

ALABAMA COUNTERFEITERS

And the story of cohort Smith Randall of Shelby County who “spilled the beans.”

*Condensed from a story by Miriam Rogers Fowler
As written in the Down South Magazine, No. 4, 2002*

In the early 1800s the Alabama frontier was still wild and spiritually settled the 1819 census shows Alabama's population and just 127, 901.

Many early Alabama settlers were running from something in a checkered past looking for a new start. When Tom Davis arrived in Alabama he was not looking to change his ways but he was running from the law in Georgia. He had broken jail in 1816 in Warren County after being arrested for passing counterfeit money and found refuge in Brown's Valley in Blount County among the renegade Creeks, Cherokees and white outlaws hiding from the law.

From newspaper accounts giving warnings of the circulation of bogus money, it is believed that Davis worked his counterfeit gang all up and down the East Coast in the early 1800s. By his own words, “he had been 38 years engaged in that business during which time he had made from \$600,000 to \$1,000,000.”

Some of the men associated with him and Alabama may have been involved in other places as well, but maybe seem to have been a personal charisma that drew to him all that had a bent for larceny. So it was not difficult to find men to help him operate his counterfeiting ring in Alabama.

After spending a little time in the Brown's Valley, Davis felt it was safe enough move west and at first went to Marion County but eventually decided on a secluded spot (hideout) under Clear Creek Falls in Walker County for his operation.

By all accounts he found at least eleven men to join him in this capital crime. And some of them were apparently dispatched to nearby towns and villages to “spend” the counterfeit money.

His eventual capture and arrest can be laid at the feet of a middle-aged rogue named Smith Randall of Shelby County. In 1820, in the town Tuskaloosa, Randall passed several bogus fifty dollar bills on the United States Bank, purchasing goods from the prominent merchants of the town, and the crime was discovered.

When confronted, he “disclosed a connection to a gang of thugs” that one newspaper said “from its magnitude and influence is truly alarming.” His confession disclosed the unsuspecting gang and its “brains,” Tom Davis, at work in Clear Creek Cave. Randall, according to the St. Clair historian of 1854 was the striker for the gang.

The town of Tuskaloosa was in an uproar. It seems strange to us that the printing of bogus money created such havoc, but in the 1820s counterfeiting was a heinous capital crime because it destroyed the delicate economy built on money printed by local and state banks. And after all the honor of the town have been stain.

Within hours of this outrage a band of men led by Major James Childress, were assembled to find and capture this gang.

The tale of the pursuit and capture is vividly told in *Reminiscence of a Long Life*, by William Russell Smith, Sr. who was an eyewitness to much of the story.

A few details of that exciting saga merits repeating here.

Major Childress was an imposing figure about forty-eight years of age, a mover and shaker in Tuskaloosa, and then a town of 2,000. Childress was the natural leader for the angry citizens who wanted revenge against the counterfeiters. He assembled the posse and started to the north toward what

is now Winston County. According to William Smith “every cabin in the village was emptied of its inhabitants – men, women and children – agape for news and craving revenge,” as the party left in pursuit. Riding an iron gray horse and dressed in hunter’s garb, Childress led a party of twelve to fifteen men accompanied by yelping dogs and a supply wagon drawn by two mules.

On the way north the men encountered a “sterling young pioneer” named John W. Prewitt returning from a visit to Walker County. As they told Prewitt what had happened, he looked into his wallet and discovered that he had also been bilked by a party of men the day before in a horse trade and according to Prewitt’s description these men were the objects of the pursuit. When asked if he wanted to join the posse his response was “Count me in.”

The angry avengers knew that these horse traders were the men they were after. Major Childress instructed them to behave as if they were on a hunting trip since they were in the neighborhood of the counterfeiters and couldn’t be sure who to trust. They knew then from Prewitt’s encounter with the Davis gang, that their destination was Clear Creek. Childress suggested that the horse swapped to Prewitt by the forgers be left behind lest the creature be recognized. So they left the stead at the home of a “thrifty young farmer.”

The group camped for the night on Clear Creek near a mill. Smith’s account says that that behaved like a hunting party shooting wild turkeys and at breakfast dined sumptuously “as only Daniel Boone ever enjoyed.” Newspaper accounts say that they were on the road two days without food for them or their horses.

Smith says that on the following morning at half mile from their camp site, the posse came upon a small newly-built log cabin surrounded by four to six acres of cleared ground planted in cotton and corn. In this cabin the men found a woman and two small children and asked the woman about her husband. The woman said that her husband had gone to Huntsville and she didn’t know when he would be back. However, when the men looked around and found a stable full of freshly groomed horses, they decided that the Huntsville story is all a lie. They ready their guns surmising the counterfeiters to be nearby.

Childress orders the men to scatter to the bluffs and cliffs of the creek as if they are hunting. A small girl about six years old with pigtails comes from the cabin carrying something down a path and is observed going under Clear Creek Falls.

Some of the pursuers followed the girl under the water fall. Smith says that the men saw a flash of light and heard a voice asking the girl “What is it Lizzie?” As they watched the scene behind the dark curtain of the falls, a plank door with a leather hinge opens up revealing a cavern room and when an arm reaches out to close the door behind the small girl, one of Childress’ men grabs the arm and seizes the man by the throat. Instantly four rifles were leveled at the men within. They offered no resistance, and a tall straight man simply says, “don’t shoot men” and turning to his comrade said, “the jig is up.”

Some may believe this account of the charming, round-faced Lizzie which describes the capture of five men in the cave. Others may believe the newspaper reports that the Payne brothers, John B. And James, were captured in the log cabin, and after being surrounded they were coerced into leading Childress’ men to the shop behind the falls where only Davis, John Goodman and John Reed were found at work. In any case the result is the same.

When the Childress’ party stormed into the cavern they found a well supplied print shop, “quantities of paper counterfeits on North and South Carolina and Georgia Banks, tools and implements for engraving bills, and dies for casting counterfeit coins of all denominations, and a quantity of counterfeit coins.

The capture took place in May after Smith Randall had turned states evidence. Davis was jailed with Randall, while Reed and Goodman were farmed to other jails. The Payne brothers were released for want of evidence.

Smith Randall, the “spiller of the beans,” and, “the most striking monument of moral depravity that had ever fallen within the sphere of... observation,” was the first of the gang to be tried. Randall’s trial took

place on May 12, Judge Lipscomb presiding. Randall was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged on Friday, June 7th. But before the date, for whatever reason, one hundred and twelve men, some of the leading men in Shelby County in 1822, sent a petition to Israel Pickens with an appeal to pardon Randall.

The reason given in the petition to the Governor on Randall's behalf was that "Randall is between fifty and sixty years of age, and has a wife with five children, three of which are infants and in helpless situation... we further represent to your Excellency, that we believe the said Randall to be entirely an illiterate man and that he can neither read or write."

The signatures included Bennet Ware, founder of the iron works in Montevallo and Shelby. Others include the Seals, the Musicks, the Richardsons and others. Why 112 upstanding citizens would sign this petition to give this rascal a pardon is still a mystery.

When the June 7th execution date came, the Governor had not yet given his decision and Randall was brought to the gallows. William Russell Smith testified that he was an eyewitness to this scene. "Randall's conduct under the gallows was notable, amusing and disgusting." He sang, shouted, and danced; called for water, and whooped an Indian yell. Everybody was anxious for him to be hung, and great was the disappointment and disgust when his reprieve was made known to the crowd. The reprieve was for thirty days, and the men of Shelby County again appealed to Governor Pickens. This time they upped the ante. To really tug at the Governor's heart strings they sent Phoebe Randall, the wife and mother of the five little ones trudging from Shelby to Dallas County with petition in hand.

Judge Webb, Circuit Court of the county into session on Monday, September 9 for the trial of the counterfeiters. While Davis had been in jail in Tuscaloosa for four months, Goodman was brought from the Huntsville jail, and Reed was brought sick from the Jefferson County jail for trial.

Finding enough jurors not already convinced of the guilt of the felons was no easy matter. But the trial finally got under way on September 14th.

Out of the four counterfeiters that stood trial, only Goodman received a not guilty verdict. This is puzzling in view of the fact that he was called red-handed in the cave, was a known forger and had a previous record of jail breaking.

The Tuscaloosa Mirror reported that the entire investigation was "extremely laborious and fatiguing to the court" and "the bar and jurors... were sustained with preserving patients and assiduity, highly credible to them all." One week after their trials begin Davis and Reed were called before the Court in a pathetic and impressive manner" had "pronounced on them the awful sentence of the law." Tom Davis "prayed for the Court's indulgence to write his memoirs of his life." The court granted the request and as a result the "fatal day was placed at a greater distance than otherwise would have been." While Davis wrote, Reed grew sicker. Then on Wednesday before he and Davis were to be hung, Reed died of fever.

Meanwhile, the ripples created by Smith Randall were widening. He had implicated in his confessions one Solomon Bridgman, esquire, of St. Clair County. Men were sent to search Brigman's house and found hidden in the chimney the engraving plates and other implements for making money.

Solomon Brigman was sent to Shelby County for trial. His sentence was hanging.

During this time, law officers made a sweep of Shelby County and Brittain Bailey, James B. Bailey and Needham Lee were remanded to the Grand Jury on charges of counterfeiting and passing counterfeit money.

Tom Davis, age about sixty, went to the gallows with quiet dignity on October 11, 1822. To this day, the personal account of his life has yet to surface. It remains lost along with his severed head, and the printing plates which were in the possession of his doctor in 1822, and later passed to Dr. William Hays of Tuscaloosa in the late 1800s.

A year after Tom Davis “swung,” his plate maker, Solomon Brigman, of St. Clair County, went to the gallows in old Shelbyville, the county seat of Shelby County.

Back in Tuscaloosa a month after Davis was hung, sometime in November 1822, Randall was again brought to the gallows. Rumors were rampant among the people that the Governor had indeed sent a pardon for the redoubtable Randall, but the truth was not known until Randall had again performed for the crowd; weeping, singing, confessing, dancing and shouting. The crowd “surged forward” suspecting that they were to be cheated again, and indeed the sheriff pulled a “long paper with the great seal attached” from his pocket and read the pardon. The crowd dispersed and Randall was escorted back to jail. But the people had to have satisfaction. When he was discharged a mob grabbed him, took him into the woods, tied him to a stomp and whipped him with cowhide thongs. When he was let go they admonished him never to show his face in town again, and he left with “universal execrations howling after him.”

*This “Counterfeit Money” is on display at the Shelby County Museum & Archives
The \$2 note, dated December 1, 1818 [on the front cover of this Quarterly Magazine]
is the one that was belonging to John Goodman ... as noted below.
Digitalized .pdf copies of these 11 counterfeit notes may be purchased from the
Shelby County Historical Society by e-mail only for \$15.00. When placing your order please
give legible e-mail address they are to be sent.*

COUNTERFEIT MONEY

- (1) Two \$20 notes ... dated 1818
- (2) Two \$20 notes ... dated 1823

- (3) One \$10 note ... dated 1816
- (4) Three \$10 notes ... dated 1818
- (5) One \$10 note ... dated 1823
- (6) One \$10 note ... dated 1824

- (7) One \$2 note, dated December 1, 1818

State of Alabama vs. John Goodman was brought before the Grand Jury in St. Clair County Alabama on October 7, 1822 on the charge that he “feloniously did falsely make, forge and counterfeit a certain bank note, namely a two dollar bill, series B, #265, dated December 1, 1818, on the Nashville Bank signed by W. Tannehill, Cashier, and Stephen Cantrell, President.”

This case was sent to Shelby County Alabama for trial and on Friday, October 25, 1822 the *Huntsville Republican* reported that the trial had been the week before.

This research can be found in the Shelby County Archives.

Property of Shelby County Museum & Archives

Available Shelby County Court Case Files [copies are \$12.00 each file]:

- (1) 49-A, Packet 0130 ... State vs. John Welch, Nicholas Welsh, Pinkney Holley, David Legroon/Legroan (counterfeiting)
- (2) 11-D, Packet 40 – 0105 ... State vs. Brittain Bailey; Thomas L. Bailey; William C. Lee; Thomas Payne; Thomas Stacy; John Martin (counterfeiting, 1822-1823)
- (3) 11-D, Packet 40-0098 ... State vs. James B. Bailey (counterfeiting, 1822-1823)
- (4) 11-D, Packet 40-0116 ... State vs. John Goodman (counterfeiting, 1822-1823)
- (5) 11-D, Packet 40-0110 ... State vs. Noah Langley (counterfeiting, 1824)
- (6) 11-D, Packet 40-0106 ... State vs. Needham Lee (counterfeiting, 1822-1823)
- (7) 11-D, Packet 40-111 ... State vs. Hugh A. Welsh (counterfeiting, 1826)

*This information courtesy of Bobby Joe Seales, President
Shelby County Historical Society, Inc.*

This \$2.00 counterfeit note was seized from John Goodman
[see above #7 for more details]

