

**WILTON NEVER HAS HAD PHYSICIAN OR LAWYER
TO LIVE WITHIN LIMITS, BUT IS THRIVING RAILROAD CENTER**

BY FRANK WILLIS BARNETT
Staff Correspondent

The Birmingham News
Thursday, December 6, 1923

**COPIED "AS PRINTED" FROM THE NEWSPAPER
BY BOBBY JOE & DIANE SEALES**

The writer before going down to Wilton thought he would get a line on it as it is a railroad center, but the more he looked into the history of the roads centering in it, the more he realized that it would take a volume instead of columns to tell about the building and the various changes through which the lines had past.

The front pages of our papers are filled with the troubles of the Alabama Highway Department and it's an off day when some community is failing to register a kick because the powers that be have passed it by in road development; but if you think good roads are productive of rows and scraps you ought to go back to the early days of railroad building in Alabama and then you would be able to get close to the real thing in the way of fights over routes and bond issues.

There is a fascinating theory about the transmigration of souls, and while corporations are supposed to be soulless, yet it's a fact that every railroad in Alabama has passed through many transformations before arriving at the present status; however, perhaps in these scientific days it might be better to speak of the evolution of our railroads, for the most of them wiggled their way up from small beginnings, and today the ones we ride on represent the "survival of the fittest." It is also true that if you make a journey over some of them at this good hour and survive "you are fit."

Instead of even trying to sketch what was known to this generation as the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railway now a part of the Southern Railway, the rider will limit his article to that section of it between Selma and Montevallo, for it will embrace Wilton, the point he is attempting to cover in this story.

WAR MEASURES.

When the Civil War began in 1861, the importance of the early completion of the Alabama and Tennessee River Railroad, the oldest of the Alabama roads which formed a part of the East Tennessee, Virginia and Georgia Railway Company, was projected by James E. Saunders and others, to whom a charter was granted by

the legislative act approved March 4th, 1848, which authorized the construction of a railroad to extend from some point on the Alabama River at, or near, the town of Selma to some convenient point on the Tennessee and Coosa Railroad; capital stock, \$1,000,000, with the privilege of increasing it to \$1,500,000.

Now, 12 years before this, an attempt had been made by the citizens of Selma to build a railroad on practically the same location subsequently used for the Alabama and Tennessee Railroad. A charter was granted at the session of the Alabama legislature, 1836-37, and books of subscription were opened in Selma in the early part of 1838. It at that time had a white population probably not exceeding 1,000 to 1,200, if so many; yet \$500,000 was subscribed on the first day, and not by men of straw but by those who had money and property, expecting to make good their subscriptions. This paragraph was inserted to show that the Selmians were early alive to the need of building a railroad to connect with the northern portion of the state.

When the War Between the States began it was immediately seen by the government that the Alabama and Tennessee River Railroad was needed to transport coal and iron to the Alabama River for distribution to the military and naval forces of the Confederacy, and therefore every effort was made to expedite the work of construction. On Dec. 9, 1861, another act was approved, appropriating \$5,861.99 of the 3 per cent fund to the Alabama and Tennessee River Railroad Company for which certificates of stock should be issued to the state, and which should "instanter be paid over to the treasurer of the state in part payment of the first interest that will be falling due from the said Alabama and Tennessee River Railroad Company, on the loan heretofore made to said company." The Confederate government realized that haste must be made.

WAR PLAYS HAVOC.

An act of Nov. 28, 1862, authorized the Alabama and Tennessee River Railroad Company and others to receive jointly donations of land, stone, timber, wood, etc., for the construction of a depot at Selma, which is set down here on account of its being the first cooperative effort of the kind in the state, and only goes to show that cooperation is no invention of those present times, but away back in time of need the people of Alabama when threatened by invasions say that is was best to get together.

It may be of interest to know that as far back as Dec. 8, 1863, three-score years ago, a branch from Ashby, just below Wilton, on the main line of the Alabama and Tennessee River Railroad Company, to the mineral region near the present site of Birmingham was authorized.

The story about the desperate attempt to retain the railroads intact in Alabama during the war need not now be told, it being only necessary to say that practically all of them sustained heavy losses by raids while the conflict raged

and at the close in depreciated or worthless securities. The tale of how during reconstruction days they were the football of corrupt politics, is well known.

WILTON.

Wilton is one town which was born on a railroad and lives by it, for everyone here is in some way connected with or dependent on railroad conditions, and so this is a poor place to run down the business.

Wilton is set down not far from Montevallo, an educational center, and it is well that the two towns in a certain sense are twins, as one lives by culture and the other by crafts, and so brain and brawn are making the southwest part of Shelby a good place in which to do business and bring up a family.

Few people know that Wilton, with some 600 citizens, is served daily by 14 passenger trains and that there is a constant stream of freight coming or going during the 24 hours. Main line, side tracks, spurs, sidings have belted it with steel.

The writer first got interested in Wilton because Will Alday, an old Eufaulian, for years sat in the depot here, for many years doing a trick as one of the telegraphers. There is something about Eufaula which seems to knit together those reared in it in indissoluble bonds of friendship. It makes no difference where you find them, they are a clannish bunch. He was sorry to find that only recently Will had retired after more than two-score years as a railroad telegrapher.

There are at least a score of engineers and as many firemen who call Wilton home, as it is a terminal from which many crews are sent up and down the lines which center in it. Then the repair shops give employment to quite a goodly number, the coal chute requires a gang, the pumping station calls for stationary engineers, while the station demands a force of clerks.

There is a long work train here on a side track which is filled with bridge workers who are repairing the coal chute. Evidently the Southern Railway does not expect to be caught without coal on this division, as it is piling up 10,000 tons at this point as a reserve supply.

NAME HAS CHANGED.

Like many other Alabama towns, this one has had several names, for both the railroad and the government have christened, the former twice and latter once. It was first known as Birmingham Junction, and therefore there is a sentimental reason why the Magic City should wish it well. But somehow Uncle Sam did not care for the title bestowed on it by the railway people so he took the liberty of calling it for some years by the more euphonious cognomen of Catusa; but less than 20 years back it became Wilton and Wilton it is for the time being unless the

government takes a further hand in it. The writer was unable to ascertain who bestowed its present tile on it, further than it was done by the officers of the railroad company.

It was incorporated about 10 years ago. Oscar Stripling is the mayor and the board of aldermen are: James Nabors, Oliver Rice, Len Cochran, J.W. Little and B.B. Curry. The town gets its light and power from the Alabama Power Company, and has a 24-hour service.

When the writer sought to obtain from some of the old residents of Wilton the name of the first doctor, he was surprised to find that in all its history no physician had ever resided in it. Now this ought to give it a clean bill of health, but the "joker" in it is that it has always been served by medicos from Montevallo. It also has been free from lawyers, never an attorney having called it home, which means that when the Wiltonites fall out with one another, if such should be the case, they have to get an advocate at Montevallo. But they have not permitted themselves to be without churches and a school, although they waited some time before establishing the former and are now in need of a better school building which, however, is the next thing on the program, as a movement is already on foot to build a more suitable school plant. Floyd Nabors, the principal has for his assistance, Mesdames Sarah Cottingham and Phelan Logan. The present building has three rooms to care for around 100 pupils.

(The Centerville Press, dated Thursday, April 21, 1938, "There will be a Square Dance at Wilton School, Wilton, Alabama, Thursday night, April 21, beginning at 8 o'clock. Admission 50 cents. Proceeds for benefit of the school. All good square dancers are invited.")

FIRST TEACHERS.

The first teachers were Misses Joe Heine and Maggie Potts; the first preachers, Revs. Z. A. Dowling, Methodist, and Paul A. Caldwell, Baptist, these two having organized the churches of these dominations. The Methodist built first and the Baptist a while after. But away back throughout this section, Rev. Ebenezer Hearne, a Methodist, had come from the Tennessee Conference, and on arriving had found Revs. Joseph D. Lee, Drury Powell, Joseph Walker and Joshua West, mighty men of God, who did valiant pioneer work for the Master in what was then almost a wilderness. Among the fathers among the Baptist in this section were men like William H. Carroll, Washington Wilks, A.C. McGraw, Jesse A. Collins, Rufus Figh, all before the Civil War, and just after it such heroes as E.B. Teague, J. R. Cowen, T. C. Boykin and others.

Now, on and around the site where Wilton stands lived some real pioneers, for remember that what was written of them in the Montevallo story will apply to the class of citizens who touched the life near Wilton. Such names as Samuel Mardis, Daniel Watrous, Henry Harless, etc., come to mind; John W. Mardis, the first surgeon, physicians like Doak, Wilson and Fowler. Then think of the men at the

bar, Watrous, Storrs, Cobb, Lewis, etc. Cobb becoming governor and Lewis the president of the University of Alabama.

This is the heart of the Alabama, geographically speaking, for Montevallo and Wilton are close to where Freeman's line was run across the state by the government to divide North and South Alabama; while the Huntsville meridian which was to separate East and West Alabama crossed, that the beaux and belles of Elyton came to do their shopping. The first merchant here was J.W. Arnold, "with an apron full of goods," to use the expression of the man who gave the information. Then W. A. Money engaged in the mercantile business as did Mrs. Maud Kinser and George Addison. It seems, however, that G.H. Crosby is the only one of the pioneer merchants who has remained in business. Wilton has now eight brick stores and one of them, that of B. B. Curry and Company, is a two-story double store building in which a large and well assorted stock is carried. There are other merchants caring full lines of merchandise. Wilton boasts as up-to-date drug store. E.S. Ambrose built the first brick store in the town.

INSERT

As told by Mrs. Jack (Lillian Ambrose) Griffin to my brother Charles Seales, who purchased the building after the Griffin 5 & 10 Store closed on Main Street in Alabaster. She said this "first brick store that was built in Wilton" by her parents, Edgar Samuel and Dora Lee (Camp) Ambrose was torn down in 1945, and the material was used by Jack and Lillian Griffin and used to construct the Griffin 5 & 10 Store in Alabaster.

FIRST DWELLING.

The first dwelling in the town was erected by R.O. Camp, the lone operator, who had a telegraph booth at this junction point. Then Mrs. Hamill Little built a house and she was followed by Henley Wooley, the first car inspector here. Soon two more residences were up, as M. C. Caldwell and John Strickland built. Mrs. John Strickland had the first boarding house. The Galloway was the first hotel, and when it was destroyed by fire it was rebuilt by J.A. Cates, and is now known as the Hotel Wilton, and is run by George Freeman, a Baptist preacher friend of the writer. Mrs. J. R. Gardner has a boarding house and hotel. This is a great eating place on account of the number of trains in the character of the population.

(The Montgomery Advertiser, dated Friday, November 20, 1903, "Destructive Fire at Wilton Junction Near Montevallo. Montevallo, Nov. 19.- SPECIAL. - A destructive fire occurred at Wilton Junction, a mile and a half from Montevallo, Tuesday night, in which the Wilton Hotel and the store of R.O. Camp were totally destroyed. A gale of wind was blowing at the time, and as there are no facilities there for fighting fire, the people could only stand and watch the buildings burn. So rapidly did the flames gather headway in the hotel building that it was impossible to save any of the furnishings. Most of the merchandise in the Camp store was gotten out of the building. The hotel belonged to Mrs. W.J. Galloway of

Talladega Springs, and was under lease to the Wilton Hotel Company. The building cost three years ago \$2,000 to erect, and Mrs. Galloway carried upon it \$1,000 insurance. The furnishings were valued at \$1,500, and were insured for \$1,150. A large number of Southern Railway trainmen made the hotel their home as it was the only one in the place, many of them were compelled to sleep in the cabosses of their trains, while a number of them came to Montevallo. It is not known whether Mrs. Galloway will rebuild or not.”)

The writer was fortunate in getting hold of the record book of the Methodist and learn from it that the church was organized in July 1910, by Rev. Z.A Dowling, known and beloved in Birmingham, a man of God who has passed to his reward. The writer knew and honored him, the saintly minister having married Miss Glenn, the sister of Rev. E. M. Glenn, of Birmingham, and the writer’s cousin. Among the charter members were Mrs. S.E. Settle, Mrs. George and Miss Lenna Moreland, Mrs. A.H. Beaty, Mrs. Robert Gunlock, Mr. and Mrs. J. R. Gardner (Mrs. Gardner kindly gave out this data), Mr. and Mrs. W.D. McClendon, John Sanders, C.E. Ambrose, Mrs. Lee Gardner and Mrs. H.G. Sanderson, all of whom still live here. The pastors have been Z. A. Dowling, Andrew J. Notestine, J. M. Johnson, R. L. Stallings and L. P. Thornburg, the present one in charge.

The Baptist have recently built a modern brick church, which is well furnished at a cost of more than \$11,000 which is really a great thing for them to have done. Paul A. Caldwell organized the church about a dozen years ago. The pastors have been Paul A. Caldwell, Eldred M. Stewart, W.D. Ogletree and R. L. Durant, now doing a great work. Some of the charter members: Mr. and Mrs. J.P. Logan, Mr. and Mrs. W.H. Wooley, J. W. McDonald, Mrs. J. W. Little, M. C. Caldwell. R.O. Camp and W. S. Thompson.

The writer got a great deal of this story out of E. S. Ambrose, a railroad engineer who came here 28 years ago. We sat out on the front porch and talked and his home sits on the site where sat the old William P. Brown residence which was moved back up on the hill to make place for a more modern home. The place might well have been called “The Cedars.” As some fine specimens are still standing in the yard. Shoal Creek is in a stone’s throw of the veranda. On it stood, until a freshet washed it away, the old Thompson Mill which has been replaced by a new one which is run by R.D. Gunlock. He is also indebted to the station master, D. S. Hubbard for letting him write this story by his fire and to a young man who gave him a two-mile lift.