

Early Days in Big Cove

By: William Sibley

In the early 1800s, the land that is now Big Cove was a part of the Mississippi Territory until 1817 at which time it became a part of the Alabama Territory before it became a part of the State of Alabama in 1819.

Big Cove had been the property of the Chickasaw and Cherokee Indians, but the United States Congress made treaties with those Indian tribes in 1805 and 1807, making the land a possession of the United States.

In 1807 the U. S. Congress authorized a survey of its newly-acquired lands in the Mississippi Territory, with Seth Pease of Washington County, Virginia in charge of the surveys. Mr. Pease sent a survey team to what would become "The Big Cove." That survey team was headed by Thomas Freeman and his assistant, John Clan Grayson.

Mr. Grayson and his team constructed a bunkhouse on the east side of Old Big Cove Road about two-hundred yards north of Terry-Drake Road and occupied that home while the survey was done. The survey began in early 1807 and was completed in late 1807.

Before starting the survey, Mr. Grayson had moved his family from Virginia to Tennessee where they lived until the survey was completed. When communicating with his family, Mr. Grayson told them that he was surveying "The Big Cove" and the name stuck. Mr. Grayson traveled to Tennessee to move his family to "The Big Cove."

Mr. and Mrs. Grayson had a large family. Some writers think there were fourteen children, but I found identifications of only thirteen. Several children were born in Virginia and several were born in the Big Cove. When the Grayson family (John Clan Grayson and Sarah "Sally" Carter and children) were traveling to their Big Cove home, they carried bridge-building equipment among their supplies. They saw fewer and fewer people and the children probably asked several times, "Are we there yet?" I like to refer to Mr. Grayson as the "Father of Big Cove" and Mrs. Grayson as "Big Cove's First Lady."

Both of my parents had ancestors in Big Cove in the earliest years of its settlement. Robert Wright, Sr., a soldier in the American Revolutionary War, who "assisted in the Capture of Cornwallis" was my paternal gr-gr-gr-grandfather, who emigrated to Big Cove in 1808. When Robert arrived in Big Cove, he was widowed from Keziah Bibb. He married Peggy Calvert in 1811 in Madison County. Robert was the father of fourteen children.

My maternal gr-gr-gr-grandparents, Robert Uel Childress (1799-1886) and Temperance Connally (1798-1865) were married on June 6, 1817 at Colliers' Beat in Berkley, on Big Cove's east side. They were the parents of seventeen children, including popular twins who both died in the Civil War in separate battles. Sgt. John William Connally (Father of Temperance) was my gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather and was a soldier in the American Revolutionary War.

Very few families, if any, have had as much positive influence on Madison County, and in particular Big Cove, as the Drakes. In 1807 when Big Cove was being surveyed, Drake brothers, James, aged 27 and William aged 18, and their brother-in-law, James

Neely, arrived South of Huntsville at Little Cove after sailing down the Tennessee River in their flat-bottomed boat. They were pleased with the Little Cove area and decided to settle there and made plans for the arrival of other Drake relatives, including Capt. John Drake, Revolutionary War soldier and father of James and William.

Captain John and five more sons arrived in Little Cove in 1810 or 1811. They purchased lots of land in the area and renamed Little Cove to Drakes' Cove.

Captain John Drake's wife was Jean Neely, daughter of Robert and Anna Neely. Future President of the United States, Gen. George Washington used Neelys' landing when making his famous crossing of the Delaware River.

Captain John Drake was probably a humorous sight to the young people of his day. He was a Quaker Baptist who spoke Olde English and who wore knee breeches and high buckle shoes. Adults probably thought he was a distinguished looking gentleman. The captain had a favorite horse named Selah, which he rode from Drakes' Cove to Philadelphia to visit relatives.

Captain John Drake's son, Elijah, married Elizabeth Wills Buford, daughter of Henry Buford, Jr. and Mattie Sherman, early Big Cove residents. Elijah and Elizabeth reared a very large family in Big Cove. Much has been written about Andrew Joel Drake who was Elijah's brother, but I could never find if he lived on the east side of Huntsville Mountain. Andrew has many descendants in the New Hope area.

The Drakes were well-known farmers, educators, and ministers. They owned much land, especially in Big Cove. Capt. John, who was a Quaker Baptist had three descendants (generations) who were ministers in

the Big Cove Free Holiness church. They were Revs. Emmett Neeley Drake, Edward Mitchell Drake, and Edward Oakley Drake.

Rev. John Henry Drake, son of Elijah, was a circuit-riding Cumberland Presbyterian preacher, whose ministry covered Madison, Jackson, and Marshall Counties. Those circuit-riding preachers usually delivered sermons in the morning and afternoon at different churches. Bad weather and overflowing creeks sometimes caused preachers to spend a night or several days with their church members. Revs. Burns Drake (Cumberland Presbyterian) and Lewis “Drake (Presbyterian) were popular ministers.

Rev. John Henry Drake had two marriages:

1. Nancy Worthem of Maysville – two children.
2. Mary Ann Anderson of Warrenton – seven children.

Several of Rev. John Henry Drake’s children, including Elijah Donnell, William Ewing, Frazier McAdow, James King and Tate Estill, were successful Big Cove farmers. William owned thousands of acres of land in three counties, owned a cotton gin, was a bank director and church elder. James King was a long-time member of the Madison County Board of Education, was a sheep farmer, owned a seven acre peach orchard and was a church elder, Grace Ellen’s daughter, Lucy Graham, was an unsuccessful candidate for Mayor of Huntsville. Tate was President of the Alabama State Cattlemen’s Association and Zachariah was an attorney.

In 1870 the Alabama legislature passed a bill that required all public schools in Alabama who received state tax money to elect school trustees. The Drake family had its own private school in Big Cove, which was not required to elect trustees, but two public

schools in Big Cove did elect trustees in the 1871 election. Those schools were Camp Ground and Drakes' Mills Free Public School House.

I was unable to find who the elected trustees were in 1871, but I did find who the election officials were.

Camp Ground School, located at Township 4, Range 1 East – No section given.

Election Officials: My great-grandfather John Wesley Miller, John Anyan,

William King, and J. L. Webster.

Drakes' Mills Free Public School House, located at Township 4, Range 2 East –

No section given.

Election Officials were W. C. McBroom, Sugar Bond Middleton, and J. K. Sanford.

The school was located in or near Little Cove. The late Margaret (Sanford) Connally, a historian of Gurley and Big Cove, was a descendant of J. K. Sanford, and she said that he lived near the Hampton Cove Clubhouse. I have talked with several Drake family researchers and they do not know those Drakes.

I found that two of those Drakes were outstanding pupils at Gurley's Robert Donnell High School (1894-1908) and the family bought and sold expensive, imported horses that they boarded "at the Peevys" and shipped them into and out of Gurley by train.

Siblings Burns Thomas "Tom" Drake and Dr. Mary Frances Drake, children of Rev. Burns Drake and great-grandchildren of Rev. John Henry Drake, were probably the best known educators in the Drake family. Tom was a school principal for almost fifty years, and many of those years were spent at Huntsville's Grissom High School. Mary Frances was a professor at the University of Tennessee for many years.

The Drakes were involved in almost every aspect of Big Cove's history and their influence is still obvious in Big Cove.



Sources:

- General knowledge of the Drake family.
- Writings by Howard Wilson Drake and Mary Eleanor Taylor-Compton in *The Heritage of Madison County*.
- Mary Louise Thedford, author of *Drake Reunion Fifty Years Golden Anniversary 1977*.
- Cynthia Snider, author of *A Grayson History* and many related families.
- (Mrs. Snider is a retired superintendent of schools).
- Old newspapers and other periodicals – Bobby Drake, descendant of Andrew Drake.