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Virgil Carrington Jones

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Isaac Criner, First Permanent White Settler

Just as the beginning of Huntsville lies about John Hunt's cabin which once overlooked the Big Spring, so is the early history of New Market wrapped around the home of Isaac Criner. Isaac, who with his uncle, Joseph, and his cousin, Stephen McBroom, is recalled as one of the first three men to settle in Madison County.

The present structure, built between 1836 and 1840, is still in a sound state on an exposed knoll overlooking a narrow little valley leading south between the ridges of the Cumberland foothills. It is the successor to two log cabins, gone years ago, one a quarter of a mile away and the other on the site of the home.

Both the dwelling and the larger part of the estate, through these more than 160 years, have remained in the pioneer's family and without burden of mortgage.

Several sources of information in regard to this father of all local residents are available. Early histories, state and county records, old newspapers, data preserved by the family and older persons who remember Criner before he died at the age of 93 in 1876, contribute to the account.

In 1803 or 1804, Isaac and his two companions followed the general movement which had brought white families down into Tennessee and Georgia. They crossed the mountains by way of the old immigrant trail, now the Winchester Road, and explored the northern part of the county around New Market. They found promising country, virgin forests and rich soil, and returned to East Tennessee for their families.

Upon coming back to this section during the Spring of 1805, they began their homes, living probably in crude shacks until the more substantial quarters could be completed.

Joseph's cabin was the first erected and was located some

miles away from the spot chosen by Isaac. Mr. McBroom, the last of the three to build, settled his family near Gurley.

While the first to settle in the county, these men were not the first to reach it. John Ditto had come to Huntsville as early as 1802 and had built a shack beside the spring, but he was an explorer and trader so bought no land. Soon afterwards he removed to Ditto's Landing on the Tennessee River and established a ferry.

John Hunt is also mentioned as the first white settler but before his death, Criner told of Mr. Hunt's arrival in the county.

Samuel Davis came to the Big Spring prior to Hunt, Isaac recalled, and started the foundation of a cabin but left it uncompleted to return to his family. Just after the Criners had moved into Joseph's home, Hunt, accompanied by David Bean, stopped there for the night. The next morning they continued on their way, carrying with them bread which had been baked especially for them. Upon reaching the spring they found the work left by Davis. Bean helped Hunt finish the cabin but was dissatisfied with the country and went back to Tennessee to settle near Salem on a creek later named after him.

When Davis returned and found Hunt occupying the shack he had started he changed his original plans and settled near New Market.

Unbroken wilderness lay over this section in 1805 and the settlers acquired a habit of living to themselves. Because of this fact it is impossible to know just how many families came into the county during that year but it is a certainty that the Davises, Walkers, Campbells, Browns, Baylesses, Rices, Matthews, McCains and Reeces also arrived soon after the others mentioned.

In addition to his uncle, Joseph, Isaac was accompanied upon his return by his mother, Rebecca, whom he had brought from that part of No. Carolina which later became Tennessee. Rebecca had migrated to that area from the German colonies in Pennsylvania. Isaac also had with him at that time his younger brother, Granville, who settled here and later removed to Texas.

For the site of the little two-room cabin he was to erect, Isaac had selected a spot near a spring on Mountain Fork of Flint River from which flowed a stream of clear water as large as that from the spring in Huntsville. This location

was three-quarters of a mile from the boundary line of the land acquired by the government from the Cherokee and Chickasaw Indians. It was situated in a narrow strip that was not bought from the Cherokees until 1819.

Criner often referred to the fact that he and his family were chased from their home by U. S. regulars and that he would move over into the 1805 purchase until the soldiers departed. He also alluded to the time his cabin was burned by the Indians. This may have been the occasion on which he erected the larger log structure near the site of the present home. Isaac had quite a bit of other trouble of a negligible nature with the Indians. He and his family built up an early friendship with the nearby tribes, exchanged gifts with them and confessed no fear of bodily harm at their hands but his property fared none too well. Any article, even a pot or pan left on the outside of the cabin at night most assuredly was to be missing the next morning. There was no shooting at prowling thieves while a horde of redskins occupied the hills which surrounded them.

Due to his small quarters and large family, his mother and wife kept their looms in a shed near the cabin. Several times they returned to their work the next morning to find that the finished cloth had been cut away during the night. At last they formed the habit of laboring until the small hours to complete the needed piece and then took it inside with them.

On another occasion a hive of bees was found missing. As he passed the Indian settlement a few days later, Criner was invited in to have a bite to eat. Much to his surprise, he was offered honey - and it was not wild honey. Over this he often chuckled.

Though the valley in which the Criners lived is now a rich farming tract, this was not always the case. When Isaac first settled there it was covered with trees and thick cane-brake. One night as he looked out over this jungle from his cabin on the hill, there echoed through the bottom a plaintive cry, as of some wild animal. Shouldering his gun and with the aid of a torch, he went to investigate. Less than half a mile from his door he found a woman from another settler's family, lost in the maze.

Criner hired two negro carpenters, slaves, to build the present home from yellow poplar. A year was required

for the work. The second cabin he had erected was moved back to make way for the new building and later was turned into slave quarters.

In planning his home, Criner arranged it with intentions of adding to it as he needed. The idea never materialized, however, for the Civil War interfered.

Seven rooms were laid off with the four larger chambers composing the main part of the house. A dividing wall entirely shut off from each other the two upstairs rooms. To pass from one into the other it was necessary to come back to the first floor and climb a separate stairway. This was devised so that the girls could have the privacy of one side of the dwelling and the boys the other.

Huge fireplaces were built at each end of the home downstairs. Ceilings were low and windows were few and small. All material, including the weatherboarding, was cut by hand.

To carry out the plan of a plantation mansion, he ordered a wide, double porch at the front of the house. Entrance to the upper veranda was gained only from the boys' side of the upstairs rooms.

Slave quarters were placed at the back and on the west side. Other outbuildings included a big smoke-house of cedar logs, a large kitchen with an immense fireplace, and a store room.

When the house was completed Criner moved into it with his wife, Nancy McCain, whom he had married in this county in 1814. His mother had died in 1826 in the second log cabin.

Isaac's family consisted of 12 children, nine daughters and three sons, all of whom were born at the time they occupied the new home, as follows: Lucinda, wife of James Scott; Rebecca Jane, wife of James Franklin Scurlock; Alfred, who married Elizabeth Walker; Mahala, unmarried; Isaac McClure, who married Lucy James Strong, parents of Mrs. George Okes, Frankford, Mo.; Nancy, wife of Charles Edwin Whiting, later defeated as governor of Iowa on the Democratic ticket; Elizabeth, wife of William Newton Flippin; Louisa, wife of Newell A. Whiting, Cleveland, Ohio; Martha Woodson, wife of William Henderson Moore, Lincoln County, Tennessee.

As soon as the family became settled, their new home was turned into one of the most beautiful in this section.

A large lawn, separated from the back by a row of cedars, was laid off and planted with nearly every variety of flower known to this part of the country. Large shade trees towered above, casting such a shadow that the place was called "Shady Hill".

The garden at the rear was divided into four squares and was separated by wide walks bordered with flowers. Each of these later was assigned to a daughter who, aided by slaves, saw to its care with the desire to have her section look better kept than those of the others. More than one sly thrust at romance occurred while these girls showed their suitors about their respective plots.

As Criner advanced in age and his fortune increased in size, including as assets land in Jackson County and other acreage in Iowa, this home became a veritable retreat for the man who dared the wilds of the Mississippi Territory. He loved music, especially that of the violin, and the gayety of young people about him. More than once crowds of visitors from Huntsville and other nearby communities enjoyed the favors of his hospitality.

On balmy summer evenings he sat there on the veranda of his mansion and gazed out into the darkness. Faint lights twinkling in the distance marked the young settlement of New Market which had grown up while he watched. Only a few feet from his door Mountain Fork rolled along almost silently in the direction of the town. Occasionally, the sound of some animal, most likely that of a heifer among his large herds of cattle, floated faintly up from the valley, while at the rear darkies murmured contentedly among themselves.

These negroes, descendants of whom still are to be found in the county, were loyal to their master. Many of the 40 or more remained on the plantation for years after the war, while only one ran away to join the Union Army.

Locked in the peace of the valley, only honesty and a man's word were encountered in the dealings of these people. Neighborliness was the backbone of their livelihood. A bucket dispatched for sugar or syrup or lard was expected to come back filled. And once, Joseph Miller, a neighbor, desiring money, sent his 12-year old son to Isaac with a request for \$500. The sum was handed the boy without even a pencil mark as a record.

Criner was nearing 80 when Alabama seceded from the

Union. He was unable to shoulder his gun in defense of his home but he stood by and watched two of his sons, the only ones alive, march away never to return. Calvin, who joined the cavalry, fell dead from his horse in Georgia. Isaac, of the Fourth Alabama Infantry, was killed from ambush at Meridianville.

The Criners received many frights from the Yankees, the worst of which occurred after a skirmish on Winchester Road in which General McCook, a Federal officer, was killed while being borne along in an ambulance. Some soldiers accompanying him swore vengeance for his death and set homes afire on all sides. The sight of rising smoke was proof of their wrath so Isaac and his daughters, his wife having died several years before, moved much of the furniture and stores up into the mountains.

On this occasion, one male slave, who died in Huntsville in the early 1930's, was sent to hide the dishes under the

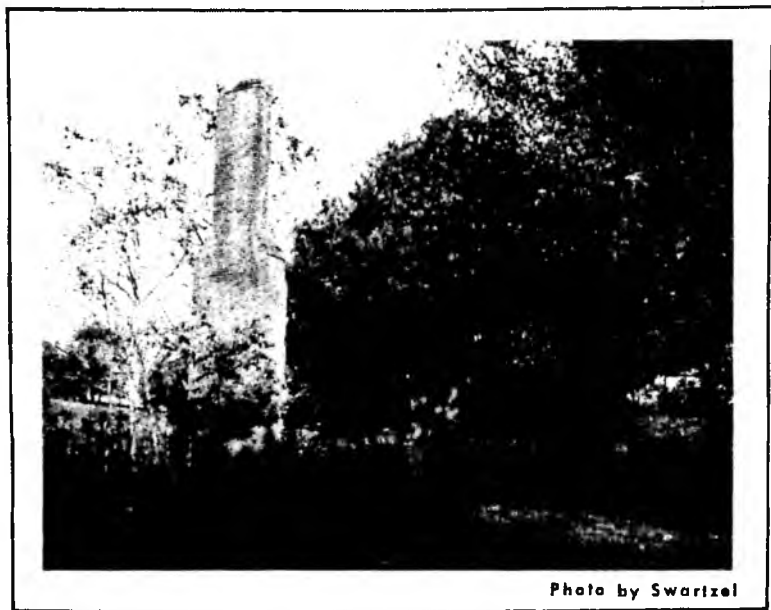


Photo by Swartzel

In 1969 two chimneys are all that remain of the Criner Mansion.

moss and water cress growing along the banks of Mountain Fork. It was his opinion, even up to his death, that many of these never were located again.

One raiding party came in rather unexpectedly and caught them napping. Even the sugar hidden amid the cotton seed in the barn - that is, all except that which an old Negro woman managed to scoop into her apron - was carried off. When the soldiers finally left they took with them the entire herd of horses and a Negro boy, Allison.

From the front of the mansion, the veranda has given way to a single porch. Windows, doors and almost the entire inside of the building, with the exception of the large fireplaces which have been reduced in size, remain unchanged.

Henry Fanning occupied the Criner mansion for many years after Isaac's death. Mr. Fanning would sit in front of the fireplaces, before which Criner more than once read his Bible, and recall the only time he ever came in actual contact with the aged pioneer. Fanning and his father were on their way home and were forced to seek refuge from a storm coming up out of the west. The Criner house was the nearest.

Isaac was unusually hospitable. He remembered a big man who once had been strong and robust and "ready to lick his weight in wildcats - or Indians." Quietly and cheerfully they had talked there in the lower west room until the rain had abated, listening to their host's rare humor and interesting tales. When they left, he had waved goodbye to them from the gate.

Descendants of this settler point with pride to the spot where his cabin was built and to another site, a hole dug back in the side of the slope above the spring to obtain a level space for a shack for supplies or other purposes. They consider them a monument. But Madison County itself is a memorial to Isaac Criner.

