

Thomas Wilson White (1817 – 1890)

A Biography by Patricia White Nation

Huntsville Alabama

December 2016

Published in the [Huntsville History Collection](#), June 2017

Frontier Huntsville

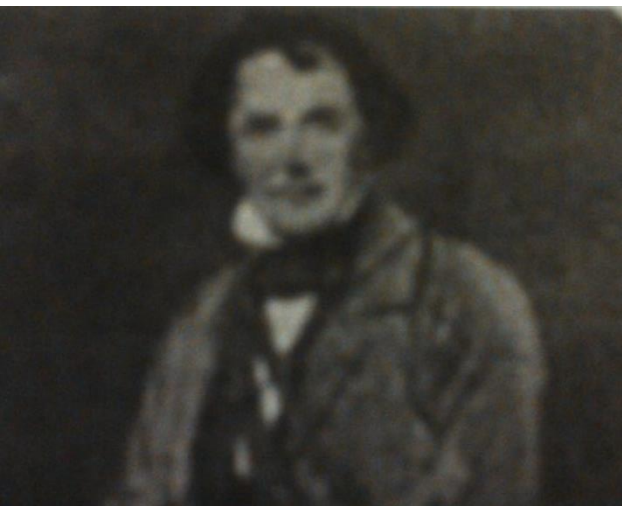
At the beginning of the nineteenth century the Alabama territory was a vast tree covered region populated with Native Americans. White settlers were few and were located primarily on the Gulf Coast and along the Coosa, Alabama, Tombigbee, Tallapoosa and Tennessee Rivers. The state was established in 1819 at the Constitutional Convention in Huntsville. By 1830 the earliest settlers had been in the state over twenty years and state, county and municipal government infrastructures were established. During the early years before and after statehood Alabama experienced a large influx of industrious people primarily from Georgia and Virginia seeking to acquire land and establish homesteads on virgin lands that were now available for purchase by the public. Alabama became an agrarian based society with numerous small family farms and large plantations. The larger plantations were established most often by wealthy educated people from Virginia and Georgia who often had political office experience. They capitalized on the opportunity to acquire rich farm land at a low price.

In early North Alabama an aristocratic class of wealthy planters developed that included North Alabama families like the Bibbs, Popes, Manning, Whites and Matthews. During the nineteenth century Southern families participated in American politics at the highest levels and they sent their sons and daughters to elite Ivy League Universities and to West Point Military Academy. The White family members held some of the most prestigious political offices in America including John White who was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Isaac Shelby who was twice governor of Kentucky, and John D. White U.S. House of Representatives.

By 1830 Thomas White's father James White of Abingdon, VA had established three large plantations in North Alabama. James White's young sons Addison White, Thomas W. White and Milton White inherited these plantations after their father's death in 1838 thereby defining the future of the many generations of the White family that followed.

Abingdon, Virginia Roots

The White family had been established in Abingdon, VA since the very late 1700s. For eighty years prior they lived in Lancaster County, PA. William White moved his family from Pennsylvania to Abingdon, VA circa 1795.



Later in 1817 his grandson Thomas Wilson White was born in Abingdon. Thomas' father and mother, James and Elizabeth (Eliza) White had 13 children. Thomas grew up in Abingdon, a small town on the edge of the frontier. The frontier "Great Road" ran directly through the small town and was one of the main arteries of transportation for settlers migrating west and into North Alabama. James White operated a gristmill north of Abingdon and owned a mercantile store in the heart of town on the Great Road. He produced salt north of Abingdon near the present town of Saltville, VA. Every day the Whites interacted with settlers traveling to Alabama. The family looked to frontier Alabama and saw business

opportunity. James White pushed into North Alabama and established mercantile stores along the Tennessee River and retail outlets for the large quantities of salt he produced in Washington County Virginia. James

White became known as the Salt King of Abingdon and accumulated wealth that he used to acquire frontier Alabama land that he developed into profitable plantations. It is said that James White “lived” in the saddle. He traveled extensively between his properties in Alabama and Virginia. With his father’s unexpected death in 1838 young Thomas faced challenges and opportunity.

Arrival in Alabama to Claim Inheritance

Thomas White moved to Huntsville, AL from Abingdon, VA in 1839 at age 22, one year after his father’s death. Within the prior three years three of his brothers also died leaving Thomas and his two brothers (Addison and Milton) title to vast land holdings including plantations and commercial property in North Alabama. These operating plantations had been established by James White over the preceding 25 years. The three north Alabama plantations were located at Bellefonte in Jackson County, Whitesburg in Madison and Morgan Counties and in Limestone County near Mooresville. Each plantation was located on the Tennessee River. Thomas also later acquired a large plantation near Helena Arkansas south of Memphis, TN.

When Thomas arrived in Huntsville the cities’ population was less than 4,000. Huntsville became Alabama's first capital when the state was admitted to the Union. This was a temporary designation for one legislative session only. Huntsville was the regional center of banking, politics and powerful families. Although not the earliest residents of Huntsville, the White family was known to Huntsville’s elite. James White had operated businesses in Madison County for years both as a planter and a merchant who controlled and dominated the production and commercial sale of salt across the Tennessee Valley. Huntsville’s wealthy families took notice when Thomas moved to the small town, a young single man who owned large profitable cotton plantations. During this period Alabama cotton was a highly profitable crop enabling Thomas to build on his father’s success and accumulate wealth. Thomas moved in the highest social circles and was noticed by one powerful Alabama family in particular – Alabama’s first family - the Bibbs. Within three years of his arrival in Huntsville young Thomas W. White became part of the Bibb family.

When Thomas White arrived in Huntsville the White family had been in America 130 years, they had fought for American independence, were officers in the War of 1812, and held high state and federal government offices. Addison White, brother of Thomas, became a Kentucky congressman and a close friend of the great Henry Clay of Kentucky. Thomas W. White’s brother Addison White was in the room with Henry Clay when he died in Washington D.C. in June of 1852.

John White, Thomas’ cousin, was Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and a protégé of Henry Clay. John White was involved in a physical brawl on the house floor in defense of Henry Clay. The White family were Whigs and were aligned politically with Henry Clay, and as such they were moderate, cautious and measured in their support for succession.

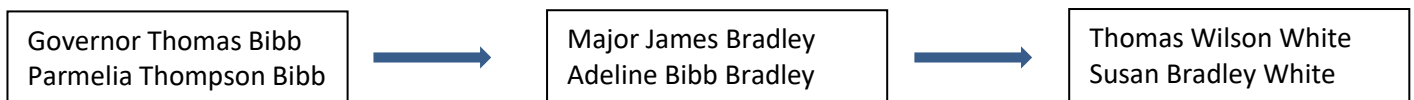
Henry Clay, with the support of the Kentucky delegation that included John White and Addison White, was responsible for the Great Compromise of 1850 that prevented Civil War. However, peace was not to last, and the country was at war ten years later. The stage was set and the die was cast, and a remarkable future for this 130 year old American family and Thomas White lie ahead.

The Bibb Family Connection

In 1840 at age 24 Thomas Wilson White married Susan Bradley, the granddaughter of Alabama's second Governor Thomas Bibb. This union was characteristic of successful southern families over generations - success in marriage lead to success in business. Well-considered marriages lead to prosperity. While young Thomas W. White may have been too young to fully appreciate this, the Bibb family certainly did. The Bibbs understood how economics and marriage were related. Thomas W. White was the right young man, in the right place at the right time.

The Thomas Bibb family lived in Huntsville on Williams Avenue. Thomas Bibb also had a family home at his Limestone County Belle Mina plantation, a two-story brick mansion built in 1826. Both of these homes stand today as historic landmarks. Thomas W. White and Susan's wedding party was held at the Bibb Huntsville residence. This was then the home of Major James and Adeline Bibb Bradley, at 300 Williams Street in Huntsville. Their wedding was undoubtable a gathering of Huntsville's oldest established families. A story is told that at the wedding dinner the serving table collapsed from being overloaded with fine food.

The Bibb Limestone County plantation in Belle Mina was adjacent to the White's Cave Place Limestone County plantation near the river town of Cotton Port and Mooresville. The relationship between the Whites and Bibbs was further established with their common membership in Alabama's aristocratic planter class. Then, with the marriage of Thomas to Susan Bradley, the granddaughter of Governor Bibb, they were one family.



As a new arrival to North Alabama, the Bibb family's experience, social standing, business relationships and political connections benefited Thomas in business and personal life. The Bibb family, being experienced cotton planters, mentored young Thomas in all aspects of plantation business, politics and Alabama society. One important family connection was Major James Bradley, the husband of Governor Thomas Bibb's daughter Adeline and the father-in-law of Thomas. Bradley was a cotton merchant and broker who was well known in both Huntsville and New Orleans. This gave Thomas White a family connection to one of the South's powerful cotton brokers and facilitated the optimal sell of Thomas' crops.

The relationship between the Whites and Bibbs is further evidenced in the 1860 Alabama census. The following Bibb family members were at that time living in Thomas White's home at 612 Eustis Avenue: Adeline Bibb Bradley (daughter of Governor Thomas Bibb), age 55, and her children, Sarah Bradley, age 30, Adeline Bradley, age 19 and John Bradley, age 12. Thomas became caregiver and provider for these Bibb family members after the death of Major James Bradley at age 57. They lived as one family.

Father of Twelve

Thomas and Susan White had their first child Adeline in the fall of 1841. The family grew to include 12 children born over a 28 year period. Their family home is located in Huntsville's Twickenham Historic District on a hillside overlooking the southwest corner of Eustis Avenue and White Street. The home was built in 1836. Thomas purchased the property around 1844 and added a side wing and detached slave buildings to the rear.



The Whites raised their 12 children in this home including Alexandria (Sandy), William and James who each fought in the Civil war. The L-shaped dwelling features an asphalt shingle gable roof, double-pile side hall floor plan, exterior end brick chimneys, brick load bearing walls, sash windows, and a masonry foundation. The house features an original basement. A brick sidewalk and curvilinear paved driveway connects to

Eustis Avenue. A wrought iron fence with brick posts and gateposts lines Eustis Avenue. The property is also accessed from a driveway off White Street.



Thomas White built a second home on White Street for his daughter Susan as a wedding gift upon her marriage to Frank Fickling. This beautiful vintage home located at 400 White Street is owned today by Deane and Carol Dayton. Both of these homes stand today in Huntsville's Twickenham Historical District.

The Thomas and Susan White home was a busy and happy place from 1844 up to the outset of the Civil war - a growing loving family, successful business ventures, political connections and social interaction. The family were active members of the Episcopal Church of the Nativity. There were five White sons living in the home of their parents James and Susan during this time. Their lives changed in 1860 when war came to Huntsville.

Alabama's Earliest Plantations

When James White died in 1838 his cotton plantations continued to operate with oversight by the White family from Abingdon, VA until Thomas relocated to Huntsville in 1939. Details of the White's plantation business activities are found in the eleven hundred pages of the "White Family Papers" that are archived in the Historical Collections Department at the University of Virginia. Brothers Thomas, Milton and Addison inherited North Alabama properties from their father. Thomas and Addison made Huntsville their home and continued to operate their plantations years beyond the Civil War. Milton continued to reside in Abingdon, VA. Some of these properties remained in the White family until circa 1950 giving an approximate 150 year ownership by the White family.

Bellefonte, Alabama Plantation: This plantation was located near the town of Bellefonte along the Tennessee River in Jackson County. Margaret Cowart's "Old Land Records of Jackson County, AL shows that part of this plantation in an original patent/warrant in Cowart's book for Col. James White that was the patent for 39.83 acres near Bellefonte dated September 19, 1833. On November 25, 1847, White family members patented 79.66 acres about two miles from the 1833 purchase.

Thomas White's brother, Addison White began purchasing additional land around Bellefonte in 1855 and continued to do so until 1882. The Cowart book shows Addison White's total acreage via original patents as 801 acres. This included the entire 16th (school) section that he purchased on January 18, 1866. This property came to be known within the family as the "Hunting Camp".

The Bellefonte plantation continued to be a hunting camp for the Whites over the years and into the late nineteenth century. Earlier James White's son James L. White died unexpectedly at the Bellefonte Plantation in 1838, from disease, believed to be malaria. The local Snodgrass family ended up with a great deal of the White plantation property when the White family heirs disposed of it.

Whitesburg Alabama Plantation: Between 1800 and 1807 James Ditto of South Carolina migrated to the "Bend of the Tennessee" and eventually established a ferry in 1807 at a place which would be called Ditto's Landing, located along the northern banks of the Tennessee River. At the time that the landing was established, the tract upon which it stood was owned by the Federal Government. In 1812 LeRoy Pope entered the land and later assigned it to John Brahan who made the final installment payment prior to his receiving the patent or title to the land in 1817. Brahan later sold it to James White. White's plantation was located on both sides of the Tennessee River in Morgan and Madison counties.

On the North side of the River James White founded the river town of Whitesburg on land that he owned. Whitesburg became a regional shipping port. The town of Whitesburg was burned by the Union during the Civil War and never rebuilt. The area today is still known as Whitesburg. Thomas White inherited this property from his father and the family produced cotton well into the twentieth century. The 1960 Slaveholder Census shows Thomas White owning 34 slaves in Madison County. The Whitesburg plantation was owned by White family members over four generations. One sad occurrence was the death of James Bradley White, Jr. (1881 – 1899) from a hunting accident at Whitesburg. Lawson White operated a ferry at Whitesburg before the erection of the highway 231 bridge. About the same time in 1916 Lawson's young cousin Gilbert White obtained a charter to operate a ferry in Decatur, AL. Both ferries discontinued service when bridges were built over the river.

Cotton Port Alabama Plantation: The town of Cotton Port flourished in the early years of Limestone County. It was settled in 1818 and chartered in 1824. It was located near the point where Limestone Creek flowed into the Tennessee River and was a prime boat landing. Steamboats from East Tennessee brought much needed goods to this area. During high water, flatboats loaded with bales of cotton departing Cotton Port, could cross the river's rocky shoals and float to New Orleans. Cotton Port once boasting a town square, handsome houses, brick stores, warehouses, and a racetrack, gradually ceased to exist. Residents left, fleeing Malaria epidemics common to the location. By the 1850's no trace of it remained. The long forgotten town cemetery was unearthed by construction of Interstate 65.

James White acquitted property near Cottonport circa 1815. This plantation has an unusual family story. It was west of the town of Mooresville and was bounded on the south by the Tennessee River. It was located in one of the most productive cotton producing areas of the south.

James White traded salt for this valuable land in the Tennessee River Valley. County Records show that J.W. Lane traded a large tract of Limestone County land near Mooresville to James White for 30,000 bushels of salt. Part of this tract was Section 11, Township 5, Range 4 West, which juts out into the Tennessee River. Milton White, son of James, sold this section to Luke Matthews. Matthews later willed the land and that adjoining it to his daughter, Lucy Spottswood Matthews. At James White's death his son Milton White inherited this property. The 1860 Slaveholder Census shows Milton White owning 92 slaves in Limestone County.

After Lucy's marriage in 1876 to Huntsville attorney David Irvine White (1853 – 1935 and grandson of James White), the property was again in the White family. It is believed that Lucy, who lived her life in Huntsville, never visited this idyllic spot, called The Cave Place after a cave was discovered on the property. A log cabin, evidently built as a caretaker's cottage, formed the nucleus of the Cave Place home structure, but its date of construction is not now known.

David and Lucy's youngest son Gilbert G. White Sr. (1890 – 1971) took possession of the property years later and continued to produce cotton. This property left the White family circa 1940 when Gilbert purchased the Bibb family Woodside plantation in Belle Mina. Woodside had been the property of Gilbert's wife Mae Witt White. Her father was John Witt who was recognized by the state as one of Alabama's "Master Farmers". Woodside was originally one of two Bibb family plantation and antebellum homes in Belle Mina. Both homes stand today.

Phillips County, Arkansas Plantation: Located 15 miles from Helena, AK, Thomas White acquired this plantation prior to the Civil War. His Bellefonte plantation in Alabama had become less productive from years of over farming. Thomas acquired the Phillips County property and relocated the majority of his slaves there. They traveled by train to Memphis then by riverboat to Phillips County. A plantation was built on vast undeveloped cane fields near the Mississippi River. The Civil War decimated this plantation and it was abandoned after the war. The purchase of, relocation to, and operation of this plantation is further documented by Watt McKinney as part of the Federal Writers' Project in late 1938.

Civil War and Military Occupation of Huntsville

During the Civil War, and the Union occupation of Huntsville, the Thomas White family along with all Huntsville citizens endured the oppression and hardships of military law. Private homes were occupied to quarter soldiers. Private property, livestock and foodstuffs were confiscated and crops were destroyed. Civil law had all but been eliminated and the populace was at the mercy of whichever commanding Union officer controlled Huntsville at the time. Entire towns across North Alabama were burned and destroyed by the Union in North Alabama. Gurley, Paint Rock and other towns were destroyed but later rebuilt. The towns of Whitesburg and Bellefonte were burned and never rebuilt. In 1863 during the Union occupation of Huntsville, from the front steps of her home, Susan Bradley White was confronted by Federal troops demanding to know where her sons Alexandria, William and James were. She replied, "They are in the Confederate Army in Virginia and I wish I had 36 more there." Shown here, the Southern Cross of Honor was a military decoration meant to honor the officers, noncommissioned officers, and privates for their valor in the armed forces of the Confederate States of America.



Susan Bradley White wrote her informative diary of life in Huntsville from her Eustis Avenue home. During occupation Union soldiers dug rifle pits in the White's front yard which brought their house and grounds within the Union fort. The war dominated all aspects of the White's life from 1860 to 1865. Every day the family lived with the fear of losing their sons and they had numerous friends killed or wounded. Family plantations were damaged, cotton stolen and property destroyed, resulting in great financial loss. By design and absent of any moral compass, the Union army prosecuted the war on the Alabama civilian population in blatant violation of established codes and ethics of war. Following the war Alabamans experienced the hardships of reconstruction, a dark and difficult time for all citizens.

Huntsville City Alderman and City President

Thomas White was a planter by profession and it is said that he was not highly political. However, considering his family legacy and his associations with Huntsville's elite he was in a position to participate in politics. In 1853 at the age 36 Thomas was elected City Alderman in Huntsville. Huntsville's current office of Mayor was formally known as the office of President. Thomas was elected as President of Huntsville in 1882 at age 64. This was just after reconstruction and during a time when the textile industry came to Huntsville. Huntsville's growth escalated during Thomas White's administration.

Descendants of Thomas W. White

Having 12 children Thomas and Susan naturally left a lasting legacy in Huntsville and North Alabama. Over the years and generations several Huntsville families married into the White family including: Brombly, Darwin, Greenway, Fickling, Hutchens, Patton, Spotswood, Richardson, Spragins, Walker, Watts, Withers and others. Many decedents of Thomas White live today in Huntsville and Madison County. They gather each year in October during the annual Maple Hill Cemetery stroll, at the two family cemetery properties of Thomas and his brother Addison, to honor their ancestors.

Maple Hill Cemetery

Thomas Wilson White died in May of 1890 in Huntsville at the age of 73. His wife Susan passed in September of 1896. Today it has been over 170 years since Thomas White first arrived in Huntsville. He lived in Huntsville for 59 years. Shown here, he and his wife Susan are buried in Maple Hill Cemetery, the oldest continuously



operated municipal cemetery in the southeast United States, with several of their children around them. Their descendants over six generations are interred throughout this Cemetery. Thomas' brother, Congressman and Planter Addison White, is buried at his Maple Hill family property near Thomas.

Maple Hill Cemetery connects all generations and brings focus to Huntsville's rich heritage and our people who are gone but not forgotten. Thomas White's family produced many remarkable and successful Alabama citizens. Huntsville carries the White family footprint today with Whitesburg Drive,

White Street and the community of Whitesburg, all named after them. The White family has been in America over 300 years and they continue in Huntsville today.

Related HHC Links:

[http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Huntsville%27s First Entrepreneur - The %22Salt King%22 of Abingdon, VA](http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Huntsville%27s_First_Entrepreneur_-_The_%22Salt_King%22_of_Abingdon,_VA)

[http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Place:612 Eustis Avenue SE](http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Place:612_Eustis_Avenue_SE)

[http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Place:400 White Street SE](http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Place:400_White_Street_SE)

[http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Person:Francis Fickling](http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Person:Francis_Fickling)

[http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Person:Susan Wells White Fickling](http://huntsvillehistorycollection.org/hh/index.php?title=Person:Susan_Wells_White_Fickling)

Works Cited:

- Madison County Government: <http://madisoncountyal.gov/government/about-your-county/history>
- 1860 Alabama census
- "Incidents of the Civil War" by Nancy Rohr
- Margaret Cowart's "Old Land Records of Jackson County, AL"
- "Interviews of Slaves": Person interviewed: James Gill of Marvell, Arkansas, Age: 86, Occupation: Farmer. This interview was done by Watt McKinney of the Federal Writers' Project in late 1938.
- U.S. Political Biography: <http://politicalgraveyard.com/index.html>
- Biographical Directory of The United States Congress: <http://bioguide.congress.gov>
- Office of the Clerk, U.S. House of Representatives: <http://clerk.house.gov>
- Madison County, AL Historical Records: <http://www.co.madison.al.us/mcrc/>
- Alabama Department of Archives and History: <http://www.archives.state.al.us>
- Maple Hill Cemetery, Huntsville, AL: <http://maps.huntsvilleal.gov/cemetery>
- The 1860 U.S. Census Slave Schedules, Transcribed by Tom Blake, March 2003: <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ajac/almadison.htm>