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Grayson History

Historic Grayson, Georgia

by Beth Johansen

compliments of Home Front Publications

Evidence of the rich history of Grayson can be found in the names of our schools and on the signs marking our roads, buildings and churches. The names; McConnell, Bennett, Brand, Chandler, Ethridge, Jacobs, Tribble, Cooper, Britt and more, reach out from the past and on into our future. The great grandchildren of our founding fathers remain among us and play vital roles in our current business, worship, politics and social events.

Although it took the foresight of men like James Patterson McConnell, town founder, and John E. Jacobs, Grayson's first mayor to actually establish what has become known as Grayson, our history does not begin there. It was the foresight of others that brought these men to this area where the land upon which we stand became available for settlement.

The rich lands of Gwinnett County, Georgia were home to the Lower Creek and Cherokee Indians many thousands of years before the first European settlers set foot on them. In February 1784 Franklin County, which is now part of Gwinnett, was opened for settlement. A State Legislation Act that fixed the price of land at 3 shillings an acre and limited settlers to 1000 acres maximum opened the area. Land Lotteries and other legislation later governed the distribution. Lands east of the Appalachian River became Gwinnett County in December of 1818. Gwinnett and Walton Counties were surveyed from the natural "Rockbridge" on the Hightower Trail in 1819.

Our Southern part of Gwinnett County, which would later become the city of Grayson, was formed on either end of what is now considered Grayson. The New Hope or Tribble's Mill area and the Haynes Creek or Midway Area were thriving settlements in the early to middle nineteenth century.

The McElvaney family operated Bay Creek post office in their mill. In 1877 Georgia Militia District was created and the Grayson area was named Bay Creek District. There is no doubt it was named for the creek that runs through the district which is lined with native Bay trees. New Hope Methodist Episcopal Church (now New Hope United Methodist) was organized around 1829. Its cemetery is a testament to the nameless pioneers of our area, some graves being marked and some not. The Billue's, Brands, Chandlers, Robinson's, Jacobs, McConnell's, Pratt's, and others are among some of the church's first members.

Haynes Creek Primitive Baptist Church was constituted in April of 1826. The area around the church was settled by the Ford, Cooper, Rawlins, Jackson, Webb, Jacobs, Brand, Williams, Rutledge, Baggett, Kilgore, Knight, Smith, Summerlin, Langley, Baugh, Head, Petty, Oliver, Palmer, and Hawthorn families. Nearer the present day Summit Chase Golf Course was a school named Midway and one farther named Campground. School and church offered a great respite from isolated farm life in the nineteenth century.

The Billue and McConnell families settled the area that we all know as the city of Grayson. About 1836 these families came from Tennessee to Gwinnett County. Stephen Billue was the first to settle here, followed by his parents Thomas and Margaret Beattie Billue. About 1837 Tilford McConnell and Nancy Billue McConnell followed her brother and her parents to this area in southern Gwinnett County.

Tilford McConnell and Nancy Billue were married in Blount County, Tennessee in 1829. Tilford McConnell was the son of Moses and Elizabeth Draper McConnell. Both Tilford and Nancy McConnell are descendents of Revolutionary War veterans. After the death of Nancy Billue McConnell in 1867, Tilford married Mary E. Harris. There were no children from this second marriage.

The 10 children of Tilford and Nancy Billue McConnell were; William Thomas, Moses, Andrew C., Elizabeth S. (Mrs. Howell C. Head), Mary E., Philo W., Sarah C. (Mrs. John E. Kennerly), Robert T., John Calvin, and James Patterson. Moses and James Patterson both left lasting legacies on the City of Grayson.

In the early 1880's Reverend James Patterson McConnell and his wife, Susan Arendell McConnell, bought 80 acres of land from his Uncle Stephen Billue. He built his own home and a frame store building near the intersection that is now the center of Grayson. In his store he was able to get a Post Office established, with himself as first Postmaster. The first Post Office was established on April 5, 1881, it was given the name "Trip" at the suggestions of J.D. Spence, a leading merchant and public figure at Lawrenceville.

While the man who served as Grayson's first mayor, John E. Jacobs, was Postmaster, he wrote to the Post Department requesting that our town name be changed to Berkeley. An Act by the General Assembly of Georgia approved and Berkeley was incorporated December

16, 1901. Mr. Jacobs was then informed that another town named Berkeley was incorporated in Georgia, so he suggested Graymont, because of the clear view of Stone Mountain from the center of town. The Post Office Department already had a Post Office named Graymont. Faced with trying again, John E. Jacobs was inspired by a letter, which came from Mrs. Ada McConnell Jacobs (his wife) who was visiting McConnell relatives in Grayson County, Texas. The name "Grayson" interested Mr. Jacobs, so he tried again. "Grayson, Town of, Incorporated. An Act No. 182, by the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, Approved December 17, 1902" changed our name to Grayson. The first Aldermen to serve the newly established city were J.P. McConnell, W.P. Williams, J.S. Pate, A. Bennett and W.J. Tribble.

Grayson grew quickly and attracted merchants, a railway, settlers, educators and religious leaders. With the increase in settlement, schools and churches began to establish themselves in order to serve the community.

"Trip" Academy served as the first school in Grayson. Prior to 1881 and from the War of the 1860's or earlier, the only education provided for the children of Grayson area was in a log cabin with "stick and mud" chimney, which stood near the south edge of Chestnut Grove Cemetery. Soon after 1900, the Independent Order of Odd Fellows joined with others to erect a two-story frame structure on the same lot where Grayson Elementary School now stands. The lot for Grayson School was given by Mr. Moses McConnell, grandfather of the children of Mr. and Mrs. John Elery Jacobs "for so long as the land is used for school purposes."

In 1913 a Bond Issue by the citizens of Grayson provided funds for a two-story brick veneered building. It was later extended and expanded when our school became a Consolidated School, Grayson High School. Grayson High School would have faced closing down for lack of funds, except for love of the school and the generosity of Mr. John Elery Jacobs, a member of the Local Board of Trustees for over twenty years. Mr. Jacobs paid all expenses for operation of Grayson High School for one year. He was repaid when funds became available. Education quality has never faltered in Grayson. Mr. Herring, Albert Henderson, and Mr. Dyer all helped Grayson School flourish through the twentieth Century. In 1956 Grayson High School was consolidated into South Gwinnett High School. The two-story brick veneered building was replaced with the present Grayson Elementary School structure. The Grayson High School bell was a 1913 gift to Grayson High School by 9th District Congressman, Thomas M. Bell. Twenty-five Grayson citizens paid for ownership of the bell and placed it in front of Grayson Elementary School where it can still be seen today. A lasting testament to the Old Grayson High that so many love and cherish.

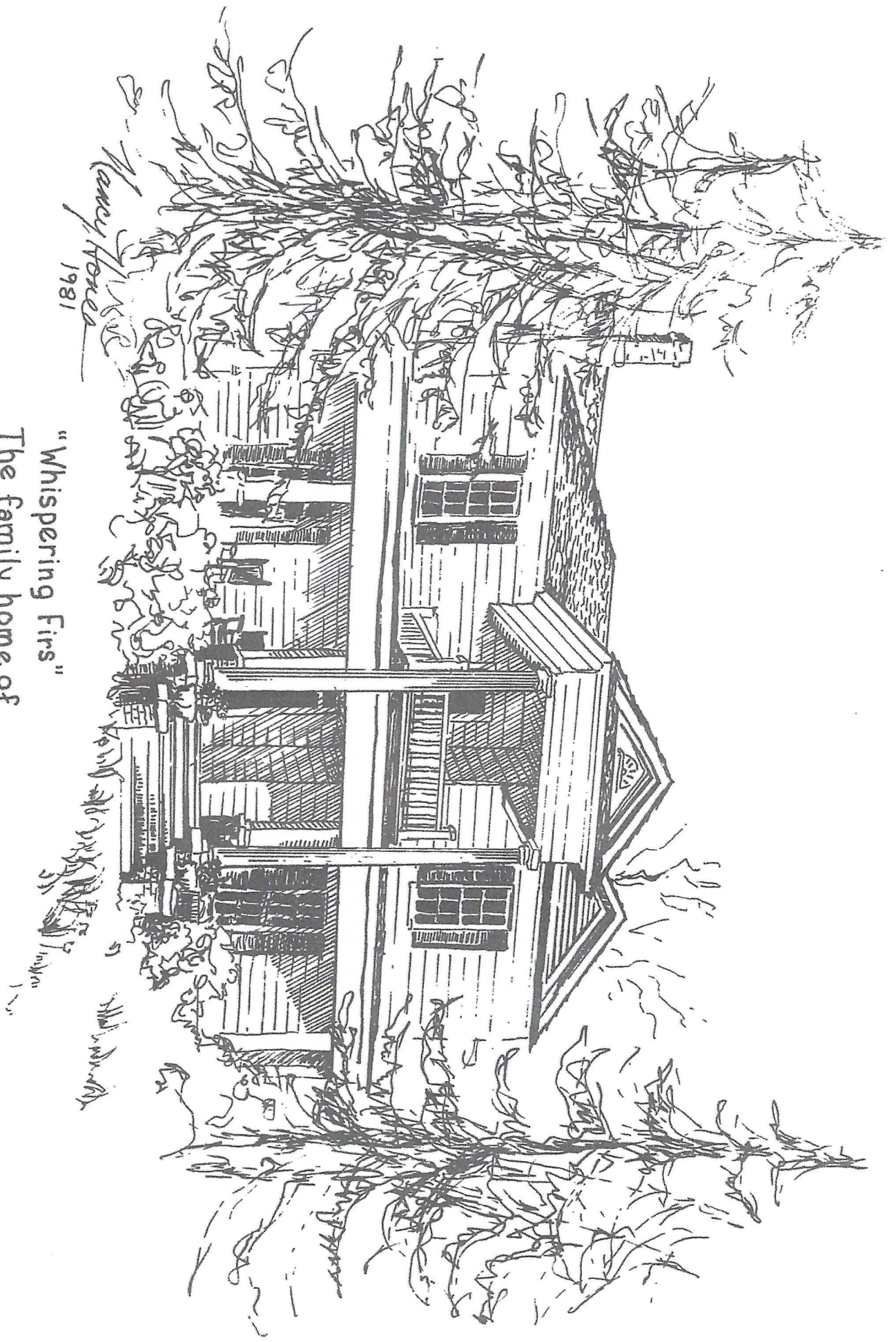
The L & L Railroad came to Grayson December 1, 1898 and carried passengers, mail and freight on two round trips daily through Grayson from Lawrenceville to Loganville. When the trains were running, from 1898 to January 1932, they were a big part of life for Grayson citizens. The old depot area can still be seen between Britt and Gym Streets. Seaboard Air Line Railroad bought up all the stock in the L & L's parent company according to records in the Seaboard Railroad Jacksonville Office. Jennings Dunnagan remembers ladies lining the tracks, with tears in their eyes, on the last run through Grayson.

Chestnut Grove Baptist Church, organized 1850 and has served Grayson faithfully since. Asbury Methodist Episcopal Church South (later named Grayson United Methodist Church) organized under a brush arbor in 1884. Grayson Baptist Church (later named First Baptist Church of Grayson) organized April 4, 1913. Churches, now as then, are a big part of daily life in Grayson.

As if naming the city was not difficult enough, establishing and keeping a post office proved to be just as demanding. Grayson citizen, Tom Moore (husband of Ponnice McConnell), learned that the Postal Authorities intended to close Grayson's post office. He lobbied to spare the city's postal service and provided a building to house it. The new post office was dedicated and an Open House held on July 12, 1964. Former Grayson Postmasters: James P. McConnell, John E. Jacobs, John W. Ethridge, Mrs. G.L. Webb, Walter T. Britt, John C. Wayne and Nancy Beck. Rural Carriers: George Wesley Gouge, Sam Rawlins, and Lamar Cooper. Barbara Britt Williams, Martha Britt Wayne, Jeanette Burton, Lucille Williams, Ruth Ethridge Gaffney and many others have all had a helpful hand in the U. S. Post Office in our town.



"Whispering Firs"
The family home of
Mr. and Mrs. J.E. Jacobs
Grayson, Georgia



L&L RR

From The Front

"When the whistle blew," she says, "everybody screamed as loud as they could — because the teacher couldn't hear a thing."

The much-loved conductor was named George Dunbar, and Miss Jacobs says she thought every conductor on every train anywhere in the world was a Mr. Dunbar.

When the train was busy switching, she says, he would get off and hug the kids just like they were his own. He always had pennies

or candy for them. One old picture Miss Jacobs cherishes shows the crew standing by their train on its last run, which she says was Jan. 16, 1932 (Seaboard spokesmen said it was two days later). She has another, much-faded, old picture that shows the L&L passing by on that last run.

The L&L RR fell victim, says Miss Jacobs, to good roads and better trucks. Seaboard says it is standard practice when a rail line is abandoned to pull up the tracks and use the materials

elsewhere. No one knows where the steel that carried George Dunbar is now.

Today Miss Jacobs divides her time between Heart Fund volunteer work and compiling a detailed history of Grayson. She is upset about inaccuracies in many histories and is trying to determine the facts for the Historical Society.

Although Grayson is one of the few Gwinnett towns that did not grow up along the rail lines, it did indeed have a railroad, she says. And she misses it.



Lawrenceville to Loganville
Olde Grayson Railroad
Grayson, Georgia