

Incident at Monee Town

The last documented fight between Native Americans and white settlers to occur in either the Morgan or Lawrence County areas happened on August 11, 1816 in what later became Lawrence County, Alabama. It took place at the Cherokee settlement called "Monee Town" or as some white settlers called it "Mouse Town". Several members of the Burleson family were involved in the conflict. The fight and resulting bloodshed sent ripples as far away as Washington D C where it drew the attention of government officials who were working with Cherokees to reach a peaceful resolution for the cessation of tribal lands in the future Alabama territory.

In 1816, the lands known today as the state of Alabama were still a part of the Mississippi Territory, which was created by an Act of Congress on April 7, 1798. Just sixteen years earlier, in 1800, the majority of the territory was held by Native Americans, with the exception of some small settlements around Mobile and Natchez. Between 1805 and 1806, the U S government signed treaties with both the Chickasaw and Cherokee tribes. These two treaties ceded land by both tribes to the U S government and resulted in the formation of Madison County in 1808. The Town of Twickenham was established and became the county seat, until 1811 when its name was changed to Huntsville. The creation of Madison County and resulting land sales to white settlers was the first step in what later became the "Great Alabama Land Rush". News of the rich lands around the Tennessee River spread across Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia and North Carolina. By 1809 hundreds of families had settled in Madison County and several hundred more had settled west of Madison County on lands held by the Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes. These latter families were intruders on Indian lands. Listed among these intruders were the families of John, James and Joseph Burleson who had migrated south from Tennessee. All three were sons of Aaron Burleson and were all mentioned in their father's 1781 Sullivan County, North Carolina Will. It is uncertain whether the Burleson's arrived in 1807 or 1808, however, they are included on the May 29, 1809 list of intruders on Limestone Creek in what later became Limestone County, Alabama. By June 1809 Federal troops had evicted the intruders with most of the families moving into Madison County. Other than a brief excursion to the Missouri area by Joseph, the three Burleson brothers and their families stayed in Madison County until the War of 1812 and the related Creek War started.

The war with the British and Creek Indians did more to accelerate the settlement of North Alabama than any other event. This was not simply because it resulted in the extinguishment of so many Native American claims, but also because it "opened the land". Roads were built through the wilderness as the soldiers who followed General Andrew Jackson got their first glimpse of the rich lands south of the Tennessee River. Andrew Jackson of Tennessee had been commissioned a Major General in the U S Army with orders to attack and defeat the Creek Indians. Jackson and the Tennessee Militia along with regular U S Army soldiers came through Huntsville in the latter part of 1813. There he was joined by the forces of the Mississippi Territory Militia. Included in the militia were James Burleson, John Burleson, Joseph Burleson and four of their sons. They served during several battles and were at the climactic Battle of Horseshoe Bend in March 1814 which resulted in the deaths of about 900 Creeks and broke the military power of the Creek coalition. At the Treaty of Fort Jackson in August 1814 the Creeks ceded about 20 million acres of their land in Georgia and the Mississippi Territory to the United States. The Cherokee and Chickasaw tribes who had sided with the Americans in the war still claimed ownership of

lands north of the Tennessee River and west of Madison County and to a large area of land south of the River. This area south of the Tennessee River was still in Native American hands in 1816 when the various Burleson families started leaving Madison County and moved into what later became Morgan and Lawrence Counties.

After their military service, which carried some of the family to the Battle of New Orleans, the seven Burleson's returned to their homes in Madison County. From marriage records, birth records, tax records, court documents, family bibles and land records, it is almost certain that they stayed in the Huntsville area until early in 1816 when one by one the Burleson families moved south from Madison County, crossed the Tennessee River and once again became intruders on Indian lands. At this time treaty negotiations were underway with the Chickasaws and Cherokees which pretty much guaranteed that the lands south of the river would shortly be open to white settlers. But the Burleson families made their move without waiting for the treaties to be finalized.

John Burleson's son, Jonathan Burleson, settled near Flint Creek in what became Morgan County in early 1816. It is not known when his Uncle Joseph Burleson came into the Morgan County area, however, based on tradition, he was head of a vigilante group organized to put down horse thieves in the area as early as 1816 or 1817. Court records show that Joseph Burleson was still in Morgan County as late as June 1818 and moved to Lawrence County a few months afterward. Joseph's brother John Burleson sold his land in Madison County in December 1816 and January 1817 and moved into what became eastern Lawrence County near the Wolftown area.

John and Joseph's brother, James Burleson, and his family --- who are the subjects of this story --- moved into what became Lawrence County in early 1816. They settled between Trinity Mountain and the Cherokee village of Monee Town, which was located on the Tennessee River at its junction with Fox Creek. The name "Monee" was probably derived from the word "moneton" which in certain Native American languages means "Big Water" people. The town was located at the northeastern edge of present-day Lawrence County between the future towns of Courtland and Decatur and lay on the north side of Trinity Mountain. It was between Trinity Mountain and Monee Town that James Burleson and his family settled. Here, they leased land from the Cherokees, built cabins and planted crops.

Also living in this area were several other families who had moved from Madison County. Among these was Martin Taylor, a Creek War veteran, who had married James' daughter, Mary Jane, and lived near Monee Town. Robert Thrasher, who had been a sergeant in Captain James Burleson's Company during the Creek War, had married Sarah Burleson, another daughter of James, and was living nearby. James' two oldest sons, Edward, who was 17 at the time his father settled near Fox Creek and Joseph, who was 16, were both still living with their parents. In all several dozen families were living in this valley area north of Trinity Mountain.

It should be noted here that the relationship between Native Americans and the Burleson family had been somewhat "tempestuous" over the years. James' father, Aaron, had been killed by Indians in 1782. James' older brother, also named Aaron, had been killed by Indians in 1785. The Burleson family had fought the Cherokees in North Carolina and in what later became the State of Tennessee. Since childhood James and his brothers had to constantly protect their homes from Indians who, in their own defense, were only defending their native lands from the onslaught of white settlers.

About two years before they settled near Monee Town, the Burleson's had fought in the Creek War which had resulted in the deaths of about 2,000 Native Americans. Based on this history, it is no wonder that the proximity of the Burleson family to Monee Town gave rise to tensions that became a powder keg with a short fuse.

On August 11, 1816 tensions between the white settlers and the Native Americans ignited into a confrontation that resulted in a fight that eventually made headline news in Washington D C. Several accounts of the fight have been printed over the years, all with varying degrees of accuracy. The best description comes from editorials in the "National Intelligenser", the dominant newspaper in Washington D C at that time. The September 5, 1816 edition discusses a letter from James Burleson written on August 13, 1816 to Colonel Winston in Madison County, Mississippi Territory. It states in effect "that he, James Burleson, and others who had settled near Melton's Bluff (Mouse Town), on the south side of the Tennessee River to the number of eight men were attacked by a party of Cherokees armed with guns and war clubs, the number not known, on the night of the 11th inst. The whites resisted and three Indians were killed and one wounded. The fear of the Indians caused consternation among the settlers, and many moved away leaving promising crops."

A few days later, on September 10, 1816, the "National Intelligenser" from information at Huntsville dated August 17, 1816, delves even further into details concerning the disturbance, writing: "It seems that a Mr. Taylor had rented a field from some Cherokees. In his absence they offered some insult to Mrs. Taylor, who escaped to the home of her father, James Burleson. Burleson, Taylor and others went to the Indian settlement where they found a number collected. They demanded an explanation. The Indians raised a yell and said fight. An attempt was made by the whites to cut them off from their arms. This produced a conflict."

With the U S government hard at work negotiating treaties with both the Cherokees and Chickasaws at the time of the Burleson conflict, there was fear the treaties could be delayed and the lands along the Tennessee River would not be ceded. This was the reason the fight was such important news in Washington D C. Fortunately, treaty negotiations continued and on September 14, 1816 the Cherokees approved a treaty with the United States wherein they ceded all their entire claim to the land south of the Tennessee River. The treaty was ratified by the Cherokees at Turkeytown on October 4, 1816 with final cessation of lands that would become Morgan and Lawrence Counties taking place in July 1817. The Chickasaws ceded their land claims on September 20, 1816. The signing of the treaties removed the last obstacle to settlement and thousands of settlers began moving into the Mississippi Territory. By 1817, growth was so great that the territory was split; the western part became the State of Mississippi and on March 3, 1817 the eastern part became the Alabama Territory. Settlers kept pouring in. "Alabama Fever" as it was called, brought thousands of settlers to the new territory. It wasn't long before a move for statehood was organized and on December 14, 1819, Alabama became the 22nd state to join the Union.

In James Burleson's letter to Colonel Winston, he states there were eight white men involved in the fight. Other than James Burleson and his son-in-law, Martin Taylor, who were the other six? This information would have been lost to history if not for an August 15, 1816 letter written to the Cherokee nation by white settlers who were concerned about reprisals against those not involved in the fight. Below is a transcribed copy of the original letter which I have been told is in the National Archives or at the Cherokee Indian Agency in Tennessee. I have left the spelling just as it was written:

Mississippi Territory

To any of the Chiefs or hed men of the Chirokee Nation. Wee feel it our Duty to let you know who committed that offence against your subjects so that the inesant may not suffer. The offence was committed on the twelveth Inst by these under named

James Burleston
John Burleson
Robt. Thrasher
Martin Tailer
Charle Tailer
John Bird
Edward Burleson
Joseph Burleson

These are all wee have any knowledg of they have left the settlement and gone in to Madison County where they will be delt with according to law as soon as it can be put in force against them and as for old fox he has went of with those men that committed this offene therefore wee subscribe our names on the other side.

(on the other side of letter)

August the 15 1816

Thomas Lovell
George Cozby
Saml B. McClure
David Devault
Samuel Cozby
William Cozby
William Fears
Robert W. Woods

Notes concerning the letter:

It states the conflict took place on August 12th. James Burleson had stated it took place on August 11th. Robert Thrasher is the son-in-law who had married James' daughter Sarah. Martin Tailer (Taylor) is the son-in-law who had married James' daughter, Mary Jane. She was the woman who had been insulted by the Cherokees and escaped to the home of her father. Charle Tailer (Charles Taylor) is probably the brother to Martin Taylor. John Bird (Byrd) had served as a private in Captain James Burleson's Company during the Creek War. The Edward Burleson listed was the 17 year old son of James Burleson. The Joseph Burleson listed was most likely the 16 year old son of James Burleson. The John Burleson, shown as one of the eight participants, could have been the son of James' brother, Joseph Burleson. John would have been almost 21 years old at the time of the incident and could have

been living in the Monee Town area. James had a son named John, however, he was only about 11 years old at the time.

“Old Fox” was chief of the Cherokee tribe in that area near the Tennessee River.

Notes on the James Burleson family:

It has been written that immediately after the Monee Town incident that James Burleson and his family moved to Missouri. This is evidently not correct. He was still living in the area on January 21, 1817 when he and other members of the Burleson family signed a petition requesting Congress to allow them to occupy public lands that had formerly belonged to the Chickasaw Nation. It is likely he and his family had moved to Tennessee by 1819 and soon after to Missouri. By about 1824 they had moved back to Tennessee. They are shown living in Tipton County Tennessee when the 1830 Census was taken.

In either 1830 or 1831, James’ son, Edward, moved to Texas and his father and the rest of the family soon followed. In Texas, the family got involved in the Texas Revolution for independence from Mexico. James served briefly with the Texas Volunteers and was involved in the famous “Grass Fight” on November 26, 1835. He led a cavalry charge against Mexican troops during the fight. James survived unscathed, however, it was to be his last battle. He became ill a few weeks after the fight and died on January 3, 1836. He is buried in Bastrop County Texas.

James’ son, Edward Burleson, became a Colonel in a Regiment of Texas Volunteers organized by Stephen F. Austin in 1835. By 1836, Edward was elected Colonel of the 1st Regiment of Texas Volunteers and commanded that group at the battle of San Jacinto in April 1836. He later was named a brigadier general in the Texas Militia and became a famous Indian fighter. In 1841 he was elected Vice President of the Texas Republic. In 1846, Burleson County was formed and named in his honor. Edward died on December 26, 1851 and is buried in Austin, Texas.

James’ son, Joseph Burleson, who had been 16 years old at the time of the Monee Town incident moved to Texas and reared a large family. He served under his brother, Edward, and was involved in the August 12, 1840 Plum Creek Battle with the Comanche Indians. Joseph died when he was 77 years old and is buried in Navarro County, Texas.

Mary Jane Burleson, the wife of Martin Taylor, died in 1877 and is buried in Ellis County Texas.

Sarah Burleson, the wife of Robert Thrasher, died in 1875 and is buried in Dallas County Arkansas.

Other than the four mentioned above who had connections with the Monee Town incident, James Burleson had nine other children, eight by his first wife Elizabeth Shipman Burleson and one daughter by his second wife, Mary Christian Burleson, who he had married in 1834. All nine of these children are buried in Texas.

One tragic family note: Jacob Burleson, one of the younger sons of James Burleson, who had been a young child when the fight at Monee Town occurred, served in the Texas Militia and was killed by Comanche Indians in April 1839 at the Battle of Brushy Creek near the present day town of Taylor, Texas.

Written by:

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November 23, 2019

NOTE:

Information for this article was obtained from several sources. I have cited some below:

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"Burleson Family Bulletin" published by the Burleson Family Association
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"Early Settlers & Indian Fighters of Southwest Texas" by A. J. Sowell; published in 1900
"Burleson family research papers of Howard L. Burleson" compiled between 1934 and 1970
"Alabama, The Making of an American State" By: Edwin C. Bridges; published in 2016
"The Handbook of Texas" Editor-in-Chief: Walter Prescott Webb; published in 1952
"Alabama Heritage" magazine; "The Alabama Territory Bicentennial Issue" published in the Summer of 2017