

JEMISON'S EARLY HISTORY

by

Melba Patton Peterson, 1972

(Digitized and minor edits by Derric Scott, 2021)

Jemison had to be named for somebody. The absolute proof that it was named for Robert Jemison has, so far, eluded me but various clues point to him [see addenda at end of this document]. Jemison was the Confederate senator from Alabama and a legislator of some prominence. Following in the path of his father, William Jemison, he established lumber plants, sawmills, grist mills, foundries, and machine shops. He was president of what is now the Alabama Great Southern Division of the Southern Railway System. He died in 1871; one year after a post office was established at this place.

I remember that my father, James William Patton, used to complain about the hardness of the soil in our yard, saying that it was an old roadbed where stagecoaches used to run; and once he pointed out a shelf of ground beneath our house which he said was part of the bank along the Old Randolph Road. Since Robert Jemison was a member of the firm of Jemison, Ficklin, Powell and Company who operated mail-carrying stagecoaches on the roads of north and central Alabama before the railroads came, it seems possible that one of their routes passed through here.

There is further evidence. Before 1850, Mrs. Martha Frances Yeldell was operating the Old Stagecoach Inn (later the Cauley White Place) on what is now the Montevallo-Jemison road on Highway 155. (Of course, the road has been moved in many places since 1850.)

On an 1836 map of Alabama the road from Montevallo to an undesignated intersection of roads - probably Old Maplesville - bulges eastward enough to have passed through this area.

The Shaw brothers, C. N. and S. P., whose family moved here long ago, told Julius Simmons that travelers from Elyton to Montgomery used to halt their covered wagons and camp overnight at a big spring located at that buggy spot (covered with cattails, and inhabited by frogs and other little creatures) that lies east of my home and the railroad and north of Highway 191. It was called Jemison's Spring.

Doubtless the Creek Indians had a trail past the spring long before!

Mrs. Juanita Garner says that her husband's family told her the town was named for some Jemison in the lumber business. The Garners were early railway agents and telegraph operators here.

Whether the industry concerned was transportation or lumbering, or if there was a desire to honor a prominent statesman, everything points to Robert Jemison.

The railroad really gave this settlement a boost. February 17, 1854, the South and North Alabama Railroad Company was incorporated with plans to

build a railroad from Montgomery to Guntersville. Construction was begun and some work was done between Calera and Montgomery. Then came the Civil war. When the Louisville and Nashville bought the interests [1871], the trackage had to be completely rebuilt.

This work was underway when a post office was established here in 1870 and James Gibbons was appointed postmaster. The office was called Langston's Station, possibly because the Langston family owned land and sold wood for cross-ties and fuel to the railroad. I. N., R. J. and G. W. Langston's names appear on deeds to land sold in early years.

With the coming of the "old reliable" railroad the lumber industry began. The forests contained virgin stands of yellow pine and some hardwoods. "Heart" pine, as the virgin wood is called, has lasting quality.

John Owen Smith was probably operating his sawmill south of Langston Station at Pine Hill when he became the second postmaster in 1872. Mr. Smith donated the land for Pine Hill Cemetery and the first burial, that of Arvazena Atkinson, was made that year. The marker can be found there yet. Tradition says our community was once called Smithville for the Smith family. [*An earlier marker has since been found of "Asa Atkinson, October 11, 1870 - August 21, 1871, son of Wm and M J Atkinson"*]

The first through operation of trains from Louisville, Kentucky, to Montgomery, Alabama, commenced that year [*September 28, 1872*].

For some unknown reason, the post office was discontinued for a couple of weeks in January but it was started again with John E. Moore as postmaster. The next year, 1873, the name was changed to Jamison. I believe this must have been a misspelling which was corrected fifteen years later. On a deed executed in 1874 the name Jemison is plainly written (incidentally, the county named is Baker). Nevertheless, Jamison was the post office name at that time. My grandfather received mail addressed to Jamison and the census showed the population of Jamison in Chilton County to be 402.

During that first ten years (1870-79) there was at least one doctor in town, J. A. McNeill, who had been issued a county license in 1875, as had H. C. Lawhon who was a businessman. There were others.

Quite a bit of land exchange is evident and the deeds designate "lots in the town of Jemison." W. H. Shelby, Isaac Lawhon, G. W. DeRamus, and Samuel L. Arledge are among Justices of the Peace who witnessed deeds.

William S. Thompson (1873), Henry C. Lawhon (1877), John R. Hornady (1877), and Wilson L. Bandy (1878) were successive postmasters.

In the 1880's land for three churches was acquired in the town proper. December 18, 1884, land occupied by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was sold by Mr. and Mrs. J. P. Allen "... in consideration of the love and affection they have for Christ and his cause and with a view to promote his Kingdom in the World ..."¹ to trustees J. A. McNeill, J. C. Morris, and J. C. Allen. [¹*From deed of Presbyterian Church.*]

The Baptist Church here was organized in the Mulberry Association in 1856. There was an old Baptist Church standing south of the Hand-Guy house early in this century. It must have been the place from which the Baptist congregation moved to its present location. That early building was sold to a Negro church. It burned some years ago.

In 1886 the Dave Crosby family donated "one square acre of ground" for a Missionary Baptist Church in the town of Jemison. The structure known to present townspeople as the old masonic hall, which was torn down several years ago, was built. It was used by the Baptists until another building was constructed just back of it in 1908. At that time deacons J. A. Skaggs, W. E. Lowery, and D. L. Langston sold it to the Jemison Masonic Lodge.

The lot where the present United Methodist Church now stands was purchased January 18, 1887, from the Pendleton C. Bean by trustees G. W. Deramus, J. H. Hughes, and G. L. McCrary. John O. Smith donated lumber for a Methodist Church. I have not been able to learn whether it was the present building in Jemison or the old church that was at Pine Hill. The building at Pine Hill was in great need of repair in 1887 and Jemison had outstripped that settlement in population so the congregation agreed to start a church in the town.

St. James' African Methodist Episcopal Church was organized in 1890 by a group of black people. The name of the first pastor is unavailable at this time. John Robinson, Need Bailey, and John Johnson were deacons. The present church stands on the hill west of Jemison.

There was an early Baptist Church organized by blacks. Its beginning probably came about after the Civil War. I have been told that the Holly Grove Baptist congregation was formed in 1900 when there was a division of St. Paul's membership. This group met under a brush arbor until a church was built. The Reverend Robert Mixson was the first pastor and Brothers Ed Singleterry, Dan Hicks, Jim Poundell, Sr., Joe Martin, and Jake Kenebrew were deacons. Members now meet in a brick church south of Jemison. Old St. Paul's Church stands north of the town.

A list of the members of these churches through those early years would name nearly all of the town's occupants.

Education was not neglected. A Professor Cordrey taught an arithmetic school. Professor Asa Burns was principal of the local school in the eighties as well as pastor of the Baptist church. I possess a stack of report cards issued by the Jemison High School for the years 1888-1891 when J. D. Ruffin, Jr. and B. F. Crump were principals, assisted by Miss Mattie Ruffin. The report cards list these subjects: orthography, reading, penmanship, arithmetic, grammar, geography, history, algebra, physiology and hygiene, physics, physical geography, geometry, and Latin. Grades were indicated by number - 10 denoted perfection; 5 denoted failure. Tuition ranged from \$0.70 to \$2.00 monthly and there is some reference to public funds. The old schoolhouse stood on or near the square surrounded today by the homes of the Brattons, Russell Peterson, and Mrs. Leo Langston. The schoolhouse oak grows in the Peterson's yard.

In the Gay Nineties and at the turn of the century Jemison had its amusements and diversions. Travelling shows passed through, medicine vendors promoted their cure-alls, the young ladies played organs (harmoniums) and pianos, and the young men played in a string band led by Henry G. Jefferies, who played the violin. Everybody in the young social set went to the depot to meet the passenger trains, not only to greet or bid farewell to passengers but to see their friends and relatives who ran the trains. A roster of L & N employees from Jemison in those days would include a high percentage of the townsmen. Many of them worked for the railroad until they reached retirement. The young ladies sighed and wept with the heroines of Augusta Evans Wilson when they were not busy sewing yards of lace and insertions on their clothing or baking cakes to serve at parties or frying chickens to take on picnics.

Baseball fever came to town as it did to the rest of the country. For some reason, the team to beat was usually Clanton. Records of four games during the Nineties show Clanton winning 13-10 and 20-18 and Jemison winning 39-10 and 21-8.

During that time Riley Monroe Honeycutt served as Chilton County Judge of Probate. Benjamin M. Gentry and Thomas Jefferson Hubbard were county tax collectors. Lewis H. Reynolds represented the county in the state legislature.

The post office name had been changed (or corrected) to Jemison in 1888, to Bristol in 1890 and back to Jemison the latter part of that year. It has not been changed since. Postmasters during the Nineties were Frank I. Crocheron (1889), Mrs. Frances E. Scott (1891), Thomas Harrison (1894), and William A. Reynolds (1898).

W. A. Reynolds' brother, L. H., had been asked by a group of farmers from Collins Chapel to establish a store at Jemison around 1895. It was known as the Jemison Corporation Company and was later sold to W. A. Reynolds.

My grandfather, John Henry Patton, came to the Pine Hill settlement in 1873 and operated a commissary there for a while. He moved to Shelby County but returned to Jemison around 1887 and opened a store adjoining his home (I am writing this in that old storeroom which is now our kitchen and dining room). Later he built a two-story frame building west of the railroad where the parking lot has been paved in "downtown" Jemison and was in business there for many years. He ran a general store, even selling tombstones and coffins, but repairing clocks and watches was his specialty.

Isaac Newton Langston and William Green Atkinson also had stores here in those early years. Mr. Atkinson also operated a cotton gin. Earlier, Dr. J. A. McNeill and his stepson, James R. Johnson were owners of a gin.

The lumbering industry flourished for years after the railroad came through, bringing lumbermen Taft and Marbury from Tennessee. J. O. Smith's lumber company became the property of the Hand family around 1888. Lawson Jefferson Hand, S. J. Health, and J. N. Hand composed the firm. Later L. J. Hand's son, William Thomas, became a member. In those days tram roads were used to move logs from the forests to the mills.

There were two such roads here as well as a huge pond in which they were stored. Now the industry that played such a major part in the development of our town is virtually dead. The virgin forests are gone.

The railroad is very much with us still. The freight trains are much longer and much, much noisier; but only two Amtrak passenger trains fly through each day. The depot is gone. Nobody goes to meet the trains any more. Or the mail. It is brought by truck. Most of the people who made the town sleep quietly at Pine Hill Cemetery with John Owen Smith who gave the land for it. And the cattails bloom, and the frogs peep while insects chirp in the bog over the spring.

September, 1972.

Melba Patton Peterson

I have enjoyed my search for facts concerning Jemison's early history. The interest people have displayed as they shared their memories and the fascination of the old deeds, papers, and history books I have read have inspired me to continue the quest and bring the account up to the present.

I am sure there are inaccuracies due to scant information which I hope can be corrected. Any further information or correction will be deeply appreciated.

As I finish copying the preceding paragraph from notes I used at a Cahaba Regional Library board meeting at Jemison in September of this year, I received more information about Robert Jemison, Jr., from his grandnephew, also Robert Jemison, Jr.¹, who is in his ninety-fourth year. He states in a letter that Mrs. Orr, a daughter of Col. John T. Milner, who was in charge of constructing the part of the railroad running through Jemison, told him that her father gave the name in honor of his very good friend, Robert Jemison.

November 4, 1972.

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¹*The present Robert Jemison, Jr.'s father was also named Robert Jemison. This accounts for both "Jr's."*