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Andrew Jackson's Activities in the Tennessee Valley

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Almost every one of us has learned about one of the most illustrious patriots in our history, the man who was born in Wax-haw, South Carolina, and who became the seventh president of the United States. He is a perfect example of how one can overcome obstacles of poverty, sickness, and death in the United States to rise to a position of economic consequence and even to attain the office of the presidency.

Most Americans do not know, however, that Andrew Jackson was a prominent figure in the early history of the Tennessee Valley region of Alabama, almost as soon as he became prominent in his adopted state of Tennessee.

As soon as the Fort Mims massacre became known in Tennessee during the late summer and fall of 1813, Jackson became the chief architect of retaliation against the "red sticks" faction of the Creek Nation, led by William Weatherford. Over 100 men, women, and children had been butchered, and all of Alabama, including even Mobile, was regarded as at the point of being exterminated. At the time of the initial Tennessee reaction Jackson was recovering from almost fatal wounds suffered in a melee with Jesse and Thomas Hart Benton in Nashville on September 4, 1813. When Governor Willie Blount of Tennessee was given the
authority on September 25 to call 3,500 volunteers from the field, in addition to the 1,500 men already enrolled in the service of the United States, Jackson was still extremely worn and debilitated. Nevertheless, on the twenty-fifth he organized his forces into the field. On the next day he sent his friend and partner, Colonel John Coffee, to Huntsville to restore confidence to the frontier, to enlist volunteers into military service and to obtain supplies. Coffee wrote to Jackson twice on October 4, stating that "I am jerking Beef and the contractors are doing all they can to procure bread, which is very difficult to do." Soon Coffee's forces had increased to nearly 1,300 men. The colonel continued to visit Huntsville in November and December and wrote many letters to Jackson reporting his activities. Meanwhile, Jackson left his advance base at Fayetteville, Tennessee, 32 miles from Huntsville, and marched non-stop in Huntsville on October 11, 1813. Thus, Huntsville was Jackson's first stop in Alabama, then of course part of the Mississippi Territory. The present marker commemorating this movement was erected at the corner of Holmes Avenue and Lincoln Street in Huntsville by the Acme Club of Huntsville in 1951.

Next, Jackson moved to Ditto's Landing on the Tennessee River, ten miles or so from Huntsville, where he joined with Coffee, then moved about 24 miles along the river near the southernmost course of the river and erected Fort Deposit, designed to be his major base of supplies. The depot was finished on October 24, and Jackson stated in a letter written on that date that the depot "is well situated to receive supplies from Holston, and from Madison county, and I am determined to push forward if I live upon acorns." Some sources state that Fort Deposit was located south of the river, although most contemporary maps and authorities place the depot north of the Tennessee.
A map of Alabama, published by T. G. Bradford in 1838 and a second map, also published in 1838, place Fort Deposit north of the river. Yet a map published in 1836 places the depot south of the river, as does S. Augustus Mitchell's map of 1846 and the Thomas Cowperthwait map of 1850. John Apencer Bassett places Fort Deposit at the southernmost point of the Tennessee in Alabama, at the mouth of Thompson's Creek. C. G. Summersell states that the depot was constructed on the river. However, another source states that Jackson located the depot near Warrenton, after crossing Brindley Mountain to Brown's Valley. Nevertheless, Jackson must have crossed the Tennessee at Gunter's landing or Gunter's Ferry (now Guntersville), for John Gunter settled at what was called the "big bend" of the river about 1784 or 1785, where he had discovered a salt deposit, and one of his sons, Edward, was to establish a ferry across the Tennessee at this location in 1818.

Jackson then moved across Racoon Mountain, to which he referred as "the american alps," reached the Coosa River and erected his major supply base, Fort Strother, on this river, about 50 miles from Fort Deposit.

Therefore, Huntsville and the surrounding area were of large importance to Jackson in the Creek War, which culminated in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, and the aid this area gave to the campaign should not be ignored. In addition, an Indian boy of three captured at one of the engagements was taken as a ward by Jackson and sent back to Huntsville. Jackson's wife Rachel and their child met Jackson in Huntsville on his triumphant return from the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. The Indian boy, Lincoyer, died of tuberculosis in 1827, after being raised by Jackson at the Hermitage. He was buried there as a member of the family.
This was but the first of Jackson's many involve­ments with the Tennessee Valley region of Alabama. Many of those who served against the Creeks saw the opportunity for the economic growth of the Tennessee Valley area. Men such as Coffee and Jackson pur­chased extensive holdings in what was to become part of Alabama. Coffee and others created the Cypress Land Company, which was able to purchase a sizable tract of land below the Muscle Shoals of the Tennessee River.14 The company, of which Jackson owned eight shares, then valued at $430.00,15 created Florence. Marquis James, in Andrew Jackson The Border Cap­tain, states that Jackson "acquired a lot or two." However, he held more town property than this, for as late as 1840 Jackson sold three lots for $240.00, to pay debts of Andrew Jackson, Junior, which "saved him from the sheriff's grasp."16 More important, Jackson was allowed to buy considerable acreage, at the minimum government price of $2.00 an acre. It is stated that by prior arrangement, no one placed a bid against him for this property.

Part of Jackson's holdings fronted on the Tennessee River at Melton's Bluff. This part of his property, situated at the head of Elk River Shoals on the south bank of the Tennessee, was purchased from John Mel­ton. Anne Royall, in her Letters From Alabama 1817-1822, states in a letter dated January 14, 1818, that Mel­ton "attached himself to the Cherokee Indians, married a squaw, and settled at this place many years ago; that with the assistance of the Indians, he used to rob the boats which passed down the river, and murder the crews. By those means he became immensely rich, owned a great number of slaves, most of whom he robbed from those boats," She further stated that Melton "used to keep a house of entertainment at Melton's Bluff, after his piracies ceased; and kept an excellent house." Other sources note that Melton's Bluff was
surveyed into 658 lots by John Coffee, became the seat of justice in Lawrence County, but declined in importance after 1820 when the county seat was moved to Moulton. In any event Jackson evidently did not profit from his investment here. In 1822 he sold part of this property for cost plus $1,000 for improvements, and was paid one-third the price of the transaction on the buyer taking possession and the remainder two years later "in good money." James G. Birney of Madison County, later the candidate of the Liberty Party for the presidency in the elections of 1840 and 1844 and a leading opponent of slavery, looked at the property but was not able to purchase it due to a lack of funds. Jackson continued to operate and maintain ownership of the gin located on or near this property. The remaining property at Melton's Bluff was sold in 1827, after the cotton crop had been picked and processed.

In addition to his own holdings the General also directed the affairs of the Huntsville plantation of Andrew Jackson Hutchins. When he was six years old his father, John Hutchins, had died and Jackson had promised to care for the boy, making this vow at the deathbed of the father. The father had once been the junior partner of Jackson and Hutchins in earlier days. Jackson frequently called the boy "my little ward" in letters he wrote to Coffee. The relationship between Jackson and his "Little Ward" is well covered elsewhere; any interested in this relationship, see the article by John H. DeWitt, "Andrew Jackson and his Ward Andrew Jackson Hutchings," Tennessee Historical Magazine, Series II, Vol. 1, No. 2. In 1821 the cotton crop of the Jackson and Hutchins plantations were ginned by January 1, and the General decided to sell the cotton in New Orleans, necessitating a wait until the winter rains filled the Tennessee River so that the cotton could be floated over the rapids of the
river at Muscle Shoals. The transaction was handled by Major George W. Martin, one of Jackson's aides in the Creek and Louisiana campaigns, who served on the staff of Coffee. 22 Jackson raised Hutchins as a member of his own household and placed overseers in charge of the plantation, although many times he personally was to visit the plantation to direct its activities. In April, 1833, Hutchins attained his majority and Jackson relinquished operation of the plantation to him. Afterwards, Hutchins was to suffer tragedy after tragedy -- death of a child and his wife, Mary Coffee, daughter of John Coffee, poor economic conditions and finally, death from tuberculosis after an unsuccessful trip to Cuba to stem the affliction.

In 1819 Jackson built the Hermitage, his permanent home for the rest of his life. In 1834 a fire destroyed the home, in effect, the blaze ruining much of the interior and sparing only the dining room wing. However, the walls and foundations were used in the new building, as well as salvaged material from the old. Once again Jackson called on Huntsville and Madison County for help. During the inflationary period of 1835 carpenters and masons were very scarce and the General's contractors looked beyond Tennessee for help. The General wrote at this time that "Hands cannot be got. I have written to Cincinnati, Louisville, Huntsville and Lexington." 23 But there is no record of how much help he actually received from the Tennessee Valley region.

By the 1830's Jackson was well aware of another facet of life in the Tennessee Valley and in Huntsville. A famed sportsman, he long had enjoyed the hospitality of the Green Bottom Inn, 24 erected in 1815 on what is today part of the campus of Alabama A & M University, in Huntsville. The inn was constructed by John Connelly, like Jackson a lover of race horses. Connelly owned "Gray Gander," then the champion thoroughbred
stallion in the South. Several times Jackson raced at the race track constructed by Connelly on the grounds of the inn. In particular, the General was in Huntsville on December 13, 1819, attending the meeting of the state legislature. He had been invited and was given all the "privileges of the floor." Staying at the inn for a few days, he brought along some of his horses and also some of his fighting roosters.²⁵ His horses did well. Of course, politics could never be left out of Jackson's life, and T. P. Abernethy, in his *The Formative Period in Alabama, 1815-1828*, succinctly sums up the political aspect of the General's visit to Huntsville. The first session of the General Assembly passed a resolution, which read as follows:

> And be it further resolved that this General Assembly do highly disapprove of the late attempt made by some members of the Congress of the United States at the last session to censure the military course of this inestimable officer from motives (as we believe) other than patriotic.

It was carried by a majority of twenty-seven to twenty-one. Those that did not support Jackson through this resolution in effect signed their political death warrants in Alabama. Alabamian's approved of Jackson's recent invasion of Spanish Florida and the capture of Pensacola, actions that were not supported on the national level. Jackson's presence also influenced the naming of Jackson County for him, the county created on December 13, 1819. Hastily created, the county's boundaries were so vaguely set that the lines have been changed six times since.²⁶

James Jackson, builder of the famed "Forks of Cypress" some five miles from Florence, was also a lover of horses and a friend and business associate of The General. James Jackson constructed a regulation racetrack in the flat meadow in front of the mansion and on May 28, 1821, wrote a letter to the
General from his home which stated that he raced and won at Huntsville. Some of his comments are important in showing the significance of Huntsville as a sporting place and the large amounts of wagering that evidently were not too unusual. To quote from various parts of this letter: "I won the race at Huntsville, the Grey had great superiority of heels, he took the track and kept it... to please others I permitted a much worse rider and heavy or (sic) Boy to ride. Camp Campbell lost upwards of $4,000 and offered (sic) to bet me $6,000 in Land Certificates, but I had too many Children for such dashing."

Thus, the General was no stranger to the Tennessee Valley. There were close ties between Tennesseans and North Alabama: economic, social, sporting, and Andrew Jackson naturally availed himself of the opportunities afforded by the area. In retrospect, this also shows the historical importance of the Tennessee Valley during the lifetime of the General, who died in 1845, to be buried in the garden of the Hermitage, by the side of his beloved Rachel, who had preceded him to the grave seventeen years before.


Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 336

6 Ibid.


10 Bassett, op. cit., p. 336.

11 Ibid. pp. 400-401.

12 James, op. cit., pp. 174.

13 Ibid., pp. 469.

14 James, op. cit., pp. 377.


16 Ibid., v. 6, p. 60.

17 James, op. cit., p. 278.


19 Bassett, op. cit., v. 3, pp. 166 & 60.

20 Ibid., p. 61.

21 Ibid., p. 181.

22 Ibid., p. 183.
23 James, op. cit., p. 690.


25 Ibid.