

The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

Volume 19 | Number 3

Article 3

9-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Page, Carlus (1993) "Covered Bridge at Butler Mill," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 19: No. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol19/iss3/3>

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COVERED BRIDGE AT BUTLER MILL

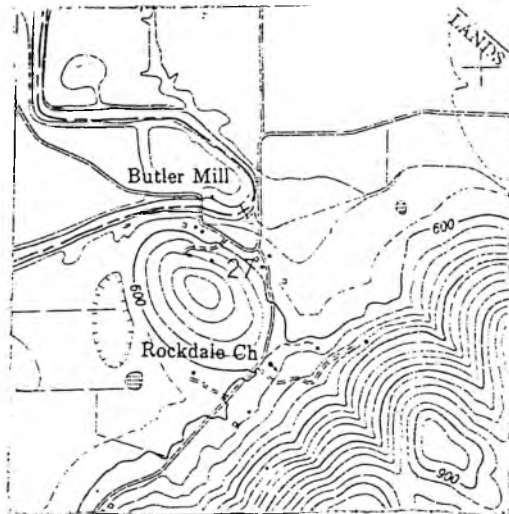
Carlus Page

There was once a covered bridge at Butler Mill. Now there is nothing left except some memories and a few newspaper articles about it. I had a profound feeling that there should be something in the annals of history to assure that something would be left for posterity. The covered bridge has been gone for many years. The site location still affords a modern-day bridge to get traffic across beautiful Paint Rock River at a point where, not so many years ago, there stood an old mill and dam known as Butler Mill.

To set the stage of where the bridge did actually exist, I'm going to carry you through Jackson County, which Anne Chambless has christened the "Switzerland of Alabama," to reach it. This gives me a little out for claiming a partial right to its location for my native Jackson County. If the bridge had existed in 1819, its left end, or south terminus, would have been in Jackson County. If it had existed between December 7, 1821 and December 28, 1825, it would have been in the short-lived Decatur County. It would then have reverted to Jackson County, and have remained so until the creation of Marshall County in 1837, where it in part remains today. Had the bridge existed prior to 1819, it would have been in The Cherokee Indian Nation.

If you travel U.S. Highway 72, east out of Huntsville, or west out of Scottsboro, you need to exit at Jackson County Road Number 63. Marked even more noticeably, as D.A.R. Kate Duncan Smith School Road. This exit gives you a true South azimuth, in case you brought your compass. Travel this road for about 3,000 feet. You will have crossed Little Paint Rock Creek, a tributary of Paint Rock River. Promptly after crossing said creek, you begin approaching the toe of a 15-20° grade or ridge. This is known locally as "Rocky Ridge", and I think I know from the topography, why. About three miles

south of this point, watch for a secondary road crossing the D.A.R. road at a right angle. Exit onto this “pike-type” road. You now have a West azimuth. This carries you by a landmark in Marshall County known between 1885-1950 as “Jim Tom Hodges’ Shop and Grist Mill.” It is non-existent today. Meander southwesterly up and down hill after hill. In 5 to 10 minutes, maybe less, you’ll be passing the old homesite of Henry and “Jimmy” Butler, deceased, grandparents of Julian Butler, Attorney of Huntsville. There are no remaining marks of this early homesite. Julian gets to be my cousin through a maternal Perkins line. Read your compass again. You pretty near have an exact West azimuth. Run this reading for one mile. You will come to Paint Rock River. Look downstream. You will observe the old south abutment of the new bridge over the river, opened in November, 1993. You may back-track to U.S. 72, or take George Folsom, Sr’s Fish-Trap Road to Grant. Go via Rockdale Church as spotted on the topo sketch below.



The house adjacent to the south abutment is the home of the Bishops, Edward and Mattie Lou Clay. Mattie Lou is the daughter of Robert Clay, one-time owner of the old Butler Mill. She is a most knowledgeable person of the history of the covered bridge and the old mill.

I got you lost but good, I know, so I'll rephrase. When you reach Paint Rock River on U.S. 72, just put your skiff in and scull it downstream some 5 miles. You can't get lost. It gets pretty jungle-like about the middle of your "short cut," but you can't miss the way because Little Paint Rock Creek's confluence is not all that navigable. You'll observe one of our unmolested streams that is beautiful. Happy rowing or sculling!

To get the full historic significance of this old covered bridge that stood in its original style until around the late 1940's, I think one must know a little about this old mill with its old wooden "Niagara Falls type" plank dam for water power.

John R. Kennamer in *The Story of Woodville* (1950, pp. 46-47), states in Chapter 5: "The largest [mill] was built on Paint Rock River more than a century ago by a man named Burns... After a few years, Bryant Cobb acquired it and built a bigger and better mill, to grind both corn and wheat. His son, 'Old' Joe Cobb tended the mill for years and years and it became well known both far and near."

"In the eighteen eighties a company of Madison County citizens, Jim Ed, George and Taylor Butler, John H. Atchley, John Russell, Frank Ivey and "Big" A. Whiterd rebuilt this mill adding new equipment. This work was supervised by E. G. Morris of South Alabama. Mr. Morris had built Lilly's Mill at Paint Rock and Walker's Mill in Paint Rock Valley ... The following noted millers ran it: M. M. (Dock) Downey ... William B. Gross, Robert Whitaker, George W. Anderson, J. Dave Jones, and Richard (Dick) Jones.

It was sold to Richard H. Jones and J. Frank Bevel, but they were not able to repair and keep it in first class condition. It was finally sold to Robert Clay.

On April 11, 1939, a tornado swooped down in swift destruction, destroying this famous old mill ... and so Butler Mill's usefulness has gone and its former glory is now history."

I went to the 1860 U.S. Census for Madison County, Alabama, to get a little genealogy on this Bryant Cobb. The following enumeration for November 16, 1860 was found:

315	Cobb, Bryant Farmer \$2,000	54	N.C.
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This leads me to a fact of some kind of circa date for the building of the covered bridge. In various other annals of history of this area, we can read about "Cobb's Ford" existing prior to and after the building of the mill. Thus, we know the covered bridge, which is our prime center piece, did not exist in the early days of the mill. A "ford" was used. But then, we know the bridge was extant as late as 1930, for I took pictures of it that were stamped on the reverse with a rubber stamp, that says "Lollar's Birmingham Sep. 8 1930.



We know for certain that the area that the mill served grew and it became a foremost industrial entity with the developing of the region which it served. This we know by what we've experienced and by "word-of-mouth." It was only this morning when, at a certain restaurant where men gather early to swap anecdotes, that I was "showing-off" my old pictures of the old bridge and mill, that a member of this prestigious "strong-coffee" fraternity remarked, "Why, I know where that is. Many has been the time that my Dad put me on a horse with a sack of corn straddling my horse and sent me off to that mill to get a "turn ground." Now "Mac" isn't one to make up a tale, but he said he always was afraid to ride through that old dark covered bridge. he said further, "My horse always pranced and "jigged" all the way through the 300-foot "dungeon-like" old bridge and I was thinking every minute he was going to jump through one of the gaping holes in the plank sidings."

You see, not only was this structure covered over the top, roofed, so to speak, but the walls on the sides were weatherproofed just like a house or a barn..Once you entered it on the brightest sunlit day, you could hardly see your hand before you until you reached the other end. And there was no turning back once you started across except by "footbackers" or "horsebackers". Wagons, buggies, autos, and the like just had to make sure the bridge was clear before they entered. Once in it, it was no time for aborting.

Another preponderance of evidence that the bridge had an early advent was the fact that the mill was inaccessible to those farmers on the east side of the river because the river at this point was just not fordable, especially with wagon loads of grain. This was a vast area of rich fertile open land near the mill site, and extending all the way north and east through Kennamer Cove and into section after section of open rich land at and near "Old Woodville". The river was generally "unfordable" at the Butler Mill site, so, isn't it reasonable to say the governments on either side of Paint Rock River proceeded to bridge the river at this point? Cobb's Ford is not mentioned further, so far as my research reveals.

We do have some evidence that a bridge did exist during the Civil War.

John B. Kennamer had a company of Union Scouts. While they were on guard duty at Paint Rock River Bridge just west of Woodville, the men were anxious to see their wives and families so they rode back into Kennamer Cove, which is in close proximity to our subject. Kennamer's Scouts were in the house eating supper. Their pickets, Jacob L. and Tom Kennamer heard persons approaching the house where the company was. Picket Jacob L. Kennamer called to them, "Halt!" and fired on them — Lieutenant Millard with a squad of about twenty Confederate Scouts, being a part of M. E. Johnston's company — better known as "Bushwhacker" Johnston — who had organized at New Hope, Alabama, leading his men and firing on the house. It was dark. The Union Scouts scattered and returned the fire. Silas P. Woodall had hid himself behind a large gate post. He fired and Lt. Millard fell mortally wounded. The Confederates turned back and the skirmish was over. Damerias (Aunt "Love" Kennamer), "as brave a woman as ever lived" gave the dying Lt. Millard a cup of water.

The horses feet carrying the Confederate Scouts back to Madison County could be heard as they passed over a rocky ridge toward the Roaring Spring. Butler Mill Bridge site was only a couple of miles away. This was in December. The Paint Rock River at this physical point and at this season was always at flood stage. They had to get to the bridge. Forging the river was impossible. Don't you know the hoofs of twenty horses running at top speed, gave the sound of an onrushing devastating "Twister"? Thus, we can establish a premise that a bridge was there in December of 1864.

In the 1920's many families from the Woodville area who spent at least a week at Butler Mill/Covered Bridge regularly each summer after "crops were laid by," just camping and fishing. The main fish they caught was the "pan-fish" type. These were the regular perch and the Goggle-Eye species. The Paint Rock River at this point was one of the best fishing

sites in the entire valley. Guntersville Dam had not been built at this time.

It took a lot of planning and preparation for a week of camping. The mill served as billeting for the campers, with the bridge serving as a kind of a "sparking quarters" for those of us who thought we'd reached that age. Cooking was done on outside grills or homemade rock furnaces. Wood for cooking and a potable water supply had to be set up. This was from a spring under the old bridge near a sycamore. Drift wood was plentiful. Each wife was assigned to some special meal for each day, but usually the "fare" was fish, gravy, Pool Room Slaw (or something near what we call it today), fish-gravy, corn bread, fresh tomatoes right from the fields, strong coffee, cereal in the morning (Post Toasties), and previously baked cakes for the occasion that were kept cool an a six hundred pound block of ice insulated with pretty good quilts and a lot of saw dust.

Each kid caught his turn at gathering in the drift wood for cooking. Many has been the time that I had my "tail" paddled for failing to gather up enough wood for the breakfast. Everyone was very well regimented. Lighting was by kerosene lanterns, and a light called an Alladin lamp. It had a mantle that was kind of a mesh. Its fuel was "white" gas and air or oxygen. In the evenings the grown-ups would play cards (Rook) and Set-Back. We wild younguns' would go frog gigging in some pond nearby.

Our main entree was fish, but sometimes the fish didn't bite. But that was no problem. I've seen as many as four country hams prepared and carried to take up the slack if the larder ran low. Again, the 600-pound block of ice was the chief refrigerator. Temporary pit privies were sanitized with plenty of lime. They were made private by boards. If a rain came up while we were having a meal under the sycamore, you'd just grab your plate of food and run for the covered bridge. Smoking was not permitted in the mill. For those who smoked, the bridge acted as a "smoker". We kids were constantly hiding in the covered bridge to smoke our "Rabbit

Tobacco." Ours was not a group to run out of food. If we did run short, Bob Clay ran a very good commissary-type victualing store near the premises. He sold coal oil too.

All of these people have been gone a long time now. They had much fun and relaxation from the chores and responsibilities of raising families and keeping the family budget out of a deficit state. I'm glad I could share the pictures with you. I note on the back of the developing logo, "Fox Photo Service, San Antonio, Texas." That company was a real big mail order developing service in this era. I am grateful to my cousins, Grover Hodges of Scottsboro and his sister, Elsie (Hodges) Kennamer (Mrs. A. H.) of Abilene, Texas, and to my dear deceased Aunt Allie (Woodall) Page, who never threw anything away, but in having such a trait, left me some goodies when she died testate April 21, 1962, as well as other legacies, some of which still grace Elberta's and my modest home and which are a real part of me and a daily reminder of how her love from her dwelling place "up there" blesses me every day of my life!

This seems to be a good note to stop on. For a better and fuller story of camping and fishing at this Old Bridge and Mill, I refer you to a story I did on Thursday, July 12, 1973, in the *North Jackson Progress*, edited by Mr. Glass of Stevenson or, maybe *The Jackson County Advertiser*, a non-existing weekly that was owned and run by my very good friend, Dr. Ralph Sheppard, Scottsboro, Alabama.

Scottsboro, Alabama
October 29, 1993



The four men in the picture above were a fun-loving, congenial group whose main object was to see who could bring in the most fish on any given day. From left to right: Milton Page, my farmer father; Homer Hodges, The Woodville barber; Robert L. (Bob) Jones, R.F.D. mail carrier; Wade Page, Woodville to Grant mail carrier. In front of them was each man's wife: Maude (Woodall) Page, my mom; Millard (Page) Hodge; Biddie (Peters) Jones; and Allie (Woodall) Page, my dear Aunt. Do I have to date this picture for you? Does not the mode of transportation, the apparel, and the cane fishing poles date it for you?

**Excerpts from *North Jackson Progress*,
Stevenson, July 12, 1973**

Butler's Mill, as I remember it, was strictly one of the outstanding vacation spots in the neighborhood of Woodville for those who loved to camp and fish. I know that earlier it served a great need domestically as a processing plant for grinding corn and wheat into meal and flour.



Note the height of this structure. This was so that all the shafts, conveyors, chutes, etc. could be installed. This grinding process was powered by a water wheel type turbine that was driven by the clear blue waters of the Paint Rock River. A wooden structure dam was built from bank to bank of the river. It may look rather crude to our modern day engineers, but it was a great accomplishment when it was built maybe around the turn of the century or even before. This dam diverted the water over to the right bank (looking downstream) into the water race where the turbine wheel was located. This race had gates for the influent and also for the effluent of the water. (Incidentally, there were no thermal pollution problems from heating up the water as it passed through the race, thence through the turbine). There was,

however, one health hazard that did exist, but I never heard of Health, Education and Welfare getting involved in it. This was from the water moccasin snakes that took refuge from fishermen in the old dam and around the sloping rocks that protruded into the water. I can't say just how poisonous this snake was, but I do know that as a youngster who has walked this old dam many a time rather than walk an extra 1000 feet across the old covered bridge, I have had the "day lights" scared out of me by them as they would slither into the water just before I made a step onto the next partially submerged plank in the dam.

Just below the 10" by 10" vertical structures that you can see just on the water side of the first tall handhewn rock pillar that you see, was the favorite fishing spot of the late beloved "Mr. Bob" Jones. (He was a brother to W. G. Jones of Woodville who recently served on the Jackson County Hospital Board). After "Mr. Bob" would have his breakfast under the sycamore and have all the fishermen and fisherwomen off to their favorite fishing spots up and down the river, he would "keep camp" and stay around for security purposes. He always smoked cigars — Virginia Cheroots — and would fish in the cool of this natural spot until time to call the anglers in to prepare lunch. As a youngster, along with some of the other children of the campers, we were always glad when "Mr. Bob" would forget to lock his Cheroots and we could "slip" one or two and hide ourselves in the covered bridge and smoke them.

I guess the thing I remember most pleasantly besides the cigar "slipping" was sleeping in the grain bins. There were two distinct sections to the mill building and a dividing wall between the areas. The men and boys slept in one section and the women and girls slept in another. Of course, the men folks and boys always slept in the first room from the entrance. This was for protective purposes. However, about the only things that one had to be protected from was a stray dog wandering into the mill or some of the youngsters up to some kind of mischievousness like slipping a live rat into the women's boudoir. There were large grain bins in the area we

slept in. I guess they were maybe 12' by 12' and about 4' deep. What fun to roll into a homemade quilt, maybe with your overalls serving also as your pajamas and sleep in two or three feet of wheat or corn that was waiting to be ground into flour or meal or be shipped away to Huntsville for the big city markets.

I remember one of the persons that was a most integral part of the old mill. "Uncle Dick Jones," as everyone knew him, was I guess what General Goods or Mother's Best Corporations would call the Chief Executive. It was "Uncle Dick" who would reserve the mill's camping facilities for our "crowd" you see. "Mr. Bob" was the mail carrier for Woodville RFD #1 and his route carried him by the old mill daily except Sunday, so there was what one today would call a priority. I am sure "Mr. Bob" repaid "Uncle Dick" for his favors many, many times by bringing him medicines, messages, and maybe occasionally a pair of overalls from the village store in Woodville. You know, it is interesting that no one ever got investigated in those days for doing a good deed even though he might be a government employee or official.

