

Part I
WILSON MURPHEY
(1800- 1878)

by Byron F. Murphey

(Editor's Note: The following article was submitted by AGS member Byron F. Murphey. We appreciate Mr. Murphey sharing his family story, which comes from many years of research. Some errors in spelling in this article were left in as not to change misspellings from previously printed sources, i.e., newspapers, probate records, etc... This article is being printed with "First Serial Publication Rights Only" and will be concluded in the Fall/Winter 2000 issue.)

Looking at Butler County's local newspaper, the *Greenville Advocate*, issued on August 8, 1878, I was startled to discover my obituary:

*"WILSON MURPHY, 78, died at home in Butler Co. 7/28. Was a native of Georgia, emigrating to Alabama at age 14 when Butler Co. was still in the hands of Indians. He was near the spot when Col. BUTLER was killed by the Indians and he pointed out his grave 44 years later when citizens decided to give him more decent burial. He was survived by 5 children."*¹

Wondering how the writer for the newspaper knew I (Wilson) was seventy-eight years old, I looked at the U. S. Census record for Township No. 10 in the County of Butler, State of Ala., which was enumerated on the 27th day of June, 1870, with Post Office Greenville, Ala. Ten years before that, in 1860, our post office was Butler Springs. Sure enough in 1870, age 69 appears along with the fact that I was born in Georgia. Living by myself, the value of my personal property is 325; ten years earlier it was 40000. In 1870 quite a large family of blacks also with the last name of Murphy is shown as the very next family. And the next family consists of my married daughter Florence with her husband Peterson Harris and an infant son.

John Murphy is said² to have come from Georgia in 1817 and died in 1844. My sister, Ellen, married Ransom Seale. Another sister, Sarah, is referred to in a Deed³ from Sarah Murphy to her grandson, Josiah Mullins, the only living descendant of Sarah Rhodes. Quoting from the text of the Deed: "Whereas I Sarah Murphy am possessed of a life time Interest in and to Certain property by the last will and testament of my late husband John Murphey, deceased, and whereas the remainder in Said property belongs to Wilson Murphy, Ellen Seales and the heirs of Sarah Rhodes, Deceased, and Whereas Josiah Mullins is the only living decendent of the Said Sarah Rhodes in whom the Said Sarah Rhodes Share of Said property will vest in right of possession at my death...". On that date of April 10, 1856, Josiah Mullins sold to me for three thousand dollars a part of that property consisting of three male negroes. One of them was named Ceaser. The first person listed in the black family listed right after me in the 1870 census is Ceiza Murphy, male age 65. All the records which were in the Butler County Courthouse in 1853 were lost⁴, consumed by fire.

Our name, Murphey, is as often as not spelled Murphy. When asked where the "e" in Murphey comes from, the response is "That's the way my Daddy spelled it." A piece of paper with my signature on it is located⁵ in a Deed book for 1868:

"Feb 18/71 Mr. W. H. Watson will you please refer to the book of Mortgages of 1868 & Cansil a Mortgage note that was giving me by Seaborn Moore in May 1868 which has been paid by him & he has lost or mislaid it & I wish you to Cansil it for me & sign my name.

Wilson Murphey"

A reading of a portion of the mortgage serves to indicate why Seaborn Moore was anxious to have it cancelled: "Know you that for and in consideration of necessary provisions this day furnished by W. Murphey of the Value of Three Hundred Dollars Silver, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged, we have this day bargained Sold and Conveyed unto Said W. Murphey the following described property to wit: four Mules One Horse five head Cattle, one wooden axle wagon, and all farming impliments on the place & the following described land the SE 1/4 & E 1/2 of SW 1/4 & E 1/2 of the W 1/2 of the NW 1/4 Sect 11 als NE 1/4 & E 1/2 NW 1/4 Sect 14, Township 10 Range 12 all of Butler County Alabama."

When John and Sarah Murphey came some three hundred miles from Milledgeville, Georgia to the vicinity of what is now Butler Springs, Alabama, the Territory of Alabama had just been formed from Mississippi Territory in March 1817. The Federal Road on which they traveled from Milledgeville, located on the Oconee River, crossed the Flint River in western Georgia and arrived at the Ft. Mitchell crossing (several miles south of Columbus, Georgia) of the Chattahoochee River which separates Georgia and Alabama. The passage through these lands, which belonged to the Creek Indian Nation, was authorized in the form of a horse path by the signing of the Treaty of Washington on November 14, 1805⁶. The four-foot wide path was developed into a Military Road during the War of 1812. The subsequent War with the Creek Nation in 1813-14 was caused in part by continued military road-building. In 1816 the Congress of the United States authorized inadequate funding for this Federal Road between Milledgeville, Georgia and Mobile, Alabama. The road through forests and across streams was nearly impassable. The Creeks learned early to exact as high river crossing tolls as the traffic would bear, aided and abetted no doubt by the white merchants who set up shop to deal with both travelers and Indians. Westerly from Ft. Mitchell on the Chattahoochee River, the road continued somewhat south of the Tallapoosa River and that river's junction with the Coosa River to form the Alabama River. The Alabama River turns south to flow to Mobile Bay; the Federal Road more or less lies parallel somewhat to the east on higher pine forested land. This southwest portion of Alabama after 1814 was considered eligible for settling by virtue of a Treaty with the Creek Indians following the War of 1812.

These early settlers found a place they liked and simply began to clear, cultivate and grow crops. John Murphey obtained certificates for land in section 29 Township 10 N Range 12 E of the St. Stephens Meridian on August 13 and 25, 1819⁷. Among others who filed on land in T 10 R 12 on August 13 of 1819 were Jesse Womack, Richard Green, John Carter, John H. Watts, Benjamin Hill, John Reddock, Andrew Farum, Thomas Hill, Josiah Hill and Henry Powell. John Murphy appears in the 1830 U.S. Census for Butler County as a male, age between 60 and 69, with a female, age between 50 and 59, and with another male in the household whose age is between 20 and 29. John's son, Wilson Murphy, and his female between ages 20 and 29 appear with two males under age 5. Wilson's son Julius was five years old and John was two. Evidently Anna and I were married in 1823.

The land on which I first filed in 1826 was in section 26 of T10 R 12. Subsequently in the years 1830, 1836, 1845 and 1854 acreage amounting to eighty, forty, eighty and 320 acres was filed on. A new Land Law of 1820 set the price per acre at \$1.25; cash payment was required. Previously, the Government had sold land on credit, not always with satisfactory results. ⁸ (Distribution of land under Homestead Law commenced in 1863.)

My sister Ellen (Eleanor in the 1850 census) Murphey married Ransom Seale in 1825 or thereabouts. A nephew of Ransom's (the nephew's father was William Seale), also named Ransom Seale, became Clerk of the Circuit Court, which position he held when he died in 1885. When Ransom Seale made out his Will on the 8th of February 1862 in preparation for his decease in April of that year, he named following Legatees: "...and they only ... Eleanor Seale, -- My Wife -- Susan A. Clark wife of John Clark and her bodily heirs, Allen B. Seale, Amelia Stein

wife of Robert Stein, John M. Seale, Lydia Stallings, wife of Robert Stallings, Abi Freeman, wife of William Freeman, Francis M. Seale, Mary M. Seale and Clara Seale, all of which are my children (save my wife)...”⁹ (“Ellen died in 1889 and was buried at Mt. Moriah near the lines of Butler and Wilcox Counties, about 12 or 14 miles from the old Seale plantation at Butler Springs.”¹⁰)

Another brother of Ransom, Anderson Seale, had a daughter Amanda who married my son Julius about 1845. By 1850, Julius and Amanda had daughters Susan age 4 and Elizabeth age 2.

Wm. H. Ringgold was the assistant marshall who enumerated us on the 25th of September 1850. How did it come about that I was responsible for eight children in my household and forty-four Black slaves, twenty-six of whom are children?

Murphey families, with the head of the household very often named John or William, had lived in Hancock or nearby counties in Georgia for a couple of generations prior to the trek from the frontier of Georgia to another frontier in Alabama. Rather than having come up Savannah River to Augusta from Savannah, the Scotch-Irish settlers mostly came down cross-country on the inland highlands of South Carolina and North Carolina. Such resettling began to take place after 1763 and 1773 land Cessions from the Creek and Cherokee Indians. Although slavery had been forbidden in the 1730s colonization of the coast of Georgia, that restriction was withdrawn¹¹ in 1749 before the beginning of settlement of the interior.

The Church of England was the Established Church in the coastal colonies of Georgia. That Church policy from the onset was: “*there shall be a liberty of conscience allowed in the worship of God ... all persons, except papists, shall have a free exercise of their religion*”.¹² However, the settlers of the interior of early Georgia had other Faiths. I personally don’t care much about the formal church, but religious beliefs did and do matter.

At a session of the Hancock County Grand Jury in September 1798, in the course of commenting on the Georgia Constitution, Judge Mitchell made the following remarks in his charge to the Jury:

“I have called the Constitution a valuable Instrument, because many much to be admired additions have been made, and one not of the least, respecting Religion. Every man has the privilege of worshipping his God in his own peculiar manner. He is not bound to maintain any Minister without his own consent and in this Happy Land, where the pernicious principles of the opposers of Christian Religion, or rather all Religion, have had too little influence to be dwelt on, there is no danger in the latitude which conscience is allowed.”¹³

Many Baptist Churches were established early in Georgia; e.g. Kiokee in 1772. Several groups of worshippers in Hancock County had organized their local congregations by 1820.¹⁴ The earliest documented evidence of a Murphey being of the Baptist faith comes from a local Deed in Butler County, Alabama in 1861. Wilson Murphey granted land to the proper officers of the Ebenezer Baptist Church on which to build a house of worship: “said house to be open for the use of any preacher when any of the Subscribers may desire to hear preach at any time that will not conflict with the regular ministry of Said Ebenezer Church”. I also gave a plot of land consisting of two acres for the use of the Church & Surrounding Community as a burying ground.¹⁵

Again in 1869, “for the consideration of the good will and affection I have and bear toward the denomination of Christians called Baptists”, I gave the Baptist Church of Christ at Ebenezer some land for as long as they kept a Church there.¹⁶ As more People formed a community at Forest Home north of the crossroads near Butler Springs, the Baptists moved the old Ebenezer Church in the summer of 1882 and remodeled it. Already competing with the Methodists with their school, they now had nearby competing places of worship.¹⁷

Turning back to the local Baptist meeting houses in Georgia, business meetings generally took place on Saturday. New members, including Negroes, were admitted "on experience of Grace" and letters of "dismissal in full fellowship" were given to those who were moving elsewhere. Disputes between members were handled as though in court of law. Swearing, disorderly conduct, improper behavior and failure to attend services were all subject to censure and even dismissal. Upon acknowledgement of wrong doing, restoration was prompt. Seemingly democratic, an autocratic preacher could be very much in control. The minutes of the Saturday meetings do not contain any vital statistics concerning marriage, birth and death. New arrivals from Virginia and the Carolinas would bring with them their letters of dismissal signed by their previous minister or the clerk who wrote the minutes.

Being farmers, these people were looking for a piece of land on which to settle and prosper. So, when what sounded like better land in Alabama became available, plenty of eager new settlers gathered up all their worldly possessions, and with their Slaves if they had some, walked or perhaps traveled in a cart and possibly a wagon or on horseback. As soon as the Oconee River was crossed, the road went through the land of the Creek Indians, most of whom were friendly. Several families went together to afford mutual protection. Walking through woods with tall trees and brush, unable to see much at all beyond the cleared dirt path, not even much of an opening appeared when a creek was encountered. And the creek was wet.

But in a way the only difference from the log cabin we had left was that we were in motion and had to cook outdoors. A big burning pine knot provided light in the evening. During the day, we teenage boys ventured into the nearby woods in search of deer or turkey to provide meat for the otherwise corn-centered meals. In some measure the twenty day trip was thus a lark.

Much of the forest consisted of large pine trees on sandy soil. Undergrowth included dogwood and wild azalea. Near our destination in Alabama the higher land of pine trees was offset in the more fertile watercourse by oaks, sycamore, beech, chestnut and hickory. Plenty of wood was thereby available for reconstructing a new log cabin and for later sawing into planks.

The goal was independence and freedom to farm one's own farm. Our forebears who left Ireland could hardly make a living. They had come from some part of England, Wales or Scotland. The Presbyterian Scots who invaded the Ulster region in North Ireland overwhelmed the local people and were eager to move on to America as the opportunity developed. Earlier, Baptists and Congregationalists had crossed into lower Ireland to subjugate the inhabitants with encouragement from English rulers. The view of the Baptists was that they could make do without a hierarchy and worship satisfactorily by creating small groups of local like-minded Christians.

Prior to 1763 all immigrants from Ireland were referred to as Irish. In the year of 1763 the Legislature of the Province of Pennsylvania referred to the Ulster people of Scottish origin who had settled in Pennsylvania as "Scotch-Irish".¹⁸ Perhaps strictly speaking the Baptists who came from lower Ireland could be referred to simply as Irish but they are probably 'english-irish' or 'scotch-irish' or no doubt in many cases 'english'. But I don't know from which part of the British Isles ancestor Murphey came.

What I do know is how to farm and own my own land and it just came about because I was born into it. Similarly for my neighbors. Growing up under the tutelage of a successful (though perhaps not affluent in the financial sense) farmer, the natural inclination is to accomplish more of the same.

A farmer's world consists of more than corn and cotton. A friend of John Murphey built a mill for him up on Pine Barren Creek. Pine Barren Creek runs east and west about two miles north of Redicks Creek that runs near Butler Springs. The Murphey Mill operating in 1828 was the first of several on Pine Barren.¹⁹ The fellow who put the mill together built himself a house the same year. An earlier frame house had been constructed in the township the year before. And before that, a blacksmith had set up shop.

The local center of trade in Butler County has developed at Greenville which is fourteen miles east of our farms. Greenville is on the main road between Montgomery, 47 miles northeast, and Mobile, 127 miles south. The navigable Alabama River is some forty miles to the west. In 1840, a four-horse stagecoach run all the way back to Milledgeville, Georgia, took about 48 hours.

Family legend has it that sisters Ellen and Sarah discovered the bubbling waters that have become a resort for the seekers of nature's benefits. Probably they did; but no doubt the Indians knew of the spring's presence long ago. At the Cahaba Land Office, I (Wilson) purchased eighty acres including the springs from the government for \$1.25 an acre. The claim was filed in August of 1845 along with payment of \$100. The certificate acknowledging full payment was issued at Cahaba in May of 1848. Cahaba is on the Alabama River just southwest from Montgomery.

Entrepreneur Sims wanted to make the Butler Springs into a health seeker's attraction. Anna and I deeded the property to James Marion Sims in December of 1850, along with twelve adjoining acres, for the sum of fifteen hundred dollars. The Court House burned down with all its records in 1853. The Deed between Murphy and Sims was recorded anew in **DEEDS VOL. B** in 1855. Interestingly, the last line in the Deed reads that the Deed was recorded in "Second book Marked E.", which of course no longer exists.

Another responsibility came to me (Wilson Murphey) a few years before the Courthouse burned. When Thomas Seale died, leaving four minor sons, I was appointed guardian. In 1854 in Vol 1 of the new Minute Record-Probate for Butler County, I was reappointed Guardian. The Court describes the fire: ". . .it further appearing to the satisfaction of the Court that all of the Records, Books, Papers etc. belonging to this office were consumed by fire on the night of the 12th day of April 1853." Discharge from duties as Guardian for the child named Wilson Seale took place in 1861,²⁰ by which time Wilson Seale was in Columbia County, Arkansas.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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