

MAPLE HILL CEMETERY: ITS ORIGINS AND EXPANSION, 1822-1930

Early pioneers of Tennessee and Georgia knew that south of the new State of Tennessee lay a rich and fertile valley claimed by two Indian tribes and the State of Georgia. Although the tribes did not occupy the land at the time, the Georgia claims were, at best, spurious, and were based on the dubious concept of "sovereignty without occupation." That philosophy was to have severe consequences throughout the nation as a result of the infamous Yazoo frauds of the 1790s. Based on its concept of "sovereignty," the Georgia legislature sold these lands to private companies, who, in turn, sold the land to gullible citizens hungry for new western acquisitions.

The territory, known as "the land of the big bend of the Tennessee River," had intrigued pioneers, especially a fabled big spring, located beneath a limestone bluff at the foothills of an Appalachian spur later to be called "Monte Sano." John Hunt, the earliest documented pioneer to settle by the spring, had built his cabin there as early as 1805. About the same time, James Ditto settled some 10 miles south on the Tennessee River where he maintained a trading post, and established a ferry in 1807. There is ample evidence that Tennesseans and Georgians were well acquainted with the entire area. Obviously, this fertile land would be of great importance to the government of an expanding Mississippi Territory, more so with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

The decision to incorporate this land into the United States developed well over several decades. President Washington put into place the necessary steps toward acquisition which were subsequently carried out during the administrations of Presidents Adams and Jefferson. First, Georgia's claims (1802) had to be satisfied which, of necessity, included the settlement of the claims generated by the Yazoo frauds. Second, the Chickasaw (July 23, 1805) and Cherokee (January 7, 1806) claims were negotiated by treaty and purchase. Third, in accordance with the Land Ordinances (1785 - 1800), each new land had to be surveyed so that the territory could be described with mathematical exactness, i.e., based on latitude and longitude, to be sold at public auctions with a minimum purchase of a quarter section. This would end the longtime practice of descriptions based on the distance from inanimate objects such as trees, rocks, and rivers.¹ The land ordinance system divided land into townships of 6 square miles of 36 sections and then subdivided into quarter sections.

According to the Chickasaw and Cherokee treaties, the United States Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn, directed Thomas Freeman to proceed to the new territory to plot its location and to prepare the land for government sales. Freeman had come to the United States in 1784 from Ireland and settled in western Pennsylvania where George Washington placed him in charge of his lands along the Ohio and Kanawha Rivers. Ten years later, Freeman assisted in the completion of the survey of the City of Washington and the District of Columbia initiated by Andrew Ellicott and Charles Pierre L'Enfant. He was involved with Ellicott in determining the thirty-first parallel boundary line of the southern United States resulting from the Treaty with Spain in 1795. Further assignments were made by President Jefferson in the newly added lands of the Louisiana Purchase. Thomas Freeman, thus, was no stranger to the American frontier.²

On September 11, 1807, Freeman, Return J. Meigs, a Cherokee Indian Agent, General James Robertson, and Indian representatives met at Chickasaw Island (now Hobbs Island) to establish boundaries for the newly purchased Indian lands. A triangular area of 345,000 acres, south of the Tennessee state line, was created which became "old Madison County." At 86° 34' 18" longitude, a point almost midway of the base of the triangle, Freeman established the *Huntsville Meridian* from which point all the lands of northern Alabama were surveyed. Because of Freeman's