

Lot's of History in That Cabin

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It's a story that reaches from pioneer days through the Civil War to a failed industrial project in the modern era.

Allison Simpson gave Saturday's historical talk at the Mathew Culbert cabin on the grounds of the Guntersville Museum. She is one of his descendants. Generations of the Culbert family lived in the cabin over the years in the South Sauty area. The cabin has doors on 3 sides and a window next to the chimney. With the doors and window open, a nice breeze blew through the structure Saturday morning.

This is the back view of the Mathew Culbert cabin from the Guntersville Museum. The log cabin including the stone fireplace was relocated from Five Points to Guntersville in 1975. The metal roof is a modern add-on. The cabin originally had cedar shake shingles.

Mathew Culbert was born about 1800 in Balleighan, Ireland, and immigrated to the United States in 1830, landing in Philadelphia. He worked his way south, spending time at his uncle James Park's home in Knoxville, Tennessee. Mr. Park was a 2-time mayor of Knoxville and a founder of the First Presbyterian Church there.

"When I think of Mathew leaving Ireland, it's always very sad to me," Mrs. Simpson said. "He was leaving his aging parents and he knew he would never see them again." The Indians were removed from Marshall County in 1836, she said, and Mathew and his brother James arrived here by late 1838 or early 1839.

The cabin was built a mile from the river in the Five Points area between Lake Guntersville State Park and South Sauty. "It flooded the first winter and it was taken down and relocated on a hill further from the river," Mrs. Simpson said. The 18x20 cabin was built of white oak logs squared with a broad ax to size 5x13. Square nails were used to secure the door and window facings.

In 1845, Mathew married Elizabeth Ann Armstrong and built a larger home 100 yards from the cabin. But generations of his family would use the cabin for the next 100-plus years.

Mathew died in 1861. "The Civil War had started," Mrs. Simpson said. "Mathew was a Union man. His wife Elizabeth testified in the mid-1870s that they both thought the old government was best and saw no need to change." As a Presbyterian, she said, he would have been opposed to slavery on moral grounds. Although he was a large landowner, he used tenant farmers rather than slaves.

The farm was raided by both Union and Confederate troops during the war, Mrs. Simpson said. By 1864, Elizabeth's father Stephan A. Armstrong had moved into the cabin. Union gunboats shelled the farm and a dud round hit a wall of the cabin, she said. "Stephen decided to show his young boys how

to disarm a shell,” she said. “It exploded and killed him and his son Asa. His stepson Solomon was severely injured.”

James Culbert, the oldest son of Mathew and Elizabeth, lost 2 fingers. He later told family members he only remembered something happening and then running in circles in the yard with his hands in the air.

Elizabeth and James testified before the Southern Claims Commission regarding their farm losses due to the Civil War. They testified of their loyalty to the Union and told about the Rebels taking their “Irish cattle” and stripping their home of everything, even the children’s clothing. James told of the Yankees taking 80 panels of oak fencing 10 rails high. Both sides took their corn and other produce during the war.

Elizabeth had one brother in the Union army and one in the Confederate army, Mrs. Simpson said. The Union brother knew that the farm had been raided and gave her vouchers that helped her later file her claim. By 1880, there was a family squabble over the estate but it was settled.

Mary Elizabeth Molly eventually inherited the cabin site. After the death of her first husband, reported in the paper as a suicide by shotgun due to “domestic disagreement,” she married Robert Murphy. They opened a dirt floor store near the cabin and the hill came to be known as Molly Murphy Hill, later just Murphy Hill, the name the area is still known by today.

Most of the Culbert plantation went under water when TVA built Guntersville Lake in the 1930s. The remainder of Mathew Culbert’s land was bought by TVA for the site of a coal gasification plant in the 1970s. That’s when the abandoned cabin was donated to the Guntersville Historical Society and moved from Murphy Hill to its present site. TVA called its site Murphy Hill and still owns it, although the coal gasification plant was never built. Mrs. Simpson called the Murphy Hill site “blight” in her remarks and told how the hill had been bulldozed in preparation for the plant.

She said the family had been fortunate in its geneology work by finding letters of Andrew Park in Knoxville. She said TVA’s survey of families to be displaced by the lake was also invaluable in their work.

Note: In describing this article, Allison said there is one error. The cabin was on land inherited by James Culbert and remained there until donated to the Historical Society by Joe D.Culbert, great grandson of James.