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John Hunt, Huntsville's First Citizen

By David Byers

For over two hundred years conversations have been heard in North Alabama about a man who came to Indian country and left few obvious tracks. The city is named for John Hunt, the first man to live at the Big Spring, and a park is called by his name but it is hard to work through the dusty rumors and stories gathered over those years.

Many Huntsvillians will remember classmates whose family claimed John Hunt as an ancestor. One Huntsville historian felt Huntsville should not claim its start at the building of Hunt's cabin but instead when the wealthy cotton-growing investors came from Georgia. Others gave Hunt credit for beginning the community around the spring but thought him to be a wanderer, clad in buckskin, a poor businessman, and only a small part of our history. So the story, so often mistakenly told, had many faces and few facts.

Some said that LeRoy Pope had swindled Hunt out of the land Hunt had cleared and built on near the Big Spring. Two families told that Hunt had stolen logs prepared by their early family members for that rough cabin at the creek side.

None were sure how long he stayed in Huntsville or where he died and was buried. Little local proof was available. The early records of government have disappeared and other problems caused research to go astray. The very common names, John and Hunt, did not help. His father, his son, his cousin and he all shared the same name.

Hunt was born about 1750 in Fincastle County, now Botetourt County, Virginia. Little is known about his wife but they did have seven children. The family moved about 180 miles south to

Granville County, North Carolina, near Chapel Hill, by 1768. He was a member of the Granville County militia in 1771.

There he was near a well-connected kinsman, Memucan Hunt. Memucan served in the North Carolina legislature, was state treasurer for three years beginning in 1784 and became a very wealthy man. His will mentioned several real estate partnerships; the largest owned 127,000 acres in Tennessee. That and several other large parcels and many slaves were left to various members of his family.

Memucan introduced John Hunt to a number of movers and shakers in the North Carolina government at occasional meetings in nearby Hillsboro. Hunt was always ready to take a public stand on the current issues. He signed an oath of support for the state of North Carolina in 1777. That same year he moved his family to mountainous Washington County, North Carolina in the extreme northeastern part of what would become Tennessee.

As the states and counties were formed, divided and subdivided, he never moved, yet he lived in the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, the short lived state called the Land South of the Ohio River, the lost State of Franklin and in Washington, Claiborne and Hawkins counties. It is true that states and counties have ancestors.

In 1787 Hunt was appointed Sheriff of Hawkins County. On November 3, 1790 the governor of the "Territory South of the River Ohio," which became eastern Tennessee, appointed Hunt a Captain of the Militia and his brother-in-law, David Larkin and swore him in, in nearby Rogersville. Hunt appears in the 1790 census taken in Hawkins County Township, Ohio Territory, Ohio.

Due to the connections established by his relative, Memucan, Hunt also held a part-time but steady job as the clerk of the House of Commons in the North Carolina legislature. Usually the legislature met twice a year in various towns for several weeks.

From 1777 to 1789, except for one year, 1786, he served the House in many ways. Legislative records in the North Carolina Archives show there he dealt with the audits of money spent, arranged for the printing of laws and journals of the meetings, and paid

The images listed below can be viewed at www.hmchs.org/gallery

Images 27 thru 31 and 36 and 37 are taken from the Published Colonial Records of the American Colonies, North Carolina.

Image 27- in May 1783 Hunt was paid as Clerk of the House of Commons and wrote a letter to Governor Richard Caswell regarding expenses of the House.

Image 28- Hunt was paid 25 pounds for searching and examining public papers, vouchers regarding North Carolina claims against the United States and delivering that information to the Comptroller.

Image 29- The North Carolina Senate protested the hiring of John Hunt as Clerk of the House of Commons. The House responded with sarcasm and support of Hunt.

Image 30- John Hunt wrote a letter to the new governor asking for guidance on instructions given by the previous governor.

reenlistment bonuses to officers in the Continental Army. He signed for the House resolutions, appointments and messages. Hunt corresponded with the governor, officers of the Federal government, the state treasurer, and set up payments to members of the legislature.

View at www.hmchs.org/gallery

Image 31- Hunt was instructed to draw 200 pounds, exchange it for hard money or tobacco, to buy paper and get the new laws

One letter, July 1785, told of a task assigned to Hunt. After each session he was sent to have the laws printed and readied for circulation. In this case he was to go from

Hillsboro (near Raleigh) to New Bern, on the Atlantic coast, to have printed the laws just passed by the legislature. The only qualified printer in the state was a long way away. There were many good printers across North Carolina, causing the question, why was this trip necessary. The elected leaders as well as the citizenry wanted to know what new laws were imposed on the state.

The governor, Richard Caswell, wrote to Memucan Hunt, a member of the legislature and kinsman of Hunt, “If you have received any accounts lately from Mr. John Hunt respecting the printing the Laws, I shall be much obliged to you to inform me. R. Caswell.”

Three days later Memucan wrote, “I happened to be able to take up your warrant, drawn in favor of John Hunt, as soon as it was presented. It is now almost a month since hearing anything from him. He was there endeavoring to exchange his money for Tobacco, or hard money. I hope this has been effected (sic) and that before now he has got the printing business in some forwardness. M. Hunt.”

Cash money was an endless problem during the country’s earliest years. Most pioneers could not deal with deciphering values of the different monetary systems that circulated: Spanish doubloons, eight reales, dollars, halves, quarters, pistareens, and picayunes. Bank notes sometimes appeared but most preferred hard money. Often debts were paid with IOUs, slaves or real estate. Tobacco often served as currency in small exchanges.

Britain’s Currency Acts of 1751 and 1764 complicated a tight money policy and few immigrants brought many coins to America. In most places of the newest west large transactions were conducted, not with money, but with promissory notes. These were usually informal scrawls on a scrap of paper, with no witnesses.

Obviously, personal relations were very important. In one case we find it said, "We would rather have Benjamin Borden's IOU than any state's currency." When the legislature of the Mississippi Territory created the Bank of Mississippi in 1809, headquartered in Natchez, one reason was an attempt to settle the situation of lack of cash. Also chartered by the Mississippi Territory legislature, the Planters and Merchants Bank opened in a building on Huntsville's Big Spring bluff in December 1816.

When the legislature chose to print its own currency, John Hunt was one of two men chosen to sign those bills. Each bill had to have two actual signatures. This North Carolina currency was

**The image can be viewed at
www.hmchs.org/gallery**

Image 32- Currency printed by the North Carolina Legislature shows Hunt's signature. Two appointees signed every bill.

considered one of the most worthless of those printed at that time. Counterfeit bills soon turned up with the same names.

Then a big-time opportunity came. In November 1788 he was

elected to represent Hawkins County, North Carolina at the convention to ratify the United States Constitution. At two meetings, in Hillsboro in 1788 and Fayetteville in 1789, he served as a delegate and the secretary and he voted against one proposed change to the document and then voted in favor of ratification. The vote was 195 to 77 in favor.

That is the UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION.

Hunt was always outspoken on public issues. He signed a petition in favor of an unfortunate young man accused of horse

theft. In 1787 he signed a petition asking to separate the soon-to-be Tennessee from North Carolina. A petition to keep the county seat and prison in Tazwell bore his signature and that of three of his sons.

Tennessee became the 16th state in 1796. The meeting at which Claiborne County was formed in 1801, from Grainger and Hawkins Counties, was held in the Hunt house in Tazwell, as was

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Image 38- Hunt is mentioned on a plaque in front of the Claiborne County courthouse as a founder.

the first term of the court in 1802. Hunt gave land for the first church in the town. Hunt again served as Sheriff, this time of the new

Claiborne County, for 4 years beginning in 1801. In June 1802, because he was Sheriff, he was named Collector of Public Monies. People really liked him and he served in public positions regardless of the community in which he lived.

In spite of all this evidence of a public life he was really a LAND

SPECULATOR. The two tasks fit together nicely. A SPECULATOR'S dream of wealth required him to look across the forests and see the small crossroads with children running around,

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Image 40, 41, 43, and 45 are from abstracts of the County Records.

Image 40- Hunt is elected sheriff of Claiborne County.

Image 41- Hunt and others post a 2500-pound bond so that he could serve as Collector of Public Monies.

Image 43- The County Court was held in John Hunt's house.

Image 45- When Hunt was elected sheriff of Hawkins County he and others signed a 2000-pound bond to insure he would do the job properly.

then to sell that vision to the newcomers. He followed the pattern where men moved ahead of the settled world, often into Indian territory, and found ways to own and sell land for a profit. He had five slaves who probably were used to improve land parcels he owned to ready them for sale.

Over and over Hunt purchased and subdivided land and sold it in three Tennessee counties, Hawkins, Sullivan and Claiborne. Lengthy documentation in Hawkins County was evidence of many trades. The term as sheriff of Claiborne County ended in 1804. Then his son, John Hunt, Jr., was elected to replace him. The son continued the land sales activity after his father came to Alabama. In Sullivan County alone, 96 deals were done between 1803 and 1837. The Hunts were in the

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Images 48 to 51 are documents showing land transactions.

Image 48- An actual deed shows Hunt sold 100 acres for 50 pounds to Henry Brown.

Image 49- An actual deed shows Hunt sold 100 acres for 50 pounds to John Galbreath.

Image 50- Court record shows Hunt sold a lot in Tazwell to Ezekiel Craft.

Image 51- Court record show Hunt sold a lot in Tazwell to his son, John Hunt, Jr.

Images can be viewed at www.hmchs.org/gallery

Image 34- A roster of attendees at the 1789 North Carolina Constitutional Convention to approve the US Constitution showed John Hunt represented Hawkins County and served as Secretary.

Image 35- Actual document showed Hunt was appointed to serve as Secretary of the Constitutional Convention.

Image 36- Hunt opposed payment for travel to the Convention to William Blount. The record shows Hunt "acquitted himself with great propriety."

land business.

Many knew about the numerous and splendid springs north of the great bend in the Tennessee River. Of those springs the most remarkable was the Big Spring in the center of the region. A few white men had visited it and the land was a part of the selfish scheme of the Georgia legislature, the Yazoo Land Fraud. In that deal Martin Beatty had purchased 1000 acres, including the spring, for \$1000. Certainly the speculator Hunt was aware of the interest in this area.

Hunt decided to look south into the Mississippi Territory, just formed in 1798. While still held by the Cherokee and the Chickasaw Nations, new land opportunities were envisioned by the adventurous and the Big Spring was on the mind of those who sought profit in speculation.

The trip was certainly planned because he left just a few days after his term as sheriff ended on April 4, 1804. Leaving his family at home, he traveled with Andrew Bean, a neighbor, on this long and lonesome track down the trails and through Indian country.

This trip of several weeks and about 275 miles found him near a fine creek on the Tennessee border. A night was spent with the Criner family at New Market on the Mountain Fork Creek. They were the first white settlers to build in that area. Although the area north of the Tennessee River was still claimed by the Indian tribes, "Old Man" Ditto had already settled on the Tennessee River nearby and operated a ferry.

Both the Criners and another family, the Davises later claimed Hunt had used their logs to start his cabin near the Big Spring. Soon he brought his family to live by the beautiful spring. They had moved their belongings, driven their cattle and settled in the spring of 1805. They were at home because in February of 1806, John's son, David, married David Larkin's daughter, Elizabeth, in

Winchester, Tennessee. The Larkins, the Beans and the Hunts had moved together several times before. That was the pattern of migration of the day.

Hunt was in the advance guard of all those who were heading to the new southwest. Washington, near Natchez, was the capital of the Mississippi Territory. Robert Williams, the governor of the Mississippi Territory, became aware of all the activity, then selected an expanse and named it Madison County on December 13, 1808. A census, taken at his direction by Thomas Freeman, revealed 2223 men, women and slaves were here. In that census, Hunt is listed with five slaves, meaning he had some wealth. Within 4 years, 5000 settlers were in the area.

The wonderful red-clay soil was a topic of conversation across the farming south. This newly available land with fine, fertile soil and water brought the next movement to the area. A number of wealthy, slave-holding planters, many from Petersburg, Georgia, came.

They brought with them a sophisticated life-style, political connections, education and money. Most who would be leaders of the new town came in that group.

Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, in his "History of Madison County," written in 1840, said, "the lands being offered were rapidly taken up by a class of settlers who were in intellect, enterprise and energy the peers of any on the continent." LeRoy Pope was a businessman, farmer and a leading citizen in Petersburg and the most affluent of all. Judge Taylor called him "a wise and liberal man."

When the Federal land sales began in August of 1809, they were held in Nashville. It was felt the prices would be much higher and neighbors could buy preferred parcels when away from those who occupied the desired land. And those with little money would not

be tempted to be bidding and fouling the sale. The big plan of the federals was to use these land sales to pay off the enormous debt created by the Revolution. Taxes then, like today, were not favored.

It was difficult to decide on which parcels to bid. Other than price and distance, the new rectangular section, range and township survey system required searching for the perfect piece to reconcile the large squares to the natural features of creeks, road, and hills. Earlier in the colonies, all land descriptions had been metes and bounds, such as from so many rods to a large oak tree, meandering down the creek to two dogwoods, and adjoining another's farm.

All land was priced at \$2 per acre to begin the auction. The most desirable area around the Big Spring was sold to LeRoy Pope at \$23.50 per acre on August 25th. Several bidders raised the price to that high level. Hunt could not afford to buy the land on which he had cleared and built. He had to get off Pope's new land.

On August 29th and September 18th he bid and bought two-quarter sections, each 160 acres, down the Indian Creek (now the Big Spring Creek) in an area today including John Hunt Park. On return from Nashville, he found this land to be swampy and not useful for his purposes. He soon allowed this land to go back to the government and it was later resold. To finance the land purchases for five years, one was required to pay 5% down. On 320 acres at \$2 the cost was \$640 and 5% of that makes Hunt's loss \$32.

On October 23rd he bought 160 acres in northwest Madison County that he held and sold in 1813. It was on the fine Limestone Creek about in the area now known as Ford's Chapel. He bought this land for the government's asking price, \$2 per acre. His son-in-law, Samuel Acklin, bought land in the area of the old

Huntsville airport. Probably there is where Hunt lived his last years.

It must have been terribly inconvenient to have the land auction in Nashville. Because it took several days to ride a horse there, several innkeepers were busy along the route. Lots of conversations, changed-minds, deals and plans occurred along that trail. Most likely some served as agents for small buyers.

Pope and a few others persuaded the Mississippi Territory legislature to name the new town Twickenham. It previously had been called Hunt's Spring. In 1811, the same legislature, when petitioned by citizens, renamed the town Huntsville.

Anne Royall, a traveling journalist/gossip columnist, wrote about Hunt in 1818 when she visited Huntsville, "Standing 5 feet 10 inches in height, his 180 pounds were a mass of flexible steel. His courage and endurance were immeasurable. He was fond of hardships, adventure and daring, but he was valued most among those early frontiersmen for his caution."

Hunt's knowledge of his surroundings served those who laid out the county and new roads when he was often consulted about routes. On one occasion he led a party of 40 men to build a road toward Whitesburg.

A number of letters still exist written by his children and friends. Like all, the family had prosperous times and troubled times. One, written by Ben P. Hunt, attorney, son of George and grandson of John, on February 13, 1896, told, "My office where I now write is above the spring, whose music, as it rolls over the dam, I hear most of the year. The rear door looks out and I can see where once was that 'tater patch.' "

Hunt and his children were valuable and valued members of the community. It is clear he was held in high regard when the populace chose to name the town for him. In 1810 the governor

named him coroner for a four-year term. Now about 60 years old, Hunt was with LeRoy Pope and other powerful men of the town a member in the Masonic Lodge.

He became a Master Mason.

His grandson reported his death from consumption in 1822. Some think he is buried on the Acklin property in the old Huntsville airport while others believe he lived with his son in a nearby Tennessee community and is buried there.

He was a soldier, lawman, politician, guide, clerk, and land speculator. He was dependable and vigorous, well respected, and it is proper that this city bears the name of this resourceful, well-adapted man of the time.

Huntsville Public Library's late archivist, Rane'e' Pruitt, assigned several the task of researching and writing about different sections of 1805 Madison County in preparation for the book sponsored by the Madison County Commission for the bi-centennial year 2005. I was given the area around the Big Spring and with that came John Hunt. My wife and I visited libraries, courthouses, and archives in his hometown Tazwell, then Rogersville and other Tennessee towns. The Tennessee Archives in Nashville, the McClung Museum in Knoxville, and the North Carolina Archives in Raleigh revealed the real John Hunt. I believe we now have the whole story. DB

The Author: *David Byers is a Huntsville native and a graduate of Alabama Polytechnic Institute. He is a retired fourth-generation nurseryman. Very active in the community, he has been involved in many organizations and boards. He is the author of the book, Crapemyrtle, A Grower's Thoughts and has written several*

articles on Huntsville history. He and his wife, Janie, have three sons and three grandchildren.

TIMELINE OF JOHN HUNT'S EVENTFUL LIFE

- about 1750 John Hunt was born in Fincastle County, Virginia
- 1771 Hunt joined the Granville County, North Carolina militia
- 1777 Hunt takes oath to support the state of North Carolina
- 1777 Hunt began as a clerk of the North Carolina House of Commons
- 1787 Hunt was appointed Sheriff of Hawkins County, North Carolina
- 1787 Hunt signed petition to separate Tennessee from North Carolina
- 1789 Hunt ended his service as a clerk of the North Carolina House of Commons
- 1789 Hunt was secretary at the Constitutional Convention representing Hawkins County, NC
- 1790 Hunt was appointed Captain in the militia of the Territory South of the River Ohio
- 1796 Tennessee became a state of the United States
- 1801 Hunt was elected Sheriff of Claiborne County, Tennessee
- 1805 Hunt came to the Big Spring in what would become Madison County
- 1808 Robert Williams, governor of the Mississippi Territory created Madison County
- 1809 Federal land sales of Madison County property began in Nashville, Tennessee
- 1809 Hunt was outbid for his home by Leroy Pope. He bought three other parcels.
- 1810 Hunt was named Madison County Coroner by the Mississippi Territory governor

- 1811 Mississippi Territory legislature changes town name from Twickenham to Huntsville
- 1819 Alabama becomes a state
- 1822 John Hunt dies

SOME SOURCES:

There are a series of photographs that accompany this article. If printed in the format for this Review a large part of the information would be too small for comfortable reading. The photographs of documents and pages are available on the website of the Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society.

<http://www.hmchs.org/gallery.html>

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