

Austin Dabney and the Harris family

January 30, 2010

This is an historic day for the descendents of Giles Harris. Let us thank our grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, and cousins who have kept the family history alive through all the wonderful stories handed down from generation to generation. At this moment we should feel connected to them in a very special way.

Other speakers today will emphasize, as well they should, the patriotism and bravery of Austin Dabney. Speaking for the family, I'd like to emphasize the second story – the one of extraordinary friendship, devotion and generosity between Dabney and the Harris family.

The time is 1779. Austin Dabney, an African-American man of about sixteen years old, is sent to fight as a surrogate for his master in the War for American Independence. He fights in several skirmishes but, at the Battle of Kettle Creek, he is seriously wounded.

Near the battlefield is the home of Lewis and Elizabeth Harris and their 13 year old son, Giles. The Harris family takes the wounded Dabney into their home and cares for him until he regains his health. This is a turning point in the life of Austin Dabney and a major event for the Harris's. During the long days of Dabney's recuperation a personal relationship is formed with the family. It is decided that Dabney will stay on after his wound has healed. With that decision, their fates became intertwined in many remarkable ways.

Over the next 15 years or so, Giles Harris and Austin Dabney work together, collaborate in business transactions and relocate from Wilkes to Madison County. A special bond of friendship and mutual respect develops between them. When a son is born to Giles and Elizabeth Harris, they name him William *Austin* Harris - certain evidence of the respect Giles had for his friend Austin.

With Giles son, William, Dabney takes on the role of mentor. Around 1820, he offers to send William to law school at Franklin College – now the University of Georgia. After graduation, Dabney's support enables William to read law with Judge Stephen Upson in preparation for the practice of law. When William faces his bar exam, Dabney is there in the courtroom to witness the event and share with William in the celebration of his accomplishment.

In 1826 William buys the land on which we stand. When he takes residence here, Austin Dabney joins him. William's arrival makes him Pike County's first attorney. Later he becomes the State representative for this district.

Dabney and William remain friends for life. When he dies, Dabney leaves William all his worldly possessions. William honors his old mentor by naming his son - Austin Dabney Harris, and; in his last wishes, he asks to be buried beside Dabney.

What an extraordinary story! One made all the more significant by its transcendence above the racial mores of the time. The story would be more than enough if it stopped there. But it continues.

It was Dabney's generosity that enabled Harris to complete his education and acquire the means to purchase this land for \$540 – quite a lot of money in 1826! Land lot 13, the 216 acres on which we stand, has continued to affect the lives of those in Harris's *extended* family. The property has produced field crops and, for the last hundred years, *timber* – the harvest of which has served many purposes in our family. One particular harvest of timber, in the 1970's, brought a much needed disbursement of funds to my sisters, cousins and me. The check I received went directly into a college fund for my children's education. Thus, you might say, extending the Dabney/Harris legacy into future generations.

To complete our family's story we must mention Jane Harris - William's sister. She is present through it all. When William comes to Pike County, Jane accompanies him. She meets and marries neighbor Samuel Mitchell, a true Georgia pioneer and one of Zebulon's founding fathers. Their marriage produces *seven* children.

Samuel once operated a trading post here for the Creek Indians and early settlers. Later he erected the first building on Zebulon's town square. It is still standing today. Near the State Capitol in Atlanta you will find Mitchell Street - named in appreciation for Samuel Mitchell's gift of land to serve as a railroad terminus. In those days, Atlanta was called Terminus.

We began our story with Austin Dabney's service to his country in the fight for American Independence. A second chapter opened when Giles Harris took the wounded Dabney into his home. Dabney left no descendents but his adopted family the Harris's certainly did. Quite a few of them are with us today. I'd like to introduce our family members, in the order in which their names appear in today's guest book.

Carl Voelker –great great great grandson of Giles & Elizabeth Harris

Descendents present at Dabney ceremony 1/30/2010:

John T. (Sonny) Middlebrooks III and wife Susan
John T. (Tom) Middlebrooks IV and daughters Amelia Frances and Mary Grace
Kennon Bartlett (Bart) Middlebrooks
Ellen Middlebrooks Granum and husband Jim Granum
James Granum
Julie Middlebrooks Whitten
Margaret Voelker Pritchett and John Pritchett
Lynn Voelker Warren
Virginia Warren Lenehan
Carl Voelker and wife Simone
William Harris (Billy) Mitchell IV
Jessica Mitchell Justice, Jeff Justice and children Cory Walker and Jenna
Powell Cotter
Molly Mitchell Jones
Robb Holmes and wife Carole
Samuel Jones
James R. (Jimmy) Mathews and wife Kathy