

WASSOM and ESSEX FAMILY  
Putnam Co., TN  
*Submitted by W. Calvin Dickinson,*  
*Tennessee Technological University,*  
*Box 5064, Cookeville, TN 38505*  
The Upper Cumberland Researcher  
Vol. XXIX, No. 3, Fall- Winter, 2004

The permanent settlement of Putnam County began in the last decades of the eighteenth century, just before Tennessee became a state, and long before Putnam became a county. Some of the earliest settlers were in the eastern and western extremities of the future county. The Bohannons, Whiteakers, Bartletts, and Hunters settled in Dry Valley in the east, and the Blackburns built a fort on a branch of Martin's Creek in the west. Buffalo Valley in the western edge was also an early area of settlement.

The Walton Road, completed in 1801 between Southwest Point and Carthage, ran through the middle of what would be Putnam County. Its completion encouraged settlement along its route. In the east, where the road would intersect with the Old Kentucky Stock Road, William Quarles established his plantation and built at White Plains about 1805. In the west, James and Bob McKinley operated a stand on the road at the village of Pekin.

(Note contributed from Maurine Ensor Patton: This stand was first owned by the Col. James Raulston family. The Roulstone/Raulston Stand aka Mt. Richardson on Walton Road in Jackson County was sold to George Carson of Baltimore who then sold the stand to James & Robert McKinley on 15 December 1836. There is a historical marker on Matthew Raulston, father of Col Raulston, in the vicinity of the Raulston Stand in Western Putnam County on south side of Hwy 70 N, west of Gentry.

Between White Plains and Blackburn's Fort, Cookeville would eventually be established in the 1850's about two miles south of the Walton Road. Before the city was created as the capital of Putnam County, several families lived on and worked the land. The Buck family lived about two miles east of town, calling their land Monticello. They would found and operate Andrew College there in the 1850's. Charles Crook owned the land on which the town would eventually be built. Richard Cooke owned thousands of acres near Double Springs west of Cookeville.

A couple of miles south of the future Cookeville lived the Wassom family. They owned part of Pilot Knob Mountain and some of the land surrounding it. In the modern town this would include areas south of I-40, Hillsdale subdivision, and parts of Honeybrook subdivision.

Andrew Wassom, 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, who was 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 Jr., 21; Polly, 11; Benjamin 5; Jacob 3, and baby Hetty.

Already residing in Jackson County in 1841 were John Wassom and Benjamin Wassom, with their families; but this author could not determine any relationship between them and Andrew. If they were related, John and Benjamin's residence in Jackson County may explain Andrew's reason for settling in the area. Other stories have the Wassoms coming to the area with the Knight family. Andrew's brother, Elijah, also lived in Jackson County; he was mentioned in the Jackson County Ranger Book in 1851.

Immediately upon their arrival Andrew and Andrew, Jr., signed a petition in October, 1841, petitioning the state to create Putnam County. John and Benjamin did not sign the petition, maybe because they lived in another part of Jackson County. More than two hundred petitioners signed the document maintaining that the new county would "add greatly to the interest and convenience" of the population. The county was not created for more than a decade, so the Wassoms and others had to travel great distances to conduct legal business with Jackson County.

In March of 1842 Andrew was one of fourteen men who guaranteed three bonds totaling \$16,000 for Circuit Court Clerk William Carr. Wassom was one of eleven signers who could write his signature. This ceremony took place at White Plains in what would be Putnam County.

Andrew and his family were engaged in farming, and they may have used slave labor, but the 1850 slave 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.

The Wassoms built a log house on the west side of Pilot Knob, and it was still used through the first half of the twentieth century. The original house was a single pen structure. An attic served as a bedroom for the children, and one fireplace on the north side of the house warmed the structure and acted as a cooking stove. Such fireplaces were usually wide enough to accommodate logs four to six feet long. 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 cook stove was added to a kitchen room which had been built on the rear.

Behind the house was a free-flowing spring which provided water for the household. Although there were several springs on the farm, this was the best; thus the house was built adjacent to it. The Wassoms lined the spring with rock to make it more serviceable. A mill on the farm ground grain for the family and for others in the vicinity, and a still provided flavorful libations for the adults. Log buildings also served as barns, cribs, and other outbuildings.

In the growing season the Wassoms would plant corn, tobacco, cotton, and flax. Very few persons planted wheat, so cornbread rather than wheat bread was the staple. In the winter men and boys with axes cleared land, split rails, and chopped wood. The annual

slaughter of hogs-razorback-also took place in the winter, usually before Christmas. Cattle, horses, and chickens completed the livestock on a farm.

Living south of the Wassoms-“three miles southwest of Cookeville” – was the John Grimes family. John and his wife Margaret Smith had one son and six daughters. With a second wife John sired two more children. Like the Wassoms, they started in a single pen log house with a puncheon floor. The logs were unhewn, and the chimney was stick and mud. J. H. Grime, the youngest son, remembered in later years, “Those were considered fortunate who had a separate room or cabin in which to cook and eat.” In the 1850s Grimes bought 700 acres farther south in the county and built two houses with hewn logs and stick/mud chimney as their permanent residence. One house was for cooking and eating; the other, with two back rooms, was for sleeping. The living/sleeping house even had four small glass windows.

In 1846 Andrew Wassom was involved in a Chancery Court case as administrator of Andrew Erwin’s will. Wassom sued Margaret Erwin, the deceased man’s widow, who was living on her husband’s land. The case terminated with a decision in favor of Margaret Erwin; Wassom was ordered to pay court costs.

By 1860 Andrew and Hester Wassom were senior citizens; Andrew was listed as 59 in the census; Hester was 60. Hetty, age 7, was the only child remaining in the log home with her parents. Andrew, Jr., had left Putnam County, and Jacob and his wife Samantha was living in a separate house, probably on Andrew’s farm.

Andrew, Jr.’s departure may be explained by a Chancery Court case in Jackson County. In July of 1854 Andrew, Sr., sued his son in a dispute concerning a tract of land on the east side of Can Creek, which was part of the Smith Hutchins tract. The case was continued twice, and was settled in February of 1858 by court decree. Within a year or two after the conclusion of the case, Andrew Jr., left home.

Wassom’s wealth was above average for Putnam County residents. His land was valued in 1860 at \$1500 and his personal property was set at \$300. Wassom was certainly in the upper half of the economic scale. Richard Cooke, the prominent county leader and state senator who introduced the petition to create Putnam County, was even more prosperous than Wassom; his estate was valued at \$4500 and his personal property at \$4900. He owned 3000 acres of land near Double Springs in western Putnam County, and he owned three slaves.

While Cooke and Wassom were at the top of the economic ladder, many county residents’ real estate was worth only a few hundred dollars, and their personal property was worthless. Benjamin Wassom 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 two and one.

The Civil War in the 1860s disturbed the stable, peaceful lives of residents in newly created Putnam County. "Language fails to tell its horrors," said J. H. Grime. "The section where he lived was rendezvous for bushwhackers and guerillas on both sides, and stealing, robbing and murder were 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. As Grime said, both sides were guilty of theft and atrocities.

The Wassoms, who felt these emotions and experienced these horrors, sent one son, Jacob, to fight in the war. He was a private in Company "C" of the Confederate 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry Battalion. The unit was stationed in East Tennessee during most of the conflict, sometimes doing conscript duty. In 1863 the battalion raided southern Kentucky, in the territory around Danville, Somerset, and Stanford.

Jacob returned to Putnam County after the war, apparently without injury. By 1870 his wife Samantha had given birth to four children- Eli, Josephine, Pleasant, and Margaret. His personal wealth, which was listed as \$250 in 1860, had increased to \$500 in 1870. The record showed no real estate wealth, so he must have continued to live on his father's land.

Pleasant M. Wassom, son of Andrew's brother, Elijah, volunteered for the Confederate army; he was placed in the 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry, commanded by White County resident: H. H. Dillard. Participating in several battles. Pleasant was wounded at Stones River, then captured and sent to a prison camp in Illinois. Paroled in 1863 he returned to Putnam County an invalid, one leg having been amputated above the knee. Pleasant purchased one hundred acres near his father's farm. He married Sarah Jaquess in 1871, and the couple had seven children.

Of those from Putnam County who served in the 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry, twenty-four were killed in battle, nine died of disease, and thirty-one were seriously wounded. Most of the wounded lost an arm or leg.

Nine other men from Tennessee named Wassom, Wasson, or Wassum, serviced in the Confederate armies during the war, and two with that name, including on Jacob, served in the U.S. military.

Simpson Essex moved to Putnam County from another part of Tennessee about the time the war started. He was a native Tennessean, born in 1842. Simpson married a sister of Jacob Wassom, Luzetta, in 1861 or 1862, and their first child, Luzetta, was born in 1862. Essex served as a private in the same company of the 16<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry Battalion as Jacob.

After the war Simpson returned to Putnam County, and Luzetta gave birth to four children- Perry, Luvenia, Sarah Butler, and Mary. The family had a "domestic servant" named Evaline. Much later, son Hilary was born to the couple in 1885.

Simpson was listed as a farmer in the 1870 census, possessing real estate of only \$50 value and personal wealth of \$800. The real estate value was so small because he probably used some of his father-in-law's land for crops. Family tales indicate that he was a craftsman, and the personal wealth may have included his craft tools.

The youngest son Hilary, followed his father and grandfather in farming on the Wassom estate, raising corn and tobacco as well as hogs and cattle. Hilary received enough education through an Eight Grade diploma to become a teacher, working at Rocky Point, Holloday and Wilhite schools. He attended Tennessee Polytechnic Institute after its beginning in 1916.

Hilary married Martha Kendall in 1916. They built a log home on the family's Pilot Knob land. Three children were born to the couple-Kate (1917), Talmage (1925), and Gilbert (1928). Hilary died in 1936. Talmage, the oldest son, served in the army during World War II as a soldier in the 24<sup>th</sup> Infantry. Wounded in the Philippines in 1945, he returned to civilian life in Dayton, OH, working as a bricklayer.

Gilbert worked in the Hudson and Chrysler automobile assembly plants in Michigan in the 1950s. Later he worked in several plants in Cookeville, living south of Pilot Knob near the original Wassom land, and farming on the side.

Kate graduated from high school and married Carl Burgess.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>