

Annals of the Ashpole Community 1750-1814

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[The Jacob Alford family was introduced just before the last segment ended]

Shortly after reaching manhood he [Jacob Alford] left Johnston and came to Bladen (Robeson) and settled on Drowning Creek, at a point later known as Harper's Ferry. There had been trouble there between the Indians and land surveyors who sought to locate government script over their possessions and the feeling was such that they resented by force of arms the attempt to take their land from them, though they held only such titles as prior possession and use gave them. The outlook was unfavorable and as a culmination of his troubles, his eldest son, Lodowick, a little boy several years old was drowned in the creek near his home.

He then abandoned that place and went down to Little Ashpole and secured a considerable tract of land, lying on both sides of the swamp and extending up its sources. (Deed dated 1788). What subsequently became the Lumberton and Harllesville road was in a general way its south-eastern boundary.

On the crest of the hill on the north side of the swamp he built his home and the necessary appurtenances, and reared his family there. The location was an ideal one. The hill on that side of the swamp was very steep and the swamp nearby afforded excellent facilities for a mill.

Like all well to do men of that time, he erected a grist mill about a mile up the swamp and opened roads from different directions to it, constructing a sunken raft across a small branch of the road leading from his residence.

There were visible relics of those old improvements up to the Civil War, and they have served a useful purpose in locating the old Ashpole Meeting House and School.

He was a man of more than ordinary education for that day and his wife, a Scotch-Irish lady (Mary Pace), which means that her antecedents, so far as education and religion was concerned, was of the best in that day, and their care was the training of their children.

As soon as it was possible to do so, he and his neighbors joined together and arranged for a common meeting place where their children might get the advantage of such training in religion and in the ordinary branches of education, as would fit them for usefulness as good citizens.

They selected a spot centrally located to the population as it was then settled and the result was the establishment of the Old Ashpole Meeting House. The place was about one mile north of his mill, and about two and one half miles north by a little west of the site of the modern Ashpole Presbyterian Church. The preponderance of the congregation were Methodist, most of whom lived on the east side of Big Ashpole. There were a few Baptist, but very few.

This Union Congregation seems to have worshiped and worked together until some time after the visit of Bishop Asbury in 1787, after which the Methodists began to with-draw, and lay the foundation for old Providence Church. Their places, however, were more than filled by the Scotch immigrants, who came in after the Revolution, and to all intents and purposes, it became a Presbyterian congregation, and the circumstances strongly indicate that the first appointment for services made by Orange Presbytery, September 6, 1796, were filled, if at all, at that place.

Under the leadership of Jacob Alford the old Congregation united with some others, groups of Scotch

settlers hereinafter mentioned, and the establishment of Ashpole Presbyterian Church, Jacob Alford becoming one of its first Elders. He took little active interest in politics, but represented Robeson in the Lower House of the Legislature in 1791-1793.

I am not informed as to the date of his death, but it was about 1814, when about 78 years of age.

The history of the old school organization of Ashpole is interesting in that it shows that the people of that community were among the prominent patrons and promoters of education. With the abandonment of Ashpole Meeting House as a place of worship, the school unit maintained its integrity, with only a change in location.

Quite a number of schools were maintained in the neighborhood from time to time, but the legitimate and immediate successor of the old Ashpole School was established about the beginning of the last century.

The location was moved to the east about a mile or a mile and a half to a point on the crest of the hill on the west side of Big Ashpole, where the old Cheraw and Lumberton (road) joined the Lumberton and Fayetteville road. It was a flourishing school and had a reputation that drew patronage from a considerable distance. I have been able to identify but one of its teachers, whose name was Hector R. McLean, whose celebrity as a teacher greatly widened the patronage and influence of the school. I know nothing of him beyond the fact that he left Robeson nearly seventy years ago, for wider fields of usefulness in the South.

The old school house in use for something like fifty years, became too small to accommodate the patronage, and was in a dilapidated condition in 1850. The patrons on the east side of the swamp concluded to establish one in some central part of their neighborhood, with the result that Union Academy was established. It was located about a mile from the site of the present village of Raynham, and about the same distance from the public road, with which it was connected by a broad avenue through tall pines. It was two stories high, painted white, and with the conventional green blinds, and presented an imposing appearance from the public road.

Several hundred yards in the rear a stewards hall was equipped, and in the fall of 1851, with Giles Leitch, who had graduated at the State University in the previous June, teacher in charge, the school began its career and maintained its reputation as one of the leading schools of the country, until its career was

ended by the Civil War.

The passerby will look in vain across the broad expanse of a large cotton field for the spot where it once stood. A large majority of the immediate patrons were Methodists and Democrats.

The establishment of this school left the population on the west side of the swamp, who happened to mostly old line Whigs and Presbyterians, without proper school facilities, and after employing Rev. Malcolm McNair, known as "Lame Malcolm", a graduate of the State University, for a year or more, they chose a prominent location for a building on the Old Cheraw and Lumberton road, about one mile west of Big Ashpole and erected a frame building one story high, unpainted, but as commodious and in all respects as convenient as the Union Academy building and named it "Ashland", from the old home of Henry Clay, their political idol, who had just died.

With Rev. Neill McDonald, pastor of Ashpole Church, as the teacher, Ashland began its career in the early fall of 1853, and like Union, maintained a successful career until closed by the results of the Civil War.

It was a school of high grade, leading up to the freshman courses in the State University, and some of its pupils are on the roll of graduates of that institution in the years immediately preceding the Civil War.

My career as a school boy began in 1853. Passing by the spot in 1905, the natural objects of the surroundings were all gone, and with difficulty I managed to identify it. Standing in front of it, weighted with a multitude of reflections, it seemed to me that I could feel the heart throb with those sad lines of Tennyson,

"Oh, for a touch of a vanished hand,
The sound of a voice that is still".

The silence was only broken by the noise of the rustling blades of the tall corn which overspread its environments.

Returning to the Alford family, these sons survived Jacob; viz, Sion, James, Wiley, Elias and Warren, and two daughters, Cynthia and Charity.

Sion became a man of mark at a very early age. His first appearance as a public man was in the latter days of the Revolution as Commander of a Voluntary force, formed to protect the community from the raids of bandits. He was less than twenty years old at this time. He seems to have had a taste for the military and kept up his connection with that branch of the service for many years, and was known throughout the country as Major

Sion Alford. He was also a Mason of high standing, and a practical land surveyor, all of which indicated that he was a man of more than ordinary education.

At an early age he was married to Clarkie, the daughter of Robert McTyer. At the age of twenty-six he was sent as a delegate to the convention at Fayetteville, which ratified the United States Constitution and carried North Carolina into the Union as the twelfth state.

About 1815 he succeeded his father as Elder in Ashpole Church, and served as such until his death in 1832.

About the beginning of the last century he purchased a tract of land on Wilkerson Swamp and in 1814, established thereon the second oldest post office in the County, and in honor of the family named it Alfordsville. He accumulated a large landed estate, the principal part of which lay along Wilkerson Swamp and its tributaries.

He had eleven children. Sons: Warren, William, Wiley, James, Jordan, Robert McT., and John W. Daughters: Elizabeth, Mary, Susanne, Catherine - the grandmother of the late Daniel McKay of Rowland, an Elder in Ashpole Church, and great grandmother of Alfred Rowland, in whose honor the town of Rowland was named, and Ann Hopson who became the wife of Alex Blue, for many years an Elder of Ashpole Church.

The next son of Jacob was James Alford who settled on his father's tract of land on the south side of Little Ashpole, opposite the old mill heretofore mentioned. He also married a daughter of Robert McTyer. He left Robeson and located in Mississippi about 1818. His entire family went with him except his son, Jacob, who remained on his father's old place until about 1839, when he moved out to the Harlleesville Road, about one half mile from Ashpole Church. His father, James, was a member of Ashpole Church, as was also Jacob, who for many years was a leading Elder. He was a member of the Legislature in the twenties. He died in 1859 or 1860, and a number of his descendants yet live in Rowland and vicinity.

Wiley, the third son of Jacob, married a daughter of Britton Drake, and moved to Tennessee. All his descendants of whom I know anything, now live in Texas.

Elias, the next son of Jacob, also moved away to Tennessee at an early day, but returned and settled in Marion County, S.C., where I presume he has descendants.

Warren, the fifth son of Jacob, married Barbara Little, and settled near the head of Little Ashpole. He succeeded his brother, Sion, as Elder of Ashpole Church about the year 1834. His first wife having died, he was married to another member of the Little family. Later he moved to Wilkerson Swamp where he died, leaving a large and respectable family, the descendants of most of whom yet live in Robeson County and in Marion and Dillon Counties, S.C., though many are residents throughout the southern and southwestern states.

His son, Sion, succeeded him in the eldership and was an active elder of Ashpole at the close of the Civil War.

Of the daughters of Jacob Alford, Cynthia, who was an invalid, never married.

Charity became the wife of Charles Thompson and from them have sprung a numerous posterity who have been large factors in the history of Robeson.

The next name which appears on the Federal Census of 1790 is that of Elias Barnes. I have been able to learn little of his family, except that he was connected by marriage with the Pope family of Lumberton - people who settled in that community before the Revolution, and were conspicuous, at least two of them, as officers in the Army of the United States.

Elias Barnes was probably the best educated and most widely cultured man of the old Ashpole Community, and seems to have been educated in New York City. Many of his writings are on record in Lumberton, and their diction, precision and accuracy bear out this estimate of him. His neighbors and the people of the County generally appreciated this and conferred upon him every honor within their gift (sic- power?).

As soon as Robeson was created, he was elected one of the first members of the Lower House of Legislature. He was one of the trustees of the lottery, by which the site of Lumberton was obtained.

As already stated, he was in both conventions of 1788 and 1789.

After the expiration of the term of John Willis, as the first state Senator from Robeson, he was succeeded by Elias Barnes who served several years in that body, and later served in the Lower House of Legislature.

He was greatly respected and trusted by his neighbors and acted in many fiduciary capacities, an example of which may be seen in the will of John Cade.

He seems to have been married twice. By the first wife he had a daughter, Harriet, who became the wife of David S. Harlee, a merchant and later a planter in Marlboro County, S.C. From this marriage there was a numerous offspring, a detailed account of which may be seen in Sellers HISTORY OF MARION COUNTY. The eldest daughter of Harlee, named Elizabeth, was married to Dr. Neill McNair.

An only son of that union, Harlee McNair, died during the Civil War, a member of Co. D 1st Battalion of N. C. Heavy Artillery. The widow later married Alexander McRae, of Wilmington, and died in that city about the year 1907, and was buried in the cemetery at Center Church.

The only descendants of the second marriage, by the name remembered by me was Dr. John Barnes, and James Barnes, murdered by Henry Berry Lowry, about the close of the Civil War.

The next prominent name in the old Ashpole Community was Sampson Bridgers, some of whose descendants still own and occupy in whole or in part his old homestead upon which was situated Providence Church, the site of which is now used as a family burial ground. Sampson Bridgers first held the office of Commissioner to organize Robeson County in 1787, was a trustee of the lottery by which the site of Lumberton was secured.

In their eagerness to facilitate the organization of the county, he and his co-Commissioner, John Cade, became sureties on the bond of the first sheriff. This officer defaulted and Bridgers was induced by Cade to take charge of the office. This induced him to become a candidate for the office later on, and he was elected and held the office several times.

The next name on this census is that of John Cade, who was a brother-in-law and boyhood friend of Jacob Alford.

He was a native of Johnston County, the son of Stephen Cade, who was a justice of the peace in 1745, later a sheriff of the county for six years, and a representative

in the Colonial Assembly in 1753-1754.

He was also a Captain of Horse in the military branch of the service. He had three sons, Robert, William and John. Robert was a lieutenant in the Royal Forces, moved to Cumberland County and died there prior to 1790, leaving a widow and children.

William left Johnston at an early age, and located in Williamsburg District, S.C., and was living there with his family in 1790, in the region of which Cades, a modern village on the A.C.L. Railroad, is the center.

John came to Bladen (Robeson), purchased land and made his home on Little Ashpole Swamp, on the crest of the hill about midway between the plantation now owned by W. H. Graham and what is known as the Fulmore Place. The year of his settlement was about 1760. He had the Anglo Mania for land and began to accumulate as soon as he was permanently settled.

He purchased the claims of several Indians near his home, and employed them as tenants or as ditchers and in other labor to which they were adapted. He began the erection of a mill on Little Ashpole in the immediate vicinity of his home, but having later acquired the land on both sides of Big Ashpole, he abandoned the first location which he had not finished, moved down to the site of the present country home of W. H. Graham, and made that his home, Being below the junction of Big and Little Ashpole, it afforded a better mill site, and here he erected his mill.

There are still visible relics of the old mill, about two miles north of Rowland, at the crossing of Big Ashpole. The old dam is almost entirely hidden by briars, vines, undergrowth and trees. Just below the dam were two mill races, plainly visible fifty years ago. Here was built a road connecting the east and west side of the swamp, and on the east side of the swamp there was an old muster ground which, during the days of the Revolution was well known as the Ashpole Bridge Muster Ground, which is mentioned in the will of John Cade.

(To be continued.)