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THE EVOLUTION OF THE LAND HOLDINGS
OF OAKWOOD COLLEGE, 1896-1996

John Rison Jones, Jr. and Frances C. Roberts

As Oakwood College began preparations to celebrate its 100th Anniversary, the authors of this article were asked to participate in a large undertaking in preparation for those festivities. The *Adventist Journal. A Journal of Adventist History*, published by La Sierra University, Riverside, California, planned to devote an entire issue in March, 1996, to Oakwood's centenary. Mrs. Minneola L. Dixon, Assistant Professor and Director of Archives, assembled an Oakwood College Archives Historical Research and Preservation Committee to assist her in her duties as guest editor. The specific assignment given to the authors of this article was an investigation of the relationship of the college to the community of Huntsville.

Although the institution's archives contained many historical documents related to land ownership, there was no clear pattern of acquisition. Indeed, folklore had combined with history to the point that a definite sorting and documenting of facts was necessary.

First was the idea that a portion of the original land, including the plantation house and slave quarters, had been built or owned by President Andrew Jackson. Next was the claim that Dred Scott had once been a slave on the Peter Blow farm, i.e. that portion of the land which contained the manor house. Third was the belief that the original land purchased by the Seventh Day Adventist Church had been the William C. Irwin farm, together with the Beasley plantation. Other evidence indicated that the Irwins sold land directly to the church representatives.

In order to clarify the facts and settle these issues, the authors undertook a survey of the original land office sales from 1809 forward to ascertain the actual land transfers. It was quickly determined that President Jackson never owned land in Madison County. From Norman Shapiro's article in *Valley Leaves*, the publication of the Tennessee Valley Genealogical Society, March, 1989, he verifies the finding that Dred Scott had indeed been a slave on the Peter Blow farm. This information was expanded by Thomas Frazier and Tom Carney into an article entitled "A Man Named Sam," for the special issue of the *Adventist Journal*. The other concerns, however, required extensive research in the Deed Books of Madison County.

Currently the College occupies all of Township 3, Range 1 West, Section 20, a majority of the Northeast and Northwest Quarters of Section 29, and one-half of the Southeast Quarter of Section 19. It would seem the assignment was relatively

simple. However, there were extreme complications arising from the original land sales of 1809. None of the land in question was sold in the original auction of 1809 when LeRoy Pope and others bought the quarter sections that were to become Huntsville. All of the original Oakwood property was sold later at the minimum price of \$2 per acre. Most of the quarters were sold on credit.

After the Federal Government had assured United States possession of the land of the big bend of the Tennessee River by 1806, the government dispatched Thomas Freeman to the new territory to establish the meridian from which the lands could be surveyed and prepared for government sale. The Land Ordinances (1785-1800) required that all new lands added to the United States would be divided into Townships of 6 square miles of 36 Sections or 144 Quarter Sections. The Quarter Section would be the initial minimum unit of sale. Although lands would be initially sold at public auction, those lands remaining unsold would require a minimum price of \$2 per acre. Under these conditions, the land sales for Madison County were held in Nashville, Tennessee, beginning August 1, 1809, and continuing for a three-week period.

The early records show the general poverty of the original owners who were trying to pay for their land after an initial down payment which was five percent of the total price (\$18.00). A further complication was the necessity of buying a Quarter Section, i.e. 160 acres, at a price of \$320.00. Under the original terms of sale, the purchaser had 40 days to come up with the remaining funds, or 20 percent (\$64.00) to make a down payment. Because of difficulties of payment, Congress began to pass relief laws but not until 1821. Significant was the fact that an owner could give up part of his land to complete payment on the rest. Extended credit was then given to debtors for from four to eight years, depending on the amount of the purchase money a debtor had already paid. The authors are indebted to Margaret M. Cowart for her preparation of material from the Bureau of Land Management original records. (See Appendix I.) This material is interesting in that it shows the tribulations of the original settlers trying to eke out an existence as small farmers. The original purchasers are found in Appendix II.

On January 23, 1896, Michael J. O'Shaughnessey sold 358.71 acres of land to the representatives of the Seventh Day Adventist Church. This was to become the nucleus of the present college holdings and constituted a portion of the former William Irwin farm. This land consisted of 1/2 of the Southeast Quarters of Section 19 and all of the Northeast and Northwest Quarters of Section 29, less 22.7 acres to the south of each Quarter Section. This is the most historic portion of the campus, inasmuch as the Northwest Quarter of Section 29 was originally sold to Peter Blow on January 5, 1811, with a final certificate of ownership patented to Blow on October 5, 1819. The Peter Blow ownership confirmed the fact that Dred Scott had once lived on this land and had married a slave from a

For a variety of reasons, Peter Blow decided to sell his property and to move westward to the vicinity of Florence, Alabama. In 1821, James W. Camp, who had purchased the Southeast Quarter of Section 19 on November 17, 1814, purchased the Blow acreage. (Deed Book H, p. 79)

Credit must be given to James Camp for the first consolidation of lands in Sections 20 and 29. He was born in Greenville, Virginia, on June 28, 1789. A man of substance, he came to Madison County in 1814 when he purchased his first land in Section 19. After the death of his first wife, Mary Ann Turner, on November 22, 1828, he married the widow of William Tait of North Carolina, nee Mary Webster of Maury County, Tennessee. James Camp died on October 9, 1845, which would result in the sale of his large land holdings to James Scruggs. Both James Camp and his first wife are buried in Maple Hill Cemetery in Section 5. (Robey, Johnson, Jones and Roberts, *Maple Hill Cemetery, Phase One*, pp. 32-32.)

Newspaper obituaries state that Colonel Camp died at his residence four miles northwest of Huntsville. In all probability, the manor house associated with Oakwood College was the structure built by Mr. Camp. A relative, John Acklen Turner, wrote to his cousin, Granville Goodlow, in 1898 and described his visits to the "home place" during the Camp ownership. (Manuscript in the possession of Norman Shapiro)

Thus, between 1821 and 1834, James W. Camp began to assemble a sizable acreage in Sections 20, 29 and 30 in addition to his holding in Section 19. As noted, he purchased the Blow Quarter Section of Northwest 29 in 1821. The following year, he purchased the Matthew Estes Southwest Quarter of Section 20 (Deed Book H, p. 147), and in 1823, he purchased the Northeast Quarter of Section 29 from William H. Winter (Deed Book H, p. 141) who had purchased this property from James Ware who bought the property from John Humphreys in 1815 (Deed Book E, p. 76).

The latter transaction is important because it shows the breakup of the original Quarter Section requirements of 1809. The Winter sale also included 100 acres of the Southeast Quarter of Section 19. This property contained a spring and was divided north/south into 100 acres to the west where Humphreys lived and 60 acres to the east. In order to recreate the original Quarter Section, James Camp bought 10 acres from John M. Rodgers and his wife, Ann, on December 4, 1834 (Deed Book F, p. 171); he had bought 50 acres from Abraham Miller in 1827 (Deed Book L, p. 48). Thus, the original Quarter Section was now whole.



Not content with these holdings, Mr. Camp secured 160 acres from John Hamblin, Jr. and his wife, Judith, in 1826 which was the Southeast Quarter of Section 29 (Deed Book K, p. 189). Thus, James Camp had substantial holdings which his widow, Mary J. Camp, sold to James H. Scruggs in 1847 (Deed Book W, p. 453).

Apparently, however, James H. Scruggs did not have a clear title from James Camp. Deed Book BB, p. 99 (1857) indicates that James White McClung, Trustee, had sold by deed to William Brandon on August 14, 1843 the south one-half of Section 20, the north one-half of Section 29 and the Southeast Quarter of Section 29 together with 77 acres in the east part of the Northeast Quarter of Section 20 and the south half of the Southeast Quarter of Section 19--963 acres "Being land on which James W. Camp then resided." William Brandon contracted to sell James W. Camp the aforesaid tract for the benefit of John C. Steger. Mr. Camp gave Mr. Brandon a note for \$8,000 whereupon Brandon gave Camp full title. This was the title that was later transferred to James H. Scruggs. However, \$2,500 remained to be paid on the note. It is interesting that both James W. McClung and William Brandon were deceased in 1848 and the Brandon estate was still active in 1857.

Nevertheless the Camp acreage was sold to James H. Scruggs in 1847 and on September 25, 1863, Mr. Scruggs sold all of his holdings in Sections 19, 29, and 30 to James A. Beasley (Deed Book DD, pp. 616 and 627). This is a perplexing transaction inasmuch as an Indenture was agreed upon on May 5, 1863, to sell the property to Beasley (page 616); however, on May 25, 1862, Beasley agreed to pay James M. Scruggs 400,000 pounds of cotton for the property. This sale was notarized by the court on September 25, 1862, but recorded May 14, 1863. The next day, May 15, 1863, James A. Beasley and his wife, Harriet, sold the property to Clara B. Lightfoot (Deed Book DD, p. 628). Could it be that Scruggs preferred payment in cotton rather than in Confederate currency?

On September 27, 1869, the administrators of Mrs. Lightfoot's estate sold her acreage in Section 29 (Deed Book LL, pp. 393-395) to William C. Irwin. Mr. Irwin owned the eastern half of the Northwest Quarter of Section 20 which had been originally purchased by David Maxwell in 1831 who also purchased the Northwest half of the Quarter in 1834. The Maxwell properties were sold to Hugh Nicholds (Deed Book R, p. 329) in 1839 and then sold to Mary J. Irwin (Deed Book X, p. 33) in 1848. Thus, with the Irwin purchases, the nucleus of the present campus was achieved. This was the property sold by William C. Irwin to Michael O'Shaughnessey for \$8,000 in 1888 (Deed Book PPP, p. 567). Mr. O'Shaughnessey sold these holdings, 358,71 acres, to the representatives of the Seventh Day Adventist Church on January 23, 1896 for \$6,300. (Deed Book 77, p. 349)

The second phase of the College's expansion involves the purchase of all of Section 20, Township 3, Range 1 West. This was the sale by James N. Ford and his wife, Julia, of 618 acres to the Seventh Day Adventist Church of Washington, DC, for \$24,750. This property, too, has a somewhat complicated history. The Southeast Quarter of 161 acres was originally assigned by John Cunningham to John Humphreys who was awarded possession on February 9, 1816.

The Northwest Quarter was originally assigned to Robert McCall who apparently assigned the property to Thomas Carroll who, in turn, forfeited his rights on July 4, 1829. David Maxwell purchased the Eastern half of the Northwest Quarter (1831) and the Northwest half of the Northwest Quarter in 1834. James Clemens purchased the Southwest Quarter of the Northwest Quarter in 1842. Both Maxwell and Clemens paid approximately \$1.25 per acre.

John Nicholson purchased the Northeast Quarter in 1810 and paid for the property in full in 1813. His certificate is dated April 21, 1814.

Subsequently David Maxwell sold his interest in the Northwest Quarter of Section 20 to Hugh Nichols (Deed Book R, p. 329) in 1839 who, in turn, sold the property to William Irwin in 1848 (Deed Book X, p. 33).

James Clemens sold his Northwest half of Northwest Quarter to Charles P. Cabaniss in 1870 (Deed Book OO, p. 154). in 1853, Mr. Cabaniss gained possession in 1853 of the Northeast Quarter (Deed Book Z, p. 191) after several transfers involving David and Eleanor Dickey to James Wilson (Deed Book M, p. 634) in 1830.

The John Humphreys property has been previously discussed. This portion of the Southeast Quarter Section was sold to William A. Winter in 1819 (Deed Book E, p. 76) who in turn sold the property to James W. Camp in 1823 (Deed Book H, p. 414).

Matthew Estes, who had purchased the Southwest Quarter from James H. Bell's original assignment, received clear title to this property on November 21, 1818 and sold the property to James W. Camp in 1822 (Deed Book H, p. 147). The Southeast and Southwest Quarters of Section 20 became part of the Beasley sale to Clara Lightfoot who sold the property to William Irwin in 1869 (Deed Book LL, p. 394).

On December 26, 1883, William Irwin sold to James N. Ford of Shelby County, Tennessee, 322 acres comprising the Southeast and Southwest Quarters of Section 20 (Deed Book III, p. 351). Septimus Cabaniss, the Executor of the estate of his brother, Charles P. Cabaniss, sold the Northeast and Northwest Quarters of Section 20 to James N. Ford in 1885 (Deed Book KKK, pp. 20-21). This tract,

Jones and Roberts: The Evolution of Land Holdings of Oakwood College 1896-1996 the Ford farm, was sold to the Seventh Day Adventist Church on September 10, 1918. (Deed Book 116, p. 249). Thus, the College's land remained until 1980 when a small acreage was added.

It is the lot of the historian to prove and/or disprove. Perhaps the 17th century becomes the most important age of the modern era, for it was in this century that the concept of evidence gained its widest credence. Evidence is that which allows one to believe with a greater certainty than the absence of evidence would allow.

In conclusion, then, there is no association of President Jackson with the Oakwood College property unless the President was a friend of the Camps or the Scruggs. It is probable that he may have been a visitor on the property, but there is no evidence of ownership of property in Madison County.

Dred Scott was a slave on the Peter Blow farm and this historical fact has been noted on the Oakwood College historical marker recently installed by the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society for the Alabama Historical Association.

There is some evidence to support a Beasley claim to the land, although the family owned a significant portion of the property only for a few months before it was sold to Mrs. Clara B. Lightfoot. Mrs. Lightfoot is an elusive character in the public records. Current descendants of the Beasley family know of no relationship to the family.

Although one can speak of the Irwin farm as that sold to the Seventh Day Adventist Church in 1896, the land was owned by Michael J. O'Shaughnessey, himself an extensive land owner in the county and the builder of the glamorous villa, Kildare, on Meridian Street. Perhaps he referred to the land as the Irwin farm, but technically that title disappeared when the land was sold. Old terminology is oftentimes slow to change. Many Huntsvillians refer to the Olin King house on Franklin Street as the Garth house, and many others call the Watts mansion on Echols Hill the Pope house. Nevertheless, interested readers might want to consult *The Huntsville Historical Review*, Volume 21, #2 (Summer-Fall 1994), for Nancy Rohr's account of "The O'Shaughnessey Legacy in Huntsville."

Hopefully this review will give a clearer "title" to Oakwood College's land holdings. For the reader, the essay should demonstrate the difficulties of creating a large farm from small acreage during the ante-bellum period. This could only be accomplished by the consolidation of small holdings as a result of the original land sales. This article should also provide a better understanding of ownership as the more successful farmers attempted to create large holdings to grow cotton for the newly emerging mills of the south and the east.

In any event, Oakwood College has been the most important owner of these properties, and the College is an outstanding member of the Huntsville community, which recognizes the College's major contributions to the community's religious, educational, cultural, and economic life.

APPENDIX I.

ORIGINAL LAND SALE RECORDS, MADISON COUNTY, AL.
PREPARED BY MARGARET M. COWART

Section 19, 3 South, 1 West - 634.40 acres

Northeast 1/4. 158.60 acres at \$2.00 an acre

To Jno. Burleson of Madison County (spelled Burlesson)

To amt of purchase money 1/4 section	317.20	24 Feb 1812
Interest	<u>10.14</u>	11 Apr 1814
	327.34	

Amt of 1st instalment	79.30
11 Apr 1814 2nd inst & int	89.44
31 Dec 1814 Cash in full 3rd inst	79.30
13 Feb 1816 do do 4th do	<u>79.30</u>
	327.34

Exam. by W.L.T.
Final cert No. 587
Patent dated 15 Apr 1816

Southeast 1/4 158.60 acres at \$2.00 an acre

To Nicholas Reedy of Madison County, M.T.

Assigned to James W. Camp		
17 Nov 1814 By amt of deposit	16.00	
31 Jan 1815 By residuary of		
1st instal	63.00	\$79.30
24 May 1826 by cash	148.70	
by discount	<u>89.20</u>	
	317.20	

Exam. by C.T.
Final Certificate No. 2034
Patent dated 1 Apr 1828

Southwest 1/4 158.60 acres at \$2.00 an acre

To John Allison of Madison County

Assigned to Peter Hudson pr Rect. #3705		
Assigned to Lewis H. Deloney pr Rect. #4090		
Assigned to Edward B.W. Delony pr Rect. #12207		
20 Oct 1810 To amt of purchase money	\$	317.20
12 Aug 1815 To interest		71.37
14 Oct 1816 do		4.75
20 Oct 1817 do		9.51
23 Oct 1818 do		<u>14.31</u>
		417.14

20 Oct 1810 by amt deposit	15.86
8 Nov 1810 by residuary of 1st inst.	<u>63.44</u>
	79.30

Amt of 1st instalment	79.30
12 Aug 1815 by cash amt of int. of 2,3, & 4 inst.	71.37
4 Oct 1816 by amt of 2nd inst & int.	84.05
20 Oct 1817 by amt of 3rd inst. & int.	88.81
23 Oct 1818 by amt of 4th do & do	<u>93.61</u>
	417.14

Exam. H.J.H.
 Final certificate No. 1140
 Patent dated 12 Oct 1819

Northwest 1/4 158.60 acres at \$2.00 an acre

To James Burlisson of Madison County

Assigned to Green Roper

Assigned to Robert Martin, Sr. Rect. #4220

22 Dec 1810 To amount of purchase money	317.20
29 Jan 1815 to Amt for interest	15.42
9 Oct 1816 Do	47.58
20 Dec 1816 Do	3.17
12 Jan 1817 Do	<u>13.04</u>
	396.41

1810 Dec 22 By amt of deposit \$16.00

1811 Jan 24 By residue of 1st instal \$63.30 79.30

1815 Jan 29 By cash in full 2nd inst. 79.30

Interest 15.42

1815 Oct 9 By amt of Int. on 3rd & 4th inst. 47.58

1816 Dec 10 By cash on account 56.04

1818 Jan 12 Do do and Interest 118.77

396.41

Examined P. Rkies (?)

Final certificate #866

Patent dated 21 Nov 1818

Section 20, 3 South, 1 West 644 acres

Northeast 1/4 161 acres at \$2.00 an acre

To David Dickey of Madison County

1811 Jul 4 322.00

4 Jul 1811 Amt of 1st instalment 80.50

19 Aug 1812 By cash in full 2nd inst. 74.86

Discount	5.64
3 June 1813 By cash in full 3rd & 4th	140.62
Discount	<u>20.38</u>
	322.00

Examined F.D.T.
Final Certificate No. 107
Patent dated 28 Aug 1813

Southwest 1/4 161 acres at \$2.00 an acre

To James H. Bell of Madison County

Assigned to Matthew Estis per Recpt #4200

1814 Jan 3 To amount of purchase	322.00
1814 Jan 3 By deposit 16.00	
1814 Jan 19 By residue 64.50	80.50
1815 Dec 20 By cash in full 2nd inst.	80.50
1816 Dec. 16 By cash in full & int 3rd inst	80.50
1818 Jan 3 Do do 4th inst.	<u>80.50</u>
	322.00

Examined W. P. King
Final certificate No. 860
Patent dated 21 Nov 1818

APPENDIX II.

SECTION 19

SECTION 20

Robert Martin 12/22/1810 # 866	John Burleson 2/24/1812 # 587	David Maxwell 11/10/34 # 354	David Maxwell 7/28/1832 # 4250	David Dickey 7/4/1811 # 107
		James Clemens 4/22/42 # 12364		
Edward B. W. Delony 10/20/1810 # 1140	James W. Camp 11/17/1814 # 2034	Matthew Estes 1/3/1814 # 860		John Humphreys 8/6/1811 # 569
		Peter Blow 1/5/1811 # 1029		John Nicholson 5/10/1810 # 192
		Robert Key 8/29/1812 # 790		Robert Alford 2/6/1811 # 466

SECTION 29

MADISON COUNTY, AL., TOWNSHIP 3, RANGE 1 WEST

ORIGINAL OWNERSHIP, 1810 - 1842