



THE TOWNS HISTORIAN



The NEWSLETTER of the TOWNS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The Towns County Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and sharing the rich history of our area. We meet the second Monday of each month at 900 N. Main St., Hiawassee, GA.

P.O. Box 1182
900 North Main St.
Hiawassee, Georgia
(706) 781-8611



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Mission Accomplished by Sandra Green, President

The historical society reached a milestone in May! All the hard work at the Old Rock Jail finally paid off! The grand opening of the museum was held at 2:00 on May 19th. We had beautiful weather and a large crowd was on hand to witness the ribbon cutting. Thanks to the many people who had a hand the restoration. A special thanks to retired Commissioner Bill Kendall and Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw. The Historical Society's dream of a museum for Towns County would have never have come true without their unfailing support. Check out some of the highlights on pages 4 & 5 of the newsletter.

We are currently in the third quarter of the year with lots of interesting programs going on. Probably the most exciting is the Honoring Our Veterans program on Saturday July 14th. It's the only program all year that is not held on the second Monday of the month. It's to express our thanks and respect to all who have served in the military. Betty Phillips is in charge of planning that program and it is a cause for which she is very passionate.

On Saturday, July 21st the Historical Society will be participating in the Georgia Mountain Fair Parade. Our float is designed by Mary Ann Miller and will feature members of the Historical Society!

In August we get back to our regular second Monday meeting time. The program will feature Ralph Nichols telling us about Tate City.

September's guest speaker will be Bob Cloer talking about growing up in Woods Grove Community and what it was like when the lake was under construction.

The Last Sheriff to Live In The Rock Jail

by Betty Phillips



Sheriff Jay Vernon Chastain, Sr.



*Jay Vernon, Jr., Jay Vernon III (Trey) and Annette Chastain
at the Grand Opening of the Old Rock Jail May 19, 2018*

When the Old Rock Jail was built in 1936, Towns County required the elected sheriff and family to live in the jail. Jay Vernon Chastain, Sr. (born Feb. 22, 1927- died Dec. 8, 1974) and his wife Eunata Ledford Chastain (born Nov. 20, 1935- died Jan. 28, 2010) moved into the jail on January 1, 1969. Their son Jay Vernon, Jr., was born April 11, 1969.

Jay served as sheriff from January 1, 1969, until his untimely death on December 8, 1974. Sheriff Chastain was shot by Roy Lockaby during a traffic stop near the intersection of Hwy. 288 and Hwy. 2 and died on the scene. He is listed in the U.S. Officers Down Memorial. His funeral was held at Union Hill Methodist Church with burial in Burch Cemetery. There were more people attending his service outside than inside the church. Cars were parked all along the roadside from the starting entrance of Hwy. 288 off Hwy. 76 W. all the way past Burch Cemetery.

Jay was the son of William Joseph Chastain (born May 12, 1900 – died Sept. 17, 1995) and his wife Nola Jane Shook Chastain (born May 31, 1902 – died Aug. 3, 1966). His brothers are Vaughn (1923-2006), Larry Venson "L.V." (1929-1978), Nelson (1938), and Erwin (1943). His sisters are Reba C. Walls (1933), Marie Opal Henson (1935-2016), and Beatrice Creed (1941).

Helen Phillips McCutcheon worked in the sheriff's office during the summer of 1971 and fondly remembers helping Junior learn to walk in the courthouse when he came to visit his daddy. Jay and Junior both loved their snack of a glass of milk and plain or ruffle potato chips. Jay loved to let Helen's nephew Kris and other kids turn on the siren in his patrol car. Such are great memories that will last a lifetime! Helen worked in 1973 and recalls selling tickets on a Model A donated by Jay to raise funds for expenses in the sheriff's office. She stated that Jay treated all people fairly and loved kids especially those in need. He had a garden and would anonymously take vegetables to families in need. He even placed his father-in-law in the upstairs cells after his arrest.

Jay Chastain, Jr., is married to Annette and they have one son, Jay Vernon III "Trey" Chastain. Junior works for Towns County EMS. Trey is a recent graduate of Towns County High School and works for the Georgia State Patrol.

Uel J. Bryson and Priscilla Kerby By Jason Lee Edwards



*Priscilla Kerby Bryson
(1819-1885)*

Uel J. Bryson was born September 10, 1819, in Haywood County, North Carolina, to John Bryson, Sr., and Jane Poston. In 1828, the area of Haywood County in which the Brysons lived became Macon County, North Carolina. On October 13, 1838, Uel J. Bryson took out a bond to marry Priscilla Kirby. She was born September 1, 1819, in Burke County, North Carolina, to Dr. Bailey Kerby and Elizabeth Sherrill.

In the early 1840s, the Uel J. Bryson family moved to what would become Towns County, Georgia. He purchased several hundred acres on what is now called Yewell Branch. He joined Old Union Baptist Church by experience on January 28, 1851. On January 8, 1853, he brought charges against Manda Lewis for her "surcelating a false report in his ofering to kis hir." He consistently gave money to the church, but he occasionally found himself having to "make acknowledgements." Priscilla Kerby Bryson was also a member of Old Union Baptist prior to 1854. On June 27, 1863, charges were brought against her and her daughters, Lucinda Bryson and Sarah Bryson Underwood, for "attaching themselves to the Methodist order." Priscilla Kerby Bryson later belonged to Brasstown Grove Primitive Baptist Church.

Uel J. Bryson served in the 918th Georgia Militia during the Civil War as he was too old for active service. By 1866, he had a licensed still that produced 120 gallons a year, but he was accused of illicit distilling in 1875. He was arrested on February 5, 1875, by a Deputy US Marshal. He was let go on a bond signed by Dr. J. G. Stephens, a local physician and prominent citizen, which stated he would appear in Federal Court in Atlanta at the next term. The bond was for \$300.00 and if he did not appear at court, Dr. Stephens would have to pay the court the money.

In order to secure the bond, Uel Bryson, along with his wife Priscilla Kerby Bryson and his daughter Isabella H. "Ibby" Bryson, made a deed over to Dr. Stephens for their farm and livestock for \$300.00 with the understanding that if he appeared at court and satisfied the bond that Dr. Stephens would return the deed to him and he would keep his property. What happened next is a case of one person's word against another. Uel Bryson later testified that Dr. Stephens told him that it would be in his interest to "leave the country" instead of appearing at court. Bryson claimed that Stephens told him he would go to Atlanta, take care of the case, and give him back his farm or \$300.00 additional to make up the difference for the value of the farm. Dr. Stephens denied this and insisted that he had encouraged Bryson to go to Atlanta but that he had crossed the line into North Carolina on the day he was supposed to have gone to Atlanta.

In 1879, the Brysons brought suit against Dr. Stephens in an attempt to reclaim the farm and \$500.00 to make up for the years that he had been renting it out. The court ultimately ruled in favor of Dr. Stephens, however, on March 15, 1880, in the middle of the trial, he was thrown from his horse and died. Sadly, Uel Bryson also never knew the outcome of the case. In June of 1880, when the census was taken, Uel Bryson was listed as being unable to work from dyspepsia. Presumably the stress of the situation was taking its toll, and he died on November 25, 1880. Uel J. Bryson and Dr. Stephens are both buried at Old Union Baptist Church Cemetery.

The land was tied up in the estate of Dr. Stephens and was sold to W. G. Blackwell in December of 1882. He immediately sold the land to George H. Plott. His wife, Elizabeth Jane Bryson Plott, was the eldest daughter of Uel J. Bryson and Priscilla Kerby. Today the land is still owned by the Plott descendants of Uel J. Bryson. In a sense, he was ultimately the winner as the Bryson farm has been in the family continuously, with the exception of the seven years it belonged to Dr. Stephens, for over 170 years.

Priscilla Kerby Bryson continued to live on land Uel J. Bryson had purchased when they lost their original place. She died May 23, 1885, in Towns County and was buried next to her husband, and near her parents, at Old union Baptist Church Cemetery.

The children of Uel J. Bryson and Priscilla Kerby were (1) Elizabeth Jane Bryson was born August 13, 1839, in Macon County, North Carolina. She died May 29, 1918, in Towns County, Georgia. She married George Henry Plott. (2) Amanda "Mandy" Bryson was born October 30, 1841, in Macon County, North Carolina. She died July 5, 1918, in Towns County, Georgia. She married Jonathan Plott. (3) Mary Lucinda "Lou" Bryson was born October 19, 1842, in Macon County, North Carolina. She died July 15, 1904, in Cobb County, Georgia. She married Bry F. Weaver. (4) Sarah "Sally" Bryson was born about 1844 in Union (now Towns) County, Georgia. She died about 1890 in Jackson County, North Carolina. She married Elijah H. Underwood and James T. Bryson. (5) Isabelle H. "Ibee" Bryson was born about 1848 in Union (now Towns) County, Georgia. She died in 1910. She never married but had a son and daughter who moved to Texas and a daughter who remained in Georgia. According family lore, she was kept locked up in a cabin to keep her from having contact with the father of her children who was a married man in the community. (6) Rhoda Bryson was born about 1848 in Union (now Towns) County, Georgia. She died in November of 1859 in Towns County, Georgia, of milk sick. (7) Magdalene "Maggie" Bryson was born about 1851 in Union (now Towns) County, Georgia. She died about 1875. She married John M. "Spikey John" Plott. (8) Martha Bryson was born about 1852 in Union (now Towns) County, Georgia. She never married and died after 1880. (9) Almeda California "Callie" Bryson was born April 6, 1855, in Union (now Towns) County, Georgia. She died August 1, 1917. She married Zachary Taylor Plott. (10) Wellington Elsberry "Welton" Bryson was born February 19, 1857, in Towns County, Georgia. He died January 11, 1913, in Johnson County, Texas. He married Rebecca Elvira Beaver.



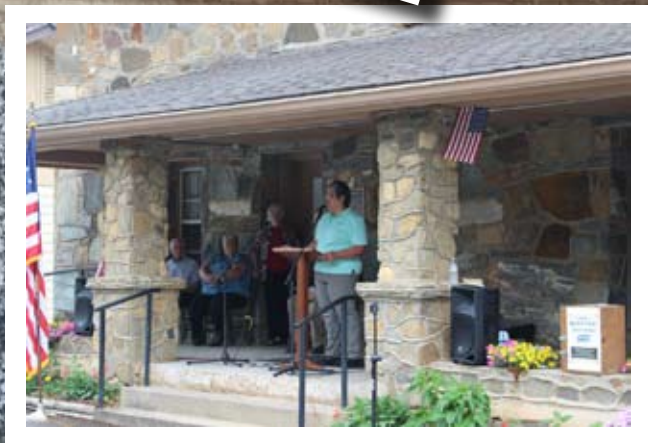
Demijohn used by Uel J. Bryson at his distillery. Currently on display at the Old Rock Jail Museum.

OLD ROCK JAIL

Photography by Jake Bennett Bradshaw



GRAND OPENING & RIBBON CUTTING



Mount Zion Church Had A Birthday by Ben H. Taylor January 28, 1954

Submitted by Nancy Cody

*So, Mount Zion Church had a birth,
And these are some of its pastors at first.
There were the Kimseys, Hedden, Standridge, and Plott
And dozens of others I have almost forgot.*

*They were all good preachers, and some of the best
But they had to give up and go on to rest.
Their troubles are over, and out of their pain.
And we are hoping some day to see them again.*

*Hedden, was a cripple; he couldn't walk much
But he preached great sermons while he stood on a crutch.
He would warn the people of their wicked ways
And sometimes preach for five or six days.*



Rev. Elisha Hedden

*There were the Kimseys, Elijah and Bob.
They were both good preachers, now under the sod.
Had great revivals that drew a large crowd,
Would all get happy and shout pretty loud.*

*John Plott was a Baptist, little on the extreme.
He had black eyes that looked pretty keen.
He was very independent, said what he thought.
And didn't seem to care whether you liked it or not.*

*Old Brother Standridge was a very tall man
He would walk up the aisle, Bible in hand.
He would preach great sermons, for four or five days,
And if people didn't heed, he went down the way.*

*He would walk out of the house, Bible under arm
And down the road he went, without any alarm.
He never would say if he'd preach any more
Just left us wondering, and standing at the door.*

*There was old Brother Swanson, we all knew so well.
He cautioned us so much about going to hell.
He was a great preacher, and one of the best
But he went on to glory, and is taking a rest.*

*He finished the work he was sent to do.
And was a kind friend to all that he knew.
When he was worn out and his work was done
The Lord called him on, to his heavenly home.*

*He pastored Mount Zion for fourteen years.
And he prayed many prayers and shed many tears.
When they wanted to join the church, he opened the doors
And he baptized some two hundred or more.*

*He would visit the sick; he'd visit the poor,
And he was always welcome when he came to the door.
He would read a chapter and then he'd pray.
And ever so often, he would spend the day.*

*He preached many funerals of our kindred and friends
Who had lived out their lives and come to the end.
He would comfort the living, honor the dead,
And we got a blessing out of all that he said.*

*When we had a revival the house would be filled
But they are mostly all dead, and lay out on the hill.
They were our parents, our children, and friends
Who had lived out their lives, and come to the end.*

*He married many couples during his life.
And he prayed the blessings on the man and wife,
That the Lord would bless and guide their life
Until death parted, as man and wife.*

*We had big singings in years that have passed
When old Curtis Taylor, was head of the class.
There were Underwoods, Turpins, and the Taylors, most all
And dozens of others, I cannot recall.*

*We would meet Sunday morning, to sing and play.
And it often happened that we stayed all day
Everybody was happy, and the songs so fine
We just sang songs and had a good time.*



Rev. Robert A. Kimsey

*There were the old deacons, Sim Adams and Teague,
But they passed on to join in the league.
They would serve the communion, lead in prayer,
Whatever was to do, the deacons were there.*

*The church is as good as it ever has been.
And we have another pastor and his name is Sim.
Sim Martin, we think, is a very fine man.
And a real good preacher, and will do all he can.*

*We are all good neighbors, let's stick to the man
And make Mount Zion the pride of the land.
Let's all work together and work for the Lord.
And when we have finished, we will get our reward.*

Continued on pg. 7

Mount Zion Church Had A Birthday

continued from pg. 6

*He will help in the Sunday School and prayer meeting too.
And ever so often, preach a good sermon or two.
When the corn is laid by and along in the fall
He will run a revival for the good of us all.*

*He is a good financier, as we already know.
If we furnish the money, he will make things grow.
The house was too small, we didn't have the room,
When we had big crowds, or got on a boom.*



Rev. John T. Plott



Rev. William A. Swanson

*If we had a loud speaker, it put on the air.
But if was rainy or cold, we couldn't stay there.
Then we'd have to be careful and mind what we said
Or somebody would hear us, at home in the bed.*

*Couldn't talk about our neighbors, or things they had.
Somebody would hear us, and really get mad.
Better let that alone, till we go to sing a song.
Then open it up, let it go right along.*

*We have as good voices as there is in the land.
Just need a little training by a singing man.
They would learn many things, they'd never forget.
And we could soon be listening to Mount Zion Quartet.*

*I have written this story, on my own accord.
And with all reverence to man and the Lord.
The language I used was the language of mine
And I have done my best, to tell it in rhyme.*

*If anyone doubt it, or think it untrue
Just write one yourself, we will listen to you.
There is a house there yet, the old people is gone.
And in just short time, we will all pass on.*

*So, let's all work together, and work for the Lord,
That we may all go to Heaven to get our reward.*

Benjamin Hill Taylor

Benjamin Hill Taylor, son of Jeremiah Taylor and Delilah Crow, was born Feb. 20, 1876 on Owl Creek in Towns County, Georgia. He married Ethel Sanders, daughter of J. C. "Lud" and Oma Lloyd Sanders. Seven children were born to them: Orbrey (1903-1945), Inez (1905-2001), Montaree (1910-2000), Ilah (1912-2002), Arp (1914-1933), Miles (1919-1993), and Clifford (1922-1971).

Ben lived on Owl Creek and worked as a blacksmith and a farmer. He made and repaired most of the tools used by himself and his neighbors. He also served as Justice of the Peace in his district for a number of years. Ben attended school in what he called the "little log house in the Soapstone Gap" where he learned the basics from the Blue Back Speller. He was a member of Mt. Zion Baptist Church where he once served as clerk.

In the early 1940s Ben was stricken with crippling arthritis and eventually became bedfast. To pass the time he began writing essays and poems. Although he was in great pain and his hands gnarled, his penmanship was a beautiful script. The topics he chose to write about ranged from political commentaries ("Let's Swap the Jack Ass In") and Humorous Musings ("Who Made the First Cream Gravy") to church history ("Mount Zion Church Had A Birth").

As stated in Ben's own words:
"I can't do much
But read and write
And that's mostly what I do
From morn 'til night.
I read of the future, I write of the past
All summed up, not much at last
But it keeps me busy, and my mind content
And off the hardships I have underwent."

Ben died Dec. 1, 1961, and is buried in Mt. Zion Church Cemetery
which is referenced in this poem.

By Hilda Taylor Thomason, Ben's granddaughter



DONATIONS

Thank you to the following people for their generous donations to the historical society.

Polly and Scott Royster

Old Rock Jail

John and Patti Kay

Old Rock Jail

Ollie and Deborah Nicholson

*In Memory of
Alice and Cliff Rogers*

William (Bill) Huff

In Memory of The Indian Town of Hiawassee

Carolyn Barnard

In Memory of Fred and Corine Gibson

Patsy Jo Mayes Bouvion

*In Memory of
Harry and Elaine England*

Brian and Mildred Underwood

*In Memory of
Kyle and Irene Underwood*



Towns County Historical Society
P.O. Box 1182
900 North Main St.
Hiawasse, Georgia 30546

