



The Chatham Historical Journal

Volume 18, Number 2

Chatham County, North Carolina

April 2005

The Prince Family of Chatham County

by Dr. William B. Gresham, Jr.*

I grew up hearing stories of my Prince family ancestors while sitting on my grandmother's front porch in Birmingham. She and my father would talk for hours about this person and that and of the history surrounding their lives. As I grew older, I determined to dig into this branch of my family, to determine for myself who they were and what they had accomplished. Beginning with a genealogy that I inherited from my grandmother's great aunt (Aunt Sally), I began to piece things together. I traced the Princes from Bristol, England, to the new colony of Virginia and finally to Chatham County in North Carolina. Here things really began to blossom, as records of their activity were readily available. I discovered the Princes to be a highly industrious family, with interests that included farming, commerce, education, and politics.

Nicholas Prince

The family of Nicholas Prince and his wife, Mary Francis Mitchell, moved into Chatham County when Nicholas purchased land on May the thirteenth 1800. On this date, Murdo MacQueen sold Nicholas 463 acres on Brooks Creek near where it flows

**Dr. William B. Gresham, Jr., an ordained Presbyterian minister, lives in Birmingham, Alabama, where he teaches history at the high school level. He is President of the West Jefferson County Historical Society and on the board of the Bessemer Hall of History. Dr. Gresham has been a member and strong supporter of the Chatham County Historical Association since 1996. He published his book on the Prince Family, Southern Breezes, the Migrations of a Southern Family, in 2004.*

into the Haw River.¹ While Nicholas had been living in southern Virginia prior to the Revolutionary War, he served in the North Carolina Militia during that war. Family lore relates that he saw action at the Battle of Guilford Courthouse and was part of the militia that pursued General Cornwallis through North Carolina. It is possible that it was at this time that he first saw the lands around the area he would eventually call home.

Nicholas and his family were tobacco farmers. In time, the family moved into a number of other economic ventures. Nicholas and his wife, Mary, had five children who survived into adulthood and were named in his will: Oliver, William, Edmond, Elizabeth, and Polly (Mary Francis).² Nicholas died in 1812.

The Daughters of Nicholas Prince

We don't know much about Nicholas's daughters. Mary Francis Prince married William Haywood Lawrence of Pitt and Chatham counties. He was a descendant of John Haywood of Edgecomb County. The Lawrences moved to Alabama in 1826 (see below).



Former Prince's Bridge Tavern, about 1930

(North Carolina Archives)

Elizabeth Prince became the second wife of Woodson Lea, probably marrying him soon after a marriage bond was signed on 23 December 1816.³ They had no children. She is last heard of living in Hale County, Alabama, from where she petitioned the courts of Chatham for her dowry.

Oliver Prince

Oliver, the oldest son, was born in 1780 and died in 1821. He married Eleanor St. Lawrence, daughter of Patrick and Elizabeth St. Lawrence of Pittsboro, in 1803.⁴ He began his career around New Hope Creek, in the White Oak Creek area. Here he and his partner Bartholomew Lightfoot built a number of grist and lumber mills and operated a successful mercantile business. In 1807, Oliver was authorized to rebuild the existing bridge over the New Hope Creek on the road that connected Pittsboro to Raleigh.⁵ This was a toll bridge known as Prince's Bridge, first owned by Oliver and then by his brother Edmond. The Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions set the tolls: two shillings and sixpence for all four-wheeled carriages, one shilling and sixpence for a horse and chair or any two-wheeled carriage, and one shilling for a man and horse. Only persons living outside the county could be charged. The Prince family would own this bridge until just before they migrated to Alabama. They also operated a tavern at the site.

Oliver built his holdings in Chatham County during the early 1800s. The 1810 census states that he owned ten slaves. During this same time, Oliver began acquiring large tracts of land along the Tar River in Pitt County. Here he came to own well over eleven hundred acres. He became a man of prominence, representing Pitt County in the North Carolina House of Commons from 1815 to 1818. Oliver died on 8 November 1821 and his brother Edmond was named the executor of his estate and the guardian of his children.

These children fared well. His son Sydney became a medical doctor. A second son, Thomas McCarroll Prince, graduated from the University of North Carolina and eventually moved to Mobile, Alabama, where he became the senior partner in the cotton-factoring firm of Prince and Garrett. This family remains a prominent family in the Mobile area today.

Oliver's daughter Elizabeth married John Exum Boddie. They moved first to Tennessee and then to Alabama. Another daughter, Julia, married Sydney Smith of Marengo County, Alabama, and his daughter Eleanor married a Frederick Moore.⁶

William Prince

Nicholas's second son, William, was born in 1787. He followed his brother Oliver in the mill business. His

partner was William L. Hayes. William Prince also served as a deputy sheriff for a period of time, being appointed to that position by Oliver's partner, Bartholomew Lightfoot, who was county sheriff from 1809 to 1812. On 3 April 1811 William married Elizabeth Stewart, the daughter of William Stewart.⁷ During the early 1800s, William and Hayes built their holdings along New Hope Creek; in 1813 he sold his interest in these holdings to his younger brother, Edmond. The 1815 county tax listing shows William with 527 acres and six slaves.⁸

William died on 22 December 1820; his wife followed him on 24 April 1825. *The Star and North Carolina Gazette* of Raleigh described her as "an amiable woman. . .surpassed by none in the benevolence of her heart."⁹ They had no children.

Edmond Prince

Edmond was born on 8 March 1792 near Hicks Ford (now Emporia), Virginia. On 21 December 1814 he married Elizabeth Toole Lawrence, sister of the William Haywood Lawrence who married Edmond's sister Mary Francis. He survived both of his older brothers and gradually gathered family lands together. He inherited his father's lands near the Haw River, and through the years he continued to acquire lands around New Hope Creek, especially around White Oak Creek. Some of this was land acquired from his brothers; other



Edmond Prince

(Courtesy of Mrs. James Cowden)

There is one further incident that sheds light on Edmond's character. In February of 1826, one of his neighbors, Edmond Mohon found himself in financial difficulty. He was unable to pay his debts, which amounted to ninety-eight dollars and twenty cents. To pay these debts, Sheriff Horace D. Bridges ordered that his holdings of three hundred acres be put up for public auction. The auction was held on February the thirteenth. At this auction, Edmond was the highest bidder, with a bid of sixty-six dollars, and the sheriff signed the property over to him. At this point, Edmond revealed his true nature, as he turned

around and signed this parcel of land over to Mildred Mohon, Edmond Mohon's wife. On the bottom of the deed Edmond Prince wrote, "I do hereby assign all my title and interest to the above mentioned premises to Mildred Mohon for value received." Edmond could have taken advantage of the financial situation. He could have put them off their land. Instead, he took a terrible predicament, and turned it to their good. Can't you just picture the faces of this couple, as they are told that they have not lost their home, that their friend had intervened on their behalf. There were other cases such as these . . .

Excerpt from Southern Breezes, the Migration of a Southern Family, by Dr. William B. Gresham, Jr., 2004

land was purchased outright. Edmond ran the toll bridge that had been built by his brother Oliver and the tavern for travelers on the site, and he farmed. In 1815 he sold the bridge on the Raleigh Road across New Hope Creek to the county for \$150. He continued to own the tavern, obtaining a license yearly to operate it.

In 1818, Edmond was appointed to serve as a justice of the peace, a position of importance in county government,¹⁰ and he held this position until he moved away from Chatham County. Justices served on the Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, were called upon to settle civil disputes, and in general carried on the business of county government. Edmond seems to have been a kind man, a man who could be trusted, and he was called upon by his peers to work for them as attorney or trustee. In 1818 a William Bridges gave Edmond a general power of attorney to recover debts for him, and in 1820 he received the petition of Reuben Mitchell for a pension on account of his Revolutionary War service.¹¹

About this time his life seems to have changed dramatically. Both of his older brothers died, 33-year-old William in 1820 at age 33 and 41-year-old Oliver in 1821, and Edmond assumed many family responsibilities. Also, his childhood friend and neighbor, Basil Manly, was converted as the result of the ministry of a slave,¹² and Edmond seems to have changed during the same period. In deeds dating between 1820 and 1823 there is mention of a meeting house (Baptist) being located on lands that he was selling, buying back, and then selling again. This church was located in what became the Bells community on New Hope Creek, as was the bridge and tavern. In 1826, when the spirits license was to be renewed for Edmond's tavern, it was given to Asa Eubanks, although Edmond was still listed as the owner.¹³ Apparently he took his Baptist conversion seriously.

The Move to Alabama

The winds of change were blowing. Good lands in

North Carolina were becoming scarce, and there was a migration to the southwest, Alabama and Mississippi, where land was plentiful – and cheap. In 1826, Edmond packed his belongings and the move was on. Traveling in a group were his family, his sister and brother-in-law William Haywood Lawrence and their family, his 71-year-old mother Mary Prince, and his mother-in-law, Charity Haywood Lawrence. Charity had become a Baptist, too, but she was troubled because she had allowed herself to be baptized in "still water." She told her North Carolina kin that she was at first convinced that it was valid but afterwards came to the conclusion that "running water" should be used, and as soon as she got to Alabama she intended to have it done right.¹⁴

The extended family first settled in northwestern Alabama in the small town of LaGrange, which occupied a low ridge just south of the Tennessee River. Here William Haywood Lawrence was involved in establishing a Baptist school that in time would be sold to the Methodists. It holds the distinction of being the first college chartered in the new state of Alabama.¹⁵

Land was scarce in north Alabama, the better lands being crowded up against the Tennessee River. In 1833 the families packed up again and made the move to a village in Marengo County known as Spring Hill, about ten miles south of the town of Demopolis, a community settled by French colonists about 1817. Marengo County is a part of the Alabama Black Belt, and the immediate region was known as the "Canebreak." Here Edmond built a plantation of several thousand acres on both sides of what was then called the Lower Union-town Road. He donated land to the congregation of a local Baptist church as well as to the community academy, Spring Hill.

Edmond's family was large. He had eleven children by his first wife and six by a second, and fourteen of these children lived into adulthood. Edmond was a man who believed in education, and he found it difficult to

educate his children in the rural Black Belt. He sent his sons Oliver and Nicholas back to North Carolina to the newly-chartered Wake Forest Institute in 1834, where they joined the first class. This school was designed to educate the sons of planters in the latest farming techniques while giving them a sound education.¹⁶ Both sons also attended the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where Oliver graduated with an A.B. in 1840 and subsequently became a lawyer practicing in Demopolis. Nicholas attended in 1836-1837 and is described in alumni records as a fruit grower in Florida.¹⁷

In 1836 Edmond moved his family to the city of Tuscaloosa, site of the state capital as well as the home of the new University of Alabama. Sons Edmond Josiah and Francis Marion attended the University of Alabama and Thomas Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia, returning to Alabama to practice medicine. To educate his daughters, Edmond helped in the establishment of two schools for women, the Alabama Female Athenaeum and Alabama Central Female College.

Edmond was not idle after the move to Tuscaloosa. He nearly doubled his land holdings, acquiring lands to the south and west of the city. To the south he grew cotton; to the west in an area known as Windham Springs, he had sheep. He was also involved in local manufacturing. In 1845 he was part of a group of Tuscaloosa's leading citizens who met to discuss the establishment of a cotton factory. Stock was sold and a factory built on the banks of the Warrior River in Tuscaloosa,¹⁸ where it remained in operation until 1865, when Union cavalry raiding across the state destroyed it.

Edmond continued to be involved in his church. The Baptists were the first Protestants to organize in Tuscaloosa, establishing Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1818. When Edmond arrived in Tuscaloosa, the church had a membership of 103, a shortage of money, and a dire need of room. Edmond hosted a meeting of the leaders to discuss the situation, after which a new church, the First Baptist, was formed. A new building was financed through the sale of family pews, and the new church was not opened until all of the pews had been sold. Edmond was extremely active in church affairs, traveling to regional meetings on a regular basis with his boyhood friend, Dr. Basil Manly, now an ordained Baptist minister, who became the second president of the University of Alabama. Prince served as a deacon in the First Baptist Church until his death on 1 May 1861.

Conclusion

Public records and newspapers shed a great deal of light on the daily lives of these men and women, but

there is still much to be discovered. One continuing mystery is the location of a family cemetery mentioned in deeds filed when Edmond moved to Alabama. The plot is described as being around one-half an acre, but to date nothing has been located.

This family certainly did not allow time to merely pass them by. They were actively involved in making the world around them. Like so many people of their day, they made the most of what the world offered to them, developing the lands where they settled. The Prince family was indeed an industrious family, involved in farming, politics, medicine, and education.

NOTES

1. Chatham County Deeds, Book L, p. 175.
2. Chatham County Will Book A, p. 210.
3. Brent H. Holcomb, comp., *Marriages of Chatham County, North Carolina, 1772-1868* (Baltimore: Genealogy Publishing Co., Inc., 1987), p. 19.
4. *Raleigh Minerva: or Anti-Jacobin*, 11 Jul 1803, p. 3.
5. 1805-1811 Minutes of the Chatham County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, February Session, 1807, p. 124.
6. See *Southern Breezes, the Migrations of a Southern Family* by Dr. William B. Gresham, Jr., for genealogical references for this and later generations.
7. *The Raleigh Star*, 19 April 1811, p. 3.
8. William P. Johnson, comp., *1815 Tax List of Chatham Co., N.C.* (Raleigh: author, 1975), p. 22. His listing includes 646 acres belonging to Hugh McLean of Fayetteville, for whom he acted as agent in a land sale recorded in Book S, p. 78.)
9. *The Star and North Carolina Gazette*, Raleigh, 20 May 1825.
10. 1816-1822 Minutes of the Chatham County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, February Session, 1818, p. 96.
11. Deed Book Z, p. 204; 1822-1827 Minutes of the Chatham County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, August Session 1822, n.p.; boxed excerpt from Deed Book AA, p. 68.
12. Thomas M. Owen, "Dr. Basil Manly, the Founder of the Alabama Historical Society," *Transactions of the Alabama Historical Society*, 1899-1903, Vol. IV, p. 126.
13. Minutes of the Chatham County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1822-1827, unpagged (February session, 1826).
14. Letter from Marshall DeLancey Haywood of Raleigh, North Carolina, to Mrs. Sarah Prince Carter dated 24 November 1900, in the papers of Mrs. Elizabeth Lacock, Nashville, Tennessee.
15. A. A. McGregor, *History of LaGrange College* (Leighton, Alabama: LaGrange Living Historical Society, n.d.); papers of Mrs. Elizabeth Lacock, Nashville, Tennessee.
16. George Washington Paschal, *History of Wake Forest College* (Wake Forest: Wake Forest College, 1935), Vol. I, p. 72, *passim*.
17. Daniel L. Grant, *Alumni History of the University of North Carolina* ([Chapel Hill]: General Alumni Association of the University of North Carolina, 1924).
18. *The Independent Monitor* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 25 June 1845).