

## **Leslie Kennedy, Tracy City's Initial Railroad and Coalmine Wanderer**

**Written by Jackie Layne Partin (2017-2018)**

**With contributions from Karin Reymer**

Young Leslie Kennedy arrived in this country in **1848** from Ireland on the Ship Forest Monarch. He had left his home in the middle of Ireland's great potato famine. The twenty-two-year old's name appeared later in **1850** as a boarder in Ontonagon, Michigan. His occupation was listed as a "laborer." On Christmas day **1856**, his father, Samuel Kennedy, wrote him a letter from Quilley Co., Londonderry, Northern Ireland and sent it to **Tracy City**, Tennessee, placing Leslie at the window of the post office in Tracy City, Marion County in the mid **1850s**. This timeline allows for Leslie to have been on the spot a few years after Thomas Benton Wooten found coal while hunting at Wooten Place in the area we now call the Heading. Leslie played a big role in the serious acceptance of a good-grade coal being in our area, and as a pre-requisite, he was on the side of the mountain seeing to the climb of the railroad beds and tracks as they were laid down for the forty-nine-ton General Mosquera to show its stuff in its pull up the steep mountain terrain in **1855**. Young Garrett Smith Backus was its chief engineer.

Looking back in **1907**, Col. Arthur St. Clair Colyar used these words concerning Leslie, *"In 1851 a roving Irishman by the name of Leslie Kennedy, in wandering through these mountains, became very much impressed around Tracy City. Kennedy went to Nashville and interested a lawyer, Col. W. N. Bilbo, in a scheme to acquire these lands and build a coal road from the junction of the Nashville & Chattanooga Road at Cowan...These facts are mentioned to show that Leslie Kennedy, the wandering, roving Irishman, made the location at this point a possibility...Leslie Kennedy's work in getting a railroad built up the mountain, as I stated above, made the location possible, for without a railroad the university would never have been located here, and if the railroad had not been built at that time the probabilities are that it would have been more than a quarter of a century before anyone else would have dared to make the financial venture of building a coal road twenty miles up this mountain before the use of coal had become general."*

**Note:** Although Mr. Colyar expressed the wanderings of Kennedy around Tracy City in 1851, it would be five or six more years before **Wooten Place** would be named **Tracy City**.

On **August 3, 1860**, Leslie Kennedy and another young man, Garrett Smith Backus, both lived in Tracy City, Marion Co. Leslie worked in and around the Wooten coalmines while Mr. Backus was a chief engineer of the train. Leslie came from West Ireland with money, \$1400 in personal "pocket" money and acquired \$2000 in real estate,

and he made money as he worked in land deals around town. Mr. Backus started out with very little money, but soon he and Leslie did some real estate dealings selling two lots on **Aug. 2, 1858**, in the Backus Addition of Tracy City to J. McFadden. Strangely, the first known official map of Tracy City town lots was made in **1873** after the town became part of the new county of Grundy, but the two lots, # 8 and # 25, from the Backus Addition, were in existence much earlier. My searches at the Marion County courthouse led me nowhere. Leslie alone bought three lots, #'s 30, 31 and 32 with a Deed of Trust, John Lowrie being the trustee, on **Nov. 12, 1860**, in Tracy City, but they too were surveyed and numbered under the Marion County map of Tracy City. Two days later in Jasper, Tennessee, the Deed of Trust was registered. Leslie was still single when he paid his taxes to the Marion County assessor in **1862**.

On **June 11, 1867**, he married a Coffee County lady named Sarah "Sallie" Sawyers. Two months later he wrote to Sarah from Tracy City.

*Dear Sarah,*

*I will begin by telling you of Mattie's mishap on the journey back here. According to her version of the affair, she and you encountered nothing but ill back on your journey to Cowan & she upon starting the next evening on the train for this place got as far as some 6 miles, when the engine tinder and several cars ran off the track. The danger was so eminent that the engineer and all hands fled their post, leaving her alone on the engine which came very nigh going over a steep bank. That train remained off the track until 12 o'clock next day. **(end pg. 1)** She was therefore compelled to walk about 4 miles to the University before finding a place suitable to lodge at until next day. Yesterday evening she arrived & as I had anticipated considerably out of humour, but that don't hurt much now, as I have rather become used to it. A fresh cause of trouble to her now is that she has muddied and spoiled her chief-traveling dress and no other to be had here besides she wishes to start back to Cincinnati on Tuesday first & I must accompany her. All right, I have no wish to detain her, as she seems so ill at ease here amongst people who are so far below the proper standard (in her view). You will be therefore Sarah, **(end pg. 2)** that as matters stand, it will be out of my power to be with you before the last of this week, as it will be that time before I can get back from Nashville & should the girl change her mind & stay here still longer, my abstinence from your side will be proportionably increased. There has been considerable sayings & doings here within the last few days, but for fear the night fail to interest you in the form & manner that I could only write them, I will reserve them until we meet which will*

*be as soon as I am able & that point you surely are satisfied upon. I was handed a letter the same day you left for you from Mother & which I concluded was not worth while forwarding (end pg. 3) as you would doubtless have the contents of it and more – told you by her own lips ere it reached you. Mattie has whispered to me that mother felt considerably angered by our late behavior towards her. I apprehended as much and had she not been somewhat **stump** by such apparent neglect, I should not have thought her possessed of those finer feelings which I judged her in possession of. I hope however that you have spared no pains to explain how very adversely everything occurred in presenting us in the performance of our dutys towards her & others. But is it true that I am to live alone here until we are prepared for housekeeping, is that not more punishment than I deserve. Surely Sarah you do not freely ... (end of pg 4) – (Sadly pg. 5 is missing.)*

In the above letter, it is easy to see that Leslie and new bride Sarah were having problems with Leslie's spoiled niece Martha "Mattie" (Smith) Prescott. Family stories mention that Mattie sharply announced, "*the light of Tracy City would never shine on her fine clothes again!*" The "mother" mentioned in the letter was Sarah's mother, Elizabeth Emma "Betsy" (Gilliland) Sawyers Willis. Sarah was an only child. Her mother lived with her probably because Leslie traveled so much in his work.

According to one deed, in August 1868 Leslie sold property in Cowan, Franklin County, TN, to Pleasant Gilliam. The building on the property formerly known as the University Hotel became the residence for Mr. Gilliam. That particular Hotel was actually in Sewanee, Franklin County, TN. In 1860, Pleasant Gilliam was operating a "tavern" in Tracy City, Marion County. In 1870, Mr. Gilliam lived in Franklin County, got his mail through the Decherd Post Office, and was listed as a dry goods retail merchant.

In 1858 these words were written in *The Home Journal* published in Winchester, TN, concerning the Wooten Mines pictured below, "...*The entrance to the mine now opened is about thirty feet above the level of the railroad, and from it and underneath, where the cars will receive the coals, are fixed a half dozen chutes or troughs and screens, over which the coals will descend being cleaned of any dust before they reach the cars.*" The photos were taken ten years later, but Leslie felt it an exciting time in the mining of the Wooten mines, especially since the war had ended three years earlier and work on the railroad and mining was once more active. Wooten Mine # 1, may have already been mined out, and this is possibly photos of Wooten Mine # 2 which went into the Colony/Hobbs Hill Rd. underground digs.



Photos belonged to Leslie Kennedy "Tracy City Coal Mines, A General View"--1868



1868 Photo of the Tracy City Mines (Photos Courtesy of Karin Heymer)

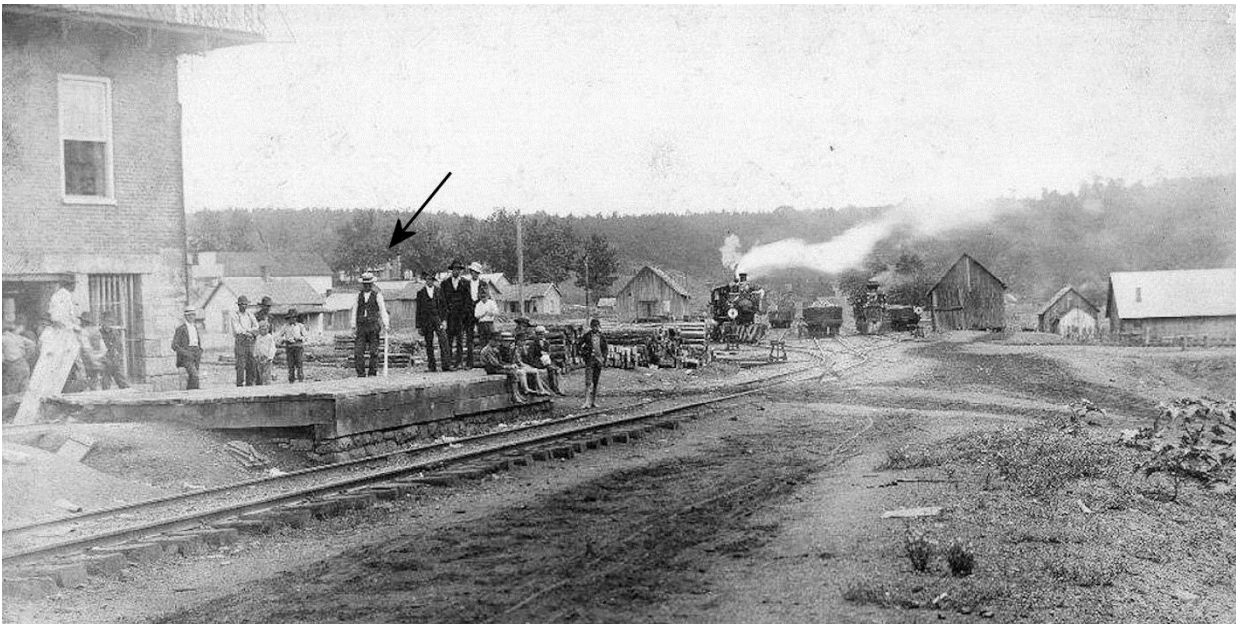
In 1870 Leslie's occupation was listed as a lime dealer; limestone was ground into a powder and mixed with the fine coal dust in the mines then spread about to keep explosions down that could be the result of a spark and the fine coal dust igniting. Leslie bought many acres of land on the eastern side of the road that ran from Tracy City to Gruetli, aka the Colony Road and the Dunlap Road. As we know from history, that road is now called the Hobbs Hill Road. The Kennedys and their first three children, Samuel P. "Sam," Thomas Charles "Charlie," and David Leslie were living in the Tracy City area in 1870. It is generally accepted that the O'Neil/Haynes/Cook house on the corner of Colyar and Cook Sts. first belonged to Leslie Kennedy and at least one deed calls it the old Leslie Kennedy house and lot.



**Thought to be the original windows around the wooden door at the Kennedy House**

On **January 20, 1864**, during the skirmish at Tracy City at the rear of the Howard and Benham store, "*...the enemy then, after deploying along the edge of the woods surrounding the town, sent in under the flags of truce four separate summons to surrender, which being refused, they proceeded to set fire to the depot, engine-house, and some buildings connected with the coal works. They paroled and set at liberty 10 of their prisoners. Of the remaining, nothing has been heard. A man named Kennedy, who owns a house in the place, and who was arrested several*

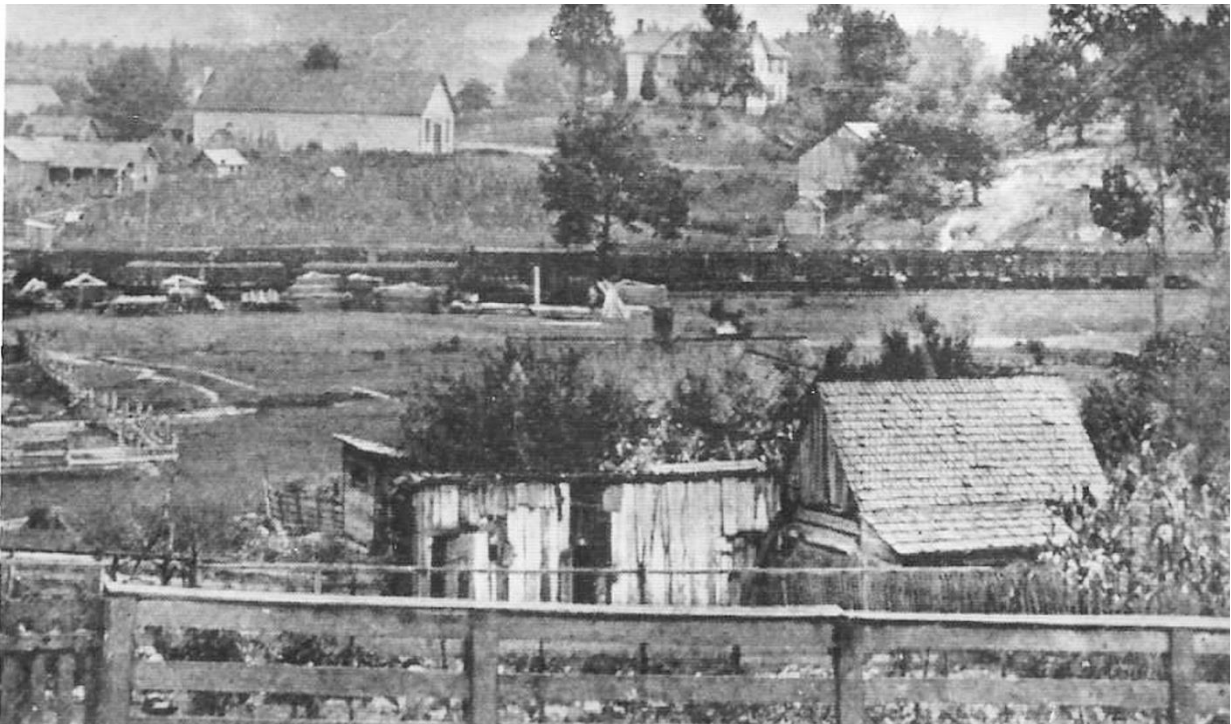
nights before on suspicion of being a spy, but who effected his escape, is supposed to have guided this rebel party into the town." The excerpt from the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, 1861-1865*, supports the idea that a Kennedy man owned a house close to the Howard and Benham Store which was at that time directly below the house on Colyar and Coke Sts. However, later there was one more Kennedy in Tracy City and that was Joseph Leon Kennedy, not related to Leslie. They were good friends. Joseph lived on 7<sup>th</sup> Street. The problem with this man was that he did not live in Tracy City in 1860; he is listed in 1870 living in the town. But being 22 years at that time, he would have only been 16 years of age in 1864 and probably would not have even begun thinking about owning a house. Leslie was the Kennedy man with a house. I can find no military records for Leslie, so I cannot say where his sympathies lay. Was Leslie the supposed spy? Was he aiding the Confederate States? Did he lead the rebels into the town he knew so well? Generally speaking, the Irish soldiers fought for the North, but some did change their thinking as the war dragged on.



**Kennedy House Can Be Seen in the Trees on the Hill Above the War Skirmish Area. This photo was taken around 1898 looking into the Heading and the Tracy City skirmish area. Many of the buildings, if not all, would not have been present in 1864.**

Locals have always looked upon the Kennedy house on the hill above the heading as being the Union Headquarters for the six and a half months of their occupation of

Tracy City. Stories of jail cells and chains with large keys in the basement area have long been told in moments of story sharing on Saturday mornings at the Post Office or shoe shops or rock fences lined with old timers “chewing” their tobacco. A few years back, I was invited into the old Kennedy house. The building that managed to survive many years, approximately 155, of necessity wears a new suit of clothes. However, underneath the whole garment, a wondering eye can see the depth of history through the renovations that have taken place throughout the years. The house made a perfect overlook of the Benham Stockade. One could see almost anything that went on in that tiny little village from that vantage point. I have been all through the old house and found ample room in the basement to have had cells, but personally, I saw no remains of such.



**Leslie Kennedy House in Center Back on the Hill (Photo Courtesy of Johnny White)**

In 1865 soon after the end of the Civil War, Mr. A. S. Colyar, the President of the Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company, seeing the destruction of the railroad system in Tracy City, put Capt. Leslie Kennedy in charge of the mine and instructed him to restore it by a good system of drainage and ventilation. Leslie was good at any job placed in front of him; he made the mine safe and workable.

Let me insert a few facts from an **1882** Grundy County deed to prop up the understanding that the house overlooking the Tracy City Civil War skirmishes was the Kennedy house. Frank P. Marquett sold a tract or parcel of land in Tracy City to William Brophy in **February 1882**. "*...to wit: on the South by what is known as Colyar Street, on the West by Coke Street, on the East & West by Lands of the Tennessee Coal & R. R. Co. and comprises 200, two hundred feet square on the corner at Coke & Colyar Streets, as appears from the plan of Tracy City...and is better known as the **Capt. Leslie Kennedy House and Lot...***" I have never doubted that Leslie owned that particular house, but when and how long he owned it has been a bother to me. Mr. Marquett was married to Mary Roddy, daughter of A. J. and Susan (Stotts) Roddy.

Sarah wrote a letter to Leslie on **July 10, 1871** from Tracy City. Leslie had made a trip back to his home in Ireland where he visited his brother, Tom. Sarah was worried about her husband's health and prayed for his return, and also wrote, "*give my love to Tom and tell him to make a good Christian out of you,*"(excerpt from a letter published in the *Grundy County Herald* 1976 Bicentennial paper). On **September 28, 1874**, while living in Birmingham, Alabama, Leslie wrote a letter to his wife concerning money he had mailed in cash, but he had not heard if she had received it. The letter was written on company stationery of the Office of New Castle Coal & Iron Company. On **April 8, 1875**, Leslie placed an advertisement in the *Birmingham Iron Age* for chestnut oak bark. He gave the town of Oxmoor, Alabama as his address. That same year, Leslie died and his burial place is unknown. Had he made it back home to Tracy City or Sewanee, or did he die away from his wife and children? Was he buried in Alabama? The family had the monetary means to have his body sent home by train, but so far, I have no knowledge of his burial site

In **1879**, "*Rev. Thomas Kennedy remained a bachelor all his life...he lived at Templemoyle, Newtown Limavady, County Londonderry, N. Ireland. He was minister at Largy Presbyterian Church....in 1879, he visited... the U. S. to meet his deceased brother's family... he visited at Tracy City, Grundy County, Tennessee, to meet his sister-in-law, Sarah (Sawyers) Kennedy and his nephews and niece.....* I find it strange that there is no mention of Rev. Thomas Kennedy visiting his brother's grave if he had been buried in Grundy County, and if he had, he probably would have been interred in the Tracy City Cemetery with a prominent tombstone. Some believe he was buried at Sewanee, Franklin County, TN, about six miles away. There are Kennedys buried in the Eastern Star Cemetery, but no known ones in the University Cemetery. The brother could easily have ridden the train from Tracy City to Sewanee to visit his grave.





**Rev. Thomas Kennedy Plaque at Largy Presbyterian Church in Londonderry, Ireland**



**Largy Presbyterian Church at Londonderry, Northern Ireland (2008)**

Out of thirty-one sheets of the 1880 Census images for District 11, Grundy County, Tennessee, only two school teachers' names were found, B. F. Armstrong (female) and Sallie Houston. Since the Census was taken in June, these two teachers could have been

teaching anywhere and came to Tracy City to visit for the summer. There was no Shook School until the opening fall of 1889.



**Leslie Kennedy**

**(1827 – 1875)**

In 1880 Sarah was a widow with five children; Sarah Elizabeth “Lizzie” and Dewitt Marshall had been added to the family. In 1873, she had also lost a little girl whom she named Martha Ann Kennedy. Leslie passed away in 1875. It is my belief that wherever little Martha Ann was buried, her dad was laid next to her. Sarah was pregnant with Dewitt when Leslie died.

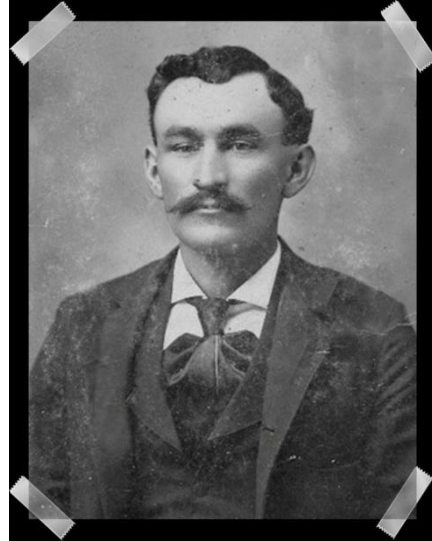
Let’s remind ourselves here that there was no public school in **Mt. Pleasant** (Hobbs Hill) at the time Leslie and Sarah lived here on the plateau. Would, or better yet, did Leslie Kennedy let his children and others in the area go without some sort of schooling? Generally speaking, most communities, no matter how far the students had to walk, furnished some sort of school house, usually a one room log building that also served as a place of worship.

**David Leslie Kennedy**

**(1870-1951)**

**Son of Leslie & Sarah (Sawyer)  
Kennedy**

**Born in Tennessee and Died in Texas**

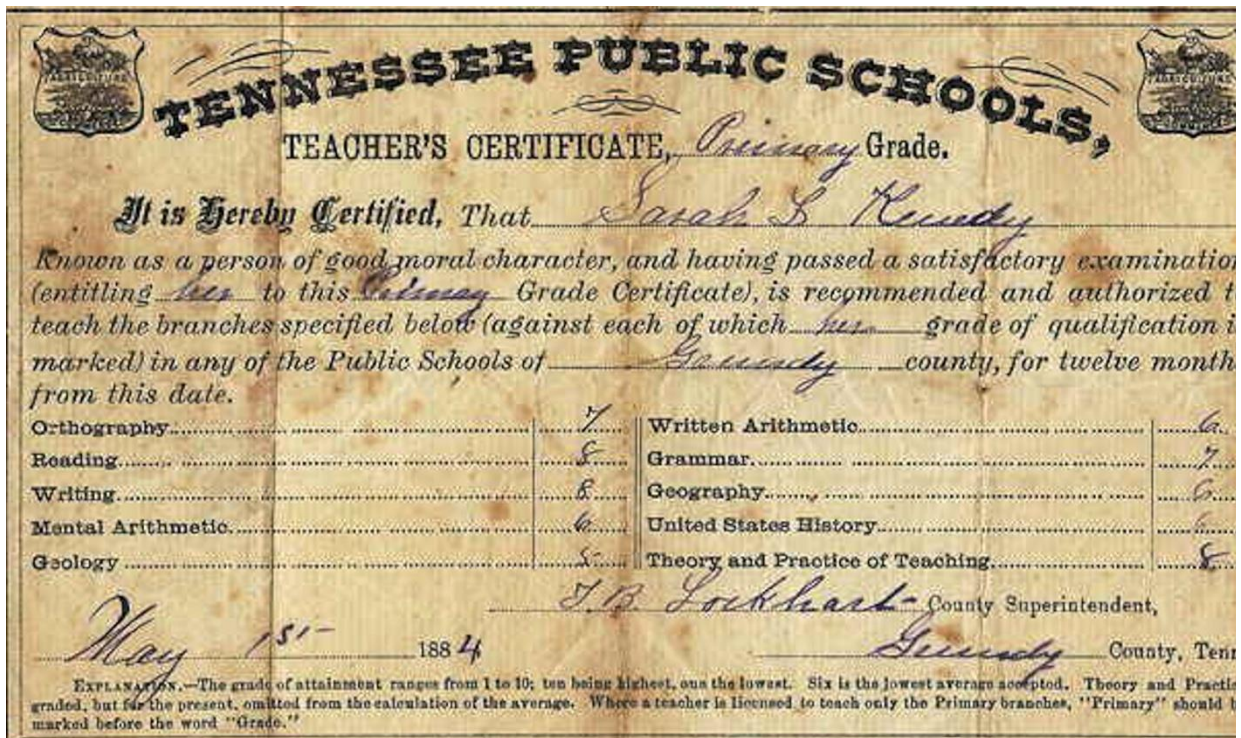


Around **1955** a Norris Burr Brown descendant, John Beecher Brown, shared a memory; he spoke of a great revival in **1888** held in the **Kennedy School** by N. B. Brown. The revival with its overflowing crowd showed him that there was a need for lots of good Bible preaching in the area on the hill. Rev. Brown had no building wherein to preach to a large crowd except the Kennedy School building that by **1889** was empty. Sarah Kennedy got her Tennessee Public School teaching certificate in **1884**. The last documents in the area with Sarah's signature on them are two deeds where she sold two acres each to Lewis and Amos Cope on what became known as (Amos) Cope Hollow Road. Today (2017) the road borders the Hobbs Hill Cemetery on the south. These deeds were signed on **Dec. 1, 1885**. This tells us that she still owned land on Hobbs Hill but left it in good hands when she took her five children and moved to Texas where she died around **1914** and was buried near her mother, Elizabeth Sawyers Willis in an unmarked grave.

She, (the steam engine named the *Sewanee*), was placed on the East Fork branch track in front of the tool house, and near the front entrance of the "*old school house...*" Since this overhaul of the engine was done before or near the time the new Shook School was built, one may wonder if the old school house may have been the Kennedy School house. On the other hand, Leslie had bought eighty-five acres of land that lay on both sides of Colony Road now known as Hobbs Hill. The Hobbs Hill School from olden days and the current school building now owned by the Grundy County School Board were almost in the center of the Kennedy tract. It has been my theory that for the most part, a school or church in olden days stayed put. It may have been torn down and rebuilt, burned and rebuilt, renovated— taking on a whole new look, but it usually stayed put. The Kennedy School was either just above the Heading at the end of Railroad Avenue or up at Mt. Pleasant/Hobbs Hill on Leslie Kennedy's land. From *The Republican Banner*

newspaper in 1869, we may read, "There is in the village a Methodist and Roman Catholic Church in the course of erection, and a flourishing school of about sixty scholars." This probably was the first school in Tracy City, and may well have been known as the Kennedy School. For certain, it was about twenty years before the James K. Shook school was founded.

Sarah Kennedy worked toward getting state certified for becoming a teacher showing her love for teaching. She left Tennessee not long after she received her certificate and went to Texas as seen by the dates on the document and on the following letter from a friend in Tracy City.



**Sarah Kennedy's Teaching Certificate for Tennessee Public Schools (documents courtesy of Karin Reymer)**

Tracy City, Oct. 8, 1884

Dear Friend,

Your kind letter was received a few days ago. I need not tell you that I was surprised as well as pleased to hear from you, for I had just come to the conclusion that perhaps we would never hear from you. I am glad you are doing well and are all so well satisfied. Our family are all well except myself, though my health is better than during the summer. I have not been able since last

Spring to visit any or even to do my housework and at one time I thought I could never live through the warm weather, but I am now able to be up all the time and can help a little with the work. **Lucinda** is about as she was when you left here. She is very fleshy but not strong. Tracy has improved a good deal within the last year, several dwelling houses, and one or two new stores have been built. We have had our house painted and a new plank fence which improves its look. The health of this place is very good there have only been a few deaths since you left. **Old man Sims** died in July and **Mrs. Horton** died in last month, both of them had been sick a long time. **Pete Sims** sold your place to **Bill and France Sweeten** and a part of it to **old Carroll Nunley**--he made several hundred dollars on it. Your cider mill is at **Jim Baileys**. **Harris Thompson** says his mother wants to buy one and is going up to look at it and if it suits her, he thinks she will take it. I don't think they have sold anything you left. **Old Mrs. McGovern** got crippled last March by being pushed off the porch. It happened in this way, someone told her that **John** was at a neighbor's house drunk and she went to try to get him home and somehow or other he pushed her off the porch and injured one of her hips so badly that she has never walked a step since. She can now get about a little in her room on crutches but the Dr. says she will never walk again.

Tell **Lizzie** that **Jane Bailey** is married she was married in July to a man by the name of **Smith**, a widower with two children. Hess is still at home but I think she will take another trip soon. She is doing no better but from all accounts worse than ever. **Nora Kennedy** ran away with **Bill Bynum** & married about two months ago. Her mother came very near tearing up Tracy but I think has about gotten over it now. **John McGovern** and **Viney Saunders** are married. I believe these are all the weddings that I can think of. **Harris Thompson** is Captain of the Mines now. **Jim Levan** was turned off on account of drinking. **Old Jack Roddy** and **Jim Bailey** are trying to see which will kill themselves first on whiskey --they are both drunk all the time. **Tom Roddy** has another girl at his house a few days old. Tom ran for County Court Clerk again and got beaten by **Isham Walker** and we are all very much rejoiced over it. I think the **Roddys** have run this County long enough. **Mr. Bull** says he will write to **Capt. Brannon** and find out what he did with that receipt but he certainly must have sent it. It may be they are trying to play off on you and make this an excuse for not sending you the balance that is due. Tell the boys we are glad to hear that they are all doing so well in Texas and hope they will grow up and make honorable good men--patterns for our Tracy boys. I was so glad to hear from my dear old friend **Becky Ashley**--give her my best love and tell her that the mention of her in your letter brought back many tender recollections and she has scarcely been out of my mind since. Tell her that "I hope she is a good earnest Christian and as I have no thought of ever seeing her again on earth I want to meet her in the sweet by and by." Give my love to your Ma and the children and tell them we often think of them. Write as soon as you can and I shall take pleasure in replying to your letters. God bless you --

*Ever your friend,  
Susan Bull*

**For researchers: Let's touch on some of the names used in Susan's letter to Sarah.**

- **Susan Bull**—Susan (Sherrill) Bull, wife of James Everett Bull who was a blacksmith; Susan Bull and Sarah Kennedy were next door neighbors and best of friends.
- **Lucinda**--
- **Old man Sims** (James Turney Sims – Nov. 2, 1825--July 27, 1884)
- **Mrs. Horton** –
- **Pete Sims** (Peter B. Sims – son of James Turney Sims & Elizabeth A. Safley Sims)
- **Bill & France Sweeten** – possibly William H. Sweeten & brother France Sweeten
- **Carroll Nunley**--
- **Jim Bailey** – (James Bailey--husband of Sarah Jane Sullivan Bailey)
- **Harris Thompson** (Harris B. Thompson--1857-1931)—son of John & Lucy (Griswold) Thompson
- **Old Mrs. McGovern** (Jane Myers McGovern – wife of James and mother of John)
- **John McGovern** (son of James & Jane Myers McGovern)
- **Lizzie** (Lizzie Kennedy – daughter of Leslie & Sarah Sawyers Kennedy)
- **Jane Bailey** (Mary Jane Bailey, daughter of James & Sarah Sullivan Bailey) married Allen M. **Smith**
- **Hess** (Hesse Bailey – sister to Mary Jane Bailey)
- **Nora Kennedy** (Lenora Kennedy) – daughter of Joseph Leon & Nancy (Travis) Kennedy (This family was not related to Leslie Kennedy, but he and Joseph worked closely together around the mines and railroads.)
- **Bill Bynum**
- **Viney** – (Lavina “Viney” Sanders McGovern – wife of John McGovern)
- **Jim Levan**
- **Old Jack Roddy** – (Andrew Jackson “Jack” Roddy husband of Susan Stotts Roddy)
- **Jim Bailey** – (James Bailey – father of Mary Jane and Hess Bailey)
- **Tom**
- **Isham Walker**
- **Roddys** (see story by Jackie Layne Partin – “The Roddy Desperadoes”)

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- **Capt. Brannon** (probably John Thomas “J. T.” or Andrew Brannan)
- **Beck Ashley**

Sarah Kennedy’s approximately one hundred acres of land went up for public auction by decree on **June 15, 1885**. Peter B. Sims bought much of the Kennedy tract at the auction for \$375.00 (Book H – pg. 451). He sold it in portions to people named Alex Sweeton, W. H. Sweeten, J. M. Fletcher, F. M. Nunley who turned around and sold a portion to Lem Campbell. The old Kennedy farm was consumed just as quickly as Sarah Kennedy left the hill where it laid. Some of the deeds were obviously not actually signed by Sarah Kennedy, but the person whose hand wrote the deeds; it appears her name was annexed with T. B. Roddy signing for her.

The letter above from Susan to Sarah causes one to think Sarah Kennedy left Tracy City rather quickly. She was here on **May 15, 1884** when she received her teaching certificate and not here in **October 8, 1884** and had been gone long enough for Susan to think she would never hear from her again. It appears that Sarah walked out of her house, leaving behind household items and land still in her name. Lewis and Amos Cope bought portions of her land on **Dec. 1, 1885**; even the number of acres sold to Lewis was left blank.

In the *Tracy City News* **Nov. 30, 1888** issue, a notice for back taxes was published. The unpaid tax was for the year of **1874**, and the land was assessed in Leslie Kennedy’s name.

I leave this story of Grundy County’s past with researchers who possibly will find out about where Leslie Kennedy died and where he was buried.

Find me at [jackiepartin@blomand.net](mailto:jackiepartin@blomand.net) .