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Charles Dillard Lyle

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Highlights in the History of Triana

by

Charles Dillard Lyle

Triana was named for Captain Triana (pronounced Treeana) who commanded one of the three ships making up the convoy of Christopher Columbus, discoverer of North America.

When the first settlers explored Madison County about the time John Hunt built his cabin above the Big Spring in 1805, they found in the midst of an immense forest growth, a tract of land as clear of timber and undergrowth as a town meadow.

This cleared spot was once a large Indian town known to the few Indian traders who preceded the white settlers as Chickasaw "Old Fields" and called Big Prairie by the Indians. It was on this spot later that the town of Triana was built.

According to Judge Taylor's history, between 1805 and 1809 large numbers of wealthy and cultured slave owners came into Madison County, principally from Georgia, Virginia and South Carolina. About a year after the creation of Madison County by proclamation of Governor Robert Williams of the Mississippi Territory on December 13, 1808, provision was made by the Federal Government to have this land sold at public auction in Nashville, Tennessee. Then anyone could get a title to the land. There seems too little history written about Triana from the time of the land sale in 1809 until the town was incorporated in 1819.

For days after the inauguration of Governor Bibb, Alabama's first governor, at Huntsville on November 9, 1819 a bill was passed by the Legislature incorporating the town of Triana. On December 20, 1819, this act was amended to provide for a governing board consisting of five trustees. Shortly thereafter the trustees proceeded to lay off the town, into streets, lots and blocks. Prior to the incorporation of the town, several large land owners owned immense

tracts of land in the Triana township, an area about six miles square. Among those mentioned in Judge Taylor's history were Merriweather Lewis, J. Q. Dillard, and the three Toney brothers, Harris, Calab and Edmund.

At this time the best cotton land in the country was located along the Tennessee River from Whitesburg, then known as Ditto's Landing, extending to a point three miles west of Triana. Madison County, as we all know, has led all counties in the State in cotton production practically without interruption since its creation in 1808. In 1816, it produced ten thousand bales for the market which, according to *The National Intelligencer*, was twice the production of any county of its size in the U.S. The big problem now facing the cotton merchants was transportation. With no railroads, the only means of transportation was by navigation. As early as 1815, the leading businessmen of the county were making plans to meet the situation. Cotton had to reach the Tennessee River to be loaded on steamboats and transported to New Orleans, via Paducah, Kentucky, down the Ohio River to Cairo and thence into the Mississippi for its ultimate destination. Triana was an excellent site for a port, being located on a high bluff, at a point where the wide and deep Indian creek emptied into the Tennessee River.

The idea of building a canal from Huntsville to Triana using the Big Spring branch and Indian Creek seemed to be the solution. I find the records in conflict as to the time this canal was dug. One historian claims the canal was open to flatboats in 1827, being drawn by mules walking along the banks. These barges or flatboats were called keelboats capable of carrying 80 to 100 bales of cotton. Another claims that no definite action was taken as to the canal's construction until the Indian River Navigation Company was incorporated December 21, 1830, and that the project was later abandoned. It was found impossible to obtain sufficient water, even with a system of expensive locks to operate these flatboats, except at certain seasons of the year, when the water supply was plentiful. I guess it will remain for future historians to settle this point.

Regardless of the fact as to whether the canal was a failure or a success, enthusiasm ran high and two years later in 1832, when the canal was completed there was a wild scramble to purchase property along the Tennessee River in Triana. City lots were sold at prices ranging from \$700 to \$1,400. Warehouses, public buildings, a bank, hotel and stores were built. Triana was on a boom. It was thought that Triana would become the principal inland shipping point for cotton in the South. Triana Academy was chartered in 1832.

Alas for the hopes and aspirations of its people, Triana's doom was sealed when the Memphis and Charleston Railroad was extended some years later from Decatur to Chattanooga.

The foregoing seems to cover the highlights in Triana's growth and development. From now on I would like to tell you about some of its outstanding families.

There is one family in particular that Judge Taylor refers to in his history, the Toney Family. There were three brothers, Harris, Caleb and Edmund. They came into Madison County in 1818, and were among the first to buy land in the Triana vicinity. These three brothers were men of considerable means (as judged by the standards of that time) and quickly identified themselves with the development of Triana. Harris Toney was the eldest and the leader. He first engaged in the merchandising and cotton business, later investing his ample means in farm lands and Negroes. He was far in advance of his time in his methods of farm development and was laying plans, so extensive they would have overshadowed all other agricultural enterprises of his time, but unfortunately he did not live long enough to see the fruition of his undertaking. He died according to Judge Taylor's history in the prime of his manhood. (Don't know just when that was.) He evidently was never married as his lands and properties were inherited by a Mrs. Coons and Mrs. Barclay.

The next oldest brother, Caleb, died at an early age. The youngest of the three, Col. Edmund Toney, was one of the best

businessmen of his day, possessing excellent judgment and sound business sense. It was said of him that in his whole life he never was known to make a financial blunder. While the war stripped him of slaves and his land ran to waste, yet at the close of the war, he was out of debt and able to embark in the General Merchandising business in Triana. He died in 1877, at age 77 and is buried in Maple Hill Cemetery.

The writer was well acquainted with the next generation of Toney's. They were all large land owners. Caleb Toney, as far as I know, had only one son, also named Caleb. Edmund Toney had three sons—Harris, Edmund and Charlie—and two daughters, Mona and Mary. Both of his daughters were educated in Philadelphia and both married Jews. Mona married a Mayer and Mary a Mr. Rugg, who was Colonel of an Ohio regiment during the Civil War. Mona had two children, Charlie and Rosa. Rosa was a beautiful girl and much sought after by the young men of her day. She spent much of her young girlhood in Huntsville, and was extremely popular at the dances at the old Huntsville Hotel. She was said to be one of the most beautiful women in the South. She was also educated in Philadelphia, and like her mother, also married a very wealthy Jew by the name of Mundell who was a shoe manufacturer in Philadelphia. Mary Rugg lived in Philadelphia, and I never knew any of her family. She did have one daughter, Jessie, who married a New Yorker by the name of Morrell Goddard, who was editor of the *New York Sun*.

An interesting incident in the life of Mary Toney was related to me by Mrs. Roy Mitchell, a granddaughter of Mr. Harris Toney. While living in Triana, she kept a diary and when the town was invaded by Yankee soldiers during the Civil War, she hid the diary in a vase which was stolen by one of the soldiers. Several years after the war, the vase showed up in a pawn shop in some Northern city and was bought by a man, whose name she does not recall. This man, when he found out that the diary was written in Triana, corresponded with Mr. Harris Toney and insisted on delivering the case and diary in person, which he did, a little later on.

The three sons of Edmund Toney—Harris, Edmund, and Charlie—were all graduates of the University of Virginia. Mr. Harris Toney also studied abroad, taking special courses at both Oxford and Heidelberg. Col. Edmund Toney died shortly after his marriage to Miss Annie King, of Nashville, Tennessee, a most charming and brilliant woman, prominent in Nashville's social circles. After her husband's death, she married his younger brother, Mr. Charlie Toney. They lived on a farm near Triana until their death some twenty-five or thirty years ago.

There were a number of other prominent families in the Triana area, with whom I was acquainted as a child. To mention a few: The Lewises, Roundtrees, Rowes, Arnetts, McCrarys, Henleys, Watkins, McIntoshes, Balls, Dillard and Lyles. Merriweather Lewis was a direct descendant of the Lewis who, with Clarke, opened up the Oregon Territory. Quite a lot of history has been written about the Lewis and Clarke expedition.

James Q. Dillard, father of my Uncle (by marriage), of the same name inherited the Triana Inn from his father, Joshua Dillard. This property was deeded him in 1847, and was later converted to a residence and housed four generations of the Dillard Family. It was torn down, probably fell down, some ten years ago. You might say it died of old age. My uncle's father married a Miss Nancy Brown, daughter of Nancy Pope, a sister of Leroy Pope.

Sorry I was unable to get any information on these other families, I am sure some of them must have had as interesting a history as the others I have mentioned. My father, John H. Lyle, and J. Q. Dillard bought the business of Toney and Grantland about the year 1870, and continued in business in Triana until the fall of 1890, when they moved to Huntsville and engaged in the Wholesale Grocery business, under the name of Halsey-Dillard and Lyle; having taken in a partner, Mr. Robert Halsey, my mother's youngest brother. Their place of business was located on the South side of the square, in the building now occupied by Ira Terry.

After the Civil War, Triana suffered the same fate as the rest of the towns in Madison County. Their slaves taken away from them and their lands devastated, they had to make a new beginning. As previously mentioned, Col. Edmund Toney, youngest of the three pioneer brothers, with his keen judgment and foresight managed to salvage enough money to go into the mercantile business. He later took in as a partner, Mr. Henry Grantland, grandfather of Grantland Rice, the poet and dean of sport writers. In a book recently published by Grantland Rice—*The Tumult and the Shouting*—he mentions an incident in his grandfather's life which turned out to be the foundation of a large fortune which he eventually made in the cotton business in Nashville, Tennessee. At his death he was reputed to be a millionaire.

When the Civil War started he had six bales of cotton which he stored in a large cave on the property where the store of Toney and Grantland was located. The Yankee invaders never found the cotton, and after the war he was able to sell it for \$1,000 per bale. [With] The \$6,000 realized for the sale of the cotton (and this was quite a fortune in those days immediately after the war), he went to Nashville and engaged in the cotton business.

I was born in Triana in 1883, and my family moved to Huntsville seven years later in 1890. My recollection of the town is that it was typical of any other small town in Madison County, with some few exceptions. There was still evidence of the town having been laid off in streets and blocks and still standing was the ruins of an old brick building formerly used as a bank building. My father used to tell me something about the social life of the community when he first moved there from Morgan County in 1870. It was quite a little cultural center. The men for the most part spent their time in reading the classics and had fine libraries. They played a lot of "Whist" which later was called Bridge-Whist. Then there was quite a lot of musical talent among the ladies all of whom had pianos and at their gatherings they would indulge in what little gossip the town and surrounding community afforded, at the same time keeping their hands busy with embroidery, crocheting and the like.

The men, those who could afford it, spent most of their leisure time in hunting. Wild game was plentiful and the feasts they had on quail, squirrel, wild turkey, etc. would make your mouth water just to think about it. There was also, definitely a religious side to the community. There were two churches, a white Methodist and a colored Baptist. Also a white school. One of the preachers I remember was a Mr. Charlie Herrin, who is now living in Birmingham, and still very active at the age of 90. Huntsvillians will remember Mr. Herrin as pastor of the Holmes Street Methodist church some years ago.

Shortly after the turn of the 20th Century, most of the old families died and their children realizing there was no future for them, moved out. Thereafter Triana, once a thriving little town seemingly destined to become a large city, soon passed out of the picture and those who have visited it lately, I believe will agree that it is now a "Ghost Town."



Clippings from Triana Municipal Files: Welcome To Town of Triana “The City of Wonders”

Looking Back on the Past and Looking Forward to the Future
Triana, Alabama, 1964

The fatal blow came to Triana when the railroad at Madison took the cotton straight to the river. The thriving Town was no more. Triana became a ghost town. Population dropped to 50 people. It would be many years later before Triana would recover from the economic depression that gripped the small town. Triana remained an unthriving city, lost and almost forgotten until 1964 when a young man had the courage and foresight to dream that the town that once was in fact could be a reality again. Mr. Clyde Foster was that man. He, along with other members of the community, set out to rebuild the Town. Triana's charter was revived on July 13, 1964. Foster became the town's mayor working day and night to bring basic services to the deprived community. Triana was growing again. The growth brought in running water, adequate housing, electricity, sewage, industry and eventually street lights.

Triana was on the road to becoming a viable community until 1978 when contamination was discovered in the Wheeler Reservoir. The reservoir served as the main source of water and food for the town residents for many years before running water was available. The contaminants DDT and PCB had been present many years before they were ever detected. The Town was devastated. Mayor Foster sought the assistance of TVA. TVA made an assessment of the environmental impact the contaminant had on the community. One of the needs that was identified was the Town's land base. TVA made funds available to purchase 155 acres of land. The acquisition of the property provided a basis for developing a 10 acre fish pond that was to be used as a source of food and recreational activities. Triana is now in a position to develop the remaining acreage into an industrial park that will create economic growth and development. [One industry is presently located there, with others in prospect.]

Census Data

The Town of Triana is located in a relatively isolated rural area of Madison County. According to 1990 U.S. Census data, the Town had a population of 499. This figure represents a 75% increase from the 1980 population figure. The Town has a 94% black population. In 1990, the Town had a 38% population of persons ages 0 to 17 years. The median family income for the Town in 1989 was \$19,643. The median family income for the City of Madison, which is approximately 10 miles from Triana, was \$51,839. The median family income for the City of Huntsville, which is approximately 15 miles from Triana, was \$39,961. In 1989, 31% of the Town's total population had incomes below \$10,000. Census data also revealed that 53.9% of the Town's population age 25 or older were high school graduates, and 8.6% of the same population had a bachelor's degree or higher. The nearby City of Madison where Town residents attend school, had a 92% high school graduate rate and a 49% college graduate rate.





*Old Infirmary and Playground
Triana, Alabama*





*Neglected
"White Cemetery"
Triana, Alabama*



*Well-Tended
"Black Cemetery"
Triana, Alabama*

