

A SUMMARY

of the

ORGANIZATION OF BERRIEN COUNTY

and

AN EPITOME OF ITS ANTEBELLUM HISTORY

by

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Berrien County as originally laid out was taken from Irwin, Lowndes and Coffee Counties.

As first organized, its area was eleven hundred square miles.

By the creation of Tift, Cook and Lanier Counties, largely from its original territory, the area of the county is now (1937) approximately three hundred square miles.

The legislative act of creating Berrien County was passed by the Legislature, February 25, 1856.

The Legislature appointed five marking commissioners-- William Roberts, Josiah Parrish, Cornelius Tyson, Jasper M. Luke, and Owen Smith to fix the boundary lines of the new county.

These boundary lines were fixed: On the North along the northern lines of land lots, numbers 275, 276, 277, etc., in the fifth and sixth districts, beginning at the eastern boundary of Worth County and running east to Willacoochee Creek; on the east by Willacoochee Creek and Alapaha River; on the south by the southern boundaries of the ninth and tenth land lot districts; on the west by Little River and Worth County.

After laying out the county by fixing its boundaries as described above, the Legislative Commissioners met at Flat Creek and organized the territory thus marked out, by naming it Berrien County and calling an election to elect county officers and a representative to the State Legislature.

The election was called to be held April 1, 1856. They named the county Berrien in honor of John McPherson Berrien, a notable Georgian.

The election returns were consolidated at Flat Creek and resulted in naming the following officers:

John Lindsey, Ordinary; R. A. Peeples, Clerk; John ( Jack) Studstill, Sheriff; John A. Money, Tax Receiver; John M. Futch, Tax Collector; Seaborn J. Bradford, Surveyor; James Dobson, Cornor; D. P. McDonald, Representative to the Legislature.

### The Inferior Court

In conformity with the State Law, the Inferior Court was established in Berrien County. The following citizens of the county were elected to be the judges of this court: Martin Shaw, William Roberts, Harmon Gaskins, Cornelius Tyson and James Griffin, Sr.

The functions of the Inferior Court were the workings of the present County Board of Education, The County Commissioners and the County Court. (When County Court is in operation in the County.) The judges of the Inferior Court were elected by the voters of the County for a term of four years. This Court was abolished by the Bullock Republican Regime in the year 1868.

## Flat Creek

Flat Creek was the precinct of the Flat Creek Militia District. It was situated four and one-half miles north of the present site of Nashville, the county seat of Berrien County. It consisted of a water grist mill, a cotton ginnery, a merchandise store, and a United States Post Office named Flat Creek. The late William D. Griffin, known as Dumps Griffin, was owner of the mill, ginnery and store, and was also post master of the post office.

Berrien County was organized, the first election returns consolidated, the county officials found elected by the consolidation were given their commission, the Inferior Court organized and the whole county machinery set in motion at Flat Creek on the tenth day of June, 1856, by the five commissioners appointed by the Legislature to lay off and organize the county.

The first session of the Superior Court held in Berrien County was held November, 1856, at the residence of Mrs. Amy Kirby, on the Coffee Road, one mile northeast of the present site of Nashville. Judge P. E. Love was the judge and R. A. Peeples was the clerk.

The Grand Jury, at this session, recommended that the Inferior Court purchase of Daniel Griner a portion of his farm for a Court House Square, on which to build a Court House, The present square is the land they bought. At that time Mr. Griner's residence was situated on the northwest corner of where the square now is. Daniel Griner was a son of Emmanuel Griner, the father of three sons---William, Samuel, and Daniel, also father of Mrs. Kirby.

## The Court House

The Inferior Court appointed a Court House Committee to draw plans and specifications for a Court House. This committee was composed of James Griffin, Sr. (grandfather of the late W. Henry Griffin), R. A. Peeples, and E. C. Morgan.

The Court also appointed a Building Committee, the personnel of which were William Lastinger (father of the late Judge Lacy E. Lastinger of Adel), Mitchel S. Griffin, W. D. Griffin, Henry T. Peeples (father of the late Judge Henry B. Peeples of Nashville), and John Lindsey.

The Court House Committee submitted to the Inferior Court, at its October, 1856, session, plans and specifications for a two story building which the Court accepted, and then advertised for construction bids. At its January, 1857, session the Court awarded the construction of the building to Woodford J. Mabry for the sum of \$2600.00. Joe Newbern was the chief carpenter on the construction of the building.

On March 22, 1858, the Building Committee reported the building finished and ready for occupancy. In their report to the Inferior Court, the Committee said, "The workmanship in the construction of the building exceeds our most sanguine expectations."

The dimensions of the building were fifty by sixty feet square and twenty feet high.

The building served the County as a court house thirty-nine years and was then removed to the east side of the Court House Square by Dr. W. B. Goodman, to give space for the erection of the present court house. It served the public as the Goodman House and Hotel House for thirty more years more.

Dr. Goodman was a noted physician of Nashville-- rising from poverty in youth to wealth in manhood.

The birth of Nashville is coincident with the laying out of the present public square and the building of the first court house. The village was named Nashville in honor of Simon Nash, a noted antebellum chair maker.

### The Jail

The jail was a strong, but very crude structure. It was situated near the present residence of Miss Henrietta Griffin.

### The First School House

The first school house built in Nashville was erected in 1858. The lay citizens and the Masonic Fraternity of the village came together in the dual cause of education and masonry and in unison they constructed an up-to-date two-story edifice, the upper chamber of which, they named the Duncan Masonic Lodge in honor of the venerable Duncan O'Quin who resided four miles west of Nashville in the now rearranged beautiful county home of Dr. P. H. Askew.

The lower chamber was named the McPherson Academy in honor of John McPherson Berrien for whom Berrien County was named, as before stated.

The street running north and south in front of the building was named McPherson Street.

The first teacher on this building was Miles Mathis, an able instructor in his day. He resigned to take part in the Civil War between the States and was killed in that fratricidal struggle. This building served its people long and well until replaced by the present Grammar School brick structure on adjacent ground. It was remodeled by J. H. Anderson for a dwelling and is now ( 1937) in fine condition. It is at present the property of L. L. Barr, an ex-Elder of the Nashville Methodist Church. The oldest town in the original Berrien County, now in Lanier County, is Lakeland. Lakeland was first called Alapaha--a trading post between the white people and the Creek Indians. For the convenience of the early sttlers, the United States Government established a post office at Alapaha.

About the year 1800 Joshua Lee, a noted pioneer of South Georgia, built a grist-mill at the north outlet of Grand Bay, near the little Alapaha hamlet.

Grand Bay is a very noted South Georgia Bay having a north and south outlet.

There being no grist mill in reach of the early settlers of this section, the neighbors of Mr. Lee took their horse carts and hauled dirt to build a dam across this outlet that they might have a mill to grind their corn so as to have meal for bread. Thus the Lee-Lastinger-Banks Millpond, now known as Banks Lake, had its origin in dirt hauled in horse carts by the neighbors of Joshua Lee to obtain bread. Joshua Lee was the great uncle of General Robert E. Lee, the great southern general of the Civil War. The Lees, Registers, and Pattens of South Georgia are closely related to General Robert E. Lee.

The proximity of the Lee Grist Mill to the little town of Alapaha caused the people to change its name from Alapaha to Milltown, which name it retained until recently when it was changed to Lakeland because of its proximity to Banks Lake. Lakeland is now the county seat of Lanier County.

In the year 1820, Joshua Lee sold his possessions to William Lastinger. Mr. Lastinger greatly improved the mill facilities by the installation of an up-to-date lumber mill, cotton gins and machinery for carding wool and cotton rolls for spinning thread with which to weave cloth (by hand) for making clothes.

Mr. Lastinger operated this industry and also engaged in large farming interests until the year 1863 when he sold his entire possessions to Henry Banks of Atlanta who greatly improved the industry by introducing planing and flour mills.

#### Early Means and Modes of Travel and Conveyance

Means of travel and conveyance in the early days of the County were very crude.

The main thoroughfares of this section of the country before the creation of Berrien County were the Old Coffee and Unions roads. These roads were opened by Legislative enactments about the year 1830. The entrance of the Coffee Road into now Berrien County was at the northeastern corner of land lot number 267 in the Fifth district, and left the county just southwest of where the town of Cecil in Cook County now is.

In traversing the territory, now Berrien County, the Coffee Road crossed the Alapaha River at the Marsh Ferry, passed through where Nashville is now situated and crossed the Withlacoochee River where W. T. Futch now lives.

The Old Union Road entered the territory of what is now Tift County just north of where Tifton now is.

The Union Road passed along where Lenox, Sparks, Adel, Cecil, and Valdosta now are situated.

The termini of the Old Coffee were Jacksonville, Georgia on the Ochmulgee River and St. Marks, Florida, on the Gulf of Mexico.

The termini of the Old Union Road were Macon, Georgia, and St. Augustine, Florida.

Stage coaches for travelers, and wagons and other means of travel and traffic traversed these roads and as there were few bridges in those days, these means of travel had to be ferried across large streams of water, hence the necessity for ferries regulated by laws.

These two roads-- the Coffee and Union-- were State Military projects backed by the Federal Government.

The Inferior Court having built the court house and domiciled the various county officers in their proper apartments in the new buildings, now turned their attention to the laying out and constructing of public roads in the county for the convenience of the rapidly growing population.

The Public roads were:

- (1) From Nashville northward to the Irwin County line by the way of Flat Creek, the present site of Alapaha, the Old McMillan cemetery, and crossing the Alapaha River at the present site of Lucy Lake, continued by the present home of Hon. J. B. Parrineau to the present site of Gladys on the county line.
- (2) The Nashville and Milltown road southeast by the residence of John Clements, father of Milly Clements, who now owns the old home.
- (3) From Milltown to the Alapaha River, connecting with a public road to Magnolia-- now Homerville, through the settlements of the Stricklands, Sirmonses, Fenders, and Tomlinsons.
- (4) The Nashville and Indian Ford Road east by the present site of the Poplar Springs School to the Indian Ford on the Alapaha River.
- (5) From Milltown northward to Tyson Ferry on the Alapaha River just east of the present site of Alapaha. This road passes by the residence of the late John Studstill, first sheriff of Berrien County, Now the home of Joe Studstill, his son; Stony Hill, the old residence of the late Moses C. Lee; Keeffe and Bullocks Turpentine still; the residence of the late J. H. Rowan, now the residence of his widow, Mrs. Phoebe Rowan, the residence of the late William Gaskins-- the grandfather of the late Alvah W. Gaskins of Nashville.
- (6) A road from the Lastinger Mills-- now Banks Lake--extending westward and northwestward to connect with the Troupeville Road at Nashville. This road was designated to pass the residence of J. T. Carroll (now extinct); the residence of Isbón Giddens--great-grandfather of Eugene Giddens, who now owns the old home; the residence of General Levi J. Knight-- grandfather of Ex-Judge Jon P. Knight

of Nashville; the residence of John M. Futch, first Tax Collector of Berrien County, now the residence of his daughter, Mrs. W. B. Allen; the residence of Ruben Futch at the Big Pecan Tree, to the Troupeville Road at Nashville. The termini of the Troupeville Road were Flat Creek on the north and Troupeville (the first county seat of Lowndes County) on the south. The Troupeville Road is now the Nashville and Valdosta Road by the home of the late Jack Moore, the New Lois School, and the home of D. J. Gaskins. one of the present Board of County Commissioners.

- (7) The Nashville and Moultrie Road from Nashville to the Robert W. Parrish Ferry on Little River by the way of the present site of the town of Adel, the county seat of Cook County.
- (8) The Nashville and Douglas Road northeast from Nashville to the Alapaha River near the residence of the Late William Gaskins, father of the late Jimmie Gaskins.
- (9) From the residence of the late Charles J. O'Neal westward to the Jacob Kinard Bridge on Little River.
- (10) The Big Creek and Indian Ford Ferry Road from Milltown northeast through the settlements of the Registers, Sirmons, Spells, Fenders and Guth ries to connect with the Nashville and Indian Ford Road at the Indian Ford Ferry on the Alapaha River.

### The Ferries

The Ferries of the early days were as follows:

- (1) The Tyson Ferry, the Marsh Ferry and the Indian Ford Ferry on the Alapaha River.
- (2) The Banks Ferry, The Clarks Ferry and the Robert W. Ferry on the Little River
- (3) The Thomas Futch Ferry on the Withlacoochee River.

These ferries were established by the early settlers of South Georgia as necessary means of travel and transportation. They were established between the years 1820 and 1835 as the travel and development of the newly settled country made it necessary. The Tyson and Marsh Ferries were established between 1820 and 1825 to accomodate the influx of immigrants from Wilkinson, Washington, Bullock Emaniell and other northern and middle counties of the State, as well as from Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina.

The Indian Ford Ferry was established about the year 1830 to take care of local Conditions and the incoming of immigrants from the eastern counties of the State.

The ferries on Little River were established along the years 1825 to 1835 to aid local intercourse and to assist immigrants westward to new territory.

The Futch Ferry was established in the year 1823 for local convenience and to help along the steady flow of emigrants southward in search of open range for their immense herds of sheep and cattle. This ferry was kept by Thomas Futch, The grandfather of W. T. Futch who owns and resides at the old Futch home near the Futch Bridge built in 1883 to take the place of the old Futch Ferry which had so long and faithfully served local conditions and the travelling public under the vigilant watchcare of its faithful owner, Thomas Futch-- The venerable Withlacoochee Ferry-man.

### The Schools

School facilities in the early history of Berrien County were very meager.

The DuBignon School House was constructed at Milltown, now Lakeland, in the year 1858, by the town and community and the Masonic Fraternity just as was done at Nashville, and for the same purposes--both houses built practically alike-- the upper chamber for a Masonic Lodge, named the Milltown Lodge-- the lower chamber named the DuBignon Institute, in honor of J. H. DuBignon of North Carolina, a man high in the estimation of the Carrolls, who had just settled in Milltown from North Carolina.

The first teacher in the DuBignon Institute was R. A. Baxter, a young man from Atlanta.

What Miles Mathis was to the McPherson Academy of Nashville, R. A. Baxter was to the DuBignon Institute of Milltown. Both were young men; both graduates of the University of Georgia; both resigned their positions in the respective schools to answer the call of the State of Georgia to take part in the Civil War-- Mathis was killed as stated elsewhere and it is not known to us what became of Baxter, It is known that both sowed seed in these schools which sprang up in the lives of their pupils after the Civil War that bore fruit to their illustrious names.

Old Stone Wall School, south of Adel now is, under the able leadership of John A. Money, the first Tax Receiver of Berrien County, did a great work for the boys and girls in that section in the antebellum days.

Martin F. Miller was an able and noted teacher--he taught east of Nashville in the settlements of the Giddens, Watsons, Gaskins, and Griffins. He also resigned to take part in the Civil War. He returned from the war and married Mrs. Memima Jones, widow of Henry Jones, who was killed in the Civil War. He taught after the war. The late W. Henry Griffin received his early inspiration from Mr. Miller, which made him the useful man he was to Berrien County. Mr. Miller was an eccentric man, but an able teacher. Most of his teaching was in dirt floor school houses.



There were other little schools scattered through the county, but with all these, the great mass of the people lay in illiteracy. Eighty per cent of the age eligibles for the Civil War service were illiterates. But among all this illiteracy, a number of boys received inspiration from these early teachers that made them colossal powers in our day--in legislative, judicial and literary circles. A few of the names are: Hon Jonathan D. Knight, a noted teacher and who served more terms in the House and Senate of the Legislature of Georgia than any other man in the County (he died while Senator); Hon. Lacy E. Lastinger, a noted teacher, lawyer and judge of the Court; Hon, W. H. Griffin, a noted teacher, lawyer, member of the legislature, and a judge; Hon, Henry B. Peeples, a successful lawyer, judge and senator; Hon. Henry H. Knight, a successful merchant and Senator.

This closes my effort to leave to the future generations of Berrien County a brief history of the Early Days of our County. My effort, though weak, has been conscientious and painstaking. If the effort meets, even in a small degree, the expectation of its readers, I shall be thereby amply compensated for the pleasant labor bestowed on its preparation.

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A Partial List of Names of Antebellum Settlers of Berrien County

Lee, Register, Patten, Studstill, Parrish, Tyson, McMillan, Giddon, Carroll, Howell, Williams, Carter, Fender, Wilkinson, Sirmons, Watson, Clements, Boyett, Baskins, Chisholm, Paulk, Snead, Mathis, Cook, Sutton, May, Ray, Shaw, Knight, Moore, Lastinger, Crosby, Guthrie, Talley, Hendley, Griner, Gaskins, Tucker, Lovejoy, Kirby, Futch, Fountain, Webb, Allen, Weaver, Swindle, Roberts, Exum, Goodman, Dobson, Peeples, Sweat, Parr, Vickers, Vickery, Woodard, Baker, Kinard, Patterson, Rentz, Lovett, Hutchinson, Dees, Rutherford, Hancock, Hall, Nix, Duff, Bird, Lily, Albritton, Overstreet, Castleberry, DeVane, McDonald, Morris, Jones, Garrett, Dixon, Rowe, Ford, Griffin, Lindsey, Turner, Kirkland, Bostick, Bailey, Bradford, Brogdon, Murray, Hughes, Harper, Fletcher, McKinnon, McDermond, Bragdon, Swain, Hester, Connell, Warren, Smith, Newbern, Easters, Money, Matthews, King, Mobley, Swilley, Goldens, Bullard, Parramore, Grady, Lamb, Hewett, Kelley, Bryant, Benefield, Lankford, Johnson, Stones, Edenfield, Cox, Walker, Drawdy, Peacock, Brandon, Hardy, Faulkner, Brown, Boldrie, Boyd, Brantley, Rhoden, Purvis, Boykin, Clyatt, Browning, Robinson, Nelson, Wilkes, Tygart, Lewis, Akins, Avera, Rowan, Taylor.