



WALTON RELATIONS

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Walton County Genealogy Society

January 2015

History Detectives

The Walton County Heritage Association receives queries regularly about people and places in the county's past. Many of them were distributed in the History Detectives e-letter that was sent in hopes that members and friends of the Heritage Association might provide information to help others with their research. It has been a long time since the e-letter has been sent and, because most queries have a genealogy connection, they will now be included in *Walton Relations*.

The mysteries are linked on our website at waltoncountyheritage.org/detectives.htm. The links below go to the Walton County History Detectives message boards where you will see more information such as newspaper articles and photographs. You are welcome to post answers or queries.

69. Photograph wanted of former DeFuniak Springs Mayor B.P. Morris.

70. There was a settlement named Shoals located where the Silver Sands Premium Outlets now sit.

71. Military Subdivision - lots in Miramar Beach that the U.S. Government developed after World War II and sold to veterans in the 1950s.

72. A Seacrest house used to be located in Grayton Beach. The owner would like to know its history.

73. Information about the Hemphill Homestead between Eight Mile Creek and Natural Bridge.

WCGS News

The Walton County Genealogy Society has changed its meeting day to the third Saturday of the month. The next meeting will be Saturday, January 17, at 10:00 a.m. at the Walton County Heritage Museum.

Walton County History Fair

The Walton County Fair building is currently undergoing renovations, so there will not be a History Fair this year.

Book Wish List

The Gillis Family in the South by Clayton Metcalf – The book is about the family of Duncan Gillis and his wife Nancy McCaskill who lived on Circle Drive in DeFuniak Springs. Clayton Metcalf was a nephew of Harold Gillis, the man who gathered a lot of the Museum's arrowhead collection. If you are willing to donate a copy of this book to the Genealogy Society, or if you will allow us to copy yours, please contact Diane Merkel.

Walton County Heritage Museum

Open Tuesday - Saturday: 1:00 - 4:00 PM

1140 Circle Drive, DeFuniak Springs, FL 32435

850-951-2127

www.WaltonCountyHeritage.org

HeritageMuseum@centurylink.net

Chestnut Trees, Knights and Priests: Once Upon a Time in Walton County

By Sam Carnley

When European settlers arrived in North America, forests of predominantly American Chestnut blanketed a large swath of the eastern part of that area later becoming the United States. They stretched from central Mississippi to New York and covered or touched ten other states in between.¹

Fossilized pollen dating to a 3,000 year warming period, or interstadial, in the midst of the ice age 30,000 years ago, indicates the trees once extended to the coastal plain bordering the north shore of the Gulf of Mexico, including the Florida panhandle. But they mostly disappeared when the glaciers peaked between 26,500 and 19 or 20 thousand years ago.^{2, 3} At the time the Europeans arrived, only small, isolated stands remained in the proximity of the Gulf coast.⁴

Florida could muster only a couple of tiny groves worthy of recognition on a map showing the natural range of the American Chestnut, but none appeared to be in Walton County. That is not proof positive though that none were there. Chestnut place names are associated with the county. The original name of Liberty, for instance, is said to have been Chestnut.⁵ Also, there is a creek of that name west of Darlington on county road maps.⁶ Whether these were namesakes of a person or the tree is unknown. The Chestnut surname is found in the county, so that is certainly a possibility. It is also possible the names were associated with the tree, which may have grown there prior to 1900. About 1904, an imported Asian bark fungus disease, known as the Chestnut blight, spread unchecked through the trees in their natural U. S. range and, within 30 or 40 years, virtually wiped them out.⁷ Any growing in Walton County either succumbed to the blight or fell to homesteaders and lumberjacks. If the trees inspired the Darlington creek name, its appearance on county maps serves as their historical record.

But they may have found their way into history at an even earlier date. In 1693, the Spanish Knight and newly appointed governor of the St. Augustine province of Florida, Don Laureano de Torres y Ayala, received a royal decree from the king of Spain to lead an expedition across West Florida from San Luis de Apalachee in present day Tallahassee to Pensacola Bay. The Franciscan priests, Friars Rodrigo de la Barreda and Pedro Galindez, would accompany him. His pack train of more than seventy horses with an escort of Spanish infantry and seventy-four Apalachee Indians departed San Luis on June 7th. On the evening of the 9th, they arrived at the Palos (Apalachicola) River in the vicinity of today's City of Chattahoochee. Ayala and the friars crossed the river by dugout to the Choctaw village of San Carlos de los Chacatos on the west bank where they slept. The following morning, the pack train crossed over and joined them at the village, which stood on the bluff overlooking today's Jim Woodruff dam, north of U. S. Highway 90 in eastern Jackson County.

Ayala kept the expedition there the day of the 10th while he enlisted the services of five Choctaw Indians as guides. On the 11th, they resumed travel, crossing Jackson County and arriving on the 12th at the abandoned Choctaw (Chacato) village site of San Nicolas on the county's west side near the present Town of Jacob. Friar Barreda recalled, undoubtedly with mixed emotions, how he had preached at San Nicolas in 1674 before dissidents opposed to his religious teaching incited a revolt that nearly cost him his life. On the 13th, Barreda, leading a squad of five infantry and twenty Indians, set out to explore and clear a trail a day in advance of the expedition. After hiking 5 leagues (about 13 miles) northwest, the party crossed a stream, probably Holmes Creek, on the morning of the 14th. Marching the rest of the day to the northwest and covering another 4 or 5 leagues (13 miles), they camped that evening, possibly in the vicinity of Smith Crossroads in the northern edge of Holmes County, about a mile south of the Alabama line.

Turning west-southwest on the morning of the 15th, they encountered a swift river after a short march of a league and a half (4 miles). On determining the need for a boat to cross the stream, Barreda ordered a "baria" tree felled from which to build one. On the 16th, while work progressed in preparing the log for hewing into a dugout, Ayala arrived with the pack train. The boat was completed on the 19th and launched the morning of the 20th. It made many round trips across the river in ferrying the supplies, saddles, harnesses and men to the other side. The packs were reloaded on the horses after they swam across. Having overcome the obstacle of the river and before putting it behind him, Ayala named it Santa Rosa. The Choctaws mistakenly informed him it

flowed into Pensacola Bay. Instead, it flowed into the bay the Spaniards called Santa Rosa, but known now as Choctawhatchee, as is the river.

Proceeding west-southwest from the river later in the day of the crossing, the expedition ground to an exhausted halt after struggling for one or two difficult leagues (3 to 5 miles) building a road over a miry stretch of mud in their path. The going on the 21st was easier on firm ground over which they traveled slightly more than 4 leagues (10 miles) in the same direction as the day before. It was not the terrain but oppressive heat that ended that day's march. To give the men relief from it, Ayala brought the procession to a halt at a creek in shady woods where they pitched camp. Both Ayala and Barreda remarked on the chestnut trees they saw there. Ayala only alluded to them in his comment that: "In the woods about were several chestnut, pin oak, and pine trees." Barreda, on the other hand, seemed more taken with the chestnut trees: "We found a large number of sturdy chestnut trees. If they had been in season, we would have gathered a good many nuts." He made no mention of any other trees as Ayala had.⁸

The distance the expedition traveled from Choctawhatchee River at that point was about 6 leagues, or 15 miles, according to Ayala's estimates. Barreda reckoned it to be about 5 leagues, or 13 miles. Based on map mileage, those estimates brought them into the eastern edge of today's Walton County. Chestnut Creek at Darlington, 13 miles from the river and two miles into the county, correlates closely with Barreda's numbers.⁹

This could be one of two things: a coincidence of assumptions; *i.e.*, that chestnut trees grew on Chestnut Creek and that the expedition went that way, one or both of which is false; or, the chance discovery of the places where the events described in the expedition actually happened. There is insufficient information to determine which, so for now all that can be said is that on the night of June 21, 1693, the expedition camped on a creek in the midst of a chestnut grove, possibly in Walton County. The next day, the knight and the priest, with their pack train, journeyed on to the west-southwest and, in early July, succeeded in their goal of marching to Pensacola Bay.

Notes:

1. The American Chestnut Foundation (http://www.acf.org/range_close.php)
2. Interstadial is an interesting word (<http://chiefio.wordpress.com/2014/01/23/of-interstadials-a-fondness-of-beetles-and-warmer-than-now/>)
3. Pleistocene Chestnut Woodlands (<http://markgelbart.wordpress.com/2013/08/25/pleistocene-chestnut-woodlands/>)
4. The American Chestnut Foundation, Map, Natural Range of the American Chestnut (http://www.acf.org/range_close.php)
5. Margaret Wooten, "Origins of Community Names – Part I," *Walton Relations*, Walton County Genealogy Society, January 2013.
6. General Highway Map, Walton County, State of Florida Department of Transportation, 2006 (http://www.dot.state.fl.us/surveyingandmapping/geomap/walt_c.pdf).
7. Pleistocene Chestnut Woodlands (<http://markgelbart.wordpress.com/2013/08/25/pleistocene-chestnut-woodlands/>)
8. Irving A. Leonard, *Spanish Approach to Pensacola, 1689-1693* (The Quivira Society, © 1939, The University Press, Albuquerque, N. M.), pp. 211, 229-232, 266-269.
9. General Highway Map, Walton County, State of Florida Department of Transportation, 2006 (http://www.dot.state.fl.us/surveyingandmapping/geomap/walt_c.pdf).

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Walton Relations is a publication of the Walton County Genealogy Society. Wayne Sconiers, President.

Distribution is encouraged! For more information or to submit an article, please email its editor,

Diane Merkel, at WaltonCountyHeritage@cox.net or call 850-897-4505.