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Bay Springs Information

Transcribed by RaNae Smith Vaughn
For the Tishomingo County Historical & Genealogical Society

Source:

Madden, Robert R. Old Bay Springs, Mississippi. *Journal of Mississippi History* 31 (2), May 1969, 116-120.

One mile east of the boundary between Prentiss and Tishomingo counties on Mississippi Highway 4, are the remains of Bay Springs, Mississippi. Perhaps the history of this abandoned hamlet can best be told by presenting the story of one man, James Files Gresham. Gresham was a businessman, county politician, military man, and prominent citizen of Bay Springs.

Gresham was born in 1820 in northern Alabama. Little is known of his early life, but in 1838, his father, George Gresham, moved his family to Tishomingo County, Mississippi. This was six years after the Treaty of Pontotoc in which the Chickasaws agreed to give up their land east of the Mississippi River and move to Oklahoma. Tishomingo County, created in February 1838, contained 923,040 acres of the ceded land. Originally, it contained the present day counties of Tishomingo, Alcorn, and Prentiss.

In July 1840, James Gresham paid William H. Files \$800 for the SW ¼ of Section 26, T6S, R9E. This is the Bay Springs quarter-section, the 160 acres where most of the structures were located. The quarter-section is divided by Mackey's Creek which was, no doubt, the main attraction of the site, for the Greshams were quick to capitalize on the potential wealth of the swiftly flowing water. In the early 1840s, they built a water-powered saw and grist mill along the creek. It was the first such mill in that section of the county, and was a financial success.

Apparently, the initial success of the mill enterprise led Gresham astray. The records indicate that he purchased a considerable inventory from several Louisville, Kentucky,

merchants, namely, William Gavin and Company; Edward Hays and Alexander Craig; and Bainbridge, Coruth, and Baily. The reason for these purchases is clarified by the authorization granted Gresham at the first meeting of the County Board in 1848, which allowed him to "retail spirituous liquors at his store on Mackey Creek."

The store later proved to be a good investment, but to Gresham's chagrin, he could not pay the debts incurred by its establishment. On July 13, 1849, he was forced to transfer title of the SW ½ of Section 26, T6S, R9E (this included the Bay Springs quarter-section) to Arthur E. Reynolds and Benjamin N. Kingen for the sum of \$5.00 and payment in debts owed to the Louisville merchants.

James Gresham had lost the property, the mills, and the store, but he had not lost interest in them. He recouped his losses, and on February 28, 1852, the state legislature approved "an act to incorporate the Bay Springs Union Factory." The act named Gresham as one of the owners, along with Jonathan Briggs and John Robertson. The corporation was given authority for "erecting, furnishing, and carrying on at Bay Springs, the manufacture of cotton and woolen yarns and fabrics; and also, for making all machinery necessary for manufacturing purposes, and for the erection, furnishing, and carrying on of saw and grist mills..."

The old saw and grist mills were torn down to make way for the new factory. A dam 11 feet high with a breast wheel 12 feet in diameter was built across Mackey's Creek. The wheel furnished power not only for the factory, but also for a grist mill with two sets of stones, a cotton gin, a blacksmith shop, and a new saw mill, which were later added. The factory itself started operation with 360 spindles, but the number was soon increased to 744. One source places the total number at 1,000.

John Briggs died early in 1856, and on March 17, 1856, his land and chattels were sold at public auction. Prior to his death, Briggs apparently bought Robertson's interest in the factory, because at the auction, Gresham acquired 960 acres of land, including sole ownership of the Bay Springs quarter-section.

The fact that Gresham went from near bankruptcy to financial independence in less than 7 years speaks well of his business acumen. His assets rose from \$5,000 in 1850 to \$30,000 in 1860. However, when the Civil War came, Gresham disposed of all his holdings, except for 40 acres which was probably his home site, and joined the Confederate Army.

After the war, Gresham returned to Tishomingo County and was elected Sheriff. He probably moved to the county seat at Jacinto, which is roughly 20 miles northeast of Bay Springs. At the end of his term, Gresham moved to Booneville, Mississippi, where he engaged in merchandising, farming, and saw milling until his death in 1891.

During the years between the beginning of the Civil War and Gresham's death, Bay Springs led a precarious life. On several occasions during the Civil War, Bay Springs was in the path of advancing or retreating forces. The mills produced little for either side, for in August 1862, they were visited by a Union brigade under the command of Brigadier General R. B. Mitchell. Mitchell reported "disabling the cotton factory at that place in such ways as to require a communication between this county and New England

to effect repairs." He also recorded that his "soldiers said it was pretty hard to live in this God-forsaken country."

After the war, the mill changed owners several times until it finally burned in the 1880s-1890s. Local legend claims that dissatisfied workers started the fire. Although the town, what little there was of it, was not touched by the fire, it too died when the factory—its main economic support—was burned.

Source:

Smith, Steven D. Old Bay Springs Revisited. *Journal of Mississippi History* 31 (3) November 1986, 297-308.

Below the waters of the Bay Springs Reservoir in Tishomingo County, Mississippi, lay the remains of a once-prosperous 19th century cotton milling community. By the 1970s, little remained of the town located on Mississippi Highway 4, a few miles west of Belmont, except a Masonic lodge, an abandoned general store, and an abandoned bridge. Then in 1979, old Bay Springs became the focal point for the construction of the Bay Springs Lock and Dam as part of the Tombigbee Waterway. This construction threatened the remaining vestiges of Bay Springs.

Today the valley of Mackey's Creek serves to connect the Tombigbee and Tennessee rivers. At that location in 1838, however, the stream current was channeled into a narrow, 30-foot-deep gorge, proving ample head for a 12-foot breast wheel to run the mills of George and James Gresham.

George Gresham moved from Lauderdale County, Alabama, to Tishomingo County in 1836, along with his wife, Margaret, 18-year-old son, James, and 10 other children. He filed claim for three-quarters of Section 26, T6S, R9E soon after, and by 1839, James had purchased the remaining southwest quarter. At that time, neighbors and potential customers for their mills were few and scattered because old Tishomingo County, which then included present-day Alcorn and Prentiss counties, had a total population of only 6,681. The Greshams were possibly speculating on continuing settlement when they built the mills. Their hopes were obviously fulfilled, as soon the tract included a blacksmith shop, general store, and cotton gin, all called Gresham's Mills by local residents.

James ensured his business future by co-sponsoring the means for farmers to transport their goods to the mills. Police Minutes between 1836 and 1852 indicate that he and another resident received \$147.50 for constructing a bridge across Mackey's Creek, and he was also on the service commission to establish roads around his village. By 1855, several roads passed through the hamlet, winding to Eastport, Fulton, Danville, and Pikeville.

Gresham's Mills became known as Bay Springs beginning in 1846. The place originally known as Bay Springs was located about four miles southwest of Gresham's Mills. But Robert Lowery, whose bay trees and springs lent their name to his home and post office, moved to Carrollville, and the Bay Springs Post Office was transferred to the general store at Gresham's Mills, which soon became Bay Springs.

In 1852, James Files Gresham made an interesting business deal, interrupted by historian Robert Madden as an indication of possible bankruptcy. Gresham accrued a debt of \$903.68 to three Louisville, Kentucky merchants for the purchase of liquor, which he planned to sell by the drink at his Bay Springs store. To pay for this expense, Gresham transferred the title to the land containing the industrial complex to Arthur E. Reynolds and Benjamin N. Kinger. However, the land was not lost, as Madden relates, or even in

real danger. It was simply placed in a trust deed until Gresham fully repaid his debts in 1855. Gresham was probably only slightly concerned about this debt, since as early as 1850 his mills were valued at \$1,500, while they were producing \$750 worth of logs and 12,000 bushels of flour and meal valued at \$500.

But James Files Gresham was not satisfied with just operating the mills and general store. He soon went into partnership with John Briggs, an Eastport businessman, to establish a cotton manufacturing factory. Briggs and Gresham divided the responsibility for the construction of the factory. Briggs provided the machinery for operating 300 to 500 spindles; Gresham provided 680 acres, the building, and the power system. At first, Gresham was to manage the factory. Later a man named John Robertson bought one-sixth interest and became the supervisor, receiving \$300 per year. By 1856, the factory was the sole interest of James F. Gresham.

Throughout the 1850s, the fortunes of the community were tied to the industrial complex. Slow but continued growth is evident from a few known activities. For instance, a stagecoach visited Bay Springs three times each day, and in 1853, a Masonic Lodge was formed. By 1860, the store owned by Gresham was purchasing \$5,293 in goods and merchandise to sell to its customers. Some 90,000 board feet of lumber, 500 bushels of meal, and 4,000 bushels of flour were being produced at these mills, while the factory produced 72,000 pounds of yarn and 18,000 pounds of carded wool. Surrounding the little community, Tishomingo County had grown to a population of 24,149.

Nevertheless, like the rest of the South, political events soon changed the lives of the Bay Springs residents. Perhaps Gresham surmised the future and prepared himself for action, because an 1860 issue of the Memphis Daily appeal published the following advertisement:

Cotton Factory, Bay Springs. Cotton Factory situated in Tishomingo Co., Miss., 34 miles from Eastport and 10 miles from the railroad. The tract of land contains 340 acres. The factory is capable of driving 1,200 spindles and 50 looms. There are plenty of good houses for operators. Priced exceedingly cheap and terms liberal. For sale by Monsarrott, Depree & Co.

In November of that year, Gresham sold the factory to J. C. Terry and W. J. Hart of Eastport. Although Gresham's ownership of the industrial complex ended, his influence in the community continued. He later formed the Cape Horn Grays, which became Company H, 26th Mississippi Regiment, and saw action in Civil War battles such as Second Manassas and Vicksburg. He survived the war and returned to Tishomingo County. After four years of serving as sheriff and tax collector, he moved to Booneville, where he died in 1891 at 70 years of age.

Throughout the ownership of the complex by Hart and Terry, from 1861 to 1866, the operations were threatened by war. In August 1861, Union troops of the 1st Brigade, 4th Division, Army of the Mississippi, commanded by Brig. General Robert B. Mitchell,

disabled the cotton factory at Bay Springs “in such a way as to require a communication between this country and New England in order to effect repairs.” Skirmishes in and around Bay Springs continued between Union troops and Confederate troops until the Battle of Iuka in September 1862. During the Confederate retreat from Iuka, an ammunition wagon spilled off the Bay Springs bridge crossing Mackey’s Creek just upstream from the factory.

General Mitchell’s assessment of the devastation appears to have been exaggerated. Historical information suggests that the factory was back in production before the end of the war. This idea is supported indirectly since Terry sold his half interest in the factory to Hart in 1866, at a price of \$5,000. Later that year, Hart entered into partnership with Alex Wiggs and M. J. Wicks. These sales indicate that some value was still attached to the factory after General Mitchell’s visit. In any case, by 1870, the factory was back in production, valued at \$30,000, and producing 80,000 pounds of yarn worth \$28,000 with its 576 spindles.

The ownership of the cotton factory changed hands several times throughout the early 1870s. The most important owner, who obtained full ownership in 1877, was John M. Nelson of Eastport. Like Gresham, Nelson operated not only the cotton factory but also the sawmill, gristmill, cotton gin, and general store. he became postmaster in 1881. The cotton factory grew to about 800 spindles. The village population grew to 65, and although its future was still dependent on Nelson’s industrial complex, it looked bright. Attesting to this bright future was an article that appeared in the *Corinth Subsoiler and Democrat* on May 13, 1881:

“One of the most important industries of the state is the Bay Springs Factory situated in Tishomingo County and owned by Col. John M. Nelson. It is situated about 25 miles south of Iuka and 20 miles east of Booneville. It runs about 800 spindles, makes yarn, cotton rope, etc., also a wool-carding machine, a cotton gin, a saw and grist mill, all attached and run by water power. There is, perhaps, no other water power in the state to equal it. It has sufficient head for 2,000 spindles and 40 looms and is never failing. The stream is about 160 feet wide with a solid rock bottom and solid rock banks about 30 feet high. It is in a cotton section. The Bay Springs Factory is just at its beginning. The time is near at hand when it will be one of the largest manufacturing enterprises of the South. There is no citizen in the South more capable of demonstration that she can be made a cotton manufacturing, as well as a cotton-growing state than Col. Nelson.”

Unfortunately, John M. Nelson died one year later at age 51. His death essentially marks the death of the Bay Springs Factory and surrounding village, though the factory continued to operate until 1885. His son, John, Jr., took over management of the mills at his father’s death, but he apparently was a poor manager. Problems began to develop between management and workers, and a fire destroyed the factory. The exact date of the fire is unknown, but it probably occurred between 1883 and 1885. Trouble did not start until after Col. Nelson’s death in 1882. In 1885, the Bay Springs Post Office was discontinued, and mail went to the nearby post office of Tynes. The post office closure was apparently the result of population loss due to a lack of available employment.

Without the factory, the village quickly deteriorated and was abandoned. The only steady activity at Bay Springs was at the Masonic Lodge on the west bank. Downstairs, church services were conducted. The lodge remained until 1953. In an attempt to bring life back to Bay Springs, Harvey Medford, Mayor of Tupelo in 1887, suggested that the state penitentiary be built at Bay Springs, along with a new cotton factory. However, his suggestion was never followed.

At the turn of the century, only the lodge and store remained. From 1990 until the 1930s, Bay Springs was the scene of intense logging activities, and the forests rang with the sounds of portable sawmills. Temporary housing was built for employees of the logging industry, but they were quickly abandoned when the logs were played out. The area then returned to quiet agricultural pursuits.

Bay Springs retained its place name throughout the early 20th century, but the annual Confederate reunions held there gradually got smaller and finally ceased. Bay Springs became only a nice spot for a picnic; then in 1979, a small group of researchers worked to piece together its history before the lock and dam were built.

The availability of water and water power stands as the main determinate of settlement in and around Bay Springs. Mackey's Creek drew the Greshams to the cliffs of Bay Springs in 1836, and today the creek serves as a water source for the connection between the Tennessee and Tombigbee rivers.

Gresham's enterprise provided a convenient central place for the local residents. At Bay Springs, settlers could bring their raw materials of wood, grain, cotton, and wool to be processed while they purchased supplies and engaged in various social activities. Some found seasonal employment at the mills and factory. Perhaps if Bay Springs had survived, it could have developed into one of the major textile centers later famous throughout the South. But that is doubtful since nearby towns like Corinth were closer to the main transportation routes. Most likely, Bay Springs was doomed before the fire. Still, Bay Springs stood as a unique frontier village, a microcosm of the 19th century textile centers far to the east and north.