

The Robber Baron of Newtonville

In addition to Fayette Court House town, Newtonville was an early settlement in Fayette County that soon became a thriving community. While this area was still Indian territory, a Mr. (?) Newton arrived around 1800 and established a trading post with the Indians. The land was fertile for farming with virgin timber, a good water supply and “switch grass” for cattle and livestock.

Many of the earliest settlers came from North Carolina by way of Tuscaloosa County. Some of these early settlers who received land grants for the Newtonville area were: Thomas Davis (1822), John McGowen (1822), Robert Bridges (1825), Issac Shepherd (1826), Nathan Nalls(1826), Thomas Lucas (1826) and Simon Poe (1826). Other Nalls and Shepherd relatives along with Hogan Yerby, Thomas Blakeney and many others settled in Newtonville between the late 1820’s and mid 1830’s. Land records show the heaviest movement to the area took place between 1830 and 1840.

Among these new arrivals was John Wilson. Mr. Wilson was born in 1826 at a place called Binion Creek in Tuscaloosa County. His family relocated to Newtonville in the early 1840’s. Records show he was a Justice of the Peace for the Newtonville area in 1844. He married Penelope Perninah Nalls in 1849.

By 1850, the population of Newtonville was substantial enough to support three stores in addition to the original trading post, which was still in operation. These stores were owned and operated by Simon Poe, Richard Mack Shepherd, and George Trawick.

From 1850 to 1860, Newtonville grew to become the largest community in Fayette County. Men who did not join the companies of soldiers leaving to fight the battles of the Civil War, joined the “Home Guard” to protect the local citizens and ferret out deserters. Under the protection of the Home Guard title, many of these groups of men developed into outlaws and murderers. John Wilson is reported to have become one of the most infamous of them all and many robberies and murders were laid at his door.

Wilson was said to be very pleasant in his outward appearance and could come across as a very nice man. However, it is believed that the first person he killed was Everette Yerby, father of Hogan Yerby. Rumor has it that Mr. Yerby was helping to dig a grave for John Wilson’s father (reported to be a very mean man) in Pilgrim Rest Cemetery. The grave was being dug beside a large chestnut tree and Yerby remarked that Wilson “would surely go to hell popping being so close to that tree”. This statement was related to John Wilson. Two weeks later, after returning from a trip taken to sell his cotton, Mr. Yerby was shot through a window late one evening while sitting at his table drinking a glass of milk. His wife ran for help to her father’s home one-half mile away. When they returned, Yerby was dead, the \$500.00 from the sale of cotton was gone, Yerby’s horse had been killed and his barn burned. Several years later Mart Shepherd saw a man in Tuscaloosa with a watch he recognized as belonging to Everette Yerby. He asked the man where he got the watch and the man replied “I bought it from John Wilson’s widow”.

In 1864, George Trawick, a merchant in Newtonville listed in the 1850 census as being worth \$1500.00 was on his way home one night and was shot and killed from ambush with a load of buckshot. He slumped over into the wagon and the mule team brought his body home. In the records of the settlement of his estate, John Wilson is listed as a purchaser of some of Trawick's property. He also became the owner and proprietor of Trawick's store.

Also in 1864, a group of the Home Guard on a raid came to the home of Bradley Nalls, father-in-law of John Wilson. Nalls told his family he would hide but if the members of the Home Guard tried to harm any of them he meant to kill some of them. It is said that members of the Home Guard went into the house and started to molest the women. Their screams brought Nalls out of his hiding place. He was shot and killed as he entered the room. Records of the appraisal of Nathan Nalls estate show him to have been a very wealthy man. His wife and only child, Penelope Perninah Nalls Wilson inherited this wealth.

A short time after the war, a group of men entered the home of Nathan Nalls to rob him. All of Nathan's 10 children were grown and settled in other places except the two youngest daughters and one son who had just return from the war. The men demanded his money and when Nathan Nalls refused the gang was going to take him outside to torture him until he relented. As they were proceeding outside, Nathan Nalls grabbed a hatchet located near the door and managed to cut one of the men in the face before they shot him. Nall's son, Wiley, came running to assist his father and was also shot and killed. One family member recognized the men as being from Binion Creek, John Wilson's original home.

An entire black family named Poe was murdered one night. The mother, father and all 6 or 8 children were shot and killed. The youngest child, who was cripple tried to escape by climbing an apple tree. The moon was bright and the child was shot out of the tree. Dr. Wilburn Jones discovered the bodies the next day. These murders were also attributed to John Wilson, however no one has ever known the motive for the killings.

John Wilson was never brought to justice for any of the crimes attributed to him. The story goes that Wilson would close his store for 2 or 3 weeks and say he was going to Texas. During these absences the murders and robberies would occur, giving Wilson the alibi that he was out of the country.

However, Wilson eventually paid a price for his deeds. In May of 1873, a young boy riding a fine horse from Columbus< MS to Tuscaloosa stopped by Wilson's store to get something to eat. The horse had been purchased by a man in Tuscaloosa and the boy was in the process of delivering it to the new owner. Wilson, showing an interest in the horse, offered to show the boy a road to Tuscaloosa through the swamp. Wilson rode off with the boy and returned later with the horse saying that he had purchased the horse and the boy had run away. The boy was never seen again.

Two or three weeks after the incident, three men came into Newtonville from Tuscaloosa. They were all carrying shotguns. Late that evening they met with a group of men from Newtonville. As Wilson was closing his store for the evening, he was surrounded and taken to a field behind his store. Soon blasts from about 15 shotguns filled the night air. No one ever knew who killed John Wilson and little effort was made to find the slayers.

Wilson's widow remarried a Mr. Brown and moved to Fayette. After his death she married Bedford H. Williams, Probate Judge of Fayette County.

Information for this article derived from the History of Newtonville, by Buren Sullivan, letters from the late Judge David Enslin, and Sesquicentennial a publication by the Fayette Co. Historical Society.