

4-1-2016

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Gilbert Greenway White III

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Recommended Citation

White, Gilbert Greenway III (2016) "Huntsville's First Entrepreneur: The "Salt King" of Abingdon, VA," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 41: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol41/iss1/5>

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Huntsville's First Entrepreneur The "Salt King" of Abingdon, VA

By
Gilbert Greenway White III

Huntsville is known today as the technology capital of Alabama, the Rocket City, and one of the premier innovation cities of America. Countless successful companies make their homes in Huntsville. Many remarkable products that changed the world were born in Huntsville. Industry giants like Olin King and James Medlock founded great companies in Huntsville. Many successful entrepreneurs have made their fortunes in Huntsville and thousands of jobs have been created. But, there is one Huntsville entrepreneur that preceded all the others.

Long before Huntsville was known as the Rocket City, a young enterprising entrepreneur ventured far from his Virginia home, and walked the dusty streets of this small remote Alabama frontier town. Before Alabama was a state, when the Tennessee River ran wild and free, frontier industrialist James White pushed into the Tennessee Valley and established a successful chain of mercantile stores in river towns that may have been the first large retail store chain in America.

As a young 17 year old James White left his home in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and worked in Baltimore, America's leading seaport. There he learned the business of mercantile, shipping, commerce and trade. America was moving west and White relocated to Abingdon, VA, the most western town in Virginia on the edge of the frontier, located on the



James White

“Great Road”. He married and started his family and business in Abington where his home stands today next to the Washington County Courthouse. He built and operated a gristmill and sold necessities to pioneer families traveling west. White looked to the Tennessee Valley and saw tremendous business potential.

Salt was a commodity in great demand in the American frontier. Salt was required for the preservation of meat and leather tanning and therefore was a vital and indispensable to all frontier families. Circa 1802 James White began producing salt near the present town of Saltville, VA. White’s salt production operations were in proximity to the Holston River in Virginia. At that time America’s rivers were the main route for commerce. The Holston River provided White a gateway to the Tennessee River which was the natural highway for commerce into the Tennessee Valley. Not only did White master the transportation, distribution and retail sale of salt, he also controlled salt production, thereby giving him a total monopoly on salt across a large geographic area. In 1812 White opened one of his first of many mercantile retail stores in Huntsville adjacent to today’s Madison County Courthouse.

Huntsville became White’s second home. His business success in Huntsville and the Tennessee Valley made him one of the wealthiest men in America. At that time, circa 1810, Alabama frontier towns were located almost exclusively along the rivers and included the Alabama towns of Bellefonte, Gunter’s Landing (now Guntersville), Whitesburg at present day Dittos landing, Triana, Decatur, Florence and many others, along the 652 miles of the Tennessee River. James White personally owned and operated 55 mercantile retail stores mostly along the Tennessee River in these and other river towns. His business enterprise was the “Walmart” of the early 1800s.

White’s domination of the salt market lead to him being called the “Salt King of Abingdon, VA”. To survive in frontier Alabama families had to buy large quantities of salt each year. If you bought salt in North Alabama in the early 1800s you bought it from James White. He accumulated great wealth and acquired vast land holdings along the Tennessee River in both Tennessee and North Alabama that later became profitable family plantations in

Jackson, Madison and Limestone counties. White founded the town of Whitesburg in 1824, just south of Huntsville. Whitesburg was on burned July 28, 1862 by Union forces leaving many families homeless.

Over his life James White made many extended visits to Huntsville from his home in Abingdon, VA. With his employees and sons he traveled into the Tennessee Valley by flat barge river boat transporting salt and other goods to his chain of retail stores. His return trips back to Abingdon were on horseback. His land holding were so extensive that during the 337 mile trip from Huntsville to Abingdon he could always overnight on property he owned. It was said he lived in the saddle and was a driven enterprising entrepreneur with boundless energy. He spent much time in Huntsville away from his Abingdon home. James White and his wife Eliza had 7 sons and 3 daughters. Three of his sons, Addison, Thomas and Francis graduated with law degrees from Princeton University and other Ivy League colleges. They later managed his retail businesses and plantations in the Tennessee Valley and beyond as far as Marvell Arkansas.

In October 1813 General Andrew Jackson traveled to Huntsville on his way to the battle of Horseshoe Bend. Jackson's army camped near downtown Huntsville only short distance from James White's business. James White was in Huntsville then and was in Huntsville during the summer of 1819 when the Alabama State Constitution was adopted and signed. The 44 delegates from 22 Alabama counties ratified Alabama's first state constitution only a short distance from James White's Huntsville business.

James White was a Colonel in the War of 1812. His ancestors and decedents fought in all major American wars and they were officers in the Continental Army - brave men and women who shaped our nation and state. James White's descendants include many notable people who are accomplished in their own right.

- Nephew Hugh Lawson White who succeeded Andrew Jackson in the U.S. Senate
- Nephew John White, Kentucky, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives

- Nephew John Daugherty White, Kentucky, U.S. House of Representatives
- Son Addison White, Kentucky Congressman and Huntsville attorney
- Daughter-in-law Susan White who wrote a diary of Huntsville after the Civil War
- Great great grandson Addison White, Madison County District Attorney and Rhodes Scholar
- Grandson David I. White, prominent Huntsville attorney
- Son Thomas White, Mayor of Huntsville who brought the textile industry to Huntsville in the 1880s
- Grandson John Campbell Greenway who at the right side of Teddy Roosevelt lead the famous charge up San Juan Hill in Cuba during the Spanish American War. Mr. Greenway's statue is in the National Statuary Hall in Washington, DC.
- Over a dozen men who served in the Confederate Army and officers in both World Wars I and II as well as the Vietnam War.



When James White died in 1838 at age 68 his estate was valued at over \$700,000. He was born into a modest

Pennsylvania farming family and departed this world as one of the wealthiest men in America. His life's

accumulated business and personal activities are well documented in his family papers that are maintained for historical research in the Special Collections Department at the University of Virginia library in Charlottesville, VA.

Today it has been 206 years since James White arrived in Huntsville on his first visit to the Tennessee Valley aboard a flat bottom riverboat. He and other family members are buried in the small private White Family Cemetery atop a beautiful hill in the heart of Abingdon, VA. Many of his descendants are interred at Maple Hill Cemetery in Huntsville, the oldest continuously operated municipal cemetery in the southeast United States. Maple Hill Cemetery (left) connects all generations and brings focus to Huntsville's rich heritage and our people who are gone but not forgotten. James White is one of many notable Huntsville citizens that are characterized and portrayed at the annual Huntsville Maple Hill Cemetery Stroll in October of each year.

From their Scottish ancestral roots, and their beginning as forced indentured servants who were sold to work on plantations in colonial America, James White's family produced many remarkable and successful Alabama citizens. Huntsville carries James White's footprint today with Whitesburg Drive, White Street and the community of Whitesburg, all named after him - Huntsville's first entrepreneur, an Alabama frontier industrialist and the Salt King of Abingdon, VA.

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About the Author: *Gilbert Greenway White III is a sixth generation Madison County, AL resident. He was born in Huntsville Hospital in 1956. Mr. White's childhood was spent working on a family farm near the city of Madison. He graduated from Auburn University with a BS in Civil Engineering and did his graduate work in English at the University of Alabama. His 36 year career has been focused on technology and related business development activity in both the commercial and Federal Government sectors. Today he is an independent consultant providing business development and proposal management services to small business Federal contractors nationwide.*

About the Author: Gilbert is the Great Great Great Grandson of the Frontier Industrialist Col. James White. He resides in Madison and his hobbies include writing, genealogy, Southern history and antiques. He is active in the Huntsville Madison County Historical Society, The Sons of Confederate Veterans and the Greenbrier Baptist Church.