

## Fannie Thompson of Beersheba Springs and her Family

The house now called Nanhaven, at 147 Dahlgren Avenue in Beersheba Springs, Tennessee, entered the family of the present owners when it was bought by Fannie Thompson (1852 – 1914) on May 3, 1887 for \$550. John Armfield had built it about 1855 and sold it on a mortgage to Charles G. Dahlgren of Natchez. After the Civil War, it had reverted to Armfield. The 1887 price was less than one seventh of what Dahlgren had paid.

Converted to 2011 prices by the index of unskilled labor, the \$550 would be \$86,000; converted by the index of skilled labor it would be \$138,000. These figures bracket the current assessed value of the property. Fannie, as far as we can tell, probably supported herself by teaching school and is unlikely, by age 35, to have saved up any such sum. The money must have been an inheritance, and we shall try to discover where it came from.

Fannie's real name was Frances, but she seems to have seldom used it, preferring Fannie or Fanny (as in the deed to the house) or Fan or Nan.

Her first visit to Beersheba is described in a letter of reminiscences by Alfred Elliott Howell (1863-1931), son of Morton B. Howell of the Howell Cottage in Beersheba. In the summer of 1884, he wanted to invite Jane Reynolds “Jennie” Thompson (1862-1941), to whom he was engaged, to visit in Beersheba. But, in his words, it was “not quite conventional” for Jennie to visit Alfred in his home, but quite all right for Jennie's sister Fannie to visit Alfred's sister Sue. So Sue invited Fannie, and all must have gone well, because Alfred and Jennie were soon married.

Fannie liked Beersheba so well that the next year she rented the White House – not yet Adams property. In 1886, she rented the Dahlgren cottage, which she bought in 1887.

The house then became the Thompson Cottage, the name on the brass knocker dated 1887 still on the front door. Fannie shared her cottage generously with her sisters Mat (Martha Walker Thompson, 1850-1940) and Jennie. She never married and in later years lived with Jennie and Alfred in Nashville in the winter and came to Beersheba with Jennie and her children in the summer. Beyond these bare facts, we know very little of Fannie. It seems she was a sensitive, gracious, gentle and self-effacing woman of deep feelings. She died before any of Jennie's grandchildren were born, whereas Mat lived to 1940 and was known and beloved by all of them.

Beginning in 1916, Jennie wrote a 22-page manuscript entitled “Family Talk” that provides much of the material for these notes, but the then deceased Fannie is mentioned only twice, whereas Mat is often cited as the authority on family history. The manuscript is now in the Tennessee State Library and Archives in the Alfred E. Howell papers.

Fannie left the cottage to Jennie and her five children: Morton (m. Marie Harwell), Martha (m. Paul Bartles), Frances (m. Esmond Ewing), Louise (m. Clopper Almon), and Isabel. In gratitude to



*Fannie Thompson*

their aunt, they began to call the place Nanhaven, which sounds better than Fanniehaven, and that is now the official name of the corporation which owns the cottage. Full voting members of the corporation are presently (2013) William Watkins Howell, grandson of Morton, Robert Boyte Crawford Howell, great grandson of Morton, Ruth Watkins Howell, great granddaughter of Morton, Martha Smith Bartles, widow of Alfred Bartles, son of Martha, and Clopper Almon, Jr., son of Louise.

In seeking the source of the inheritance which enabled Fannie to buy the cottage, we can start with Fannie's mother, Martha Ann Trabue, daughter of Charles Clay and Agnes Woods Trabue.

The Trabue line goes back to Antoine Trabue, a French Huguenot from Montauban, who reached Virginia in about 1700. A grandson, Daniel Trabue, left a vivid account of his service in Kentucky and Virginia during the Revolutionary War<sup>1</sup>. Charles Clay Trabue was the son of Daniel's next younger brother, Edward. Charles's mother, Jane Clay, was a second cousin of Senator Henry Clay of Kentucky.

Charles had gone with the Kentucky Rifles to the Battle of New Orleans. On the return march, Andrew Jackson persuaded him to settle in Nashville. There he met and married in 1820 Agnes Green Woods (1799 - 1849), who had come from Virginia in about 1815 to join her brothers Joseph, Robert, and James Woods who had been very successful in several businesses in Nashville. "They were bankers in the city and iron merchants in the country, having rolling mills called 'The Cumberland Iron Works' in Stewart County and also owned a steam boat line to New Orleans."<sup>2</sup>

Agnes and her brothers were the fourth generation of the Woods family in America. Michael Woods (1684 – 1762) and his wife, Mary Campbell, came from Ireland to Pennsylvania in 1725. Michael had been born in Ireland, the grandson of a trooper in Oliver Cromwell's army, which had invaded Ireland in 1649. In 1734, Michael and Mary moved to a site at the foot of Blue Ridge in what is now Albemarle County. They are thought to be the first white settlers in the western half of the county. The following excerpt from the Wikipedia article on Jarman Gap underlines their importance for the development of the area.

*Jarman Gap, known as Woods Gap in its early history, was a major early crossing of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The gap was originally a buffalo trail and a Native American path, and is the site of the earliest settlement in the area. Michael Woods was the first European to settle in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Albemarle County, having traveled down the Shenandoah Valley from Pennsylvania in 1734. Woods and his family crossed the Blue Ridge using what is today known as Jarman Gap, and settled on a 2,006 acre plot registered in 1737 called "Mountain Plains" on the eastern slope of the gap. This gap became known as Woods Gap after the family, and was renamed as Jarman Gap around 1800, when Thomas Jarman bought the property. Jarman Gap was also crossed by the historic Three Notch'd Road, a colonial era road in use by the 1730s. The portion of the Three Notch'd Road over then Woods Gap was constructed by Michael Woods from west to east beginning in 1737.*

A few years after Michael's death, the homestead at the foot of the Blue Ridge just west of Crozet was sold to John Blair, later appointed by Washington to the U.S. Supreme Court. It then became known as Blair Park.

Andrew Woods (1722 – 1781) was probably the tenth child of Michael and Mary. He wasn't mentioned in Michael's will, but neither were several other children. Andrew lived nearby until after Michael's death, then moved to what is now Botetourt County in 1765 or 1766. He and his wife, Martha Poage, settled about nine miles south of the present town of Buchanan. Their eldest child was James Woods (? - 1817). James married Nancy Rayburn and settled in Montgomery County, Virginia. Their ninth and last child was Agnes Green Woods. When her brother James came back from Nashville for a visit, he found her unhappy, perhaps because of a stepmother, so he took her to Nashville with him.

1 Daniel Trabue, *Westward into Kentucky*. (University of Kentucky Press, 2004)

2 Quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are from the "Family Talk" mentioned above.

They rode horseback with a party of settlers, but Agnes had a wooden trunk which went on a wagon. Each side of the trunk was a single board. The trunk and its tradition came down in the family and is now, 2013, in the home of the writer.

Charles Trabue, whom Agnes married, started off in the wholesale dry goods business and initially had some success, but then the business failed, and Agnes began taking in boarders, among them John Wood Dodge, later a well-known painter of miniature portraits. Martha Ann, the eldest child, was born in Nashville, but the family then moved to Missouri, where Charles was overseer of government salt wells and perhaps had other work. After some years and several more children, they returned to Nashville by steamboat in better financial condition. Probably with help from Agnes's brothers, they sent Martha Ann to school in Philadelphia for a few years.

In 1839, Charles was elected Mayor of Nashville, and was re-elected in 1840 but before he could begin his second term, he had a stroke or heart attack, and Agnes had to spend the remaining nine years of her life caring for him and their small children. She wanted desperately to live longer to care for him and her young children and to help Martha Ann with hers. Fate willed otherwise, and she died in 1849, aged 50. Charles outlived her by several years, and Martha Ann cared for her father and younger siblings.

Martha Ann had seven younger siblings, of whom we need mention only the youngest, George Washington Trabue (1839 – 1884). Before the Civil war, he worked for Western Union, the telegraph company. During the war, after first serving in the artillery, he was transferred to the Signal Corps and is said to have been the first man to go aloft in a balloon connected to the ground by a telegraph wire and from there to report on enemy positions. After the war, he rejoined Western Union and became the Superintendent of the Southern District. In 1884, his wife died leaving him five sons under the age of 17. Later that year, he went to New York on business, where he suddenly died. The boys became wards of Fannie Thompson's sister Mat, but that gets ahead of our story.

Fannie's mother, Martha Ann Trabue (1823 – 1884) married George Torrence Thompson (1816 – 1884). The first of his family to come to Nashville was Phebe Thompson (1807 – 1885) of Cincinnati. Why she came is not known, but she married John M. Hill (1797 – 1870) of Pennsylvania Dutch stock, who had recently arrived and opened a dry goods store on the south side of market square in Nashville. They lived over the store, worked hard, and did very well in the business. Phebe accompanied her husband on trips north to buy merchandise. On one of these, they visited her family in Cincinnati where they found that her younger brothers George and James, twins aged 14, were not happy at home with their step-father, so she brought them back to Nashville with her. James returned to Cincinnati, but a younger brother, Charles, was picked up on a later trip. George and Charles worked in the store, learned the business, earned the affection of John Hill, and on January 1, 1845 bought the store from him and changed the name to Thompson & Co.

Before the sale of the company, Phebe had also brought to Nashville for a visit Louise Wright, daughter of her sister Eliza. But the visit became a permanent move. Lou, as she was called, was a “handsome, vivacious girl, petted by the young uncles” but willful too. At 16, she insisted on marrying Argyle Eakin whom Jennie describes as “the very handsomest man the sun ever shone on.” He must have had some money too. But it was soon gone; and he turned into a worthless, dissipated husband. A son, John Hill Eakin, was born when Lou was 17. After all efforts to reform Argyle had failed, John Hill told Lou she either had to divorce him or leave his house forever. She chose divorce, which was very rare in those days. She lived very circumspectly until after Eakin's death, when she married Thomas W. Evans of New York, moved there, and lived in a brownstone house on Fifth Avenue. Her son, John Hill Eakin, was as good as his father had been worthless and became a true son to the Hills in their old age.

When the business was sold to the Thompson brothers, the Hills moved out of the space over the store and bought a house on Church Street. Jennie recalled “All we children remember of Uncle Hill is

of seeing him sitting on their immaculate porch with ... the old dog Lonzo at his side. We hardly knew which we were most afraid of – Uncle Hill, the dog or the parrot. He liked children, they said, but didn't know how to make them like him.... But Aunt Hill – oh *she* knew good and well, and to this day I remember the taste of those tea-cakes!”

Five days after the purchase of the dry goods business, George Thompson married Martha Ann Trabue. He was 29 and she about 23. They had ten children of whom eight survived infancy: Agnes (m. George O'Bryan, co-founder of the O'Bryan overall company that sold under the Duckhead name), Elizabeth (m. John P. W. Brown, who had served with Forrest's cavalry), Charles Trabue, Martha (Mat), Frances (Fannie), John Hill, Jane Reynolds (Jennie, m. Alfred Howell), and Katherine (Katie m. Joseph Weakley)

Up to the Civil War, Thompson & Co. prospered, but during the war it was closed, and the Federals used the ground floor as a commissary selling crackers. The Thompsons were allowed to keep the remainder of their dry goods on the second floor. George did such work as he could find, especially as an accountant for a Mr. Cornelius, an undertaker who was busy “burying Yankees.” Later, he estimated that he had buried over 60,000 people!

The family lived on Cherry Street (now 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue) in a house they bought from the family of the adventurer William Walker, known as the “grey-eyed man of destiny” who established several “republics” in Central America before he was captured and executed in 1860. A number of Walker family items came with the house, including a large trunk marked A. W. on one end. It can still be seen upstairs in Nanhaven.

During the Civil War, after the fall of Fort Donelson, down Cherry Street streamed Confederate soldiers, “poor, and ragged and draggled and hungry ... but they joked and laughed.” The Confederates released food stores in Nashville to the civilians, who cooked them and served them to the passing soldiers, using the horse-mounting blocks as tables. Just outside the Thompson house, a Federal spy was discovered with a Union blue uniform under his Confederate gray uniform. On the spot, he was hanged from a nearby lamp post.

Then up the river came the Federals. With field glasses, the family could see them preparing to land, “putting on white gloves, brushing coats and caps”. Then down Cherry Street came “infantry, artillery and wagon-train, all new and fine, well-fed, sleek, and groomed, and the hearts of Nashville people died within them.... But then came news of the battle [of Murfreesboro] and back came Buell's army under whip and spur and lash.” These words are from Jennie's pen with the account attributed to Mat, but we may assume that these scenes made a deep impression on 12-year-old Fannie.

Toward the end of the war, there is one specific mention of Fannie in Jennie's memoir. South of Nashville there had been a “female academy” run by a Mr. Elliott, who had, we gather, bought on credit a quantity of dry goods from Thompson & Co., giving as security a first mortgage on Boscobel, a large country house built for the girls from the far South who did not want to make the long trip home for the summer. When Elliott defaulted, George Thompson took possession and felt the house had to be occupied to preserve it. He and his helpers moved the household on Christmas Day, 1864. The battle of Nashville had been on December 15-16, and he knew that the place would be a scene of devastation. He wanted the young children to stay for a time with a relative in Nashville, but Fannie absolutely insisted on going with the movers. The estate had been in the center of the fighting; there were three or four trees standing in 45 acres of what had been woods. By actual count there were some 1500 stumps of trees destroyed by artillery. All the doors of the house were missing.

The family did save the house. In the spring of 1865, after the end of the war, they were joined by Uncle George Trabue, freshly released from his service in the Confederate Signal Corps, and Cousin Charlie Thompson, presumably son of George Thompson's brother and partner. A Union “guard”, a Mr. Lacy, was also posted to live with them.

In the late fall of 1866, Boscobel was sold at auction to satisfy other creditors. When the bidding

passed what was owed Thompson & Co., George, assured of getting his money out of the place, dropped out of the bidding. The winning bid was from the Orphan Asylum, and it moved in as soon as the Thompsons moved out and returned to Cherry Street.

After the war, George's health began to fail, and he was unable to cover the expenses of the family. We know from the will of his sister Phebe Thompson Hill that she had given him \$14,000 by 1880. Consequently, we can be sure that the \$2,000 that his wife, Martha Ann Trabue, had received from her childless uncle Joseph Woods was also exhausted. Thus, the \$550 purchase price of the Dahlgren cottage surely did not come from Fannie's parents.

But that same will tells us whence it did come, for the will left \$500 each to Fannie, Mat, Jennie, and Katie Thompson. The will was probated in January 1886 so by May 3 of the next year she would have had most of what she needed to buy the house.

In that first summer of 1887, the group in the house consisted of Fannie, her mother, Jennie and her six-month-old son Morton, plus Mat and her four youngest Trabue wards: Charlie, Tony, George, and Will. The boys must have come with some insurance money, because Mat gave up her teaching to care for them in her house at 15<sup>th</sup> and Broad in Nashville.

When he grew up, Mat's ward Charlie Trabue built Roundtop on a beautiful site on the brow of the mountain between what are now the Garrett Adams and Leonard Tate places. He kept a well-worn path to Nanhaven and gave Mat a bathroom with a tank above it to catch rainwater from the top half of the roof. His son Charles C. Trabue III, with his wife Mary, built a lovely home on Armfield Avenue, and their descendants and relatives are frequently there.

Mat's ward Will Trabue often brought his family here. His son, also Charles Clay Trabue (Dr. Charlie), married Julie Ritzius, granddaughter of Arnold Hunerwadel of Beersheba. Together with their daughter, Julie Trabue Yates, Dr. Charlie has rendered a great service to all Trabue descendants by compiling *The Trabue Family in America*, which has been essential for preparing these notes. Julie Yates, granddaughter of Dr. Charlie, married Rob Taylor, son of Sarah Taylor, and has more Beersheba family than she can possibly count.

– Clopper Almon, Jr.