

THE ALABAMA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY

MARIE BANKHEAD OWEN, Editor
EMMETT KILPATRICK, Co-Editor



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EDITORIAL

As explained in Volume 10 of the ALABAMA HISTORICAL QUARTERLY, the publication is not issued on current dates but in order to correct this situation four quarterly issues are included in Volume 11, as was the case in the preceding volume. The same practice will be followed until the issues are of current date.



DR. ROBERT LESLIE SCRIBNER

DR. ROBERT LESLIE SCRIBNER

Dr. Scribner, author of this "Short History of Brewton, Alabama", prepared the article in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the graduate school of the University of Alabama, in 1935. He is at the present time Associate Professor of History at Oglethorpe University, Ga. He graduated in Central High School in Bridgeport, Conn., in 1930; received the B. A. degree at the University of Alabama, May 1934; and the M.A. degree in history at the University in 1935. He graduated June 1949, in history with the Ph.D degree at the University of Virginia. He was instructor in high school social science at the T. R. Miller High School, 1936-38, and the same at Cuthbert, Ga., 1938-41. He served in the United States Army, 1941-45, being promoted from Private to Captain during those years. His foreign service was in New Guinea and the Philippines. He is an Independent in politics and a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He is unmarried.

Dr. Scribner was born May 13, 1914, at Bridgeport, Conn., son of Willis Henry and Iola (Simonds) Scribner; grandson of William Watkins and Harriet (Howe) Scribner, of Randolph, Vermont, and of George and Minerva (Segar) Simonds, of Hartford, Conn. His paternal ancestry located in Norfolk, Conn., in 1680 and the maternal ancestry settled in New Haven, Conn., about 1639.

A SHORT HISTORY OF BREWTON,

ALABAMA

by

ROBERT LESLIE SCRIBNER

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate School of the University of Alabama

University, Alabama

1935

A SHORT HISTORY OF BREWTON, ALABAMA

Preface

In inscribing this brief history of Brewton, I am unable to claim as wholly my own the few virtues others, in examining it, have professed to discover. Men there were who had accumulated a wealth of material which they unhesitatingly placed at my disposal and, by so placing, saved me innumerable steps. Others held, or knew the whereabouts of, keys to invaluable sources of data, directed my steps, and assisted in unlocking doors. While everyone I encountered in Brewton displayed a willingness, even an enthusiasm, in aiding me, I feel particularly indebted to Messrs. Ed Leigh and Thomas McMillan, O. C. Weaver, Sr., W. Emmett Brooks, Sr., Archibald H. Elliott, and Clifton D. Jordan.

Nor can I possibly overlook the heartening assistance and encouraging counsels rendered by Doctors William Jennings Bryan and Albert Burton Moore, of the Department of History, University of Alabama. The former checked me with the reins of historical canons when I was inclined to wander, while the latter permitted a degree of straying when he was satisfied that readability was not divorced from accuracy. The results of their balancing guidance are, I am pleased to believe, happier than if I had been allowed to choose my own path entirely.

Robert L. Scribner,
Tuscaloosa, Alabama,
May 23, 1935.

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INTRODUCTION

Southwesterly in the "Cotton State," reposing on that narrow finger of land which Florida directs suggestively toward the Father of the Waters, lies Escambia County, long the greener pasture for which four nations and a Cause strove that they might call it their own. Here, once they had swept the Alabama aborigines aside, lived the Creek warriors, tall, erect, and intelligent—themselves eventually to be ground beneath the heel of a merciless intruder.¹ Here, under proud Castilian banners, glittering in wrought armor and bedizened trappings, rode the Conquistadores of His Most Catholic Majesty, though caring less for the soil than for the precious metals it might contain. Here, too, once roved the fur traders of the Sun King, the red-coated officers of the British colonial service, Confederate troopers in hopeful grey, Yankee raiders in vengeful blue, carpet-baggers, scalawags, nondescript riffraff, and bewildered Negroes freshly emancipated—all searching for wealth, whether legitimate or spoil, or for home.

Long was the road until Escambia attained its destination of countyhood. The very name of the county, indeed, resides in the mists of antiquity. Some have contended that it was Spanish in derivation, signifying "Clear Water."² but Archivist Peter Brannon, with seeming finality, writes that "Escambia is really a Choctaw Indian corruption of two words . . . *Oskiambeha*. The word 'oski' means *cane*, the 'ambeha' is the distinctive form of the passive of a plural word. It means "*cane therein*." The region, he concludes, "adjoins the Choctaw country but (it is) really Creek territory. However, Choctaw names are frequently given in Creek localities."³

Preserved in the writings of LeClerc, a Frenchman who lived among them for many years, is the Creek legend of their racial past. Apparently they were subservient to the Mexican

¹Albert Burton Moore, *A History of Alabama and Her People* (Chicago and New York 1927), I, 19.

²Ed Leigh McMillan Papers, Brewton, Alabama.

³Letter to Leon G. Brooks June 11, 1928; *ibid*.

Aztecs and left their native scenes following the downfall of the wretched Montezuma (1519). They tortuously traced their way northward until they had met and dispersed the Alibamos, thereafter to embrace the victor's hard-earned reward by settling the valleys of the Coosa and the Tallapoosa. They had their neighbors—Choctaws, Cherokees, and Chickasaws—, but of the "Big Four," the Creeks were pre-eminent. Admirably equipped in physical prowess and temperament for forest strife, they were in William Bartram's eyes, "a proud, haughty, and arrogant race . . . brave and valient in war, ambitious of conquest, restless and perpetually exercising in arms."⁴

It was between 1513 and 1530 that the Spaniard appeared. In his imperial thought Alabama was a northerly sector of the Floridas, and across its expanse, in 1539, rode that adventurer extraordinary, Hernando de Soto. It is probable that he ventured as near the Escambia country as Clarke County,⁵ but quite possibly his fame, or ill fame (as one pleases) reached the Creeks in their more southern reaches. Certain it is that within another twenty years the Spaniards were acquainted with the region of Mobile Bay, while there is evidence that they had already established a settlement thereabout.⁶

But as slowly the power of Spain withered on the intricate vines of misdirected policy, the task of usurping her world primacy engrossed European chancelleries. Exploration of the Mississippi mouth was accomplished by the enigmatical Robert Chevalier de la Salle and gave to Louis *le Grand* substantial claim to the heartland of the North American continent, while the complementary labors of the sieurs d'Iberville and Bienville consolidated the hold of France on the southern marches of the vast Louisiana tracts.⁷

⁴Moore *History of Alabama*, I, 16-17, 18-20.

⁵*Ibid.*, I, 58; cf. The Gentleman of Elvas, "Narrative of the Expedition of Hernando de Soto," in *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States, 1528-1543*, edited by T. H. Lewis. New York 1907.

⁶Moore, *op. cit.*, I, 61; P. J. Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile* (Boston & New York, 1898), 30-36.

⁷Marie Bankhead Owen, *Our State—Alabama* (Montgomery, 1922), 40.

Three generations in possession seemingly steeled the French grasp beyond dispute; but in the laws of imperialistic aggrandizement there is no statute of limitations: proof lay in that epochal seven-year struggle (1756-1763), the termination of which found a victorious Britain wrenching from Versailles and Madrid a mammoth colonial imperium, the Floridas and the Alabama country being lumped with the rest of the territorial booty.⁸ But what, after all, is a status quo, and how long must it endure to merit its designation? Within little more than a decade the thirteen seaboard colonies were aflame in insurrection against the British monarch and his parliamentary "friends," in which insubordination they were at length overtly encouraged by the vengeance-thirsting Bourbon allies, France and Spain. By 1780 Bernardo Galvez, the youthful governor of the Louisiana Territory, had overrun Alabama and re-established *de facto* Spanish sovereignty. In the diplomatic jockeying which followed Lord Cornwallis' Yorktown misadventure, intrigue and counter-intrigue were the Paris routine. Our essential point, however, is this: that both the infant United States and venerable Spain emerged from the conference with claims to that strip of earth presently forming Escambia—a bone of contention on which they growlingly gnawed until 1705, when, by treaty, the boundary was definitely established at the thirty-first parallel of North latitude, and the future county became American beyond dispute.⁹

Through its Crown charter, Georgia controlled the Alabama country, and through the cupidity that too frequently characterizes economic man, the Alabama country controlled the speculative impulses of those high in state office. In the welter of corruption marking the celebrated Yazoo frauds, the land was surrendered to the Federal government in 1802, shortly thereafter to be incorporated by Congress as part of the Mississippi Territory. It was the Enabling Act of March 1, 1817, which established, within the bounds of the present state, the Alabama

⁸*Ibid.*, 50.

⁹*Ibid.*, 51.

Territory, 'so called from the names of its great river.'¹⁰ And the time was apt, for already (1814-'16) sizeable acres had been stripped from the Creeks by Andrew Jackson in retaliation for an ill-advised uprising. In all, outside of those portions still remaining in possession of the red men, provision was made for the creation of seven counties. The bulk of present-day Escambia lay then within Conecuh County, with a fringe of soil resting in what are now Baldwin and Monroe¹¹—the Canaan, states Professor Abernathy, of a rugged frontier population: "Few people of extensive wealth moved into . . . the region during the period of early settlement. Only the man who needed to better his fortune had an inducement . . ."¹²

These settlers, he finds, came largely from Georgia, proximity and the Yazoo sales being the prime magnets. And they, well removed from more settled communities,¹³ were prone, as one might readily suppose, to develop a certain impatience with Federal intermeddling in their affairs. But though subscribing to Jeffersonian individualism, they quite escaped those subsequent influences classifiable as Calhounism. A decade after the end of the War between the States Escambia was still "the least agricultural of (Alabama) counties,"¹⁴ a land overrun by extensive pine forests,¹⁵ wherein the plantation system, if potential, was not yet present; and thus the average male inhabitant remained a small, independent farmer or lumberman, concerned with few political theories other than those likely to be entertained by nineteenth century agrarians eking out a sustenance for themselves and their dependents.

¹⁰Owen, *Our State*, 53; and the name of the river, of course, derived from that of the earlier Indian tribes.

¹¹Thomas Perkins Abernathy, *The Formative Period in Alabama, 1800-1825* (Montgomery, 1922), Plate IV, *contra* 164.

¹²*Ibid.*, 26.

¹³*Ibid.*, Plate III, *contra* 163; the southern portion of the Territory was as yet untouched by main throughfares.

¹⁴W. Brewer, *Alabama; Her History, Resources, War Record, and Public Men* (Montgomery, 1872) 247.

¹⁵W. G. Clark, in *The Memorial Record of Alabama* (Madison, Wis., 1893), I, 303 ff.

Although Conecuh County voted the militant Southern Democratic ticket of Breckenridge and Lane in 1860, it cast 399 votes for John Green, unionist, to represent it in the Alabama Secession Convention, as against 372 for Wilson Ashley, separatist.¹⁶ But as the state joined the concourse of sovereignties striking for Southern independence, it may reasonably be supposed that the Escambia section turned out its ratio of men in grey. Some of them, indeed, we shall meet in Brewton.

In 1868, one of the troubled years of the Reconstruction, Escambia assumed the dignity of a separate countyhood, and that by the very simple expedient of staging a successful secession of its own. The northern element of Conecuh provided the motive by removing the county seat from Sparta to Evergreen, a location inconvenient for the southerners—fatal irritation. Warm with indignation, the malcontents established a new “county” seat at Pollard, the main railroad junction of their section, and this act was given legal sanction by the legislature on December 10.¹⁷

* * * * *

At an altitude of eighty-five feet, lying some seventy-five miles northeast of Mobile and approximately a hundred and five southwest of Montgomery, is the present Escambia county seat, the City of Brewton. Located as it is but fifty miles from the Gulf of Mexico, it is within easy range of the warm breezes betimes wafting up from the coast and bathing the lowlands. The passing stranger would content himself that this small community¹⁸ is one of comparative youth, for the building structures are either of recent construction, or, if old, have like dowager duchesses, had their true age carefully offset by a layer or two of paint. Negro shanties clustered across the railroad track

¹⁶C. P. Denman, *The Secessionist Movement in Alabama* (Montgomery, 1933), 154.

¹⁷McMillan Papers.

¹⁸The population was 2,818, according to the Federal Census of 1930. Citizens, however, point to a “Greater Brewton,” which comprehends some 5,000 souls.

running down St. Joseph Street, the main thoroughfare, toward Mobile, he would discount; they have no age at all, or are all ages wrapped into one; and they will be gone tomorrow, to be replaced by similar jerrybuilt rookeries the day after. He would be pleased by the trees and shrubbery which shade and beautify the better residential sections, and, contrariwise, he would be less enamored of the business section and the flat, sun-beaten suburbs, stretching tenuous fingers cautiously year by year into the red clay hinterland.

Nor—if he has an eye for this sort of thing—could the stranger help being pleased to note that the older Southern manner continues to hold its own within the municipality, even in a day of encroaching industrialization. There is a suggestion in the atmosphere that what may reasonably be accomplished on the morrow need not be initiated today. But the suggestion is atmospheric only. Your Havanan would say, "*Manana.*" A typical Brewtonian simply does not comment on it.

Yet despite the aspect of communal newness, with the concomitant suspicion that perhaps the way of life has been imported, Brewton has, more than its present and future, an interesting past. Probably a majority of its citizens have scant knowledge of its yesteryears beyond their own memory; but tradition as mellow as old wine continues to pattern much of their daily behavior and bespeaks the richness of an unsuspected heritage. No boom town, then, is Brewton, sprung from the seeds of a sudden prosperity. It has risen slowly from the toil and planning (and, they being human, occasional misplanning) of many men and women. The city of today is the ripened fruit of their labors.