

Pilings in Little Escambia Creek Explained

ASHS Column for February 14, 2008

Jerry Simmons

My last column had a photo accompanying it that didn't turn out very well. I don't believe the fault was the Ledger's. It was most likely because I sent the picture file too small to be enlarged satisfactorily. I hope you were able to make out the Century High School's baseball players well enough. If not, let me know, and I'll send it again and I'm sure the Ledger will run it again for us.

My not being sure where the Century jail in the early days was located brought several interesting comments. One was from Grace Joiner, a real nice lady from over in Bratt. Mrs. Joiner told me about memories of her and some other girls walking down the railroad track and fellas in the jail trying to get them to come over and talk to them. I can see those girls right now, giggling as they walked along, thrilled by the attention they were getting, but also probably a little fearful of the possible danger of talking to desperados locked up in the calaboose.

As you may see from the crude sketch I've attached to this column, the jail was on the east side of the tracks, but further away from Front Street than I first thought. It was about halfway between Hecker Road and Front Street.

Henry Earl McCutchin told me the little building at Front Street and the east side of the railroad that I thought might be the jail was actually a "switch" house. Its purpose was presumably to keep the track switching mechanism safely locked away to prevent unauthorized changing of the track positions. If someone switched the tracks incorrectly and a fast L&N train came through, the result would be a catastrophe. I had wrongly supposed it to be the jail.

In this sketch, you can see the location of the Depot Hotel. According to John Bush, who is doing research on his grandfather, John B. Vaughn, Miss Eva's father, the hotel was variously known around 1905 as the Depot Hotel, Mrs. McCurdy's boarding house, and Vaughn's hotel (or boarding house). Also, Bush said, there are references to a stable Vaughn



These pilings may be seen on the west side of the twin bridges (where U.S. 31 crosses Little Escambia Creek

owned, where he apparently rented horses for use.

One thing I can do well is be wrong. Over the last few years, I've been incorrect in writing that the remnants of pilings visible in the middle of Little Escambia Creek (where Highway 31 crosses the creek) were part of a log flume. I recently ran across a 1960 letter from Brewton's Ed Leigh McMillan to Floyd McGowin of Chapman, Alabama, in which there is another explanation for the pilings.

McMillan said the pilings were part of a log boom, a method by which early loggers were able to contain logs in a body of water. Pensacola Bay had many of these booms, each kept by different logging or sawmill companies to keep their logs and timbers separate from others. Log booms in Pensacola Bay did not necessarily drive pilings but they did use means to anchor the timbers to keep them in one area.

Four men from Erie, Pennsylvania were partners in a sawmill constructed near Little Escambia Creek in the 1880s. According to McMillan, they drove pilings down the creek for about a quarter mile from the sawmill's location (they named the community around the mill "Erie"). These pilings created the "boom." The upper end of the boom was open and the lower end closed, and the pilings were spaced to hold or contain the floating logs. The boom served the same purpose as a mill pond.

The letter continued, "The pilings, when they were originally driven in the creek, were probably 16' to 20' longer than they are now. Some years ago after the boom had ceased to be used, loggers using the creek to float logs to the river cut off the pilings at the water level at low water stage."

Booms such as this were common for sawmills located on streams, because the streams were used to either float logs to the mill, or to float squared-off sawn timber down to the Conecuh/Escambia River and from there to market in Pensacola.

Maybe soon we'll cover log ditches. But for your information, the first documented log ditch constructed in this area was in Santa Rosa County in 1875, by Major Wallace. Wallace, Alabama, and the Wallace community in Santa Rosa County are both named for this man.

I guess that's enough lessons for one week. Don't forget the Alger-Sullivan Historical Society's meeting February 19 at 6 p.m. Call 850-256-2447 for more information.

The next week, on February 26, is the Escambia County Historical Society meeting. Dr. John Hall is presenting the program on the Bartram Trail at 3:15 p.m. You can contact 251-867-7332 or 251-809-1528 for information or directions.

Y'all come.