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John Williams Walker

By Nancy Rohr



Our John Williams Walker was a young member of the “Broad River Bunch” from Petersburg, Georgia. He had attended Princeton University and met friends Richard Wilde and Thomas Percy there. (At college, these men pledged their friendship and to name their children after one another.) Walker returned to Petersburg where he joined with capitalists LeRoy Pope, the Bibbs, Watkins,

and Dr. Manning to purchase newly available Creek lands in Madison County, Alabama. Walker married, Matilda, Pope’s daughter and the move was on to become the blue-blooded “Royal Party” who settled in the rough wilderness that was here. The trip took them through Athens, Georgia to the Nashville Road and near Winchester, Tennessee they turned south to come down the Great South Trail finding the “handsomest land he had ever seen.”

Walker immediately read law and practiced in Madison County and became involved politically. His opinion was significant to other leaders. John Coffee and Andrew Jackson both stopped at Oakland on their way south to Indian troubles. President Monroe stopped there for a “second breakfast” after his surprise visit in Huntsville in 1819.

As Alabama was planning to become a state, the Constitutional Convention was held in Huntsville in 1819 and Walker was selected President. This constitution was an exceptional document. Every white male 21 years of age and a citizen of the U. S., who had been in the state one year and the district three months was eligible to vote. No property, tax-paying or militia qualifications were applied – in effect universal white manhood suffrage. After statehood, Walker and William Rufus King became the first U. S. Senators from Alabama.

During his short time in the U. S. Senate, Walker was involved actively in the Missouri Compromise, acquisition of Florida, and he fathered the 1821 Land Law, to become a public hero in other frontier states.

In the meanwhile, sons followed the birth of daughter Mary Jane – LeRoy Pope Walker, John James, Percy, Charles Henry, and Richard Wilde Walker. When Matilda accompanied her husband and the newest baby, William Memorable, to Washington City, they left friend and neighbor Tom Percy to manage the other children and their estate. Unfortunately, the toddler, Charles Henry, became quite ill. Two doctors, Fearn and Erskine, and the boy's grandmother were called to attend the child. They were not enough. Percy was afraid the news would upset the fragile health of the parents, and he did not mail the letter with the details of the boy's death. He sent a grief-stricken letter north to be delivered by a friend, and the parents received the news two months after his death.

By November 1822 Walker realized his own health was too frail and retired from the U. S. Senate. In early spring of 1823, John Williams Walker, a life-long victim of consumption, passed away with his family gathered around him at Oakland, age forty. Although the Alabama Department of Archives and History

records say he is buried at Maple Hill, both he and the boy, Charles, most likely are buried somewhere there on his property.

One son of course was Leroy Pope Walker, first secretary of war for the Confederacy. Richard Wilde Walker was a lawyer who served both in the U. S. and the C. S. A. legislatures. Many years later Missouri-born, 30-year Congressman Richard Walker Bolling has a building named for him in Kansas City.

A trio of phenomenal men, John Williams Walker, Tom Percy and Dr. Samuel Brown lived for a time out on this very lane. Tom Percy, from Natchez, married Maria Pope, also a daughter of LeRoy Pope, and managed Brown and Walker's business and plantations while they were out of town. Percy's own plantation was called Belfield. Among Percy's notable descendants are Walker Percy, award-winning writer, friend of Shelby Foote and William Faulkner; Will Percy who wrote *Lanterns of the Levee*; the women poets Catherine Warfield and Eleanor Percy Lee and their niece Sarah Dorsey who moved Jeff Davis into her estate Beauvoir while he wrote his memoirs and then bequeath the house and her estate to him. Senator LeRoy Percy defied the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920 Greenville, Mississippi. Later still, Charles Percy, businessman from Illinois, president of Bell & Howell, served 18 years in US Senate and was GOP hopeful in presidential term 1968.

Dr. Samuel Brown, a close friend of Thomas Jefferson was America's first lithographer, a Lexington chemistry professor and physician who inoculated 500 people for smallpox as early as 1802. Dr. Brown's analyses led to the use of an ore found in Kentucky that could explode on impact, unrecognized until then, to manufacture gunpowder. Brown married a sister of Tom Percy and lived for a time out this lane where he died in 1830. Of the three friends, Tom Percy is buried in Maple Hill, the other two Dr.

Samuel Brown and U. S. Senator John Williams Walker, and the child, Charles Henry, most likely are out there on Walker Lane or nearby.

About the Author:

Nancy Rohr is a retired teacher, as well as a contributing writer to the Huntsville Historical Review and Historic Huntsville Quarterly. She has written books on local history and recorded stories for the Huntsville History Collection. Mrs. Rohr is a past board member of the Huntsville Madison County Historical Society and volunteers at the public library.