

## CHRONICLING A PIONEER PUTNAM FAMILY – THE WASSONS

Cumberland Tales

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Andrew Wasson, born in Tennessee in 1800, came to Jackson County with his family in 1841. This part of Jackson County would be included in Putnam County in 1854.

Andrew's wife Hester Erwin, less than a year older than her husband, was born in North Carolina. Hester could neither read nor write. The couple came to Jackson County with five children. Andrew was 21, Polly was 11, Benjamin was 5, Jacob was 3 and Hetty was a baby.

Andrew Wasson owned about 640 acres, including Pilot Knob Mountain and the land surrounding it. In the modern town this would include the area of Interstate Drive north of I-40, and Hillsdale and Honeybrook subdivisions south of I-40.

Immediately upon their arrival, Andrew and Andrew Jr. signed a petition requesting the state to create Putnam County. More than 200 petitioners signed the document, maintaining that the new country would "add greatly to the interest and convenience" of the population. The county was not created for more than a decade, so the Wassons and others had to travel great distances to conduct legal business in Jackson County.

The Wassons built a log house on the west side of Pilot Mountain, and it was still used through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The original house was a single pen structure. The attic was used as a bedroom for the children, and one fireplace on the north side of the room warmed the structure and acted as a cooking stove. Food was generally boiled in a black pot hung on a pot rack, and cornbread and potatoes were baked in a skillet. In later years, a wood-burning cookstove was added to a kitchen room on the rear.

Behind the house, a free-flowing spring provided water for the household. The Wassons lined the spring with rock to make it more serviceable. A mill on the farm produced grain for the family and for others in the area, and a still provided flavorful libations for the adults. Log buildings served as barns, cribs and other outbuildings.

Andrew and his family engaged in farming, and they may have used some slave labor, but the 1850 census does not indicate any slaves. By this time the three boys and both girls were old enough and strong enough to help with the heavy labor.

In the growing season the Wassons planted corn, tobacco, cotton and flax. Very few persons planted wheat, so cornbread rather than wheatbread was the staple. In the winter men and boys cleared land, split rails and chopped firewood with axes. The annual slaughter of hogs also took place in the winter, usually before Christmas. Cattle, horses, and chickens completed the livestock on a farm.

The Wasson family wealth was above average for Putnam County residents. Their land was valued at \$1,500 in 1860 and their personal property was set at \$300. Many county residents' real estate was worth only a few hundred dollars, and their personal property was without worth. Wasson was certainly in the upper half of the economic scale.

By 1860 Andrew and his wife Hester were senior citizens. Hetty, age 17, was the only child remaining in the log home with her parents. Andrew Jr. had left Putnam County, and Jacob, with his wife Samantha, was living in a separate house, probably in the family farm. Benjamin Wasson was married and had a family in 1860, but the census does not indicate any real estate or personal wealth for him. It does note that he could not read or write. He and his wife Elizabeth had two children, Mary and Harriett, aged 2 and 1.

The Civil War in the 1860s disturbed the stable, peaceful lives of the residents of Putnam County. "Language fails to tell its horrors," said J. H. Grime, neighbor of the Wassons. "the section where we lived

was a rendezvous for bushwhackers and guerillas on both sides, and stealing, robbing and murder was the order of the day.” Champ Ferguson was the most infamous guerrilla leader, but nameless others roamed the countryside, taking what they wanted at gunpoint.

The Wasson sent one son, Jacob, to fight in the war. He was a private in Company C of the 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry Battalion, CSA. The unit operated in East Tennessee during most of the conflict, sometimes doing conscript duty. In 1863 the battalion raided southern Kentucky in the area of Danville, Somerset and Stanford.

Pleasant M. Wasson, son of Andrew’s brother Elizah, volunteered for the 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry CSA. His Company F was commanded by Captain H. H. Dillard of Putnam County. Participating in several battles, Pleasant was wounded at Perryville, KY, in 1862.

The first report sent back home by Sgt. J. L. Davis of Company F listed Wasson as “mortally wounded in the thigh, and leg was cut off since.” Later the report was corrected. He was captured and sent to a Illinois prison camp Paroled in 1863, he returned to Putnam County as an invalid. Pleasant purchased 100 acres on his father’s farm, married Sarah Jaquess and sired seven children.

After the war Wasson family and their descendants continued to live in Putnam County, engaging in agriculture. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, at least one attended Tennessee Polytechnic Institute.

Others moved north to work in industry. Talmage Wasson, son of Hilery, served in the infantry in World War II; he was wounded in the Philippines in 1945.

*Cumberland Tales is a service of the Cookeville History Museum. The editors, Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, invite anyone to submit a story of 800 words concerning the history/folklore of the Upper Cumberland region.*

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