

New County established from Fayette land honoring Fayette Man

In Alabama, the Reconstruction-era Legislature was rife with wrangling and manipulation, resentment for the “carpetbag” and “scalawag” members, and a lingering of resentment among the southern and Tennessee Valley large planters who wanted secession and the small farmers of the north and northwestern part of the state who had been so strongly opposed to secession.

During this time one young and ambitious representative from Marion County proposed the creation of a new county. In January of 1867, John Hollis Bankhead proposed that lands be taken from Fayette County to form the southern part of the new county. The northern part would be taken from Marion County. As has been stated in earlier articles, originally, Fayette County extended all the way to the Mississippi line as did Marion County.

The Bankhead family, which produced such outstanding Alabamians as U. S. Senator John H. Bankhead, Jr., Speaker of the House William B. Bankhead and the famous actress Tallulah Bankhead, were early Alabama pioneers who had settled near present-day Sulligent around 1816. That area was then part of Marion County. Young John Hollis had served as a captain in the Confederate Army (he enlisted at age 19) and began his long political career when he was elected to the Alabama Legislature in 1865. He served in both houses of the legislature and later was elected to the U. S. Senate where he served three terms and died in office in 1920. He was the last Confederate veteran to serve in the U. S. Senate.

Bankhead initially proposed the new county be named “Stonewall” in honor of the Confederate hero, Stonewall Jackson. However, some of the “carpetbag” and “scalawag” members found the name Stonewall to be unacceptable and the proposed bill failed to receive the required two thirds majority vote. A few days later, Bankhead resubmitted his bill. This bill had changed the name of the new county from Stonewall to Jones County in honor of Elliot Priest Jones of Fayette County. Jones was a prominent and influential member of the Legislature whose support Bankhead needed.

Elliott Priest Jones was a lawyer who was born in Moulton, Alabama in 1819. His family had moved to Lawrence Co. from Kentucky. Jones received a common school education and began his career teaching school. During that time he read law in the office of Ligon and Walker and began his law practice in Fayette in 1844. Jones served as the Fayette County Treasurer in 1845; Register in Chancery Court, 1845-1850; Postmaster, 1845-1850; Justice of the Peace, 1847; County Court Judge, 1848-1850 (County Court was changed to Probate Court in May of 1850); and State Senator from 1851-1858 and 1865-1867. Jones along with Burr W. Wilson was elected as a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1861 and 1865.

Jones and his wife Lucinda Page Jones raised ten children in Fayette. His oldest son, James Benjamin Jones had started one of the earliest Fayette newspapers, *The Fayette Sentinel*. J. B. Jones was the grandfather of the late Fred Jones and Mary Ann Jones Crump. He built the Jones home which is facing the intersection of Highway 18 (Vernon Hwy) and Highway 96 (Millport Hwy). The home was built in 1866 and is thought to be the second oldest home in Fayette.

An article published in the *Tuskaloosa Gazette* on October 14, 1886 described Elliott P. Jones as follows:

“Elliott P. Jones was elected to the Senate in 1851, 1853, 1855, 1860, and last in 1865. I do not think it would be exaggerating in regard to him, or disparaging to others to say that Judge Jones was the ranking Senator from that section of Alabama. His standing in the senate was very good. He had the confidence and esteem of such men as Jemison, Gunn, B. C. Yancy, Watts, McLemore, B. H. Baker, Bethea, Bullock and many others who deservedly stood high in the councils of the State. As a lawyer he was very safe. His advice was always in the interest of peace and against litigation. He was in no sense of the word technical, but wanted to get right to the merits of the case and try the real issue. His fairness was proverbial.

In politics, Judge Jones was a Democrat, true to his principles, but liberal and generous to the other side, in which he had hosts of warm personal friends. He was first elected Judge of the County Court, but upon the organization of the Probate system he went out. He was never beaten in a contest before the people. Judge Jones was opposed to succession, and in 1860 espoused the cause of Stephen A. Douglas for President as the surest means of averting calamities that subsequently befell the South. After the election in 1860 he was elected to the Convention called by Gov. Moore. In that body he voted against Succession, and was one of the few who refused to sign that document. – After the war he was elected to the Convention called by Gov. Parsons, and was elected to the Senate, - the last one before reconstruction. This term closed his public life. He betook himself to his profession, which he followed until a few years ago, when death called him. [1880] He was ready for the summons. His memory will long live in the hearts of his numerous friends.”

John Hollis Bankhead chose well when he decided to change the name of his new county. If the name he chose the first time, “Stonewall”, hurt him politically, then the name he chose the second time, “Jones” would ensure his success. On February 4, 1867 Jones County, Alabama was established.

On March of 1867, Congress passed the Reconstruction Act which ended the Presidential Reconstruction and began the Congressional version. The civilian government of Alabama was now subject to Congressional Reconstruction policies. The actions of the newly created Jones County had to be approved by the Freedman’s Bureau and the military authorities.

In April of 1867, Jones County received the approval from Wager Swayne, who was a commissioner of the Freedman’s Bureau and later became the military governor of Alabama. He ordered an election to determine the site of a county seat and instructed that no man should be denied the right to vote in this election because of race or color. The government of the new county began its business on August 26, 1867.

Despite the progress of Jones County, a movement arose in north Alabama to undo the action which created the county. In November of 1867, Jones County was abolished and all territory was returned to Fayette and Marion County. General Swayne did not favorably view this action and in December of that year he sent a letter to the probate judge of Jones County stating he would try to get the county reestablished when the Legislature met again and suggested that the county should continue its business as if it had not been abolished.

During 1868, the non-existing Jones County continued to operate as usual: officials were elected; taxes collected; and contracts were let for a courthouse and jail. To further complicate matters, those in the

legislature who had an ax to grind and wanted to ensure that Jones would not have the new county named after him were able to pass a bill on August of 1868 changing the name of Covington County to Jones County in honor of Josiah Jones, a local politician. Josiah Jones however did not want the county named after him.

Therefore, in 1868, Alabama had a nonexistent Jones County in northwest Alabama which was functioning and seeking to be recreated, and an existing Jones County in South Alabama that its namesake wanted to disavow. To end the confusion, Jones County in northwest Alabama was renamed Sanford County (after Henry C. Sanford, a pioneering settler from North Carolina in Cherokee County), and Jones County in south Alabama was renamed Covington County.

John Hollis Bankhead never forgot the compromise he had to make to get his new county established. Although he no longer served in the Alabama Legislature he still had considerable political clout. He used that clout to once again get the name of his county changed. With Bankhead's urging and support, on February 8, 1877, the Alabama Legislature changed the name of Sanford County. The lands ceded by Fayette and Marion to form a new county were finally named Lamar County in honor of Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus Lamar. Lamar was a native of Mississippi and a former Confederate soldier who served as a Confederate Diplomat to Russia. He also served in Congress with Bankhead.

Information for this article was acquired from Mary Ann Jones Crump, Louis P. Moore, and an article which appeared in The Alabama Lawyer publication in March 1992 written by Samuel A. Rumore, Jr.

Photos: (1) Map of the area

(2) Elliott Priest Jones and wife, Lucinda Page Jones