

REPORT ON OLD BELLEFONTE:  
AN HISTORICAL SITE IN NORTHERN ALABAMA

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Dr. C. Roger Nance, Senior Investigator, and Beverly E. Bastian,  
Junior Investigator, in accordance with the contract between the  
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OLD BELLEFONTE: REPORT ON ITS HISTORY,  
ITS CONTEMPORARY ROLE, AND ITS PRESENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL VALUE

Bellefonte in the Beginning and in the 1820's:

The origin of Bellefonte and how it happened to become the county seat of Jackson County, Alabama, were directly related to the circumstances surrounding public and private land in the county in its earliest days. A review of these circumstances will provide a picture of how Bellefonte came to be.

The Treaty of February 27, 1819 with the Cherokee ceded the land that is now the part of Jackson County north of the Tennessee River. The Treaty also provided for the reservation of 640 acres of land in the ceded area, to be had in fee simple, for each of certain specifically named persons. Among them was James Riley, who in this manner came into possession of the land on which Bellefonte would eventually be established. Also under the terms of the Treaty, the ceded area would be protected from intrusion by settlers until January 1, 1820 (Indian Affairs, 1904: 177-80).

On December 13, 1819, an act of the Alabama legislature created Jackson County out of the Cherokee cession, at the same time fixing a temporary county seat at Sauta Cave (Brannon, 1941). About 1820, people began to settle on the public lands in various places

around the country. Among the earliest to settle in the vicinity of what would be Bellefonte were a Dr. George Washington Higgins and a Mr. Stephen Carter (Blue, 1861: 14).

On October 3, 1820, James Riley bound himself in penal bond for the sum of \$13,000.00 to George W. Higgins and Stephen Carter. This bond would be void when the following conditions were met: First, Higgins and Carter paid him \$6,500.00 in specified installments to be completed by the year 1824; and second, he had signed over his 640 acre reservation to them (Carter, S., 1827: 2). On the strength of this bond, presumably, Higgins and Carter founded, surveyed, and laid out the town of Bellefonte, naming it for the nearby spring that would supply the town's water for many years (personal communication, Christine Sumner). The site of the town was chosen for its proximity to the Tennessee River, but care was taken that it was enough removed and elevated to reduce the danger of flood and disease (interview with Daisy Caldwell, 1974).

On December 13, 1821, in the same act that created Decatur County out of part of Jackson County, the Alabama legislature appointed seven Jackson County men to choose a temporary seat of justice for the county (Brannon, 1941). Very shortly thereafter, on December 15, 1821, the legislature incorporated the town of Bellefonte inclusive of 60 acres (Acts of Alabama, 1821), and by 1822, Bellefonte had been chosen as the second temporary seat of justice of Jackson County (Kennemer, 1935: 18).

Sometime during the first quarter of 1823, the official survey of the public land in Jackson County was undertaken and plats submitted to the General Land Office, signifying that the lands were ready for sale

at public auction (Bell, plat of TIV RVI E., 1823). On January 1, 1823, the Alabama legislature approved a memorial to be sent to Congress requesting an indefinite postponement of sales of public lands in Jackson and Decatur counties. In the same memorial, the legislature also asked for pre-emption rights for the settlers on public lands in Alabama (American State Papers, 1859, IV: 2), because until the public lands were sold, the persons settled on them were, in effect, "squatters" and subject to removal and loss of their crops and improvements at any time. Congress granted the Alabama legislature's request to postpone the land sales in Jackson and Decatur counties. It denied pre-emption rights.

Later, sometime between January and May of 1823 and in response to another Alabama memorial, Congress passed an act to allow certain Alabama counties in which the public lands were not yet sold to pre-empt quarter sections of land to establish county seats (American State Papers, IV, 1859: 2-3). Perhaps judging that the time was auspicious, in mid-1823, the Alabama legislature again delivered a memorial to Congress requesting pre-emption rights for settlers on public lands, referring specifically to the plight of "certain inhabitants of Jackson and Decatur (American State Papers, III, 1834: 641)". Again the request was denied, and, in fact, later the Committee on Public Lands of the House of Representatives would make an example of the settlers on public lands in Alabama (among others) in making its April 23, 1824 report to the House, disfavoring the renewal or extension of pre-emption rights (American State Papers, III, 1834: 719-21).

Making do with the gains achieved in 1823, the Alabama legislature addressed itself to getting a permanent county seat established in Jackson County. An act of December 24, 1824 appointed five commissioners for Jackson County and set forth guidelines for the selection of the quarter section of land, the establishment of the county town, and the erection of county buildings. A town square was to be provided and reserved from sale. Apparently something delayed the implementation of the legislature's instructions, because on December 16, 1826, the legislature again attended to the matter of Jackson County's seat of justice by directing that the commissioners appointed under the Act of December 24, 1824 meet on the fourth Monday of February, 1827, and formally proceed with their appointive responsibilities (Brannon, 1941). Finally, on December 17, 1827, the southwest quarter of section 17, T4S R5E was purchased for the seat of justice, and patent to it was obtained August 25, 1828 (Kennemer, 1935: 18). But some other, unknown, factor impinged on the final decision of the commissioners, and "just after 1828", the permanent courthouse and jail were built at Bellefonte (Kennemer, 1935: 66).

Meanwhile, by early 1824, George W. Higgins and Stephen Carter had finished paying the specified sum to James Riley and had a sound legal claim on his 640 acres. But they did not have title because Riley died before he could sign the land over to them.

Consequently, on July 20, 1827, Higgins and Carter petitioned Jane Riley, as administratrix of the estate of James Riley, for conveyance of the title of the land to them. ✓ The judge of the Orphan's Court of Jackson County set the date for the hearing on the third Monday in October, 1827 (Carter, W., 1827). While no records from this hearing exist, it can be assumed that Higgins' and Carter's petition was granted because the earliest deed books for Jackson County (1830-31) show that these men legally sold lots in Bellefonte and tracts in other parts of Riley's reservation.<sup>1</sup> They gave land for the use of the town as a county seat (Kennemer, 1935: 132), meaning, probably, that they gave enough land for the requisite town square and jail, and perhaps some additional lots whose sale would help to finance the public buildings.

From the foregoing, it is easy to reconstruct the situation that brought Bellefonte to the fore. The land on which Higgins and Carter had a claim drew more people and investment of money and effort than most other land in Jackson County because the probability of clear title was much better: First, because it was to be had at an early date, whereas the sale of the public land had been postponed; and second, because even when the public land was sold at auction, settlers were at a terrible disadvantage bidding against speculators, frequently losing what they had invested in the way of improvements

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<sup>1</sup> Copies of deeds relevant to Bellefonte were kindly supplied by Mrs. Christine Paradise Sumner who painstakingly transcribed them from the official deed books in the Jackson County courthouse.

on public lands. So those who could afford to, bought land and/or town lots from Higgins and Carter, and Bellefonte had a head start on most of the other communities in the county. Those who had settled on the public lands in Jackson County and elsewhere kept their legislature busy sending memorials to Congress asking for pre-emption rights, alternating with requests for postponements of the public land sales (American State Papers, VI, 1860: 10-12, 51-52, 142). Finally Congress capitulated and granted the pre-emption rights on May 29, 1830. Thereafter the actual settlers of Jackson and other Alabama counties could own their 160 acres at the minimum price. A decade of waiting and uncertainty was over.

But meanwhile, Bellefonte was already owned, settled, and growing, having secured the county seat and having a population of 200 at the time of its incorporation (Sulzby, 1944: 9). It must have been able to take quite an early lead in the commercial, political, and social affairs of the area. There was at least one store by 1828 (Smith and Deland, 1888: 98), a post office after February 14, 1822 (Post Office Records, National Archives, courtesy of Christine Sumner), some kind of temporary courthouse after 1821 (Kennemer, 1935: 18 and Brannon, 1941), a permanent courthouse after 1828 (Kennemer, 1935: 66), and a Presbyterian church by mid-1829 (Marshall, n.d.: 2417). One of the proprietors of the town, George W. Higgins, was also a physician (Blue, 1961: 14, and personal communication, Christine Sumner), so medical services were available

in the town from the earliest time. In 1820, a stage line was extended from Knoxville to Huntsville on a road running parallel to the Tennessee River on its north bank (Abernethy, 1965: 100), and while there is no definite evidence that the stage ran through Bellefonte at this early time, it is probable that before the decade was over, Bellefonte was a regular stopping place on the route to Huntsville. Consequently, there was probably an inn or a tavern, possibly even run by Daniel M. Martin, an early settler of the Bellefonte area (Blue, 1961: 15) and the builder and owner of the still-standing "Stage Coach Inn." The grave of a deceased child of Daniel Martin is marked with a headstone bearing the earliest date now to be found in the Bellefonte cemetery: 1826 (Summer, 1971). Bellefonte's advantages as a river port must have drawn the money crop of the neighboring farms (cotton) into the town for storage and eventual keelboat transport down the river to market. The demand for the importation of non-locally produced foodstuffs like sugar, coffee, and whiskey and such manufactured items as frontier farmers need probably created an excellent opportunity for commerce.

With the population figure mentioned above, there must have been a number of dwellings in Bellefonte. While the existing deeds for lots in Bellefonte are dated just after the early period being discussed here, it is possible to draw some tentative conclusions about the extent of settlement in Bellefonte by considering how many lots are not accounted for in the surviving deed books. These

unaccounted for lots were probably registered in earlier deed books, no longer extant. The existing deeds for lots in Bellefonte represent a broken series of numbers, the lowest being for lot #2, and the highest being for lot #156. The earliest date is for December 4, 1829, and the latest, August 8, 1848. These deeds deal with exactly forty of these Bellefonte lots. Assuming that the lots in the town were numbered consecutively and that there were only 156 of them, that still leaves at least 116 lots that probably were sold in the 1820's, during the town's beginning years. A number of adjoining lots may have been purchased as tracts for the purpose of later speculation, but, even so, it is probable that many of the lots in Bellefonte's 60 acre corporate limits were individually owned, if not settled on before 1830.

Bellefonte in the 1830's and 1840's:

In 1833 Bellefonte had a population of 320 persons (Darby and Dwight, 1833: 49). By 1844 the population had grown to 400 (Haskel and Smith, 1944: 57). The physical face of Bellefonte was reflecting this trend also. Deriving a tally from the property descriptions included in many of the old deeds to Bellefonte lots, it is possible to get an idea of the number and kind of structures that were in the town and the scope of the activities that were taking place there in this period. Six stores are mentioned in the deeds, probably dealing in general merchandise, but this is not

specified. Two of the stores are described as brick, one as being a frame building, and the other three are not described, merely mentioned. Two blacksmith shops are mentioned, one a frame building formerly used as a "workshop," the other not described. A sadler's shop is mentioned, the jail is mentioned, a wagon shop is mentioned, and there is reference to a tanyard on the outskirts of the town. A brick store and office combination and the "Bellefonte Academy" are also included in the deeds. Many of these businesses are on lots fronting on the town square. Five residences are mentioned: three frame dwellings, one brick dwelling, and one whose construction material is not specified. The latter is described, however, as having outbuildings - a smokehouse and a kitchen.

Kennemer says that in 1839 a Methodist church, a frame building, was erected (Kennemer, 1935: 132). He also says Bellefonte had two brick stores, five or six frame stores, and two brick dwellings besides the courthouse and jail. He does not say when this was the case nor does he say from where his information comes, but it is not unlikely that he derived his count from the old deeds, also. This same author credits Bellefonte with having had six merchants, a blacksmith, an apothecary, and a cabinet maker (ibid.). The names of these persons do not coincide with those of the men mentioned in connection with the stores and shops described in the deeds. Smith and Deland (1888) add another two merchants to the list of businesses present in the 1830's and 1840's (p.94, p.98).

Evidently there was quite a business community there at that time. A contemporary gazetteer gives us a concise description of Bellefonte in this period: two churches, one Presbyterian and one Methodist, two academies, twelve stores, fifty dwellings, and 400 inhabitants (Haskel and Smith, 1844: 57).

While none of the sources summarized above mentioned inns or taverns, Bellefonte had at least three in this period. A man who was to figure largely in Bellefonte's later history, Robert T. Scott (the founder of Scottsboro, Alabama), came to Bellefonte from Huntsville in the early 1830's. He either purchased or built an inn called "Belle Tavern" and operated it for a time. Another innkeeper who would later contribute greatly to Bellefonte in a different capacity, was Major Robert A. Eaton, who also came to the town in the early 1830's. His inn was called the "Mansion Hotel."<sup>2</sup> Possibly Daniel M. Martin had an inn in the 1830's, too, but the hostelry for which he is known, the so-called "Stage Coach Inn" whose massive, rough-hewn limestone masonry chimney bears his name, was not built until 1845 as the inscription on the chimney itself attests. There was a "Jackson Inn" in Bellefonte, too (personal communication from Christine Sumner), which may well have been Martin's inn, the name of which is not really known. There is certain evidence in the early deeds to Bellefonte lots that Martin

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<sup>2</sup>These particulars about Scott and Eaton supplied by Christine Paradise Sumner from her unpublished book.

owned property on "Jackson Street," one of the named streets of the town, and that property may have been the site of his inn. Also, Martin was a good Jacksonian Democrat, several times an elector for his party, and he may have chosen to honor the popular hero by naming his inn for him.

In the '30's Bellefonte got its first newspapers. "The North Alabama Star" was one early paper, established and published by Major Robert A. Eaton (mentioned just above) as his maiden publishing effort in Alabama (Elliott, 1958: 91). The "Star" lasted only a year and Eaton went on to Tuscaloosa to publish another paper. In 1841 he returned to Bellefonte to found and publish the "Jackson County Democrat" which continued to be published at least up until 1855 (Ellison, 1954: 10). Ellison's guide to early Alabama newspapers also lists Eaton as a co-publisher of the "Bellefonte Courier," a newspaper known to have been in existence as early as April 16, 1834. This paper merged with the "Jackson County Republican" sometime in 1837. By April 11, 1839, Robert T. Scott was the editor of this publication. Ellison also indicates that Eaton was a co-publisher of the "Jacksonian," originally called the "Herald" (Blue, 1961: 11) and published in Bellefonte beginning September 29, 1837. Blue says this paper was the forerunner of the "Jackson County Democrat" (ibid.) which is mentioned just above. A new paper, published by Green and Maddin and called the "North Alabama Register", successfully competed with the "Jackson County Democrat" in the mid-1850's. Eaton, meanwhile,

in conjunction with R. C. Gill, a printer, had begun publication of the "Bellefonte Democrat" in the early '50's (Gist, 1968: 34). This paper was taken over by publishers Frazier and Jones in the mid-'50's and renamed the "Bellefonte Era." This was the last of Bellefonte's newspapers, ceasing publication in the early years of the Civil War.

While life in a frontier community like Bellefonte infrequently offered much in the way of the amenities, there were outlets for sociality, and at least one of the finer things in life was available to Bellefonte's citizens. In 1847, Lodge #82 of the Masonic Order was established at Bellefonte and was thereafter an important link in the lives of the men of the town. William A. Liddon, the county surveyor of Jackson County, "... was an accomplished musician and for a long time used this talent for the pleasure of the community about Bellefonte, where he was leader and instructor of local musicians composing the brass band (Owen, T. M., 1921, IV: 1045)".

In the early 1840's, Jackson County was stricken with a series of epidemic diseases which persisted over several seasons. Blue says, "In 1840, 1841, and 1842, severe epidemic diseases prevailed, at first bilious fevers in various forms, followed by Scarlet fever, unusually severe and fatal (Blue, 1861: 6)". Daniel Martin, writing to his daughter in Texas after the Civil War, reflects that "This has been a year sorter like 1840 for sickness ... (Martin, D. M., January 27, 1872)", so apparently the epidemics took their toll in

Bellefonte, too.

The Treaty of New Echota, December 2, 1835, between the United States and the Cherokee Indians ceded all the land of the Cherokees east of the Mississippi River to the United States and allowed the Cherokees then living east of the Mississippi two years to move west to Indian territory. Thus the part of what is now Jackson County south of the Tennessee River was acquired, and thus militia men from Jackson County participated in the Cherokee removal. In June of 1838, ten companies of infantry were raised and ordered to appear at headquarters in Bellefonte to be mustered into service (Norwood, et al., 1838). Five companies marched directly to Turkey Town across the river; the other five were sent elsewhere. Under the orders of General Winfield Scott, the local militia rounded up the Cherokees who lived in Jackson County and sent them to Gunter's Landing to be shipped west on boats (Thornhill, July 20, 1967).

Interestingly, William Tecumseh Sherman had occasion to spend some time in Bellefonte in 1844, while he was still just a lieutenant. Christine Paradise Sumner (1974) recounts this event: "Young William Tecumseh Sherman was just out of West Point, in 1844, when he was ordered to go by horseback from Charleston to Marietta, Georgia, to assist in hearing claims of Georgia volunteers in the Seminole War for lost horses and equipment. After completing his work at Marietta, he proceeded to Bellefonte where he spent two

months continuing his duties. When he returned to Fort Moultrie, Charleston Harbor, on horseback, he followed closely parts of the route he would take 20 years later in his historic 'March to the Sea.' In later years he said, 'I had ridden the distance on horseback and had noted well the topography of the country.'"

The period now being discussed was one of growth and diversification for the state, the county of Jackson, and, of course, for Bellefonte. Thornhill (October 5, 1967) says that the number of slaves in Jackson County tripled between 1820 and 1840, and slaves were a good barometer of wealth in that period. Furthermore, Thornhill says in a later article (October 19, 1967) that Bellefonte " ... was the leading trade center in the county. There were cotton warehouses and mule and horse sale barns. No place in the county was so prosperous. All of the above was due to river trade and transportation ...".

Bellefonte in the 1850's: The Golden Age and the Eve of the Civil War:

The 1850 census provides us with the most useful and probably the most reliable demographic data on Bellefonte for this time or any other. This census gives the head of household by name and lists household members by name and age. Family head's occupation is often given, along with the dollar value of his or her real estate. While Bellefonte per se is nowhere listed in the census, a portion of the enumeration for District 20 is distinct from most of the rest of the county. Taking in 52 households, this section

is made up almost entirely of heads of households whose stated occupations are professional, business or service-type ones. There is no extant key explaining to which areas the three arbitrary enumeration districts in the county relate, but the content referred to above at least encourages argument that that portion of District 20 deals with Bellefonte. The names of the heads of households would bear out this assumption to a great degree. So, assuming that Bellefonte's populace is therein enumerated, the following statistics apply: 123 males and 132 females for a total population of 255. Occupations as given by 66 males are as follows: Professional - one probate judge, four physicians, two lawyers, one druggist, one editor, one teacher; Business/Commercial - six merchants, two hotel or tavern keepers, five store or bank clerks, three grocery keepers; Craftsmen - six blacksmiths, six shoemakers, four mechanics, two tailors, one printer, one watchmaker, one sadler, one stonemason; Agricultural - six farmers, one overseer, four laborers; Miscellaneous - two sheriffs, one jailor, two criminals, three students. Real estate value is stated by nineteen heads of households and divides these households into two distinct groups: thirteen have real estate worth \$2,000 or less, and six have real estate worth \$4,000 or more. The largest value reported was \$7,200 and the smallest value was \$100. One family reported as real estate five mulatto slaves, dollar value not given.

The distribution of persons in households permits some interesting observations on life in Bellefonte. Several merchants, farmers, and craftsmen have young, unrelated, unmarried men living

with them, possibly to learn the business or trade. Other families have unrelated teenage girls living with them, possibly as maids. Daniel Martin was boarding three young men at his inn - a lawyer, a tailor, and a schoolteacher. The other innkeeper had two young families boarding with him, one complete with mother-in-law, the other without a husband or father. The jailor, his family, and the two criminals (both labelled murderers, incidentally) have their residence clearly indicated in the census as "JAILHOUSE" by the meticulous census taker.

A description of antebellum Bellefonte at its peak was provided by Nelson Kyle, Jackson County's Register in Chancery from 1887-1917, in a letter to Dr. Thomas McAdory Owens, Director of the Alabama State Department of Archives and History. Kyle was born in Bellefonte in 1862, and writes:

"Bellefonte was quite a handsome little village before the war, with the four sides of the square filled in with two story brick business houses, with a neat courthouse in the center, this place was watered by a large flowing spring at the foot of [word left out, probably 'hill'] on the northeast border of the town. Old Bellefonte was quite a political center in its day ... There was at one time a fine bar, some of the best known lawyers in the country practiced there. My grandfather Nelson Robinson and his brother Major Jim, Hon. R. C. Brickell, L. P. Walker, W. H. Robinson, W. H. Norwood, and Col. John Norwood being among the prominent ones (Kyle, 1916)".

A Union soldier, writing to his parents from what would be his winter quarters in Bellefonte, also described the courthouse and square: "This building is an excellent one for this country, it is built of brick, and two stories high. It is surrounded by a fine cluster of locust trees and altogether is a very pleasant place for

persons who have within the last two years spent as little time within a house as I have. (Widney, 1863)".

Matthew Powers Blue, Montgomery's prominent historian, has preserved several more facts about Bellefonte in his manuscript draft of a history of Jackson County. Writing around the year 1861, Blue states that Bellefonte's population numbered about 500 (p.11). Elsewhere, Blue relates that Bellefonte had two schools: "... an excellent Classical School ..., now a permanent and highly respectable institution, and a fine female school (p.9)".

Blue also discusses some business activities that were taking place at Bellefonte and elsewhere in Jackson County. Even in 1861, Bellefonte was still on the upswing of the cycle of prosperity that began in the '40's. Businessmen were looking for ways to maximize their newly acquired capital. Blue relates that at Bellefonte there were two merchants, Napier Shelton and a Mr. Harris, who had set up a shoe factory (p.8). This, incidentally, sheds some light on why Bellefonte's 1850 census lists six shoemakers all in a row - they were interviewed by the census taker while at work in Shelton's and Harris' factory. Blue also mentions that Robert T. Scott 'has done much to promote a spirit of enterprise in manufacturing', and he lists five other Bellefonte men who were all "active enterprising citizens (p.8)".

In 1849, when the prospect of a railroad through Jackson County arose, the county's "enterprising" citizens saw a two-fold opportunity:

a much more reliable way of marketing their money crops, now livestock as much as cotton (Moore, 1934: 273), and an almost certain large return on capital invested. Kennemer says Jackson County citizens subscribed heavily to the stock of the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, scheduled to cross their county and join up with the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad near Crow Creek (Kennemer, 1935: 39). According to Henderson, when the proposed line for the Memphis and Charleston Railroad was being surveyed, " ... the citizens of Old Bellefonte would not hear of the railroad running through their aristocratic old town, and the consequence was the railroad company built a depot three miles from the capital of Jackson ... (Henderson, 1913)". Kennemer adds that the idea of the railroad was squelched by the water transportation interests for fear of competition (1935: 66).

Robert T. Scott, innkeeper and editor, also had eight terms in the state legislature, the last two in the period when Alabama was in a turmoil over state aid for internal improvements (1847 and 1853), and being a man of wide experience from having served two gubernatorial appointments in Washington, D. C. pursuing Alabama claims before the Congress, Scott had no such qualms or fears about railroads. He not only recognized the transportation advantages offered by the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, but also saw the opportunity to fulfill a long held dream of his own. Very early in his life, Scott had attempted to establish a town near Huntsville in Madison County. A

plan for that town had been drawn up and the land acquired, but somehow the project fell through (Gist, 1968: 42). Realizing, doubtless, that a railroad depot would virtually guarantee the livelihood and growth of a town, Scott exerted considerable influence on the management of the Memphis and Charleston to build a depot on the property he had acquired just west of Backbone Ridge, where he had been living since early in the '50's (Gist, 1968: 48). Scott even donated land for the depot ("Early History of Scottsboro", 1934) and was probably one of the citizens of Jackson County who "... gave the right of way for almost nothing ... (Kennemer, 1935: 39)". Track laying in Jackson County took place between April, 1855 and March, 1856 (Kennemer, 1935: 39). In 1855, "Scott's Mill" had a post office (Scruggs, Alabama Postal History, n.d.), so Scott's expectations were being met as people were drawn to the commercial prospects the railroad offered, and, by the time the railroad was completed, on March 8, 1856, Scott had his town, variously labelled Scott's Mill, Scott's Station, Scottsville, and, ultimately, Scottsboro.

Not satisfied with having just any town founded by him and named after him, Scott actively began to seek the county seat for Scottsboro (Gist, 1968: 48). The state legislature was made aware of the fact that the courthouse in Bellefonte was in need of repairs and that possibly a new and larger courthouse was needed to keep up with the growth of the county, and somehow this concern became

associated with the idea that the county seat should be moved from Bellefonte (Kennemer, 1935: 66). So the legislature passed an act on December 17, 1859, giving Jackson County voters an opportunity to decide whether or not they wanted the county seat moved, and if so, giving them an additional opportunity to pick the new site. The election held the first Monday of May, 1860, resulted in a decision to move the county seat, and the election held the first Monday of August, 1860, elevated Stevenson to the honor of hosting the new seat of justice (Kennemer, 1935: 66-7). The intervention of the Civil War maintained the status quo. Before the war was over Robert T. Scott died, but his will, made ten days after the legislature provided for the election on the relocation of the county seat, directed that his wife and executrix " ... donate lots [in Scottsboro] for public purposes as it should be deemed necessary to GROW UP [sic] said town (Gist, 1968: 48)". Scott also provided that proceeds from the sale of each alternate lot around the public square be donated to the town (Gist, 1968: 49).

The destruction of the courthouse at Bellefonte during the war (Brewer, 1872: 284) doubtless reignited the relocation controversy, even though county court continued to meet in Bellefonte until November 9, 1868, when the court ordered the county records removed. On August 3, 1868, Charles O. Whitman, a resident of Scottsboro and a State Senator, got a legislative act passed which allowed the county commissioners to select a location for the county seat. Their

choice, however, was limited to "... the most suitable place ... on the Memphis and Charleston Railroad within eight miles of the center of the county (Gist, 1968: 36)". This eliminated Scottsboro's only serious competition for the honor of having the county seat. So on September 5, 1868, the commissioners voted and the probate judge declared Scottsboro duly elected (Gist, 1868: 36). The heirs of Robert T. Scott had already signed an agreement on September 1, 1868, to transfer to the county the public square and a site on the square for a jail, provided Scottsboro be selected for the site of the county seat (Gist, 1968: 49). Thus plans could be made right away to build the new courthouse and jail.

From the foregoing it can be seen that the downfall of Bellefonte was not the result of a lack of foresight alone, although this is the most commonly set forth explanation. While it is true that Bellefonte's rejection of the railroad condemned the town to isolation at a critical time and would have resulted in eventual obscurity at the least, the effects of that negative decision would have been felt neither so early nor so extremely had not the ambitions of Robert T. Scott exacerbated the situation. With the effects of the war immediately added on, Bellefonte was doomed.

Bellefonte in the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Final Years:

While not having favored secession, Jackson County contributed her share to the war effort. Bellefonte raised a company of

volunteers and, under Captain H. C. Bradford, they were sent to Fort Morgan near Mobile for assignment (Kennemer, 1935: 66). John B. Gordan, resident in Jackson County at the beginning of the war, raised his company of mountaineers from Dade County, Georgia, Marion County, Tennessee, and Jackson County, Alabama and assembled them in Bellefonte (Owen, M. B., 1934). He took them up on nearby Sand Mountain to drill. Later this company would become Company I of the Sixth Alabama Infantry and would gain fame as the indomitable "Raccoon Roughs", distinguished by their 'coon skin caps which they wore even with their regulation C. S. A. uniforms. It was these mountaineers who first treated Gordan to the famed "wild rebel yell" (Gordan, 1903: 9), but whether they originated it or not cannot be said. John B. Gordan, in his later performance on the battlefield, would so distinguish himself, that he would be promoted to general before the war was over.

Judging from the volunteer rolls from Jackson County, overall Bellefonte had approximately twenty volunteers in the Confederate Army (Corvart, 1973 and 1974). One of them is buried in the Bellefonte cemetery. He is a son of Daniel Martin, the innkeeper. His tombstone reads, "James K. Polk Martin - Born November 5, 1844, Died January 4, 1863 in a Negro's cabin at Parker's Cross-Roads of a wound received in the battle at the place, December 31, 1862. He was most brutally treated by the Yankees and neglected by his own side."

Bellefonte's only direct contact with the Union Army was in the

winter of 1863-64. During that period the 15th Army Corps, a part of Sherman's army under the command of General John A. Logan, were encamped all along the Tennessee River from Woodville to Bridgeport (Kennemer, 1940). It was the 34th Illinois Volunteer Regiment which occupied Bellefonte, and a letter from one of the soldiers of this regiment describes how the soldiers burned the records in front of the courthouse to keep warm (Widney, 1863). Sherman had ordered that his men subsist by foraging since it saved supplies and disadvantaged the rebels, even as it afflicted the local non-combatants. En route to Chattanooga on December 17, 1863, Sherman ordered that "...all the forage and provisions in the country around Bridgeport and Bell Fonte [sic] be collected and stored and no compensation be allowed rebel owners (Miller, 1901: 188)". While there is no documentary evidence regarding the exact circumstances of the event, by the end of the war, the courthouse at Bellefonte had been burned and several dwellings as well (Kennemer, 1935: 134-5; Brewer, 1872: 284).

As it was for all of northern Alabama, Jackson County was left severely depleted by the war and the people were hungry and impoverished. The continuous skirmishing in the area had been as devastating as a major battle, but on a wider scale (Moore, 1934: 429). With reference to Jackson County, Miller says, "... from first to last a quarter of a million of Federal soldiers passed through the county (Miller, 1901: 335)". Describing the situation to his daughter in Texas, Daniel

Martin wrote, "I have had everything taken from me but my land; my town property is literally destroyed. I am as poor as Job's turkey except in land ... (Martin, D. M., May 6, 1866)".

But Bellefonte had not been razed by any means. There were several dwellings that survived the war to be moved, intact, to Scottsboro (Matthews, Leola and Eunice, 1974). Others were torn down and the materials used to build homes in Scottsboro ("Early History of Scottsboro", 1934). The post office at Bellefonte continued to serve the populace thereabouts (Martin, D. M., May 6, 1866 and others), and the court continued to meet, business as usual, somewhere in the town. In 1867, Daniel Martin wrote to his daughter that her older brother, William G. Martin, "... lives in Bellefonte in what was left of my old houses and is trying to keep tavern in a very small way (Martin, D. M., July 21, 1867)". Life in Bellefonte went on, but on a much reduced scale. National and regional events continued to touch the town - Martin mentions in two separate letters dated in August of 1868, seeing troops of Ku Klux Klansmen in the area near Bellefonte, and both he and his son-in-law lash out against the "scalawags and carpethaggers" in the legislature.

In another letter, Martin gives some of the reasons for the migration of people out of the county around 1870, and these reasons perhaps explain in part why the census figure for Bellefonte in 1870 was only 72 (Brewer, 1872: 283):

" ... We have not made a general good crop since the War on account of drouth and laziness and last year was the worst of all. And then it was reported all over this country that Texas had made the best crops in the world, that she had corn, wheat, pork, beef, and mutton enough to feed the world and that it was very cheap. And the people, being goaded to death by taxation and sick of a negro constitution, a negro legislature and Government, all that could raise the money to pay their way, went off like a swarm of blackbirds (Martin, D. M., March 21, 1870)".

But things picked up, and in 1873 Martin relates that his son " ... lives in my old houses in Bellefonte; has a fine store in my old brick corner house. He also has a fine new cotton gin. It stands up on the Fowler lot. He gets more cotton to gin than any other gin about here and sells more goods than any other store in the County. Say to your Aunt Mary that your Brother Billie is now doing as good a business as I was in your mother's lifetime when my tavern was in full bloom ... [Ella Marley's mother died in 1853] (Martin, D. M., December 22, 1873)". Bellefonte was still a steamboat landing at that time (Neville, 1963: 25), but there were only two or three steamboats plying the Tennessee between Chattanooga and Decatur (Campbell, 1932: 92) and those very irregularly (Caldwell, Daisy, 1974).

In 1883 Bellefonte was listed in a business directory as having a population of 100 and the following services and business: five general merchandise firms, a saw mill, two physicians, a notary public, a Justice of the Peace, and a lawyer. Also indicated as being resident in the town were eleven farmers (Alabama State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1884-5: 132). In 1887, another business directory

lists Bellefonte as having a population of 150. At that time, the town had a telegraph, express, and railroad agent, a notary public, a Justice of the Peace, two physicians, two saw and grist mills, a lawyer, and three general stores (Alabama State Gazetteer and Business Directory, 1887-8: 111).

Abruptly things declined, however, and in 1889 the Masonic Lodge at Bellefonte disbanded (Masonic Lodge Grand Library, Montgomery, personal communication). An atlas from 1893 (Gaskell's Family and Business Atlas of the World) indicates Bellefonte had a population of 100 according to the 1890 census, but on March 4, 1894 the post office closed down, and the town cannot be found in any references after that time. Some people continued to live on the site of the old town, however. The Snodgrasses, whose ancestors were among the earliest families to settle the area, still had a store right across from Daniel Martin's old inn up until the time of the first World War. Their descendants own the old town today.

#### Some Important Bellefonte Citizens:

Bellefonte can lay claim to a number of interesting and prominent men. The most often mentioned of her citizens is Williamson R. W. Cobb. Cobb was a merchant before he entered politics in 1844. From that time he lost only one election in the next twenty years. After two terms in the lower house of the Alabama legislature, he was elected to the House of Representatives in 1847 and served

in Washington until the Alabama delegation withdrew in 1861. During his tenure in the House, he was the chairman of the Committee on the Public Lands. Back in Alabama, in 1861 he was defeated in his bid for a seat in the Confederate Congress, but won it two years later. He died in 1864. He was the only Representative to Congress Jackson County ever called her own (Brewer, 1872: 286-7; Garrett, 1872: 395-7; Kennemer, 1935: 197; Richardson, 1936; Owen, T. M., 1921, III: 357; Blue, 1861: 16).

Major Robert A. Eaton was mentioned above in connection with Bellefonte newspapers, but he was also important elsewhere in the field of pioneer Alabama journalism. In Tuscaloosa in 1836 he was co-publisher of the leading Democratic journal in Alabama, "The Flag of the Union", and simultaneously put out a monthly literary magazine, "The Southern". Later, again in Tuscaloosa, he established another paper, the "Gazette". He was elected State Printer by the Alabama legislature for five successive years and he also printed the Supreme Court Reports from 1841 to 1849. He was elected Mayor of Tuscaloosa, but resigned that office. He settled at Carrollton, Alabama in 1849 and established the "West Alabamian". He died at that city in 1853 (Elliott, 1958: 97).

The Norwoods, Henry and his son, John H., both had distinguished public careers. Henry served in both the War of 1812 and the Creek and Seminole Wars. Coming to Bellefonte in 1820, he established a plantation. He was active in the militia and at the time of his

death he was sheriff of Jackson County. He served four terms in the legislature in the 1830's. John H. was born at Bellefonte and studied law there. He entered the bar at Bellefonte in 1852. He was appointed probate judge in 1855, elected in 1857 to continue in that office, but resigned to be First Lieutenant in Captain H. C. Bradford's Bellefonte company of Civil War volunteers. His war record was such that he was a brigadier general when he finally had to retire from battle because of injuries. In 1865 he was elected to the State Senate. In 1875 he was a delegate to the State Constitutional Convention. In 1886 he was again elected probate judge and served in that capacity until his death in 1891 (Brewer, 1872: 285-6; Owen, T. M., 1921: IV: 1288).

Silas Parsons was one of the very first settlers at Bellefonte where he supported himself by laboring on a farm. Desiring to study law he ran for sheriff and was elected in 1823. Allowing his deputy to run the office, Parsons studied law and was soon admitted to the bar. He practiced at Bellefonte until he moved to Huntsville in 1831. There he entered into two consecutive prestigious law partnerships and rose to such eminence at the bar that in 1849 he was elected unanimously by the state legislature to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court bench. Ill health forced him to resign this responsibility after only two years, much to the regret of his colleagues. He went into retirement in Texas and died in 1860 (Garrett, 1872: 524; Owen, T. M. 1921, IV: 1324; Blue, 1861: 15).

### Bellefonte's Role in Local, Regional, and State Affairs:

As a seat of justice for nearly half a century, Bellefonte was obviously the hub of legal activities for the local area and for the county. As has been referred to above, many prestigious lawyers argued their cases before Jackson's bench, and the color and vigor of the rhetoric there was such that court days signalled an influx of people from the surrounding countryside into Bellefonte courthouse to hear and judge the cases on their entertainment merit. The public square was a marketplace where auction sales and trading of all kinds took place. With the various goods and services provided by the merchants and craftsmen of the town, Bellefonte must have been a center of considerable commercial activity. The availability of cheap and regular water transportation must have made Bellefonte a pretty hectic place in the period from February through April when Muscle Shoals could most easily be navigated and the keelboats and, later, steamboats were relaying cargo after cargo of cotton down the Tennessee on the first leg of the journey to the market at New Orleans. The vital and highly partisan newspapers published at Bellefonte broadcast to the otherwise scattered and insular outlying hamlets news of the state and country in a period when tremendous exploration, expansion, and adjustment were going on. And, of course, Bellefonte was where people came when they needed to educate their children, or get together with their fraternal brothers, or hear a good, rousing

sermon, or get medical aid, or have their flintlock repaired, or collect their nephew coming in on the stage from Knoxville.

At the regional level, Jackson was politically allied with the other Great Bend counties. Strongly Democratic, in the early '40's Jackson joined Madison, Marshall, St. Clair, and De Kalb counties in an attempt by the Democrats to eliminate Whig Congressmen by instituting a state-wide general ticket system of electing Representatives, knowing that with the great weight of Democratic votes in the northern part of the state, the Democratic candidates would easily win and control all the Congressional seats. When this plan failed, these five northern counties attempted to gerrymander the Whigs out of Congress. This kind of partisanship-cum-sectionalism characterized Alabama politics throughout its antebellum period, and Jackson County was so much a part of this that it was referred to as "the Flagship of the Alabama Democratic Fleet" (Moore, 1927, I: 235). In the '40's, at least one out of the three state representatives from Jackson County for every term was a resident of Bellefonte, and during six terms in the '40's, Bellefonte residents dominated the Jackson County delegation.

In 1838, Bellefonte was the regional headquarters for the Cherokee removal and the staging area for the militia activities precipitated by the Government's implementation of the Treaty of 1835.

In 1844, W. T. Sherman made Bellefonte his headquarters for

the continuation of his hearings on reparation for equipment and horses lost by volunteers in the Seminole War, so Bellefonte must have been a known regional center.

In state service, the contributions of a number of Bellefonte's citizens have been mentioned. Worthy of additional mention for specific distinguished service to the state of Alabama is Robert T. Scott. Twice a gubernatorial appointee while still a resident of Bellefonte, Scott sojourned in Washington over quite a period of time attempting, first, to obtain Alabama's due from the "2 and 3% funds" (skimmed by the Federal Government from the proceeds of Alabama public land sales and earmarked for internal improvements), and second, to press Alabama's claims for advances made on account of the Indian and Mexican wars. In the state legislature Scott was chairman of the Committee of Ways and Means in 1853-4, and was also a Presidential elector (Brewer, 1872: 284; Garrett, 1872: 319; Owen, T. M., 1921, IV: 1512).

At the Secession Convention in 1861, the Jackson County delegation refused to sign the Ordinance of Secession and joined other northern Alabama delegations in writing, signing, and presenting what was in effect a minority opinion on secession. Their "Address to the People of Alabama" states their reasons for not signing the Ordinance. One Jackson County delegate, J. P. Timberlake was on the committee which authored this document. John R. Coffey of Bellefonte was the most influential and respected

of the Jackson County delegates and his counsel of moderation and patience lent a more sober perspective to the emotionally charged issues at the convention. But when it came to signing or splitting away from the state, Coffey and the rest of the north Alabamians gracefully acceded for the sake of state unity (Darden, 1941).

#### Archaeological Value of the Town of Bellefonte:

The primary value of the old town of Bellefonte today is in what it has to offer as an archaeological resource. Bellefonte is analogous to a "type fossil" for the first half of the nineteenth century in northern Alabama - a distinct and pristine example of a typical community whose time span is short, specific, and inclusive of the interesting and important antebellum developmental period of Alabama's history. It can be seen from the foregoing historical presentation on Bellefonte that the town is representative of a lifestyle, a settlement pattern, and an ecology that characterize the period spanned. Since the town functioned as the primary base for all of the human activities in the adjacent area, it is reasonable to expect that evidence of these activities is preserved at Bellefonte and is archaeologically recoverable. Further, the archaeological value of the town is enhanced by the fact that it died out with very little rebuilding or subsequent major disturbance taking place. Relating to this point, it is relevant to consider here the results of the limited field investigation

made at the site.

The remains of the major roads<sup>3</sup> that passed through Bellefonte can be traced easily over what is probably the full extent of the site because these roads continued in use well into this century. The only antebellum structures standing on the site are the old frame inn of Daniel Martin and a cabin, referred to as "the old Turkey place", which as a lean-to addition of a more recent date. Two limestone foundations of what were probably antebellum brick structures were found - that of the courthouse and that of a long narrow building which may have been one of the brick stores on the public square. The courthouse foundation was composed of massive, roughly shaped limestone blocks some 8 or 9 inches deep and approximately 24 inches wide laid into sterile red clay and forming a quadrangle whose dimensions are at least 35 feet by 40 feet. Only two corners were located, so this foundation may actually be larger. It was within 20 feet of an old cistern which was probably part of the public square complex (both Huntsville and Scottsboro had water supplies on their earliest courthouse square plans). The cistern and the courthouse foundation are on quite an elevation and this may be an artificial feature, part of the original construction process which would have reduced the amount of digging necessary to construct the basement of the courthouse and the excavation for the cistern. The fill materials of the basement and cistern are a great archaeological resource that

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<sup>3</sup>For these features and all others discussed below, see composite map at the end of this report.

could contribute a great deal of information spanning almost the entire period of Bellefonte's existence.

The long, narrow foundation mentioned above was composed of roughly shaped limestone blocks approximately 8 inches wide, 6 inches deep, and of varying length. The outline formed by these blocks is approximately 15 feet by 60 feet - only two sides of this foundation are exposed and then only at intervals, so the true extent of this structure is not known.

One feature of the site which shows tremendous potential is the rubble of the old jail. Now obscured by a small cabin, the site of the jail is otherwise untouched and the jumble of bricks under the cabin is probably the most undisturbed remains of a structure at Old Bellefonte. This site, incidentally, is about 20 feet north of the modern county road and would be affected by the scheduled construction there.

A cabin site was observed (near where the Stage Coach Road used to run) which is in perfect condition. The outline is raised and the chimney and doorstep foundations are perfectly preserved. This structure is approximately 15 feet by 35 feet.

Informants who are longtime residents of the area pointed out various features on the site which there was not time enough to investigate, but which add to the potential of the site. Reportedly there was a brick quarry where clay was mined for the making of bricks. Conceivably then, there was a kiln, too, however crude.

A brick sidewalk leading to the city spring was also pointed out, though no part of the paving is now exposed and no digging was done to confirm this report. The sites of another cabin and of the Masonic Lodge and schoolhouse were indicated to lie just north of the Bellefonte Landing Road.

Surface collecting in the several fields around the core of the site indicate very rich artifactual content in the field immediately northeast of the old inn and in the field southeast of the old Turkey place. These may have been densely inhabited areas or there may have been numerous trash pits scattered about such that plowing could disturb and spread the contents over the surface of the fields.

Disturbance of the site must be noted in two areas - in the immediate vicinity of the old inn, where bulldozing was done in 1966 to even and compress the surface because of the presence of considerable brick rubble (evidently remains of antebellum structures), and in the area adjacent to the modern county road. The extent of the disturbance near the road is not known but minimally has to take in the graded ditch that flanks the road on either side up to six feet out.

Evidence in the old deeds to Bellefonte, while not conclusive, contributes to the conclusion that Bellefonte's public square was close to an acre in extent. This means that with the courthouse located where it is with respect to the modern county

road, the county road in that core area is probably on the site of a former row of business buildings or residences that composed the southwest side of the public square. Whether any remains of these structures survived the construction of the county road cannot be said. It can only be pointed out that new construction activities in the area adjacent to the road could destroy whatever is left of that part of Bellefonte's core area.

So Bellefonte's archaeological potential is there as described in the foregoing and it need only be pointed out one more time that Bellefonte's advantages as a type site are inherent in its history.

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## Legend for Composite Map of Bellefonte:

Modern or Surviving Features: ——

Excavated or Reconstructed Antebellum Features: ---

## Identification of Features and Sources of Information:

- A. Original boundary of Bellefonte (old deeds, aerial photos)
- B. Old Stage Coach Road (aerial photos and informant's identification)
- C. Bellefonte Landing Road (1936 TVA Land Map # 8-4159-63.5)
- D. Jackson Street (derived from old deeds)
- E. Cross Street (derived from old deeds)
- F. Adams Street (derived from old deeds)
- G. Spring Street (derived from old deeds)
- H. Russell Street (derived from old deeds)
- I. Courthouse foundation (field excavation)
- J. Cistern (field observation and informant identification)
- K. Store foundation (field observation)
- L. Martin's inn (1936 TVA Land Map # 8-4159-63.5)
- M. Old Turkey place (1936 TVA Land Map and informant's identification)
- N. Jail (field observation; exact size or shape not determined)
- O. Cabin foundation (field observation)
- P. City spring (informant's identification; now under water)
- Q. Brick sidewalk (informant's identification; extent not determined)
- R. Quarry (informant's identification; extent not determined)
- S. Masonic Lodge/school site (informant's identification; size not known)
- T. Cabin site (informant's identification; size not known)
- U. Modern county road ( 1936 TVA Land Map # 8-4159-63.5)
- V. Modern edge of Town Creek (1936 TVA Land Map # 8-4159-63.5)

