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THE FAMILY GRAVEYARD--A VANISHING LANDSCAPE

by Dorothy Scott Johnson

How many times have you passed an ancient burial ground and felt an uncontrollable urge to stop and "just look around"? As you walked among the lichen-covered stones you would brush your hand across the face to glimpse a name or a date. You wondered about the lives of these people--what were their problems and sorrows, their joys and hopes; what was their contribution to the world?

Bending down and squinting into the inscription, barely visible through the crust of moss and time, you became even more aware there was a "long ago". Touching the stones, you felt a link to the past and realized that others had lived, toiled and died after walking the same sod as you and that their labors had paved the way for you to enjoy a life-style they never dreamed of.

These were the people, and their descendants, who had come to a newly created county in north Alabama called Madison. Many came on foot carrying only a gun, axe, knife and what other few necessities they would need on the frontier. The more affluent came on horseback or in ox-drawn carts through many miles of danger-infested mountains, woods and streams.

These hardy pioneers, whose graves are so wantonly destroyed today, built their own rough cabins to keep out the biting winds of winter and the snakes and rains of summer. Their food was what they could raise, not what they bought at the supermarket. They cleared their land with a hand axe, not a

bulldozer. They reaped their harvest with a scythe, not an airconditioned combine. Their "freezer" was a cool mountain stream or a hand-dug cellar. The graves in which they sorrowfully laid their children, parents, and spouses were dug with shovels, not backhoes.

The early pioneers in Madison County buried their dead in the back yard, in the garden, or in a serene spot in view of the house. They then piled rocks high over the graves to discourage predators from digging up the body--a serious threat in the wilderness. Today, these rock-piled graves are often mistaken by laymen for "Indian graveyards," and dismissed by the white population as of no consequence. (How sad is that attitude!)

As more people moved into this valley, communities developed and churches became a focal point. Some families chose to bury their loved ones by the church if it was close enough to get to in inclement weather, otherwise they continued to bury on the land near their home until the advent and wide acceptance of the automobile and all-weather roads.

During the Mississippi Territorial Period, few stone masons came into the valley, and it is presumed that those who did come plied their talents toward building homes and fireplaces for the settlers rather than chiselling inscriptions on tombstones.

Only five territorial-period tombstones survived outside of Maple Hill Cemetery until modern times and they were probably shipped down the Tennessee River from Chattanooga. The earliest known stone to survive until modern times was in the John Drake Cemetery on the Jones Farm on Garth road:

In Memory of
Rosanna Drake
who Departed this life
on the 8th of November
1814, aged 30 years

Rosanna's upright tombstone disappeared within the last fifteen years--probably taken by a juvenile who mistakenly thought it was "cool" to steal a tombstone.

A box-tomb, off Macon Line in northeast Madison County, was erected by a young husband to his wife who had dutifully accompanied him to this hostile frontier and lost her life in the process:

In Memory of
Sarah Bell
Consort of James Bell
born 1777, died Aug. 3, 1815

In the early 1980's Sarah Bell's marker was bulldozed under. It was then dug out of the ground and re-set by Billy Monroe who headed a federally sponsored cemetery restoration committee. A few weeks later the monument again disappeared and a pond appeared in its place.

The upright tombstone of James C. Fennell is the only one dating from the territorial period still in existence outside of Maple Hill Cemetery and known to this writer. His original grave site was in what is now the Camelot subdivision in southeast Huntsville but was legally moved to the John Hobbs Cemetery, in the now Chimney Springs subdivision, in 1975. The stone exists today only because of careful preservation by Mrs. Roy Cochran, a family descendant. The inscription states:

James C. Fennell
Born
January 18, 1780
Died
September 3, 1817

The last two known territorial period tombstones to survive until Huntsville's tremendous expansion in the early 1960's were those of George and Anna Watson Jude. When I first saw these graves in 1966 they were intact along with the markers of three children--all covered with box tombs. When I went back to copy the inscriptions in 1968, only George's marker remained intact. The children's markers were broken and scattered or missing, and Anna's stone was broken in two with the bottom half missing. Only part of her inscription remained:

Anna Watson Jude
Dau. of Matthew and Elizabeth Watson
born September 17, 1754
died...

Even though part of the stone with the death date on it was missing, through the Last Will & Testament of her husband we glean that she died before him. The children who died before him, however, were not listed in the Will, and since their graves are now gone, their identify has been lost forever. George's inscription read:

George Jude
born
the 15th day of August, 1746
died
13 December 1818
aged
72 y 3 Mo 28 days

Sometimes history is written on a tombstone such as that in the Bragg Cemetery in Hurricane Valley southeast of New Market:

Shedrick Golden
was born July 4, 1808
in the year of our Lord
On the 13th of January, 1865
he was taken off and murdered
for maintaining the Union and Constation
of the United States.

The inscription clearly points out the conflict between neighbors of southern sympathies and those of northern sympathies during the Civil War. It also shows that not all southern residents were pro-Confederacy as is commonly believed. Mr. Golden and William E. Norris, then a youth, were butchering hogs near a spring on the side of the mountain off Ray Road when a group of strongly pro-Confederate neighbors rode up on horses. Norris outran the horsemen, but Golden was caught and killed.

Revolutionary Soldiers Buried in Madison County

Many Revolutionary soldiers are buried in Madison County, a reminder of this country's war for independence by a rag-tag army of poorly clad and poorly fed citizens. Among them are Adam Dale (born July 14, 1768, died Oct. 14, 1851) in the Jeffries Cemetery one mile east of Hazel Green; John Amonnet (died March 30, 1833) in the Donaldson Cemetery of Jimmy Fisk Road, Samuel Davis (died Aug. 31, 1842 aged 88) and Moses Poor (stone now gone) in the Graveyard Hill Cemetery at New Market, and Robert Clark (born Feb. 23, 1757, died Nov. 20, 1837) buried in a fence row off Monroe Road, to name a few. Included in this list should be

John Connally who is buried in the Connally Cemetery on St. Clair Lane off Bell Factory Road. One of his descendants, John Connally, became governor of Texas as a Democrat and a candidate for president of the United States as a Republican. Unfortunately, the Madison County pioneer John Connally's tombstone is one that is no longer in existence since cattle have been allowed to mill under the lofty trees of the tiny family graveyard crushing the marble stones to dust.

I have seen tombstones in Madison County used as a hearthstone, steps to a house, a driveway, a ford across a creek, a splash-board under a downspout, and a cornerstone to a barn. Special note was taken of the remnants of tombstones imbedded in the north wall of Maple Hill Cemetery. One cannot help but wonder how many of these destroyed stones were erected to the memory of an old patriot who came to Madison County to carve a better life for himself and his family.

Works of Art--Gone!

Not only are we losing part of our heritage through destruction of our graveyards, we are losing works of art that cannot be replaced. In the McDavid Cemetery, three miles south of the Tennessee line, is the grave of Brancy Davie who died in 1848, aged 27 years, the wife of Dr. Gabriel S. Davie. Brancy's monument was the only box-tomb found in Madison County made entirely of marble. The lid was exquisitely ornamented with carvings of roses in deep bas-relief surrounding a shield. In the center of the shield were carved these words, "I am not dead, but only sleeping." A few months before I visited this once lovely spot, neighborhood boys had knocked the stones to the ground while rabbit hunting. Cattle were

then let into the graveyard and they completed the destruction.

Progress?

In order to build, we must destroy; one is impossible without the other. Progress may mean the destruction of a wildlife habitat, an ancient tree, a dilapidated building, a landscape, or as some avaricious people believe, a tiny family graveyard. It is society's role to dictate what must be retained for the benefit of future generations. Carl Sandburg once said, "When a society or civilization perishes, one condition can always be found; they forgot where they came from." Each time one tombstone is destroyed, part of our heritage, our history, is destroyed. We must not allow these reminders of "where we came from" to be lost to future generations.



