in North Carolina, as were his parents. "Susanah" was given as 58, born in Kentucky as were both of her parents. Their children were listed as Fannie (23), Jessie (21), and Susan E. (18). Each of these children was shown as born in Alabama with their father born in North Carolina and their mother born in Kentucky, which fits for David and Susannah. Their 1880 household (Dwelling 86 and Family 90) listing was continued on page 11 of the Madison precinct census pages, but only one child was shown there. That child was William Thurman (not "Bowers"), age 1, born in Alabama, recorded as a son of the head of household, David Bowers. The birthplace of William's father was given as Georgia and that of his mother as Alabama. These birthplaces do not match those consistently given for David and Susannah. Furthermore, William's race was listed as Black, whereas David and Susannah and their other children were all listed as White in every census.

At this point, it would appear that an error in the records had occurred, or perhaps David or his son John fathered a Black child. However, that would not explain the birthplace differences or the surname change for William. Further checking found the family of Mark Thurman, a Black man, on page 9 in Dwelling 79, Family 82. Mark was listed as age 24, born in Georgia. His wife Laura was 20, born in Alabama. They had one daughter, Menorra, age 3, born in Alabama. Apparently, they were the biological parents of William Thurman, but exactly why David Bowers would be listed as his father, with William residing at age 1 in the Bowers household is unknown and open to conjecture. William went on to grow up and live in the Mooresville area as a farmer according to later census records. Furthermore, while census listings imply that Susannah was the mother of all of David's children, that proved not to be the case. His first wife was Eliza Hodges of Morgan County, born in Virginia. She died in 1845 after giving birth to Sarah, David E., and possibly Edward Bowers. In 1847 David married Susannah Stringer, the mother of the other children. It takes a number of sources to learn these things. Persistence and patience in research

is definitely necessary for some family histories to be determined.