Dr. James Manning: Madison County Pioneer, Doctor, and Land Speculator

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Dr. James Manning

Madison County Pioneer, Doctor, and Land Speculator

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It is 2015 and the intersection at Gallatin Street and Lowe Avenue in Huntsville is paved. Even the birds ignore the sounds of the city and the patch of ground on the Northwest corner is sufficiently unimpressive to ignore the idea that a stately home, once the largest in Alabama, dominated the intersection. Looking back 200 years to 1815, Huntsville had grown with the territorial expansion from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi River and was a center of commerce in North Alabama with two to three hundred people residing in and around the town. People of all descriptions, the landed gentry from the Atlantic coast, adventurists, squatters, men fleeing the law, and, of course, slaves made the town and Madison County home. One diarist records walking all the way from Virginia and never seeing a stone house till arriving in Huntsville. As 1819 approached everyone in the Territory focused on Huntsville as passionate and influential men gathered to write a Constitution in hopes of being accepted into the Union as the State of Alabama.

Why is Dr. James Manning a key character in the early days of the territory and Alabama? And, why is he little more than a footnote to the history of the County? Dr. James Manning, along with many old family names familiar to the residents of Madison County, was a doctor and planter that, unknowingly, played a role in creating the social environment of Antebellum Alabama. There is no indication that he was politically motivated. He is not mentioned as holding a high office in the land. But, if he stopped...
his buggy and turned to his wife, Sophie Thompson Manning, and waved his hand toward the rise as he described how he would create a space in the trees and call their new home “The Grove”. It was most likely the product of land speculation and cotton. But his place in history may never have been noticed if not for the Weeden family.

Dr. Manning was born in New Jersey in 1775. Prominent families were acquainted with each other during the post colonial period, shared similar social and economic goals, and they were always conscious of insuring a proper marital match for their sons and daughters. Dr. Manning was most certainly a good match for the daughter of Robert and Sarah Thompson of Virginia. The date of their marriage is not clear but Mr. Thompson, being landed gentry, would certainly have been familiar with the prospects of cotton’s future, cheap land in the Southwest Territory, and most likely encouraged Dr. Manning to make the trip west.

Since before the turn of the century the Atlantic coastal states' planters observed Europe’s growing demand for cotton and they were committed to converting cotton into a cash crop and influenced the Federal government to make land available in the Southwest Territory. The Federal government was willing to oblige since the sale of land and excise taxes were its principle source of income. But, there were Native Americans to deal with and France. Beginning in 1805 and 1806 the Choctaw and northern Chickasaw and Cherokee Indian concessions opened up land to white settlement but that news was old news to those that had formed companies based upon getting rich quickly by purchasing land cheaply and dividing it into townships and sections and reselling. Martin Beatty was one of the first to buy and others followed including Freeman Jones, William Campbell, G.
Harrison, Henry L. Sheffey, and Benjamin Estill all forming the vanguard of future cotton producers.

By 1809 Georgia and South Carolina led the South in cotton production and coincidentally in the same year the earliest evidence of Manning’s land purchase in Madison County and other parts of the future Alabama black belt was recorded. Littleberry Adams with 17 slaves, one of two of the largest slaveholders in 1809 had cleared land and by 1810 placed cotton on keelboats destined down the Tennessee and Ohio Rivers to New Orleans. By 1815 Adams owned 32 slaves and more than 600 acres of land.

The Manning history is sketchy through the early years when jousting politicians and planters were attempting to win support to cut away from the Mississippi Territory and create the Alabama Territory, of course the war of 1812 and fears of Native American uprising dominated political discussions and challenged the growth of the Territory. Yet a steady flow of people came to the Huntsville area and it was incorporated as a town, the first in the state, in 1811.

There may have been an official peace with the Chickasaw and Creek Indians but it was often shattered farther south of the Tennessee River and the farmers along the Alabama and Cootusa Rivers were frequent targets for their grievance. Threats to Huntsville and Madison were common and the legitimate concern caused panic among the residents north of the Tennessee River on a number of occasions. After the Creek Indian War of 1813 and 1814, the Native Americans that had called the Southeast United States home since the 1500’s were forced farther west.

By 1811 Alabama was recognized as a cotton producing area. The output was marginal compared to South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee yet by 1820 approximately 11% of the cotton produced in the South came from Alabama. The state produced 30,000 bales of cotton, 10,000 from North Alabama including Madison County. Mr. Thompson had been correct and Dr. Manning was reaping the benefit of his insight.
That special estate Dr. Manning named “The Grove” may have been built beginning in 1815 but more likely later when cotton was clearly the economic driver for the county. It is possible it was inspired by his sons as indications are that Dr. Manning lived near Madison along the Browns Ferry Road.

Dr. Manning and Sophia had five sons Felix, Robert, James, Payton, and William, and a daughter Sara and they generously allocated their holdings to their children. Dr. Manning watched Huntsville become a city, the birth of the Alabama Territory, and Alabama join the Union. They were there when the Native Americans were driven west from their ancestral homes to the Indian Territory in Oklahoma passing Huntsville just a short distance to the north. He read about Texas becoming a Republic then a state, the Mexican War, and all the while his real-estate holdings grew along with the cotton economy. He was an active participant in sustaining and nurturing the economic system that would eventually be destroyed by war. The cotton kingdom reached maturity by 1840, contributing more than 20% of all the cotton produced by the future Confederate States.

Dr. Manning died on May 3, 1841 at his home near Madison. His wife, Sophia lived another seven years dying in 1848 at the age of 66. Dr. Manning may have practiced his vocation in and around the county but it is quite certain that his relationships with the prominent citizens of the territory added to his wealth and guaranteed proper marital matches for his children. Sara, Peyton Manning’s wife, was the daughter of William Weeden, for whom Weeden Mountain on Redstone Arsenal is named and another Weeden daughter, Elizabeth, married William Manning, brother of Peyton and Felix. And, if it were not for a painting hanging in the Weeden House at 300 Gates Avenue, Huntsville, Alabama of Dr. Manning and his wife, details of their life may have remain buried in the aging pages of the Madison County archives without notice; similar to thousands of others that created the Cotton Kingdom and the Antebellum South. HHS

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