

OLD NANCY ACADEMY, THREE SITES AND FOUR BUILDINGS

By J. A. Sharp

Old Nancy Academy in Sevierville was established by the Tennessee legislature in 1806, but did not operate as a school until 1811. Then a site was donated to the school's trustees by Isaac Thomas, Sevier's war guide, and James McMahan, one of Sevierville's founders. Each men gave an acre of land and the two acres adjoined.

Here in 1811, a frame building, 20 feet by 30 feet, was erected with funds and labor contributed by local citizens. Copies of the Thomas and McMahan deeds prove that this first Nancy Academy was located on the lot where the late George L. Zirkle lived, and a hand-dug well for the school was on the adjoining lot owned by C. L. Thurman.

The school continued at this site until 1816 when a fire of incendiary origin destroyed the building. A local citizen, not indicating much interest in education and whose identity is unknown, burned Sevierville's first school when the trustees secured the services of the teacher whom he disliked.

The next record of the operation of the school was in 1818 when the "Forks of Little Pigeon" (Sevierville) Baptist Church appointed its Pastor, Rev. Richard Wood, William Henderson, and George Oldham to meet with the Academy trustees at the courthouse where an agreement was reached for the school to use the Church building.

The Baptist Church, located then on the Cemetery tract on the East Fork of Little Pigeon, was used until 1822 when the third and last site of Nancy Academy was purchased from Micajah C. Rogers, early Sevierville merchant. He received \$400.00 for two Sevierville lots, on one of which was an unfinished brick building. This building was repaired and used by the Academy until 1849 when a frame building, "40 feet long, by 26 feet wide, 2 stories high," replaced it.

The latter building, as well as the brick building, stood on the corner off Main Street, and Park Road, and was the home of the late S. L. Atchley and family for many years. Many persons still living remember it and many still living attended school there.

In 1842 the peace of the old school was disturbed by a lawsuit which was instituted in the Sevier County Chancery Court by John Brabson, Samuel Pickens, George McCown, and Isaac A. Miller, all of whom were new trustees appointed by the Sevier County Court in 1841, against the following old trustees appointed earlier by the State legislature: Thomas Hill, James P. H. Porter, John Sharp, Alexander Preston, Micajah C. Rogers, William Henderson, Isaac Love, and Benjamin D. Brabson.

The complainants' bill charged that the \$400.00 paid to Rogers for the two lots and the "indifferent, unfinished brick building" was an "wholly unnecessary waste of funds." It was charged further that the old trustees lost the original Thomas and McMahan site when it was "enclosed and occupied by others."

The old trustees proved that the price of the lots and brick house was not exorbitant, and that Rogers was compelled to wait 12 years before receiving final payment. It was proven also that the hand-dug well on the ridge failed to provide sufficient water for the students, and that the muddy road (the present Park Road) between town and school worked a hardship on the students during the winter season.

The new trustees, however, submitted proof that Henry M. Thomas, son of Isaac Thomas, and Abraham McMahan and John McMahan, sons of James McMahan, actually had enclosed the original two acres. Value of this land, now lost to the Academy, was set at \$5.00 to \$10.00 per acre by depositions of Andrew Lawson, Sr. and others; therefore, this loss was not too great. The new trustees also made much of a crack in the brick wall of the Academy which weakened the building so much that students and teachers ran outside during storms.

About the same time as the lawsuit, which resulted in vindication of the old trustees, a storm of scandal and political controversy broke upon Nancy Academy. In 1842, Isaac A. Miller, and Academy trustee and Sevier County lawyer, absconded to Texas with \$720.00 of the school's funds, and this scandal and other affairs of the school was exposed before the whole of East Tennessee in a bitter Second Congressional campaign in 1843.

Lewis Reneau, prominent Sevier County lawyer who lived at Henry's X Roads, was a Whig aspirant to represent this District, to which Sevier County then belonged. James Cumming, Methodist preacher who lived on Walden's Creek, started the quarrel when he published a letter (March 8, 1843) over his pseudonym, "Little Kentucky," in the Jonesboro Whig, edited by another Methodist preacher, William G. Brownlow, just then starting his stormy career as editor-politican in Tennessee. Rev. Cumming charged State Senator Reneau with assisting Representative Miller in getting the legislature of 1841-1842 to enact a special law that permitted Miller, as Academy trustee, to obtain the Nancy Academy funds from the State Comptroller.

Reneau denied these charges in a long letter to the Knoxville Register, March 29, 1843, and charged Rev. Cumming with being the "tool" of his old enemies, John Brabson and George McCown, local Whig leaders and Academy trustees. He also stated that Cumming's primary interest was to elect William C. Senter, from Grainger Co., his Whig opponent and the third Methodist preacher involved in the dispute. This newspaper war in the Whig and the Register continued until Reneau withdrew from the race in July. Then Senter easily defeated his Democratic opponent in the election of August 3, 1843.

The history of Nancy Academy after 1850 would justify another article. The school closed after the establishment of Murphy College by the Methodists in 1890. On August 7, 1893, the last Academy trustees, J. E. King, A. J. Hicks, J. A. Householder, L. S. Trotter, and John Murphy sold to Pink Maples a "certain lot of land including the building thereon situated in the town of Sevierville, on south side of Main Street." The purchase price was \$1200.00. This was the end of the old school.