To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Lynda Lasswell Crist entitled "Useful in His Day and Generation": James Alexander Ventress (1805-1867). I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in History.

Ralph W. Haskins, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Vice Chancellor
Graduate Studies and Research

"USEFUL IN HIS DAY AND GENERATION": JAMES ALEXANDER VENTRESS (1805-1867)

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Lynda Lasswell Crist

August 1980

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For

James Alexander Ventress III

and

Charles Betts Galloway Ventress

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ABSTRACT

For any student of nineteenth-century America, the biographies of those who lived through the era of the Civil War must be of more than passing interest. In particular, the lives of the men who essentially controlled the economy and actively participated in politics are of utmost importance.

James Alexander Ventress, born in Tennessee but a Mississippian from early childhood, was one of those men. Reared by a prosperous, slave-holding father who had twice removed to the American frontier, James Ventress received a better-than-average education in the local academies and in New Orleans. He lost his parents on the brink of adulthood and immediately left home for an extended European sojourn, which was focused on higher learning. Studying law, science, and the arts, he invented medical and measuring instruments as well as firearms, dabbled in creative writing, and fostered a serious interest in translating and producing French drama. At the end of eight years, having obtained no formal degree at any of the universities at which he had studied, he returned to his family home in eastern Wilkinson County, Mississippi.

For the next decade he was well occupied as a planter and Whig legislator, rising to speaker of the house and senator. He earned and deserved his reputation as a conscientious representative of his constituency and was frequently found among the committees which drafted published declarations of party doctrine. In addition, he pursued several favorite projects--the completion of the public buildings in Jackson, the geological and agricultural survey, and establishment of the state university. For his efforts in the latter cause, he was named "the father of the university," serving as trustee for a quarter century.

In the mid-1840s Ventress turned from the Whig to the Democratic party. He was an elector in 1848, exercising considerable influence in southwestern Mississippi, usually a Whig stronghold. With the crisis of 1850-51 Ventress declared himself a Union Democrat, a choice which proved the end of his active political career. After a brief association with the Know-Nothing movement, he retired from public service but maintained a lively interest in politics.

Ventress married late in life, in 1848, to a New Englander whose inheritance gave him control of a vast estate centered on LaGrange plantation. In addition, he had speculated wisely in Mississippi and Louisiana cotton lands. By 1860 he owned properties valued at over half a million dollars. A good businessman, Ventress employed overseers

on his scattered domain, provided adequately for his slaves, and shouldered serious family responsibilities. The education of his own sons was a primary concern and he also watched carefully the upbringing of numerous nieces and nephews. His avocations included a major renovation of his home--with the aid of a famous Philadelphia architect--scientific experimentation, and the acquisition of a magnificent library.

The story of James Alexander Ventress and LaGrange is based mainly on contemporary newspapers, primary printed sources, and a substantial collection of family documents never before used for scholarly purposes. His life is important, both for illuminating the history of Wilkinson County and for his own role as a political and economic leader of consequence, yet one whose contributions to Mississippi have been generally overlooked.

PREFACE

Because of the pivotal role played by Mississippi in the antebellum years, the lives of state leaders, the background and interests of those who controlled local politics, and the activities of all who paid homage to King Cotton must be of interest to students of American history. James Alexander Ventress belongs clearly in the latter two categories and, but for a political philosophy which left him increasingly out of step with the voting majority, might have been a state leader as well. Since he was not, his contributions to Mississippi have been largely neglected.

Born into a family with a long tradition of public service and reared in a section of Mississippi which enjoyed political and social influence far out of proportion to its population, Ventress sought office at an early age. Most of his rivals were, like himself, professional men of better-than-average education. He served in the legislature for a decade, during the period that Mississippi was truly a two-party state. Coming from a traditionally Whig county, he was a strict party loyalist until 1845, when he took up the Democratic standard. Political changelings have always fared poorly in Mississippi, thus he found public life less and less appealing. Emphatically

not a "man of the people," he did not relish stumping the countryside, and, as a substantial property-owner, feared the likely results of fire-eaters' strategies in 1850 and afterward.

His activities as a public servant were not of the kind which commanded attention. He did not concentrate on the controversial issues--state financing, slavery, state rights. Instead, his tastes were inclined to such matters as the establishment of a state university, a general agricultural and geological survey, and what new penal theories might be employed to best advantage in Mississippi. He worked conscientiously for his constituents but his eye was also on grander schemes. Once he had succeeded in his goals, he preferred that others direct the daily routine--of university and penitentiary management, organization and reportage of the survey. His services are duly noted in secondary works, but because he labored mainly behind the scenes, his contributions have not been emphasized. Nevertheless, it is instructive to study the career of one who was in the second echelon of state politics, whose name was not a "household word." Such studies are exceedingly rare, for few public figures of any echelon in nineteenth-century Mississippi left sizable collections of personal, business, and political correspondence with which to attempt biographies.

In Wilkinson County, Ventress was influential and well known, both because of his legislative services and because he was a large land-owner. He participated, at first enthusiastically and later from a sense of duty, in the county agricultural society and numerous political meetings. He helped sustain the local economy and was active in various civic affairs. Since there is no history of Wilkinson, a study of his life provides at least one window on a region which is very important in the early history of the state and at the same time is overlooked because it exists in the shadow of Adams County and Natchez.

Ventress' personal life is important both for his means of livelihood as a "typical" large planter and for his avocations, which were not ordinary. Possessed of a prosperous farm by inheritance from his parents, he also speculated--wisely, as it turned out--in various properties in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. He became owner of a vast estate when he married in 1848, augmenting and improving the most fertile lands and selling others until he amassed a fortune. The family manuscript collections, indeed, provide more than ample source materials for the economic history of a great plantation spanning more than seven decades.

In addition to the management of his realty, Ventress was an avid student and inventor, a legacy of his eight-year

European education. He perfected measuring instruments, weapons, and cotton machinery improvements, holding a patent in the latter. Also, he was a dedicated researcher and experimenter into new agricultural techniques, farm equipment, and methods of construction. When renovating his home, he employed a designer of national repute and ordered furnishings and accessories of the latest style. The story of the modernization of LaGrange in 1860 is a rich mine of information for architectural history, even in a state which boasts a myriad of significant structures. His speeches and writings reflect his wide reading in the classics and contemporary materials; the contents of his library--only a partial listing of which survives--tend to belie the opinion one might hazard about the intellectual activities of a planter living in what many would consider a backwater.

Knowing Ventress' life and work is a step toward a better understanding of the kinds of contributions made by the great majority of elected office-holders at the state level, those who did not proceed to Congress or even to the governor's mansion. For local history, a description of his career is also important because he was identified so closely with Wilkinson County's formative years. Biographies of individuals like Ventress--those who served just beyond the limelight, whose personalities and inclinations did not lead them to center stage--are needed to

help form a clearer picture of a key southern state in the turbulent pre-Civil War years.

Since this work is based to a large degree on Ventress family papers and other manuscript holdings, many quotations are from contemporary letters. Ventress himself, although well-educated and a linguist, was a bad speller, as were many of his correspondents. To obviate the over-use of "[sic]," misspellings, capitalization, and punctuation are simply reproduced as nearly like the originals as possible. Translations from French correspondents in Chapter II are by the author.

The appendixes contain Ventress' contribution to a European scientific journal--including a drawing of an early invention--the text of a speech delivered to the Mississippi house of representatives in 1842, and genealogical charts showing six generations of the Trask-Ventress family.

The frontispiece (Figure 1), the only extant likeness of Ventress, is identical to an oil portrait owned by James Alexander Ventress III.

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FIGURE 1. James Alexander Ventress

CHAPTER I

"NOT ONLY A RARE THING BUT A SERIOUS UNDERTAKING"[1]

More than a modicum of courage was needed to migrate to the wild and mysterious Mississippi Territory in the early nineteenth century. Especially was this true if one were burdened with a family and household belongings. Yet Lovick Ventress, in company with his brother-in-law Duncan Stewart and other family members, did undertake the long journey from Robertson County, Tennessee, in 1809. For Ventress and Stewart it was not the first relocation; for both men, already in middle age, it was the last. For Ventress' second son, James Alexander, it marked the beginning of his residence in the state whose growing pains, prosperity, and tribulations would be in many ways a reflection of his own life.

The descendant of Englishmen who settled at Norfolk, Virginia, in colonial times, Lovick Ventress was born prior to the American Revolution. His parents were probably George and Mary (Everett) Fentress, whose family included five sons and a daughter. The two who moved to Tennessee--

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[1]D. H. Conrad to John F. H. Claiborne, February 26, 1859, Claiborne Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson (hereafter Claiborne Coll. and Miss. Archives).

Lovick, the eldest, and James, the youngest--are of particular interest to the Mississippi branch of the family.

Originally their name was De Fentresse, a Norman clan, one of whose knights had gone to England with William the Conqueror. For gallantry at Hastings he was made "Lord of the Demesne called the Cedarr Chace, upon the Warwick King's causeway. . .where the family lived in opulence and high respect up to the time of the Commonwealth" and where they were "notably honored for their high degree of military spirit, for legal acumen, and for purity in the Magistracy." At least two eventually migrated to America, James to the "Royal Grant of Fairfax, Loyal Virginia," and John to Roxbury, Massachusetts. Those who remained in England are called Fentress and Fenis, the latter change due to fears of persecution by Cromwell partisans.[2]

Virginia proved bountiful for the Fentresses. The family prospered, owning land and slaves; as late as 1891 there was a town called Fentress in Norfolk County. But at least one member of the group, Lovick's father, emigrated

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[2]Family history provided by James Fentress to James A. Ventress, Jr., 1910, Trask-Ventress Papers, Miss. Archives (on microfilm)--originals owned by James Alexander Ventress, III, Woodville, Mississippi (hereafter TVP). According to descendants, the change from Fentress to Ventress occurred in Tennessee by force of custom. There are still Tennessee kinsmen surnamed Fentress.

to North Carolina, probably in the mid-1700s, to a spot near the Roanoke River in the northeastern part of the colony.[3] Lovick himself, perhaps sensing the boundless opportunities offered in the West, and possibly the beneficiary of a military land grant, moved on to newly organized Robertson County, Tennessee, in the year of statehood, 1796. With him were his wife Elizabeth Bryan, her brother Hardy, and a cousin.

Ceded to the United States by North Carolina in 1790, Tennessee was still the frontier. Indeed, the land north of the Tennessee River and west of Cumberland Gap, was largely reserved for military grants. An act of the North Carolina legislature provided two hundred acres and a slave to each soldier who served three years in the Revolution; later the acreage was increased--640 for privates, 7,200 for colonels. Another law in 1783 provided more land for veterans, established a Cherokee reservation, and attempted to settle previous claims on Carolina with large grants to various individuals. During this period nearly four million acres were entered, most of them ending in the

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[3]For the Virginia Fentresses, see Edward W. James, ed., The Lower Norfolk County, Virginia, Antiquary (5 vols., Baltimore: Friedenwald, 1895-1906), passim; J. B. Fentress to James A. Ventress, Jr., February 10, 1891, and Lucy H. Hallums to James A. Ventress, Jr., July 13, August 3, 1891, Papers of James A. Ventress and Family, Miss. Archives (hereafter PVF).

hands of speculators. But still Tennessee remained the natural goal of many Tarheels for the new territory "was the daughter of the Old North State, and held to many of her laws and customs."[4]

The tract on which Lovick Ventress resided for a decade was located "on Sycamore Creek, including mouth of Battle Ground Creek," some thirteen miles southwest of Springfield. A tributary of the Sycamore, the Venters Branch, testifies to the family's home nearby. Lovick's brother James and brother-in-law Hardy Bryan, who remained in Robertson County, are listed among the pioneers of the area; as early as January 25, 1799, Bryan took the oath as a justice of the peace. County court minutes record on the same day that Lovick Ventress was among those asked to report on the most efficient route for laying a road through Springfield toward Nashville "as far as Sychamore."[5]

Over the next ten years the records indicate a number of land transactions involving Ventress. He was

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[4]Samuel C. Williams, Beginnings of West Tennessee (Johnson City, Tenn.: Watauga, 1930), 116; Thomas P. Abernethy, From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1967 [1932]), 40-54, 182-209, 346-47.

[5]James B. Hallums (descendant of James Ventress) to author, August 9, 1976; "Sketches of Sevier and Robertson Counties," American Historical Magazine, V (October 1900), 324; County Court Minute Book, I, 64, and Deed Book A, 56, Robertson County, Tennessee; Claudia Trichel (descendant of Mary Ventress Cage) to author, July 21, 1977.

also delegated in 1800 to work under the supervision of Hardy Bryan on the road to Clarksville from the Sycamore ford and to help mark another road from Springfield. Beginning in 1801 he served as a county court, superior court, and road court juror, and as foreman of the grand jury. On July 21, 1802, he was given a permit to build a mill, one of the first in Robertson County. Ventress' name disappears from the legal documents after August 1811, when a land sale indicates that he was then a resident of Mississippi.[6]

Sometime during the Ventress' residence on Sycamore Creek, Elizabeth Bryan Ventress died, leaving a daughter, Mary. By 1804 Lovick had married Elizabeth Stewart, by whom he had three children--William Charles Stewart (born about 1804), James Alexander (February 12, 1805), and Elizabeth Ann (1807). The Ventress family included Lovick's brother James until 1803, when he married Jeannette Stewart, Elizabeth's niece, also reared by Lovick Ventress.[7]

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[6] History of Tennessee. . .Montgomery, Robertson, Humphreys, Stewart, Dickson, Cheatham and Houston Counties (Nashville: Goodspeed, 1886), 835; County Court Minute Books, I-II, passim; Wills, Inventories, Bonds, I, 87; General Index to Deeds, Book O (1796-1838), 307-9; Deed Books A, 56, B, 293, J, 401, Robertson County.

[7] Lucy H. Hallums to James A. Ventress, July 13, 1891, March 8, 1892, PVF; Claudia Trichel to author, June 8, July 21, August 20, 1977.

The Stewart family background is both interesting in itself and also necessary to understanding later connections with the Ventresses. Numbering Banquo, Robert the Bruce, and two signatories of the Magna Carta among their forebears, the Stewarts have a rich history. Those who lived in Robertson County in the 1790s were the children of William and Jane (or Janet) McDugald Stewart of Bladen County, North Carolina, William having come to Cape Fear from Scotland in the mid-eighteenth century with some three hundred others from Argyllshire. Four of his offspring settled in Mississippi--Duncan, Charles, Jane (or Janette), and Elizabeth;[8] all four are buried in Wilkinson County.

Duncan Stewart (1752-1821), his brother Charles, and their sisters presumably were born in North Carolina. Duncan had been a member of the lower house, 1789-90, and may have served in the Revolutionary War. Moving west about the same time that Lovick Ventress did, Stewart settled first near Clarksville in Montgomery County, Tennessee. He subsequently emigrated to Robertson, where he held title to some 1,500 acres. Early records show that he was a taxpayer in 1798 and list his active dealings in

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[8]"Notes on the Stewart family," and Patrick Murphy to Ventress, September 22, 1853, PVF; "William Stewart of Bladen County, N.C.," Stewart Clan Magazine, XIV (August 1936), 122.

land. His brother Charles and cousin Walter were early residents in the same area. When Robertson and Montgomery counties were subdivided in 1803, the new county was named in honor of Duncan Stewart, the "eponym unique in that he was not a military hero or some national figure." Charles Stewart was likewise a prominent citizen, acquiring vast acreages, operating a mill on Red River as early as 1810, practicing law, and serving as Montgomery property appraiser. Both brothers were elected to the Tennessee general assembly: Duncan to the senate, 1801-1807, and Charles to the house, 1801-1803.[9]

However successful they were in Tennessee, many members of the Stewart-Ventress clan decided to relocate once again on the frontier: the Lovick Ventress family--Lovick, wife Elizabeth, and their children; the Duncan Stewart family--Duncan, wife Penelope Jones, and probably four children, all under age ten; Charles Stewart--family unknown; probably John and Janette Stewart; and likely James Stewart, said to be Duncan's twin--family unknown. In addition, a number of slaves must have accompanied the group. Left behind in Tennessee were Lovick's brother

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[9]Robert M. McBride and Dan M. Robison, Biographical Directory of the Tennessee General Assembly, 1796 to 1861 (Nashville: Tennessee State Library and Archives and Tennessee Historical Commission, 1975), 698-99; History of Tennessee. . .Montgomery, Robertson, 835, 901; Iris H. McClain, A History of Stewart County, Tennessee (Columbia, Tenn.: Iris Hopkins McClain, 1965), 1-9, quotation on 1.

James, his former brother-in-law Hardy Bryan, and the Stewarts' cousin Walter.

Whether the group traveled the Natchez Trace or overland to the Tennessee and Mississippi, then downriver by flatboat or barge to Fort Adams, the journey could not have been an easy one. It is logical to believe that they took the Trace because it was a more direct route to their final destination in southwestern Mississippi. It is also likely that the trip was made in the autumn, that time of year when the Trace was most passable--the streams being at their lowest and the weather pleasant, with warm days and cool nights.

By 1809 the Natchez Trace in Mississippi had been greatly improved by the federal government. With the organization of the territory in 1798, some attention was given to improving communications with Natchez, the capital, and in the early 1800s treaties were negotiated with the Chickasaw and Choctaw to allow construction of a wagon road through their country.

> The troops of the United States were soon engaged in clearing a way through the wooded districts, throwing rough bridges across the streams, and constructing causeways of timbers laid crosswise and covered with earth. In the summer of 1802 the road was approaching completion.

With the acquisition of Louisiana in 1803, the Trace became a vital link to the increasingly busy commercial

center at New Orleans.[10]

Descriptions of the Trace, "that marvel of prehistoric engineering,"[11] abound, as do tales of highway robbers and mysterious disappearances and happenings, such as the still-clouded death of Meriwether Lewis, which occurred along the route in October 1809, about the time the Tennessee party was moving south. The five hundred miles of road from Nashville to Natchez

> followed the crest of ridges between rivers. . . . [having been] designed to eliminate river crossings, and to minimize as much as possible up and down climbs. . . . It was as nearly level as such a road could be, at almost exactly a thousand feet above sea level for hundreds of miles.[12]

The lush vegetation, the exotic flora, plentiful game, and rich soil in the dense forests had been well publicized, luring thousands of settlers and fortune-seekers.

Most of the former were, like the Ventresses and Stewarts, of British stock from the original colonies; a

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[10] Julian P. Bretz, "Early Land Communication with the Lower Mississippi Valley," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XIII (June 1926), 5-8, quotation on 8.

[11] Robert Cantwell, Alexander Wilson, Naturalist and Pioneer (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1961), 213.

[12] Ibid., 211-21, quotation on 213-14. See also Alexander B. Grosart, The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson (2 vols., Paisley, Scotland: Alexander Gardner, 1876), I, 208-16, and Eron M. Rowland, "Marking the Natchez Trace," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XI (1910), 345-61.

contemporary estimate placed the number of foreign-born in the Natchez District in 1810 as less than 10 percent. During American hegemony the population grew quite rapidly. In the decade of the 1800s it quadrupled and began to spread outward from the nucleus around Natchez, then a small village. The first permanent white outpost had been established in 1770, swiftly followed by a wave which gathered momentum in the mid-1780s.[13] The magnet was land, claimed by grants from Great Britain, Spain, and the United States.

When American settlement was first encouraged, after 1798, it was generally agreed that small grants and the provision of preemption rights were essential for those who held no foreign titles (they who had come after the Treaty of San Lorenzo, opening navigation of the Mississippi). The various types of claims as well as the rights of squatters were taken into account in the passage of the land act of 1803: British and Spanish grants were confirmed for those in residence in 1797; others living in the Natchez District without firm title received 140 acres and preemption rights.

Registering and resurveying proceeded slowly. Time extensions were granted for filing and sales postponed

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[13]William B. Hamilton, American Beginnings in the Old Southwest: The Mississippi Phase (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1937), 113-58.

until January 1, 1809--unquestionably a key date for explaining the migration of the Ventresses. Proffered tracts included all the surveyed territory between the Pearl and Mississippi rivers, land not otherwise disposed of, and land not covered by British claims. By 1816 sales in the Natchez District totalled 450,000 acres to a white population of about 19,000. Speculation, therefore, seems to have been fairly rare, and although there were a few large holdings, there was no tendency to accumulate extensive tracts during the territorial period. Those with real property in excess of 1,000 acres were generally old settlers from the time of British and Spanish rule--the territorial aristocracy--most of whom lived along the river or on Cole's, St. Catherine's, and Second creeks in Adams County near Natchez.[14]

Lovick Ventress and family, on the other hand, more nearly fitted this description:

> The early settlers of Mississippi, like a majority of emigrants to new countries, were a hardy, industrious and independent class of men, and though not blessed with a superfluity of golden treasure, they possessed in abundance the material that constitutes the wealth of a nation,

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[14] Ibid., 6-67, 95, 99, 142, 269-70, 272; Hamilton, "Mississippi 1817: A Sociological and Economic Analysis," Journal of Mississippi History, XXIX (November 1967), 270-80, 290; John W. Monette, History of the Discovery and Settlement of the Valley of the Mississippi (2 vols., New York: Harper & Bros., 1848), II, 339-67.

> viz: Pigs, poultry and children, sustained by industry, economy and perseverance.[15]

After reaching Natchez, where the Trace officially ended, the Ventresses and Stewarts traveled another fifty miles to the southeast. Even if they had come by river to land at Fort Adams, it was at least a day's journey to the eastern part of Wilkinson County, where they claimed their land and built their homes (see Figure 2).

Wilkinson anchors Mississippi's southwestern corner and is bounded by the thirty-first parallel (the Louisiana border) on the south, the Mississippi River on the west, the Homochitto on the north, and after 1809 the fourteenth degree of longitude on the east (the Amite County line). Established in 1802, fifth county in the territory, Wilkinson was named in honor of the controversial general whose career was so closely connected with the region. In land area Wilkinson comprises 590 square miles watered by several creeks and streams. Physically, it may be divided into unequal quadrants, each of which has a particular topography and differing degree of productivity. The northeastern quarter has the poorest soil, and is dotted with rocky hills and numerous brooks and springs. To the west, along the Mississippi and as far south as the road

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[15] John C. Watkins, "The Mississippi Panic of 1813," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, IV (1901), 487.

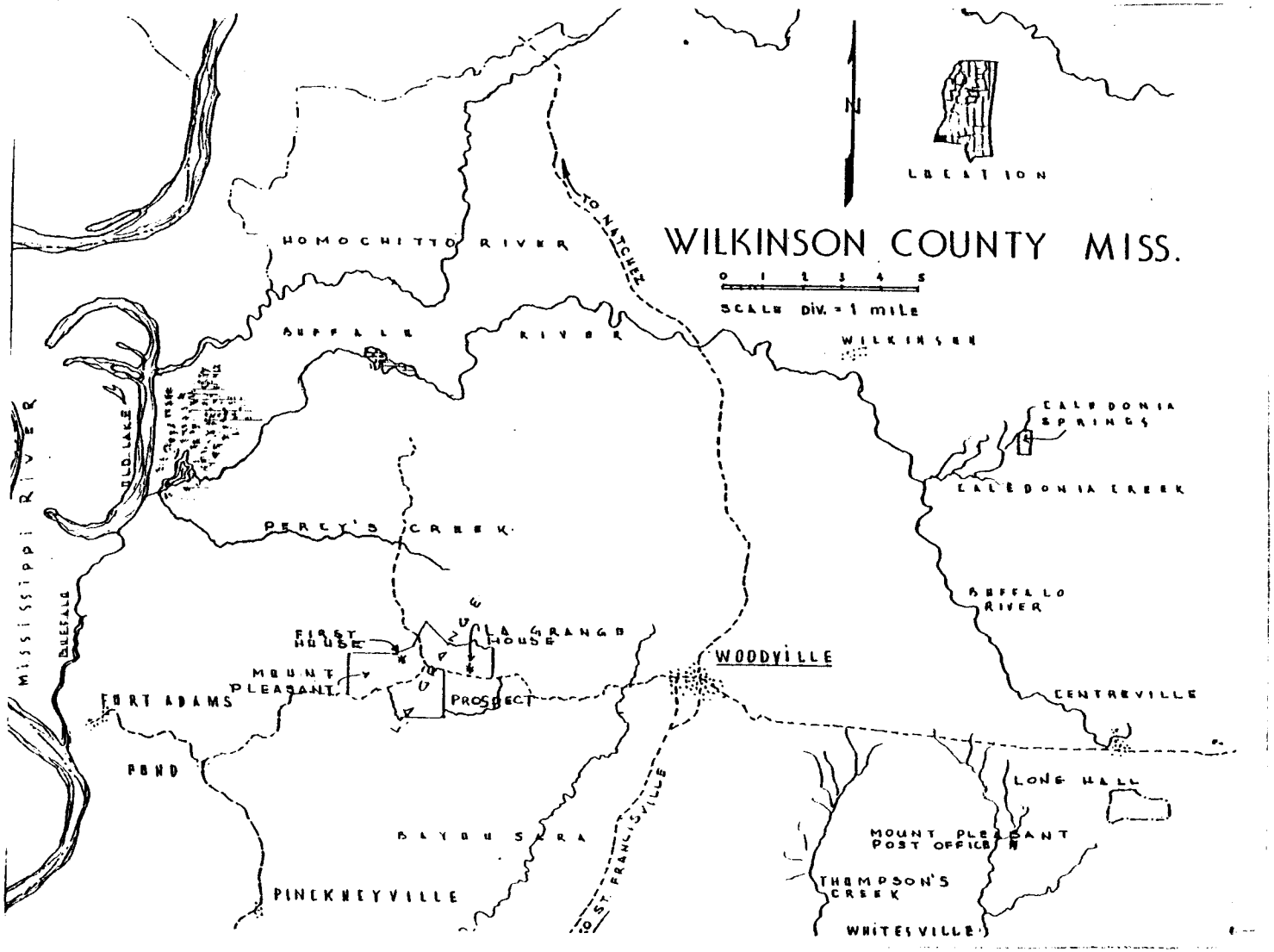


FIGURE 2. Map of Wilkinson County

from Fort Adams to Woodville, lies some of the most fertile farm land in the county. Irrigated by Percy's Creek, Buffalo and Homochitto rivers and their tributaries, this quadrant was rather sparsely settled, mainly by large plantation owners who held Spanish and British grants. South of the Fort Adams-Woodville road is the best land of this lush, verdant country, where Bayou Sara provides water for the varied and tangled forests, profuse flowers, shrubs, vines, and thick carpets of grass. The last quadrant, the southeastern, was home for the Ventress family. Bounded by the Woodville-Centreville road on the north, Amite County on the east, Louisiana on the south, and the Sligo road (Woodville to Bayou Sara, present Highway 61), this land

> is a rolling plateau, gently sloping to the several tributaries of Thompson's Creek with the richest soil on the west and gradually thining as each successive tributary is crossed toward the east . . . . Tremendous brakes of cane and beech of a large growth [are] filled in with the evergreen holly and dog wood. . . . Its abundant and colossal forest growth denote a warmth as well as tenacity of soil which yields the largest crop of every cereal, of every vegetable, of every fruit, of the orchard and vine. . .which has ever been grown successfully in its latitude.
>
> Even its "worn out" field are simply unexplored mines of agricultural wealth, for its very clay subsoil is soil of the richest character when tended with the agriculturists skill and care . . . .
>
> Scarcely a mile from east to west [is not] cut with its trickling brook or bold flowing creek,

all flowing north and south with wide fat valleys between.[16]

Into this primeval region the Ventresses and Stewarts ventured for the first time late in 1809. There were few to welcome them except the citizens of Woodville, a tiny community where they could have stopped to obtain supplies. In 1810, the county population was reckoned at 5,068; of those, 2,432 were white, approximately four white inhabitants per square mile. The seat itself has never been more than a small town. Founded about 1803, Woodville was one of the three known settlements in Wilkinson County when the Ventresses arrived. Although an 1806 map does not show the village, the descendant of an early resident recalled that in 1805 "there were only a few houses, temporary shanties, where Woodville is." He also remembered that the first frame house on the site was built about 1801. A survey was completed by Robert Tanner and Charles Netterville in 1809, some ten years after Fort Adams, the first white settlement in the county, had been established and about two years after Pinckneyville, the former county seat, was platted.

Woodville is located at the western end of a ridge which extends from Centreville toward the Mississippi, some

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[16]Winans Dickson, Wilkinson: The Southwest County of Mississippi (typescript, March 4, 1941), 1-4, quotation on 1-2, RG60, WPA Records, Wilkinson, Miss. Archives.

450 feet above the river level at Bayou Sara, a site "admirably adapted to thorough drainage, and perfect sanitation." Consequently, the citizenry were less vulnerable to the recurring ravages of yellow fever. During James Ventress' adulthood, the town was supported almost entirely by the trade of the surrounding countryside. But in 1809 Woodville was only a straggling collection of buildings, "a wholly artificial creation" since a central county seat was needed. Most of the early Wilkinson countians lived to the west and traded at Fort Adams; many of the army officers stationed there entered land early and decided to live permanently in southwestern Mississippi.[17] Among the first pioneers were the Trask brothers from Massachusetts, one of whom, James Lawrence, was living near the Woodville-Fort Adams road at the time the Ventresses went to Mississippi. Trask and his vast holdings later would be of utmost interest to James A. Ventress.

Making their way past the town which would serve as their lifeline to the world, the Ventresses and Stewarts eventually reached the area known as Mount Pleasant.

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[17] J. H. Jones, "Evolution of Wilkinson County," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XI (1910), 79-80; A. R. Kilpatrick to J. F. H. Claiborne, March 21, 1859, May 2, 1877, Claiborne Coll., and James Brieger, comp., Hometown Mississippi (typescript, Miss. Archives), 973-979; Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi (2 vols., Chicago: Goodspeed, 1891), I, 180-

Lovick Ventress' land was described in 1818 as 1,033 acres of class 4, quality 2, indicating that he paid two dollars per acre if he bought it all in 1809-10; it is certain he purchased several hundred acres in December 1809. The tract, called simply the Ventress Place and later, Lone Hall, was located in fractional sections 13, 14, 16, and 26 of Township 1 Range 1 East. Title to some 1,302 acres in the same sections was confirmed in three separate land grants to Lovick Ventress between August 1819 and February 1821. He was assessed for taxes on only 982 acres (the grants of August 1819) in 1820, 1821, and 1822, but after his death his widow claimed and paid taxes on 1,300 acres.[18]

The house Ventress built for his family in 1809 is nowhere described. Neither a mansion nor a domicile of such note as to be recalled by early visitors, it probably was closer in appearance to the one constructed several years later by the Reverend William Winans, a neighbor in similar economic circumstances. His was a large log or split-timbered house, perhaps a dogtrot, with loft,

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81, II, 218-20; Walter C. Hearn, Towns in Antebellum Mississippi (Ph.D. dissertation, Mississippi State University, 1969), 6-7, 14-15; Hamilton, American Beginnings, map facing 521, also 352. For a good history of Fort Adams, see Gordon E. Gillson, The Development of a Military Frontier: The Story of Fort Adams and the Hinterland (M.A. thesis, Louisiana State University, 1954).

[18]Wilkinson County tax rolls, 1818-25, Miss.

unglazed windows, and wooden hinged doors. Even one of Wilkinson County's most prominent citizens, Edward McGehee, lived in a one-room cabin in the early 1810s.[19] There were undoubtedly some outbuildings, too--barn, wagon shed, smokehouse, poultry house, as well as quarters for the servants. In sum, Ventress' situation conformed to one general description of local pioneers as "farmers of moderate means. . . . The lands to which they migrated were of fair fertility and afforded good returns to the cultivator. This class was fairly prosperous, many of them becoming wealthy and owning slaves as a rule."[20]

Once in Mississippi, though, Lovick Ventress was faced with a severe economic depression. Beginning with the privations of the embargo, the onslaught of cotton rot in 1811, and generally low prices for the staple, the depression continued until 1815. By then, as one historian so aptly phrased it, the king of Spain had been replaced

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Archives; McBride and Robison, Biographical Directory, 698; Hamilton, American Beginnings, 248-49; Woodville Republican, January 17, 1829; receipt, September 30, 1815, land grants, August 12, 16, 1819, February 10, 1821, TVP, folders 187 and 271.

[19]Ray Holder, William Winans: Methodist Leader in Antebellum Mississippi (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), 45-46; Holder, ed., The Autobiography of William Winans (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1936), 164.

[20]Wilkinson County tax rolls, 1818, 1822, Miss. Archives; Jones, "Evolution of Wilkinson County," 81-82.

in the Natchez District "by a more despotic monarch, King Cotton." Early attempts to find a regional staple had failed: tobacco because it was of an inferior quality and entered a glutted market, and indigo because of insect damage, the necessities of too much equipment, and the fear that the dye was injurious to slaves' health. There were large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, both for home consumption, and cattle for export as well. Near the Ventress place in eastern Wilkinson County (now Amite) there was some production of naval stores, the residents being known as "rosum heels." By 1799-1800, however, cotton had emerged as the major crop and by 1801 the Natchez District was on its way to prosperity. The well-known Mexican or Petit Gulf cotton made its debut in 1807, and slaves were still purchased from Africa as late as 1807, smuggled in from the Spanish territories, or bought from dealers elsewhere in the States. At the turn of the nineteenth century there was a sizable trade in luxury goods, which passed through Natchez and Fort Adams, the latter a customs center from 1800 until 1804. Some planters were leaders in diversification, but increasingly Wilkinson County, along with the rest of the Natchez District, depended heavily on the importation of necessities such as pork, flour, and manufactured goods.[21]

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[21]Hamilton, American Beginnings, 179-227, quotation on 179; Hamilton, "Mississippi 1817," 281-87; John H. Moore,

Any description of Lovick Ventress' activities in Wilkinson County must be sketchy. His name, of course, appears on the various tax rolls and the census records for the 1816-22 period, which reveal that he was a moderately prosperous farmer. He was designated a trustee of the county poorhouse in 1820, and was among the incorporators of Jackson Academy, a boys' school located "about 16 miles E. S. E. of Woodville" near the Ventress homestead. The Reverend James H. Kilpatrick was the teacher in 1818; among his students were Duncan Stewart's sons as well as one of the Ventress boys, either James or his older brother William. A Mr. Fox, subsequently an Episcopal priest, taught at Jackson Academy in 1819-20, but eventually proved so unacceptable to the patrons of the school that they withdrew their support. The academy soon closed.[22]

Beyond the daily routine of work and school, life at the Ventress Place must have been lonely. For companionship and day-to-day assistance, the Ventresses would have relied on their closest neighbors, who also happened

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Agriculture in Ante-bellum Mississippi (New York: Bookman, 1958), 13-36. See also Charles S. Sydnor, A Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region: Benjamin L. C. Wailes (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1938), 10-14.

[22]"First Academies," Woodville Republican, July 19, 1924; A. R. Kilpatrick to J. F. H. Claiborne, May 2, 1877, Claiborne Coll., Miss. Archives; Holder, Winans Autobiography, 292-93.

to be their kin. Duncan Stewart lived on the adjoining plantation to the south, an estate which later boasted a lovely home, Holly Grove.[23]

While the Ventress family history is shadowy in the early Mississippi years, the Stewarts are more visible. Elected to the territorial legislature in 1813, Duncan Stewart was a senator when chosen lieutenant governor in 1817, an office he held until 1820. He had also been surveyor general of the territory.[24] Another relative, Elizabeth Ventress' brother-in-law John (or Jock) Stewart, a die-hard Scot and former British army officer, was also well known in Wilkinson. On the king's birthday each year he "always appeared in full regimentals much to the disgust of the patriots of Woodville. . .on one occasion narrowly escaping violence at their hands."[25]

Ten years after their arrival in Mississippi, the family was flourishing. Lovick Ventress' three youngest children were teen-aged and his daughter Mary wedded to neighbor and fellow Tennessean Pulaski Cage. Suddenly,

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[23]Mrs. Walter Probst, "Holly Grove Plantation," Woodville Republican, March 14, 1975, p. 6.

[24]Dunbar Rowland, Mississippi: Heart of the South (2 vols., Chicago: S. J. Clarke, 1925), I, 479, 494; Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Official and Statistical Register of the State of Mississippi, 1908 (Nashville: Brandon, 1908), 45, 60, 176; McBride and Robison, Biographical Directory, 699.

[25]Biographical and Historical Memoirs of

however, in the autumn of 1822, while on a visit to Tennessee, Lovick Ventress died. A niece, aged four, had "a faint remembrance of seeing uncle Lovic when a corpse"; she recalled "seeing him while he was laid out," and noted "the color of his hair was auburn." She also provided the only details of his burial--at his former Sycamore Creek farm next to the grave of his first wife.[26]

News of his death had reached Woodville by late October, when his widow, her brother Charles, and Harry Cage posted a $60,000 bond for control of the estate. Bond was also recorded for the guardianship of the three minor children. An inventory of Ventress' personal property was taken immediately and all goods appraised. The trustees made their report on January 11, 1823, finding a total worth of $27,939.75, including sixty-one slaves valued at over $25,000. The inventory shows that Ventress had made some concessions to good living on the frontier--"A Lot of Books," a considerable amount of table- and glassware, a

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Mississippi, II, 833.

[26]1820 census, Mississippi, Wilkinson; Wilkinson County tax roll, 1822, Miss. Archives; Marriage Book A, 16, Wilkinson County; Lucy H. Hallums to James A. Ventress, July 13, August 3, 1891, PVF; Mary F. Hendrix, ed., "List of Births, Deaths and Aged Persons in Wilkinson County, 1822," Journal of Mississippi History, XVI (April 1954), 125. A Ventress descendant, James B. Hallums, could find no trace of the graves in 1976 (Hallums to author, August 31, 1976).

clock, looking glasses, and two carriages.[27] The property was substantial enough to precipitate a lawsuit by his elder daughter, Mary Ventress Cage. In 1824 she received a cash settlement of $2,700 from the other heirs.

Elizabeth Ventress apparently managed her plantation capably, as an 1824 court report shows. The report of the transactions involving Lovick Ventress' estate lists moneys received and disbursed. Of the former, $8,775 was for the sale of cotton and $1,000 represented money borrowed from a bank. Paid were several outstanding bills and $200 "for William"--$9,772 in all--leaving a balance in her favor of $3.

Her one surviving letter, dated January 29, 1821, reveals deep concern for sons James and William, away at school in New Orleans. With the letter, delivered by a friend, she sent the boys

> six shirts and 2 vests. . . . I am affraid that you stood in need of them. . . . I am truely anxious to hear from you we have not heard since the last day of December I wrote you a long preamble a week ago this Day but no reply to me

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[27] Chancery Court Inventories and Accounts, IV, 45, 71-73, 98-99, and Land Record Book D, 246-48, Wilkinson County.

> O my Dear Children Do not neglect your Mother as you have Don heretofore or you will breake my heart.[28]

Only two and a half years after her husband's demise, "much lamented by a large circle of relations and friends, Mrs. Elizabeth Ventress, relict of the late Lovick Ventress, Esqr., [died] in the 55th year of her age, after a most painful and lingering illness." She passed away on March 24, 1825, at her daughter's home; no details of her burial place were given. Her will provided two slaves for William, the gig--undoubtedly the same one listed in Lovick Ventress' estate--for James, and two slaves for an infant granddaughter. The remainder was divided equally among the children.[29]

With the deaths of both parents in less than three years, James Ventress and his siblings were suddenly on their own. Eliza was married to Abram M. Feltus, a merchant planter; William would marry in a few years and move to Louisiana. James, at the age of twenty unready to carve his niche in Mississippi just yet, soon began the biggest adventure of his life.

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[28]Probate Court Minutes, II, 39, 64, 71, 123, 139, III, 3, 15, 43, Chancery Court Inventories and Accounts, V, 36, Wilkinson County; Elizabeth S. Ventress to James A. and William C. S. Ventress, January 29, 1821, PVF.

[29]Woodville Republican, January 1, 1824, April 5, 1825; Probate Court Minutes, III, 68-69, Chancery Court Inventories and Accounts, V, 174, Wilkinson County.

CHAPTER II

"A PERSON WOULD PROFIT MUCH FROM VISITING DIFFERENT COUNTRIES"[1]

Possessed of some financial means and an education gained at the local academy and a New Orleans school, James A. Ventress set sail in 1825 for Europe, where he was to remain for eight years. Although he "left home for the purpose of visiting England & Scotland," he also admitted "an anxiety for the attainment of knowledge," and his arrival was well timed for matriculation at the University of Edinburgh. Rather than simply a Grand Tour, Ventress' trip focused on education. His initial stop in Edinburgh, however, seems a natural one, given his family's Scottish relations and perhaps his own lack of training in foreign languages. Certainly he was among few American students to take the step; a small minority of New Englanders of some prominence and equipped with Harvard degrees, studied in Europe. Southerners rarely did, and most of them profited from the medical training offered at Edinburgh, Leyden, Paris, and London. Ventress' interests were in science, law, and the arts, all of which he pursued vigorously in Britain and on the Continent.

An autobiographical account, entered in a

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[1]Journal, 1825, p. 1, PVF.

leatherbound diary purchased from "Benjamin Levey & C, New Orleans . . . July the 9th, 1825," records the beginning of the young man's most interesting sojourn:

> That a person woud profit much from visiting different countries it is requisit he should make [minutes?] of the priciple objects & circumstances which present themselves to his view so that in his leasure hours he can retrace his steps in doing which memmory (which is so closely allyed to sensibility) will exert her every power and recall the feelings whether agreeable or dissagreeable and confirm the mind of the truth by the association of circumstances however trivial which transpired at the same time. Feeling an anxiety for the attainment of knowledge I concluded to visit Edinburgh which will not I hope be arrested by the interposition of misfortune. . . . On the 29th day of June 1825 I left home for the purpose of visiting England & Scotland proceeded as far as A M Feltus' here I remained untill the 2nd of July, arrived at St. FrancisVille [Louisiana] where I remained all night. On the ensuing morning proceeded to New Orleans on the Steam Boat Packet . . . landed at said place early in the morning of the 4th where the populace were not unmindfull of the day I remained at Richardson's Hotel untill the 17th when I shiped on board the Packet Ship Crawford Capt. Rathbone). . . . The Crawford is a vessel of about 375 tons a very fast sailer. She left New Orleans about 6 ock on the 17th at which time there were know several cases of yellow fever at 8 ock next morning we cleared the bar at the Belus [Balize] The weather was very calm and we were compelled to wait untill the ensuing morning before we could bid adieu to land even then reluctantly. On the twelfth day we crossed the Catugas Banks a distance from the mouth of the Mississippi of 450 miles, the heat this far was almost unsupportable.

After some comments on the dolphins, sharks, and porpoises seen in the course of the voyage, Ventress continued:

> Nothing of consequence hapened except several cases of fever which did not prove fatal. On the 11th [August] we were cheered by the sight of land which was the Islands near the light house at

> Sandy Hook [New Jersey]--about dark we landed at quaranteen . . . we were not detained longer than two day--While confined here I made several small excursions into the Island it is mountanous & barren and holds out few inducements but that of situation. It commands a fine view of Long Island Governors Isl. Jersey & the Island and City of N York. . . . This place [New York City] is very handsome the scenery around it needs not the pen of romance to give it a relish neither will that admiration be extinguished while walking the streets & viewing the publick buildings the hansome parks which you may spend the rural evening yet in the midst of thousands. On my arrival here I put up at the City Hotel . . . at which place I remained during my stay it is a very spacious house & well attended the number of boarders while I remained never was less than one hundred. . . . On my arrival at this place I was much gratifyed to find some of my old acquaintances. . . . With them & my fellow passengers the hours glided off quite pleasantly many evenings we spent by riding into the suberbs & once stoped to see the treading mill it is situated within the wals of the penitentiary . . . we were conducted by one of the overseers who treated us very decently. . . .

Here he launched into a detailed description of the mill itself, a description which at once betrays his keen life-long interest in all kinds of machinery.

Like any good tourist, Ventress seems to have visited all around the city, noticing the churches--"Numerous and spendid"--the public buildings which he saw as "large & hansome particularly the city hall which is built of fine white stone," the theaters--another special interest which would concern him a great deal in Europe--Castle Garden, the town of Brooklyn and its celebrated navy yard at which he "had the pleasure of boarding three seventy fours, vz Washington[,]Franklin & the Ohio."

At last, after a stay of two and a half weeks:

> On the 1st. Sept. I left New York. . . . on leaving we were favoured with a fine wind which moderated with the setting sun the second day was also very fine on the third commenced a brisk north easter which continued for four or five days and terminated in a stiff gale the wether from thence untill the nineteenth was very favourable--we were then off the Irish coast when it became very cloudy and rained considerable which lasted untill we were near Holly head [Holy Isle] the only [land] we saw in coming up the [St. George's] channel was the Bardsey [island] . . . next day we spoke a Brig who informed us we were fifteen miles from the Irish Coast but the first land we discovered was Holly head which presented her stupendous front on which we gaized with indiscribable pleasure.[2]

A short way east lay their destination, Liverpool.

Ventress had booked passage on the Columbia, a 492-ton sailing ship. Built in New York and launched in 1821, the vessel began service in 1822, with an average crossing of thirty-four days (westbound). The Columbia and other packets operated on regular schedules, usually sailing from each port about twice a month. Specially built craft, they were constructed with a view to year-round operation, speed, seaworthiness, and the ability to operate in all kinds of weather. They were "fast-sailing, heavy cargo carriers, with nice compromises between speed characteristics and cargo-carrying ability." Sharp competition on the New York to Liverpool routes had driven

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[2] Ibid., 1-6.

prices down so that from 1823 until about 1833, the time Ventress was sailing, the standard fare was thirty guineas, including wine, for all the lines. The average number of passengers was ten, and rarely more than twenty-five. Although Ventress did not provide details of his day-to-day occupations during the crossing, there were diversions--reading, shuffleboard, games, and meals that were purposely lengthened to help pass the time. Live animals were always aboard and it is assumed that the food was adequate. The Columbia itself was among "the largest, most commodious, and most luxuriously equipped packets built in America up to that time," and like other ships of the Black Ball Line, easily outdistanced most competitors.[3]

Nevertheless, Ventress and his fellows must have been happy to disembark after the five weeks at sea. And the Mississippian was as interested in Liverpool as he had been in New York:

> The large & numerous docks filled with ships the high & spendid towers the chimneys of large manufactories pouring forth vales of black smoke the wind mills whose wings seem to fann the inhabitants heated by their ever smoking factories the thunder like noise of the carts the hurry and confusion of the inhabitants all combine to

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[3]Robert G. Albion, Square Riggers on Schedule: The New York Sailing Packets to England, France, and the Cotton Ports (New York: Archon Books, 1965 [1938]), 234, 240, 242, 244 276-77; Carl C. Cutler, Queens of the Western Ocean: The Story of America's Mail and Passenger Sailing Lines (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1961), 150; Howard I. Chapelle, The Search for Speed under Sail, 1700-

> confirm the spectator in the just belief that for business it scarcely could be excelled. The Star & Garter Hotel kep by R. Arundell (Paradise Street) was the inn we (we the passengers of the Columbia) put up & at which myself and Mr. Clemme remained during our stay in Liverpool it is kept in a superior stile.

Soon sightseeing began and once more Ventress was fascinated with machinery. He discovered a "gass factory" in the eastern part of town, marveled at the architecture of the blind asylum and workhouse, and the pottery "a mile and a half above Liverpool on the Mercy [Mersey] which is truly a great curiosity." Nearly two pages of his journal are devoted to the process by which white clay was transformed into the renowned "herculaneum" pottery. His final comments before moving on to Edinburgh were about the city of Liverpool, which, he said:

> abounds in Charitable institution the churches are numerous and very fine the publick buildings [are] also remarkable for splendor the Exchange & City hall is some of the best buildings in England the smoke of the factories and I believe the quality of the clay with which the brick is made) gives a dark and dreary appearance to the whole place.[4]

It is unknown how long he lingered in Liverpool, although certainly it was long enough to make contact with a cousin, Alex Reid, who later helped with Ventress' financial needs.

1855 (New York: Bonanza, 1967), 265-68.

[4]Journal, 1825, pp. 6-8, PVF.

Arriving in Edinburgh perhaps as early as October 12, he noted on the last page of his journal that he "commenced attending the University of Edinburgh 8th November 1825,"[5] just four months since he had left home.

In the 1820s the university was in transition. The medical and arts faculties were declining, the result of an increasing probe into the relationship between the goal of a liberal education and the necessity of professional preparation--in short, a questioning of long-established educational theory. In 1826 the Royal Commission on the Scottish University was established and five years later reported that above all, the institution needed more efficient management. The curriculum should be completely revised, regular examinations reinstated, class attendance and more written work required, and entrance examinations reinstated for some subjects.[6]

Uncertainty and questioning there were, but the school simultaneously enjoyed a time of general prosperity. A decade before, in 1816, the university had embarked on an ambitious building program which modified an earlier plan

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[5]Class cards, 1825-27, PVF. According to a class list for the following year, the date the session began--a Tuesday--was chosen in order to avoid interruption of the academic schedule by communion week.

[6]D. B. Horn, A Short History of the University of Edinburgh, 1556-1889 (Edinburgh: University Press, 1967), 115-21, 150-65.

by Robert Adam. He had envisioned two quadrangles separated by a hall and the chapel; around the quadrangles were to be classrooms and the library, as well as faculty residences. Later architects made changes in the design, but by 1823 the buildings Ventress would frequent were ready. These included the science and history facilities on the northern and southern sides of the one large quadrangle. The last of the old institution's edifices, the library (built in 1616, renovated in 1753), was "in a ruinous state . . . propped up by beams fixed against the new buildings." During 1825-27, while Ventress was there, some 16,000 of its 70,000 volumes were being repaired prior to their removal to the new library, undoubtedly causing inconvenience to students and faculty.[7]

With all the new construction and the increased enrollment it stimulated, there was a critical shortage of student housing. A campus magazine published in 1826-27 advised that students should live "'in a proper place' . . . under the supervision of honest and moral persons," since most charges of student misconduct were the fault of various landlords.[8] Ventress was fortunate, finding room

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[7]Alexander Grant, The Story of the University of Edinburgh during Its First Three Hundred Years (2 vols., London: Longmans, Green, 1884), II, picture facing 171, 179, 197-205; Horn, Short History, 122-29.

[8]Horn, Short History, 136; Grant, Story of the University, II, 487.

and board close to the campus, on Nicholson Street, with a family named Spittal whose son Robert was a second-year medical student.[9]

Once they found a place to live, most students had to be thrifty. Some had small scholarships and some earned extra money by teaching. An extreme example was one who lived on £8.2s for six months in 1827; others gave up such luxuries as candles and fires, privations indeed in the long winters. But, as an earlier commentator said, some survived on £30 per year, living in garrets "upon porridge and herrings."[10]

Ventress' monetary situation was more stable, as an Edinburgh friend commented: "Harassed not a little as I am myself . . . I confess that I occasionally reflected upon what I considered would be your tranquil and happy status, with feelings somewhat akin to envy . . . you have been so moderate in your expenditure."[11] Ventress' brother, William, a New Orleans commission merchant, the factorial firms of Brown & Shipley and W. M. Duncan & Sons, and his cousin Alex Reid in Liverpool, were all involved in managing

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[9]Matriculation lists, 1825-26, 1826-27, University of Edinburgh archives; Thomas Graham to Ventress, May 1, 1828, PVF.

[10]Grant, Story of the University, II, 488; Horn, Short History, 115-17.

[11]Thomas Graham to Ventress, May 1, 1828, PVF.

his funds. In early 1828, however, he clearly faced a crisis and the likelihood that he would have to withdraw from college. His brother was unable to meet the drafts on Liverpool bankers, "'owning to the failure of his Crop this season'." However, the commission merchant noted later that "he offers to give for the amount of both Bills, his Notes indorsed by two respectable Citizens his neighbours," a solution which apparently resolved the problem. Several different bits of evidence point to mismanagement in New Orleans and to the fact that funds there were often inadequate. "Cousin Alex," by providing timely advances and letters of credit, seems to have been the intermediary whose help enabled Ventress to prolong his stay in Europe. In late spring 1830 a letter from William Haile in Woodville advised that "Your property here is amply able to support you--and the proceeds will be applied to that purpose. I think the money has failed to reach you, as I heared your brother speak of a remittance some time since." After 1830 Ventress evidently had no serious financial worries. But whether or not he suffered some inconveniences while at Edinburgh, at least he had the companionship of others in like situation and seems to have made the "warm and lasting friendships" which hardship engendered.[12]

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[12]Alex Reid to Ventress, January 30, May 25, 1828, April 11, 1829, W. M. Duncan & Sons to Ventress, May 31, 1828, John Campbell to Ventress, October 28, 1828, William

In his first year of study (1825-26), 2,013 students enrolled at the university, but only nine of them were from the United States. The other Americans were from Virginia, South Carolina, New York, Boston, and "America--Bath" (towns in Maine and New York). George G. Crawford, a first-year medical student, later served as a Civil War officer and as professor of anatomy and surgery in Atlanta. Another American, Alfred Langdon Elwyn of Boston, was a Harvard graduate who eventually received his medical degree from Pennsylvania in 1831, winning acclaim as a writer and philanthropist. All eight of Ventress' countrymen studied medicine, proof that the medical faculty maintained the fine reputation it had gained in the eighteenth century. In fact, nearly half the students at Edinburgh studied medicine; some 40 percent, like Ventress, enrolled in the arts courses; most of the others studied law.[13]

University authorities confirm Ventress' attendance in the "1st and 2nd year Arts courses in 1825-26 and 1826-27," adding that "his name appears in the Chemistry class

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Haile to Ventress, April 24, 1830, William S. Johnson to Ventress, November 30, December 2, 8, 1831, PVF, Grant, Story of the University, II, 489.

[13]Matriculation lists, 1825-27; Richard H. Shryock, The Development of Modern Medicine (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947 [1936]), 25, 54-55; for Elwyn and Crawford, see National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (50 vols. and index, New York: James

lists for both these sessions."[14] Class cards among his own papers provide a partial list of the courses he took:

1825-26: moral philosophy

April 1826: universal history

May 1826: practical chemistry

November 1826: natural philosophy

1826-27: chemistry and pharmacy

1826-27: political economy

In 1826 "Jacobum Alexandrum Ventress" was inducted into the "Societas Hunteriana Edinburgena"--also called the Hunterian Medical Society--organized two years before. One of several student groups, it was a social and debating club.[15]

Ventress left no impressions of his student days in Scotland, but other sources indicate that lectures in the 1820s were often only "dictates," leading some students to hire tutors. Other objections to current policies were pointed out by a university journal, which denounced "avaricious professors" who required their own expensive

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T. White, 1898-1968), XXIII, 135-36, XXVIII, 210.

[14]Matriculation lists, 1825-27, University of Edinburgh archives; Marjorie Robertson (University of Edinburgh archives) to author, August 18, 1976.

[15]Class cards, 1825-27, and certificate of the Hunterian Medical Society, PVF; Robertson to author, August 3, 1977; Horn, Short History, 142-43.

textbooks, deplored the change in student recreation from outdoor sports to billiards, and demanded that the student body be consulted in the election of professors to all university chairs.[16]

For diversion, there were numerous pubs, the theater, and yearly holidays. Normally, the sessions lasted from early November until late April for arts and divinity students. The long summers were supposed to be devoted to independent work but also provided ample opportunity for vacations, which frequently took the form of pedestrian tours. Charles Darwin, for example, walked through North Wales in the summer of 1826; George Bancroft and Oliver Wendell Holmes, too, found hiking tours immensely educational and pleasurable during their years as foreign students.[17]

Student records, unfortunately, do not provide details of Ventress' performance at the university. An unsigned biographical sketch, written after his death and

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[16]Horn, Short History, 98, 136; Geoffrey West, Charles Darwin: The Fragmentary Man (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1937), 60.

[17]Robertson to author, August 3, 1977; Horn, Short History, 175; Nora Barlow, ed., The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, 1809-1882 (London: Collins, 1958), 53-54; Russel B. Nye, George Bancroft: Brahmin Rebel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 39-40, 42-43; John T. Morse, Jr., The Life and Letters of Oliver Wendell Holmes (2 vols., London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., 1896), I, 152-54.

admittedly vainglorious, said of his years in Edinburgh:

> he was a pupil of the celebrated John Wilson--Christopher North--author of Lights and Shadows of Scottish Life, Noctes Ambrosianae [in Blackwood's Edinburgh Review], etc., who wrote of him that he was "an assiduous and successful student," and became so much impressed with his aptitude for philosophical studies that he urged him to remain and devote himself to that branch of learning, with a view of succeeding him in the chair of moral philosophy in that university. While a student in Scotland, he formed the acquaintance of Sir Walter Scott, and had the honor of being a guest at the banquet when Lord Meadowbrook forced from that distinguished writer a confession of the authorship of the Waverley novels [Edinburgh, February 23, 1827].[18]

John Wilson was one of Ventress' professors and did write the opinion quoted above on one of his class cards,[19] but there is no other evidence of the young man's acquaintance with Scott.

Of Ventress' instructors, Wilson was probably the best known. Teaching both moral philosophy and political economy for thirty-three years, he was described by a university historian as a hero to his countrymen and "before all things, the Students' friend; his house was constantly open to them in unreserved hospitality." Hence they pardoned "a thousand irregularities: they forgave him for not

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[18] Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 953.

[19] Class card, political economy, 1826-27, PVF.

teaching them moral philosophy at all; they drank in his discursive utterances and adored him as a man."[20]

Another professor, John Leslie, taught natural philosophy from 1819 until 1832, after having been a mathematics instructor. The first volume of his never-completed opus, Elements of Natural Philosophy, had appeared in 1823. His laboratories were well equipped with scientific apparatus and in 1826 he introduced popular lectures for mixed classes of men and women. "Unseemly results are said to have followed" and the experiment was dropped. Sir William Hamilton, Ventress' history instructor, had small classes of about thirty students and from all accounts was not a particularly popular member of the faculty.[21]

The opposite was true of Thomas Charles Hope, professor of chemistry. Having studied with Lavoisier, Hope had made some significant contributions to his discipline before turning to teaching. He was overwhelmingly successful in making chemistry attractive, drawing classes of several hundred; in 1826-27, Ventress' second year, Hope had 479 students. Because of his popularity, the chemistry classroom was the largest in the newly completed Adam-Playfair building. As Ventress' fellow student Charles

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[20]Grant, Story of the University, II, 345-46.

[21]Ibid., 354, 369.

Darwin testified, "the instruction at Edinburgh was altogether by Lectures, and these were intolerably dull, with the exception of those on chemistry by Hope."[22]

Ventress' surviving correspondence with Professor Hope confirms the latter's active interest in his students. Early in 1826 Ventress sent, anonymously, a notice of some undescribed invention to Hope. The response was gracious: "Any suggestion of a new instrument entitles its author to commendation & it will be a gratification to me . . . to have contributed to bringing forward such a matter--I have also gratification in encouraging the efforts of my pupils."[23] Ventress' earliest known letter, a draft of his reply to Hope dated April 3, 1826, betrays the young inventor's insecurity and hopes of success:

> After a longer delay than I intended when I wrote you I now send you the fruit of my unprolific brain and hope if it do not meet with approbation it will with pity. . . . In the accompaning sheets I have sketched this instrument to you both with an unskillful hand and imperfect description. I have attempted to be brief yet clear. . . . I did not enter into a minute description as I thought it needless in addressing one who is capable instantly of perceiving the learning of the general principles and upon them forming a just opinion. . . .

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[22] Ibid., 397-98; Horn, Short History, 97; Barlow, Autobiography of Darwin, 46-47.

[23] Thomas C. Hope to Ventress, March 24, 1826, PVF.

> Circumstances has within a few months altered my condition considerably or I should have attempted to have told the truth of said instrument before I would have presented it to you. I should be happy if your trouble would meet with recompense from its utility

Hope's reply was not totally discouraging as he requested Ventress to meet him in the classroom any morning to discuss the invention.[24]

Neither its nature nor Hope's opinion is revealed in any subsequent correspondence, except that a letter to Ventress some three months later does mention "your late discovery in Hydrolicks," perhaps a machine with chemical application. A friend in Edinburgh with whom Ventress corresponded after leaving Scotland discussed some experiments with a "'steam-heating' system," remarking that "your method of weighing the gases might be of some avail in the case of Hydrogen. . . . I am glad you still philosophize." In any event, Ventress was not discouraged, as later experiments and creations followed. Letters from a classmate in 1829 and 1831 indicate that the professor had not forgotten the American either; as Richard Allan wrote, Dr. Hope spoke "in honorable terms of you."[25]

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[24]Ventress to Hope, April 3, and Hope to Ventress, April 22, 1826, PVF.

[25]William Haile to Ventress, July 30, 1827, Thomas Graham to Ventress, August 26, 1827, January 13, May 1, 1828, and Richard Allan to Ventress, November 9, 1829, October 31, 1831, PVF. See the description of Ventress' stereometer on pages 52-53.

Despite what apparently were congenial surroundings, Ventress did not remain to graduate from Edinburgh--most arts students did not--and after two years left by a circuitous route, indulging in more travel. An Edinburgh colleague, R. L. Milligan, penned two letters of introduction to citizens of Dumfries, one of the stops on his British tour. Ventress intended, Milligan wrote, "visiting a few of the Towns in the South of Scotland, and North of England, on his way to Liverpool--and from thence to Paris. When in Dumfries, he is desirous of being introduced to Mrs. [Robert] Burns . . . and if possible to get him a small portion of the writing of Mr. Burns." Ventress also visited Glasgow and Greenock, a seaport and manufacturing town on the Firth of Clyde, where he was "received so satisfactorily" by his "new cousins," the family of John Campbell, whose mother was Ventress' maternal aunt.[26]

By the end of August, Ventress had reached Liverpool, arriving in Paris soon after. From November 1827 until summer 1829 he lived at 4 rue des Poules (now rue Laromiguière), a short street some three blocks southeast of the present Panthéon. About twenty minutes' walk from

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[26]Horn, Short History, 182-83; R. L. Milligan to John M. Diamond and to A. Hamilton, August 11, 1827, Thomas Graham to Ventress, August 26, 1827, John Campbell to Ventress, October 28, 1828, and Patrick Murphy to Ventress, September 22, 1853, PVF.

the "quartier de la Sorbonne," his room was not far from the Odéon theater, where Alexandre Dumas and Alfred de Vigny regularly presented their plays. In 1829 he moved to the Hôtel Corneille, at 5 rue Corneille, a dark single block about sixty yards long but within sight of a corner of the Luxembourg gardens and much closer to his classrooms and the library.[27] With the exception of about two years of travel and study in London and elsewhere on the Continent, Paris was home until he returned to Mississippi in late 1833.

If the young American considered the University of Edinburgh old and tradition-ridden, the Sorbonne must have seemed positively "antient." Founded in 1253 as a theological school, the University of Paris (or Sorbonne) flourished in the later Middle Ages and, following a massive renovation and revival in the seventeenth century, became the watchword for culture and learning in France and much of Europe. The philosophy of the French Revolution and the Age of Enlightenment contributed to increased public and state support for all French centers of

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[27] Thomas Graham to Ventress, August 26, 1827, and various letters, 1827-33, PVF. For these street locations and others in Paris, see Paris sous Napoléon Ier: La Topographie de Paris ou Plan Detaillé. . .en 1808 (Paris: A. Taride, 1908), and Jacques Hillairet, Dictionnaire Historique des Rues de Paris (2 vols., Paris: Editions de Minuet, 1961). For contemporary illustrations and descriptions of Paris in the years 1827-33, see Charles Simond, La Vie Parisienne à Travers le XIXe Siècle: Paris de 1800

learning, including the Sorbonne. Beginning in 1806, the name University of Paris was officially abolished and various facultés were substituted by Napoleon. Underlying the change was the belief that professional specialization was more practical than the "encyclopedic unity" of medieval educational theories.

Courses in the faculté des lettres included literature, art, philosophy, history, and geography, taught in 1830 by twelve professors who lectured twice a week--once to a large audience of students and the general public and again to special students and other scholars. The course outlines gradually broadened in the nineteenth century, emphasizing useful general concepts and relying less on Latin and Greek. The same kinds of changes occurred in the science faculty, in mathematics, physics, chemistry, and natural science. Transferred from the old Collège de Plessis to the Sorbonne in 1821, the sciences lacked adequate laboratories and classrooms for some years but the professors still registered significant contributions and gradually increased the emphasis on practical application. Dean of sciences during Ventress' years of study was Louis

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à 1900 (3 vols., Paris: E. Plon, Nourrit et Cie., 1900), I, 568-656, II, 3-76, and Marcel Poëte, Une Vie de Cite Paris de sa Naissance à Nos Jours (Paris: Auguste Picard, 1925), 355-461.

Jacques Thenard, a member of the Academie des Sciences, author of a well known textbook, and discoverer of the processes for purifying lamp oil and white lead.[28]

Ventress also followed the law course for four years (1827-30 and 1831-32), studying for a time with Charles Comte, for whose course he paid thirty francs per semester. He likewise benefitted from the tutelage of another noted scholar, Jean Baptiste Say, who in 1831 wrote a letter of introduction to Jeremy Bentham, calling the Mississippian a zealous disciple of their theories and worthy of Bentham's interest. The law faculty consisted of five professors and four assistants, who conducted classes in history, political science and political economy in addition to civil, criminal, commercial, constitutional (after 1830), and procedural law. Not taught by the case system, but rather as a "cours dogmatique," the courses were so difficult that most students hired tutors and formed study groups. Classrooms of the faculté de droit were near Ventress' first address, close to the modern Pantheon and

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[28]Paul Boyer, et al., La Vie Universitaire à Paris (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1918), 14-20, 34-48, 50-60; Jean Bonneret, La Sorbonne: Sa Vie, Son Rôle, Son Oeuvre à Travers les Siecles (Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, 1927), 1, 8-10, 33-34, 128-29, 193-94.

not within the walls of the Sorbonne proper.[29]

Ventress evidently did not receive a degree from the university, yet must have profited enormously from his years in Paris--surely a heady atmosphere for a young man from Woodville. An American who arrived the year Ventress left certainly found his time well spent. Studying medicine, Oliver Wendell Holmes declared that the French were "half a century in advance" of the English; he also reveled in the invigorating cosmopolitanism of the capital, which made geography, politics, and history daily fare. Holmes was delighted, as Ventress must have been, with the endless social and cultural attractions, especially the numerous theaters--the best places to learn French. Admittedly, living in Paris, even as a frugal student, was dear. Counting books, instruments, and tutors as well as room and board, Holmes estimated his annual expenses at 6,000-7,000 francs, or about $1,200. But again on the positive side, Paris was beautiful and stimulating--and students were both respected and feared.[30]

It was in Paris that Ventress seems to have matured,

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[29]Class cards, printed list of law courses and professors, certificate signed by Comte dated August 17, 1830, and Jean Baptiste Say to Jeremy Bentham, October 12, 1831, PVF; Boyer, et al., Vie Universitaire, 78-93, 97.

[30]Morse, Holmes Letters, I, 83-130, passim.

especially in a creative sense. His interests broadened, he invented more, and his fascination with the theater continued as he translated some plays and attempted to stage them. He was involved in American social and political circles, pursued a mysterious woman, and traveled extensively, using Paris as home base.

There is more extant correspondence concerning the inventions than on any other subject in the 1828-33 period. Friends from Edinburgh commented frequently on Ventress' mechanical contrivances, theories, and ideas, at the same time apprising him of their own achievements. For instance, Thomas Graham reported his election as a fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh on the strength of his "process for absolute alcohol," noting that he had some papers published and had "several projects in mind, including one for sugar refining." Moreover, a number of men and one woman with whom Ventress corresponded or to whom he was introduced--Sir David Brewster, James Dutton, Jacob Perkins, Josiah Parkes, Charles Jones, A. Buffum, Joel B. Nott, and Lady Anne Vavasour--held patents of various kinds in Britain.

Although details and drawings of most of Ventress' schemes have not been located, some of his interests are clear. At least one of his Edinburgh inventions was evidently related to a spinning frame, and in June 1829 he answered a letter regarding possible employment with a

French agency distributing "improvements in machinery." The same letter noted Jacob Perkins' "experiments on the compressibility of water" and added that "his plan, like the one suggested by you avoided all objections arising from the expansion of the vessel in which the water was compressed"--perhaps the same "discovery in Hydrolicks" mentioned by a Ventress correspondent in 1827. In any event, he was still fascinated by steam power as evidenced by another letter concerning an opportunity "to go into the business of building steam boilers." In 1831 a friend suggested that a steam-driven plough would be a challenge to him; the following year he was advised to contact an American in London who was trying to introduce "some improvements in steam boilers and stoves."[31] Some inventions surely advanced beyond the hypothetical stage. One was a medical instrument, the drawing for which was sent to the London Medical Gazette in January 1832 and apparently published soon after. A friend who had received a copy of the

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[31]Thomas Graham to Ventress, May 1, 1828, Charles F. Johnson to Ventress, June 10, 1829, May 30, 1832, A. Buffum to Ventress, June 13, 1829, and Anne Vavasour to Ventress, April 10, 1831, PVF. Thomas Graham (1805-69), one of Ventress' instructors, won a prize from the Royal Society in 1834 for his discovery of the law of diffusion of gases, the beginning of a brilliant career in science and public service. See his biographical sketch in the Dictionary of National Biography [hereafter DNB] (21 vols. and supplements, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917-71). For the patents held by the individuals mentioned, see Bennet Woodcroft, Alphabetical Index of Patentees of Inventions (London: Evelyn, Adams & Mackay, 1969 [1854]), passim.

journal wrote: "I see by the Instrument of which you send me an account, that your attention continues to be turned occasionally to mechanical subjects."[32]

Another of the inventions, a gun, was a project of more than a year's duration. Ventress' interest in firing pieces of various sorts was lifelong and he was himself an expert marksman, having been so trained as a child.[33] Although the history of this particular invention is better documented than any of the others, even the information on it remains sketchy. His friend Charles F. Johnson wrote from Connecticut in July 1832 that

> the gun stock lathe of which you request me to send you drawings, I cannot easily procure them at present. . . . If any of the contrivances were sent out to Europe it would be best that all should go that they might be disposed of together.

Explaining Eli Whitney's adoption of standardized parts, he remarked that two other men were considering the introduction of Whitney's methods and machinery in Europe. Tempted to join the enterprise, Johnson opined, "if you

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[32]W. Cummin to Ventress, January 8, 1832, Charles F. Johnson to Ventress, May 30, 1832, PVF.

[33]See, for example, Ventress to Jefferson Davis, June 18, 1861, unprocessed materials, Miss. Archives, and Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 953. There are several letters suggesting Ventress' continuing interest in arms, especially in "fancy guns"; from Daniel W. Adams, April 16, 1849, T. W. Carter, October 2, 1857, and T. Jones Stewart, undated, TVP, folders 244, 249, and 268.

would care to have any thing to do with it, perhaps I could bring you in." The same letter responded to Ventress' query about the issuance of patents to foreigners.[34]

Apparently he decided not to have his weapon patented abroad and certainly held no British patent in his own right. However, a month later he received a revealing letter from Josiah Parkes, a Birmingham inventor of steam engine improvements; enclosed was a "Patent Agreemt. between you and Mr. John Jones," also a resident of Birmingham.[35] After a year had passed, on September 2, 1833, another clue appears in a long letter from Jones.

Explaining that he had written earlier in the year but had not received a reply, he concluded that Ventress had left Paris. Now, he said,

> I am extremely sorry that it is. . .my painful duty to inform you the Gun is a total failure. Relying on your assurance "that you had shot the Gun a great deal in France, and "that it answered admirably well," I petitioned for a patent, which after expending 214£, including the cost of three journeys to London, was ultimately sealed on the 7th of March last.

The patent to which Jones referred was "percussion locks

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[34]Charles F. Johnson to Ventress, July 28, 1832, PVF.

[35]Parkes to Ventress, August 21, 1832, PVF: B. M. Rimmer (Science Reference Library, London) to author, October 19, 1978.

applicable to fire-arms"; only three months afterward, on June 12, he received a second patent for "gun and pistol locks." He consequently spent £100 on tools and a workshop, and another £150 on improvements, but complained

> I found it impossible to render the Gun as patented, at all efficient. And furthermore, I am assured that if I could have done it, the patent could not be maintained, for that the Gun has been exhibited in England as far back as three four & five years ago.

Angry at the waste of money, Jones accused his erstwhile partner of deliberate deception as well;

> You assured me "it was not known," and farther, "that it was even a profound secret in Belgium," for that, "The King of Holland had taken such a liking to it, that he had induced the inventor of it, to engage, not to make any but for himself"! and to induce him to do this you informed [me] The King had given him all his ordered for Military Guns . . . and that this was the reason why the Gun was not known! . . . I am assured . . . that this is <u>altogether</u> untrue . . . and I am farther assured . . . that the real reason why the Gun has attracted no attention, is because it was a <u>known failure</u>.

Jones demanded a reimbursement of £500 and threatened legal action if the deception regarding the Dutch monarch and the inventor could be proved. Finally, he accused Ventress of breaching an agreement "relative to the Gun-Stock Machine." According to Jones, the Mississippian's promise to furnish specifications and drawings of the machine was a part of the inducement for Jones's service in manufacturing the gun. Complaining that months had passed, Jones lamented, "I have heard nothing of it nor do

you so much as mention it in your letter."[36]

A brief note from M. J. Malherbe de Goffontaine in Liège on September 4, 1833, indicates that Jones had also written to him in an unpleasant tone. Requesting a copy of the Jones-Ventress agreement, the Frenchman noted that from the first day they met he had taken Ventress for a man of honor in whom he had absolute confidence. He reported happily that the two guns which Ventress had requested were in fabrication and that the latter would receive them before leaving Paris.[37] Whether or not he did is unknown, nor is there evidence that Jones was paid or mollified. A month later, in mid-October 1833, Ventress left Europe for home.

Yet another contrivance was left behind in Paris--a stereometer, being manufactured by a Mr. Brodeur. Ventress had described his invention--a device for measuring the volume and specific gravity of a body, especially a solid--in an article published in the Edinburgh Journal of Science in July 1827. In late October 1833 a friend reported that Brodeur had simplified the instrument "with your consent,"

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[36] PVF. For a listing of patents owned by Jones, see Woodcroft, Index of Patentees, 309.

[37] PVF.

and planned to charge only a slight fee if Ventress would mention him when the invention was presented "to the Institute." Nearly a year passed with no response from Mississippi. Charles Stewart, the friend still in Paris, then asked "if you are determined to give up the instrument, write to that effect & inform me to what usage I am to apply your 15 francs--to another year's subscription to the Populaire?" Ventress subsequently told Stewart that for the present he had "'bidden adieu to the sciences'," a decision Stewart regretted, recalling that Ventress had gained "the approval of some of the most learned men in Europe."[38]

If his inventions mostly came to naught, Ventress evidently was not so discouraged that he ceased "creating" altogether. His attraction to the theater, which had begun in Edinburgh, intensified as he translated French plays and tried to become a playwright-producer.[39] In October 1828 an English friend wrote to him: "Mille pardons, for supposing you would write such a play as the

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[38]Ventress, "Description of a Stereometer," Edinburgh Journal of Science, VII (July 1827), 143-45--see Appendix A; Charles Stewart to Ventress, October 22, 1833, September 27, 1834, July 5, 1835, PVF.

[39]Thomas Graham to Ventress, May 1, and H. McDowell to Ventress, May 28, 1828, PVF.

Prairie [an adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's novel] would be. . . . the stage is much gone down in England & John Bull likes best something strange & that makes him laugh." A year later Richard Allan in Edinburgh offered similar advice, suggesting that Ventress translate and send to Scotland some current comedies. But, he cautioned,

> a literal translation from the French would seldom do here: . . . the French would sit quietly, & listen to an actor for 20 or 30 minutes at a time, but an Audience here would not for more than 5 or 10 & would then show their marked displeasure. . . . Comedy, Farce, &c carry the day; These few hints, I know will with you supply the place of volumes.[40]

Contemporary criticism of the British theater confirmed Allan's opinion, calling the offerings generally "degraded," and decrying the mass of "French translations, adaptations, and mutilations" appearing regularly in London and provincial playhouses. According to the Dramatic Magazine, thirty-eight of seventy plays presented at Covent Garden and Drury Lane in 1828-29 were translated or adapted from the French, the greatest categories being farces and interludes. A listing of pieces presented at the Haymarket for 1830 likewise reveals a sizable number

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[40]Anne Vavasour to Ventress, October 25, 1828, and undated, Richard Allan to Ventress, November 9, 1829, PVF.

of comedies, farces, and musical farces.[41]

Comedy and satire seem to have been Ventress' fortes, although he also translated Voltaire's Mahomet (last done in England in 1817) and hoped to stage Thomas Otway's recently revived tragedy, Venice Preserved, in French with the noted Irish actress Harriet Smithson as the heroine.[42] In 1829 and 1830 he apparently enjoyed some success in his avocation. Two Edinburgh schoolmates expressed their delight at "the success you have met with at the French theatres" and requested copies if the plays were published. One described the whereabouts of various male and female friends employed in acting, surmising that Ventress would be especially interested since he was "now a theatrical man (I believe you had always a leaning that way)."[43]

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[41] Dramatic Magazine, I (1829), 23, 141-44, II (1830), 76-78.

[42] Partial translation of Mahomet in Ventress' handwriting, and Harriet Smithson to Ventress, June 12, 1830, PVF; John Genest, Some Account of the English Stage, from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830 (10 vols., Bath: H. E. Carrington, 1832), X, lxxvi. Smithson (1800-54) had appeared in the Otway play at Covent Garden in early 1829, but declined to try the role of Belvidera in French. For a sketch of her life, see DNB.

[43] Richard Allan to Ventress, November 9, 1829, H. McDowell to Ventress, January 20, and --- Chotard to Ventress, October 6, 1830, PVF.

Ventress' British outlet for his plays was William Henry Murray of Edinburgh, an actor and manager of the Theatre Royal, as well as of a playhouse in Leith. Murray was well informed on what had been translated and performed and often could suggest new approaches. Judging one of Ventress' efforts--title and subject not known--in March 1831, he commented:

> [I] think it possesses considerable talent, tho' in many instances there are allusions too broad and indelicate for the Stage. If forwarded to one of the London Theatres I am sure it would receive every attention--The Haymarket for instance . . . where three act comedies are in request.[44]

Some of Ventress' and his friends' plays were sent along to London in 1831 but notice has not been found of their coming to life on stage. Translators were seldom if ever credited in the reviews, thus it is more than possible that Ventress was responsible for some of the plays displaying "licentious taste" that were imported from the Continent. As late as July 1835, long after Ventress had returned home, Charles Stewart asked if he were still paying "your court to Thalie? Have you yet presented the excellent comedy you once did me the favor to read, to the public? . . . but few modern english pieces have afforded me as much pleasure as

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[44]Allan to Ventress, November 9, 1829, February 6, 1831, William H. Murray to J. A. Mason, March 26, 1831, PVF. For more information on Murray, see DNB.

that one did."[45]

In addition to his theatrical ventures, Ventress dabbled in satire, addressing a note on January 18, 1832, to the newly established Figaro in London, a "great organ of wit and epigram." He enclosed "the following epigram upon Lords Brougham & Eldon, hoping that neither from want of point nor from Political feeling, it will be found unworthy of a place in your next number." The subjects were John Scott, Earl of Eldon and former chancellor of the exchequer, who led the opposition in the House of Lords to the Reform Bill, and Henry Brougham, Baron Brougham and Vaux, the current chancellor. A popular Whig leader, the latter was also a founder of the University of London and was most recently in the news because of a dramatic and rather sarcastic speech he had made on the Reform Bill. Ventress' earthy contribution was brief:

> Reform! cried a Bull in a terrible rage,
> Who was said by the calves to be Lawyer and Sage.
> What! cried an Ox, we, who're reformed in the flesh
> To give up our stalls and be caught in a mesh!
> No! No! Mr. Bull, I will tell it you plump.
> No sooner was this said, than into his rump
> The bull thrust his horn. The Ox felt a shock,
> Then sailing on high was seen by the Flock,

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[45]--- to Ventress, April 27, 1830, Charles J. Johnson to Ventress, June 27, and Richard Allan to Ventress, October 31, 1831, George W. Haven to Ventress, September 29, 1833, Charles Stewart to Ventress, July 4, 1835, PVF.

> The Bull shook his head--gave his Mouth a slight twitch,
> Then into the Ox's stall nestled his breech.
> The Flock low'd aloud, with the voice of a Clarion,
> Hail! Lord of the Veaux and Briton's own Baron.[46]

Not published in the following issue of Figaro, the contribution was noted on January 28 with thanks. However, the editors declined to print it--no reason given, but certainly not on the grounds of ribaldry, quite evident in several articles which were published.

Yet success with his literary productions did attract the attention of the staff of La Revue des Deux Mondes, a new journal whose secretary was a Ventress "connection." On July 16, 1830, the young man was elected a "collaborateur-correspondant," a sort of representative and subscription agent for the magazine in foreign countries, Ventress being on the verge of a trip to Germany. Collaborator-correspondents were to concern themselves with studies in history, science, literature, fine arts, practical arts, political economy, natural science, industry, or "the public good," and once a year were to contribute an original idea on one of those subjects. Correspondents received a free subscription to the Revue when they had obtained six new subscribers from their respective "departments"--in Ventress' case, from Germany. While in

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[46] PVF; for sketches of the careers of the Earl of Eldon and Baron Brougham, see DNB.

Berlin he served the Revue faithfully, distributing commissions for other collaborator-correspondents, and arranging for a local bookseller to handle the magazine.[47]

Also in July 1830, the most exciting political event of Ventress' European sojourn occurred in Paris: a revolt overthrew the Bourbons and thus provided the American with a chance to see radical democracy in action. "Being an exceptionally fine rifle shot himself," someone later recalled, "he readily noted the inferiority of the French troops as marksmen." Speaking of the incident, Ventress reportedly said the people on rooftops were more endangered than those at whom the muskets were aimed.[48]

Despite work on inventions and compositions of various kinds as well as his studies, Ventress found time to acquire valuable friends. Early in his Parisian sojourn he became acquainted with several prominent people, among them David B. Warden and the family of Sir Henry (Nooth) Vavasour, Bt. Warden (1772-1845), Irish patriot,

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[47] Certificate of election and attached pamphlet, July 16, 1830, and --- Bulos to Ventress, July 4, 1831, PVF. No contributions by Ventress are listed in the Revue's tables of contents, 1831-34.

[48] --- Chotard to Ventress, October 6, 1830, PVF; Simond, Vie Parisienne, I, 641, shows a map of the barricades; see also Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 953.

naturalized American citizen, former consul in Paris, and a scientist by training, was, when Ventress knew him, an expatriate author and book collector. He lived on the rue Pot de Fer, just around the corner from Ventress' first home in Paris and therefore also close to the Sorbonne community. A rallying-point for many Americans in Paris, Warden provided numerous letters of introduction for Ventress and was involved with the young man in political matters, such as a proposed dinner for William Cabell Rives in 1830.[49]

Ventress' other close friends in France, the Vavasours (of Melbourne Hall, Yorkshire) were commended by his cousin John Campbell:

> I am exceedingly glad to find that you have become acquainted with so fine a family as that of General Sir Henry Vavasour, as you must profit much by mixing in such highly respectable Society, and you should make a study of cultivating their favour.[50]

Ventress did so. The family was fond of him, sharing

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[49]Ventress to Warden, March 25, 1831, Warden Papers, Maryland Historical Society; for Warden, see the biographical notice in DAB. For the Vavasour family, see Sir Bernard Burke, The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1967 [1884]), 736, 1052, and Who's Who, 1900 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900), 1010. For correspondence concerning the Rives dinner, see Ventress to Warden, Rives to --- Beaumont, and Beaumont to Ventress, all dated February 5, 1830, PVF. See also Morse, Holmes Letters, I, 95-96, 105.

[50]John Campbell to Ventress, October 28, 1828, PVF.

interests in politics and the theater as well as encouraging his scientific bent. Sir Henry was particularly keen on things mechanical, notably "our little bellows & grindstone," a creation "for ascertaining the Lee way of ships," and a "steam plough." Lady Anne, who later held her own patent on "machinery for tilling land," praised Ventress' innovative machines, saying their great simplicity was their "great beauty" and that "what others rack their brain to find out comes into yours by inspiration." With their children, the Vavasours lived mainly at Fontainebleau, but were in touch with Ventress frequently. Lady Anne discussed politics with ease and was especially concerned with the revolution of 1831 in Poland.[51] After 1831, however, there is no record of correspondence between Ventress and the Englishmen nor any mention of their friendship in later letters.

As would be expected of a young man of pleasing appearance and lively mind, Ventress' time was not spent entirely in study or in the company of families and male friends. The only physical description of him before middle age--the one in his passport, when he was twenty-six --confirms his Anglo-Saxon ancestry: blond hair and eyebrows, blue eyes, aquiline nose, average mouth, round

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[51]Anne Vavasour to Ventress, October 25, 1828, April 10, 1831, and undated, PVF; Woodcroft, Index of Patentees, 585.

chin, ruddy complexion, oval face, and 176 centimeters tall (about five feet, nine and one-half inches). Whether or not he was stout, as he became later, is not noted.[52] In any case, he was not unattractive to women.

Some idea of Ventress' romantic attachments can be found in various bits of correspondence. Richard Allan wrote from Edinburgh that "the Lasses--'Sleigh ho'--[were] All as charming & as kind as ever" and that "your old friend Miss B" was living nearby. Another school chum suggested that he "must take [home] with [him] either an English & an Irish wife," requesting that Ventress give him the commission to find one. Charles Johnson advised that Ventress cultivate the friendship of the Vavasour daughters since their "beauty & accomplishments" were rare qualities among American women. A more general comment is especially revealing: asking what substitute Ventress had found for the company of a mutual friend who had been in Paris, Johnson answered his own question, saying "I suppose quelque liaison d'amour as I know that you have facilities in forming them." The mutual friend himself wrote from New York asking for the latest news, but feared "you are too busy with the fair ones of Paris to give an account of yourself to your friends on this side of the atlantic."

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[52] PVF.

And in 1833 a German admirer wrote a long letter to her "dearer Alexis," hoping he would return to Berlin to see her but surmising that "the charming french ladies have spread their net round you, and that is . . . the cause of your staying so long."

Only one of "dearer Alexis'" Parisian female acquaintances is named--a "Mlle Florionne" in September 1831.[53] At this time and for some ten months afterward, he was writing to and receiving love letters from a woman who signed herself "M" or, more often, "M--h--." Clearly she was more than a friend, her letters implying that their relationship had begun in 1828. There is evidence in her letters, too, that she was married, perhaps to someone named Victor.[54]

Meetings between the two were frequent--in the evenings during or after dinner, and once certainly in the "passage Colbert," an alleyway near Place des Victoires,

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[53]Richard Allan to Ventress, May 1, 1828, October 31, 1831, H. McDowell to Ventress, January 1, 1829, Charles F. Johnson to Ventress, June 10, 1829, --- Chotard to Ventress, October 6, 1830, and Bertha --- to Ventress, October 20, 1833, PVF. See also Charles Stewart to Ventress, September 7, 1834, and Charles F. Johnson to Ventress, September 1, 1831, PVF.

[54]Her letters are dated from August 29, 1831, to June 6, 1832; there are some undated notes as well. The reference to Victor is in her letter of March 26, 1832, PVF.

some distance from where Ventress lived. "M--h--" traveled a good deal, usually with a companion (her husband?) and often visited female friends. Her letters are in French, addressed to "Mon cher ami" or "cher Alexandre"; occasionally there are paragraphs or postscripts in Spanish. Delivered by an unnamed emissary, probably a servant, who waited for Ventress' reply, the epistles most frequently were signed by "one who loves you with my whole heart." Numerous comments concern her missing him, her anticipation of their next tête-à-tête, the dangers of becoming too accustomed to his company, and the suffering she endures in his absence. While Ventress was in London in November 1831, "M--h--" penned her longest surviving letter, which reflects the content of one of his:

> You say that I am the person you think of most since you left. Ah, dear Alexander! How these expressions make my heart beat faster! I have no doubt that you are sincere. You say that you think with delight of the moments we had together. They were so short and fast! But even so, they left me with unforgettable memories. You say that you think I judge you to be lazy and cold. No, Alexander, not cold but a man whose soul is occupied elsewhere. Alexander, if you only knew how I am torn between duty, love, and self-esteem! . . . It wasn't necessary for me to see you often to love you to the point of idolatry. They say one cannot love without hope. I can attest to that because I have loved without hope for three years and with all the force and ardency a soul is capable of. When you were gone the first time [to Berlin in 1830-31], although I felt offended and remembered you with sadness I never stopped loving you. Now we are separated again, Alexander, and maybe forever. If I am condemned never to see you again, I promise you my strongest affection and that no other man will

> have the place you hold in my heart. The love I have for you is no whim, it is inalienable. You are and will be all my happiness.[55]

After June 1832, when "M--h--" was away in Cherbourg, the correspondence from her ceases. There are no later references anywhere to the adoring Parisienne.

Ventress' trip to London was only one of several in 1827-33. First was a journey to Germany which he had scheduled for the fall of 1829 and postponed until 1830. Armed with a letter of introduction from David Warden to Baron von Humboldt, one of the founders of the University of Berlin, Ventress traveled via Strasbourg and Heidelberg. Reaching Berlin on October 4, he found a place to stay at 67 Wilhelmstrasse and enrolled in the University when the term began in November.[56]

Although there was no great American interest in things German until the 1840s, Ventress was following a trail blazed by several scholars fifteen years before.

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[55] M--h-- to Ventress, November 24, 1831, PVF.

[56] Passport, David B. Warden to Baron von Humboldt, September 15, 1830, Richard Allan to Ventress, February 6, 1831, Anne Vavasour to Ventress, April 10, 1831, John I. Hawkins to [Ventress?], June 9, 1831, --- Bulos to Ventress, July 4, 1831, Bertha --- to Ventress, August 23, 1831, M--h-- to Ventress, August 29, 1831, PVF. A certificate from the University of Berlin dated October 28, 1891, PVF, states that Ventress was a philosophy student from November 10, 1830, until March 14, 1832.

George Ticknor, Edward Everett, and George Bancroft all had studied in Germany and beginning in 1817 published articles in the North American Review on language, literature, and educational techniques. As a result, German metaphysical philosophy and romantic literature, especially the works of Goethe, became known and popular. Everett, Bancroft, Ticknor, John Lothrop Motley, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow studied at Göttingen, but Berlin by all accounts was more exciting.[57]

A city of "right-angled streets and yellow-stuccoed houses," the Prussian capital had been transformed by Frederick the Great from a mediocre town to a great center of politics, industry, and culture, rivalling Vienna. During the French occupation, the University of Berlin was founded as "a haven for the German spirit," based on the admirable maxims of freedom for the individual, for research, and for the nation. The university buildings, formerly a royal palace, were fitted for the school in 1809. Located on the magnificent Unter den Linden, in "the handsomest and busiest part of Berlin," the university flourished, as

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[57] Scott H. Goodnight, German Literature in American Magazines Prior to 1846 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1907), 9-41, 49-50; Orie W. Long, Literary Pioneers: Early American Explorers of European Culture (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1935), passim; Nye, Bancroft, 33-58,305-6.

did the city itself in the long years of peace after 1815. Since Berlin was not a literary capital like Paris and London, the university curriculum concentrated on science and technology, aiming for a comfortable union of research and instruction. The essence of the school was personified by some of the great minds who attracted bright students from several nations--Hegel, Savigny, Fichte, Ranke, and Schleirmacher.[58]

Like John Motley, who went to Berlin in November 1833, Ventress undoubtedly was drawn to study with Savigny, "the most celebrated jurist in Germany." Perhaps like Motley, Ventress engaged a tutor to prepare himself not only in the language but also in the basics of legal theory. He studied at Berlin for approximately six months, until the summer of 1831, when he took the "conventional" trip down the Rhine, viewing Frankfurt am Main, Saarbrücken, and Metz on his way back to Paris.[59]

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[58]Gerhard Masur, Imperial Berlin (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 20-27, 32-35, 154, 187-93; Karl Baedeker, Berlin and Its Environs (Leipzig: Karl Baedeker, 1908), 48-49, 55, 58.

[59]George W. Curtis, ed., The Correspondence to John Lothrop Motley (2 vols., New York: Harper & Bros., 1869), I, 26-34; passport, PVF. Thirty-four years later, Ventress received from a friend aboard an Elbe River steamer a letter describing the beautiful scenery "which you may remember from your own experience"--Peter Miller to Ventress, June 6, 1865, TVP, folder 261.

While Ventress was in Berlin, Polish resistance to Russian rule was underway, a struggle which aroused his deep interest. In 1830 the Russians had been expelled and a revolutionary regime established, but during the following summer the enemy retaliated, taking Warsaw finally on September 8. Sympathy with the oppressed and overpowered Poles led Ventress not only to supply gratis the design of some new war weaponry but also "to tender services . . . in any other way." Unfortunately, as he recounted to his friend Warden, he was not permitted a leave of absence from the university. Even a burst of bad temper--"I told them my mind as freely as if I had been in a free land"--failed to overcome their refusal, termed by the avid volunteer an example of "a small if unadulterated despotism."[60] Nearly three decades afterward, Paul F. Eve, by then a distinguished Nashville surgeon who had fought with the Polish patriots, provided his recollection of Ventress' proposed weapons:

> I met you in Berlin on my way to Poland, May 1831. You there committed to me two suggestions for the Poles--one, a cork jacket as a substitute for the common cuirasse--the other the pointing or directing cannon by an

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[60] Ventress to David Warden, March 25, 1831, Warden Papers, Maryland Historical Society. See also Curtis, Motley Correspondence, I, 18, 33. Motley notes with some amusement the great store set in signed promises and official documents by German authorities. For an account of the general interest felt in Paris and elsewhere about the Polish resistance, see Edward L. Morse, ed., Samuel F. B. Morse: His Letters and Journals (2 vols,

> index which would or could regulate the firing with precision without sighting it as is commonly done. By this you thought cannon might be used successfully even in the dark.
>
> Both of these propositions I submitted in your name to the Polish Government and received its thanks for you. A commission was named for investigation, but owing to the constant, ever-changing scenes of a hasty and short-lived revolution, I never heard its report or received the results of what it did.[61]

Ventress himself provided more details of the weapon in 1861. He then proposed substituting for cannon "very large breech-loading rifles, carrying hollow-conic-leaden balls; the barrels to be from four to five feet long six of which should be firmly placed in a frame . . . and rigged on a pair of wheels . . . drawn by a single horse or mule." Describing the sighting arrangements, Ventress said the barrels could be fired simultaneously and that more of the enemy could be killed than with a conventional cannon or rifles. He maintained that the weapon would be of "incalculable protection to a retreating army . . . with regard to their effectiveness, economy and locomotion." And he corroborated Eve's

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Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), I, 408-11.

[61]Eve to Ventress, December 9, 1858, owned by William P. S. Ventress, Slidell, Louisiana. For Eve's own contribution to the 1831 revolution, see his sketch in DAB. See also Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 954.

recollection of having made the same suggestion to "the Polish General in command of Warsaw. . . . The General returned me his thanks and ordered the experiments to be made--but before they were completed Warsaw fell."[62]

In October 1831, far from German authorities and revolutions, Ventress moved to London, "for the purpose of studying English Law and Jurisprudence." Once more Warden provided a letter of introduction, as did Jean Baptiste Say. According to one American student, London was a city of "bald streets and set faces" compared to Paris, but Ventress had no trouble adjusting. He soon found a room at 12 Rupert Street in Soho, a short walk from Piccadilly Circus. Any evidence of his having enrolled in formal courses at the University of London is lacking, but he did obtain a six-month pass to the famous reading room of the British Museum.[63]

He also joined the National Political Union, formed shortly before in response to the House of Lords' rejection of the 1831 Reform Bill. Organized by Francis Place, a

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[62]Ventress to Jefferson Davis, June 18, 1861, unprocessed materials, Miss. Archives; Ventress to David B. Warden, March 25, 1831, Warden Papers, Maryland Historical Society.

[63]Warden to Charles Sealsfield and to William Lube, October 18, 1831, Say to Jeremy Bentham, October 12, 1831, PVF; Morse, Holmes Letters, I, 94.

London radical, "with some support from London skilled artisans," the Union "rallied London in support of the government in the constitutional crisis," but refused to join in the more extreme demands for universal suffrage and annual parliaments. Ventress was said by one of his friends to have "extreme democratical principles in government" in 1832, thus his association with the Union is credible.[64]

His first stay in London lasting only a few months, Ventress was touring again early in 1832, through Brussels to Liège and back to Prussia, followed by a quick trip to Sicily and Sardinia before returning to Paris. The summer was spent in London, probably on business relating to the weapon patent with Jones. By October he was settled once more at the Hôtel Corneille.[65]

May 1833 marked the beginning of extended travels to Italy, via Marseille. This time he seems to have been simply a tourist. As Warden wrote to a friend in Rome, Ventress proposed "seeing . . . celebrated monuments and

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[64]Membership card, National Political Union, May 1, 1832, PVF; Asa Briggs, The Age of Improvement, 1783-1867 (London: Longmans, Green, 1960), 252. On Ventress' political views, see Charles F. Johnson to him, July 28, 1832, PVF. See also Ventress' contribution to the Figaro, described on page 57 above.

[65]Josiah Parkes to Ventress, August 21, 27, 1832, Charles [Manon?] to Ventress, October 5, 1832, PVF.

curiosities." And he proceeded, despite a letter warning of Italy's poor condition--"the palaces are crumbling," a friend wrote, "and the proudest edifices are employed for the most menial services."[66] In the eleven weeks of his holiday, Ventress' passport shows many pages of visa stamps to every sizable city in Italy. Landing briefly at Genoa, then Civitavecchia, he disembarked at Naples on May 16, and traveled to Rome and Vatican City, north to Florence, Bologna, Rovigo, Venice, Verona, and Milan. Via the forty-mile Simplon Pass, on a carriage road built by Napoleon, from Domodolossa to Iselle on July 17-18, Ventress reached Geneva four days later, arriving in Paris on August 5. Barely two and a half months afterward, on October 16, the final visa stamps shows him bound for New York from LeHavre, and for the last time David Warden penned a letter of introduction, this time to a Baltimorean.[67]

"After a very boisterous passage of thirty-six days,"

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[66]David B. Warden to M. Jackson and to Humphry Atherton, May 1, 1833, and George W. Haven to Ventress, November 14, 1832, PVF. For a like description of Rome's decay, see Curtis, Motley Correspondence, I, 47-48. See also Morse, Letters and Journals, I, 329-63, for an account of Italian touring in 1830.

[67]David B. Warden to Dr. Ducatel, October 10, 1833, PVF.

Ventress wrote, "I had the pleasure of setting foot upon the beloved land of my nativity." He remained in New York a couple of weeks to see old Edinburgh confrere Charles Johnson, then "proceeded to Philadelphia where I . . . enjoyed myself for four or five days in company with some warm-hearted friends." Afterwards, he journeyed to Washington to urge the reappointment of Warden as consul in Paris. Thanks to the friendly intercession of Wilkinson Representative Harry Cage, one of his "most intimate friends" (and a cousin by marriage), and with the aid of the two Mississippi senators, one of whom was also from Woodville, Ventress gained an audience with President Jackson.[68]

In January 1834, having been "more than eight years absent from our Country," James Alexander Ventress returned home. He plunged immediately into the intricacies of Mississippi and American legal codes and in May 1834 published in his hometown paper a short article about whether or not a circuit court jury had been impaneled properly. It was not until February 1841, though, that he

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[68]Ventress to Warden, December 26, 1833, Warden Papers, Maryland Historical Society. Despite numerous recommendations and a petition which Ventress and others had sent in his behalf Warden was not re-appointed.

was formally licensed to practice law in state courts.[69] In 1835, less than eighteen months after his return, he became a candidate for the Mississippi legislature.

His friend Charles Stewart wrote from Paris of Ventress' change of scene and occupation:

> So! you are happy and contented at Woodville? What a contrast there must be between that town and this. You regret Paris occasionally? The theatres, operas--Rubini, Tamburini &c &c et "Il mio tesoro" [a reference to "M--h--"?]? I am not at all surprised to learn that your friends in Mississippi wish you to become a candidate for your state Legislature: a person of your character and abilities may justly lay claim to the highest office which a free and enlightened people may have it in their power to bestow. I have not the least doubt but that, should you consent to serve, you will be elected . . . with the greatest ease, this is the stepping stone to the United States Congress. . . . Happy man! You, at least, will not be condemned to linger on through life unknown, and when dead, to be soon forgotten and unregretted.[70]

Ventress' study and experience abroad set him apart from his peers, and he continued his inventions of mechanical devices, the study of law, and the catholic reading tastes he had cultivated. Coming to maturity during the Industrial Revolution and affected by liberal European philosophies, he was gifted with an inquiring mind which he

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[69] John A. Haven to Mrs. Poindexter, December 13, 1833, PVF; Woodville Republican, May 24, 1834; certification to practice law, February 9, 1841, PVF.

[70] Charles Stewart to Ventress, July 4, 1835, PVF.

had improved by diligent study and travel. Unquestionably, for an American of any generation, he was exceptionally well educated.

No dilettante, he used his foreign experiences to good advantage. His example and probably his encouragement inspired several young members of his family to acquire good educational backgrounds. With Ventress' help, a nephew planned to complete his medical training by "a residence of a year or two in the hospitals of Europe, more especially of Paris"; another nephew attended the University of Mississippi. Ventress' own sons were sent to a Virginia preparatory school and the universities of Mississippi and Virginia at a time when it was financially very difficult to afford such luxuries. The library at LaGrange, Ventress' home after 1848, was called "the finest, if not the largest, collection of rare works in the State," the contents reflecting his years of foreign study. His long association with the cause of education in general and the state university in particular is also a testimonial to his extraordinary schooling. During the Civil War his knowledge of German proved the salvation of his home.[71]

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[71]Lewis C. Pynchon to Ventress, undated, and February 2, 1857, TVP, folders 90, 331; Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 954, 956; Franklin L. Riley, "Private Collectors and Students," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, V (1902),

Beyond these evidences of the years abroad, one might assume that like George Bancroft before him, Ventress was influenced by the general currents of democratic liberalism and ardent nationalism stirring before 1848. But also like Bancroft, Ventress was an innate conservative, a theoretical rather than a practical democrat, or as one acquaintance phrased it, "a Democrat of the old school."[72] He would soon have ample opportunity to express and implement his ideas.

282; Woodville Republican, May 1, 1909.

[72]Nye, Bancroft, 305-6; Woodville Republican, July 27, 1867.

CHAPTER III

"WITH A DUE REGARD FOR THE PUBLIC WEAL."[1]

Neither Woodville nor the "Old Ventress Place" changed much during Ventress' absence. His sister and brother, both married now, had families and were well established in the community. Some old friends were gone but others remained, and Woodville maintained a reputation as the home of numerous public officials and a prosperous, healthy citizenry.

James's sister Eliza and her husband Abram Feltus owned considerable property on Thompson's Creek but lived in town for a number of years. A merchant, Feltus was a New Yorker who had come to Woodville in the 1810s and formed a successful partnership in 1818 with a New Englander, William P. Trask.[2] The elegant home where the Feltuses lived for some time after 1841 is still standing south of Court Square on Second Street.

Upon his return Ventress was to become acquainted with his brother's new family. William's wife, Augusta Maria, whom he had wed in 1828, was the sister of John

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[1]Obituary of Ventress, Woodville Republican, July 27, 1867.

[2]For a biographical sketch of Feltus, see Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, I, 729-30.

Hampden Randolph, a fabulously wealthy cotton and sugar planter; Randolph's brother-in-law, member of another pioneer Wilkinson County family, was future Confederate general St. John Richardson Liddell. William Ventress was himself a planter, holding land in eastern Wilkinson County, undoubtedly a share of his father's estate, and probably residing on a tract near Bayou Sara south of Woodville and in the vicinity of the Randolph-Liddell plantations.[3]

As the hub of local activities, Woodville flourished but grew slowly in population. The town supported academies for boys and girls, some of the earliest founded in the state, as well as the weekly Republican, at the same time Mississippi's oldest newspaper and business institution. St. Paul's Episcopal Church, predating all others in continuous operation west of the Alleghenies, is a neat, white frame structure with lovely stained glass and a pipe organ given in 1827 by Ventress' brother-in-law. Two other denominations also prided themselves on their churches, both the oldest of their kind in the state, the Baptist and Methodist. Yet another feather in the town cap was the

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[3]Woodville Republican, February 16, 1828; 1850 census, Louisiana, Ascension, family 701; ibid., 1860, family 336; Haskell M. Monroe, Jr., and James T. McIntosh, eds., The Papers of Jefferson Davis (2 vols. to date, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971-), II, 3-4; Wilkinson County tax rolls, 1828-39, Miss. Archives.

construction of the state's first railroad, the West Feliciana. Chartered in 1831, the tiny track connected Wilkinson with an important landing twenty-seven miles away at Bayou Sara, Louisiana, a larger, more prosperous port than nearby Fort Adams.

"As evidence of the growing importance of this village," the Republican boasted in 1827, "there have been several houses lately finished and now ten or twelve going up. Rents are high, and no tenements unoccupied. Four dollars per inch front has been offered and refused for a lot of ground on one of the principal cross streets." Houses and buildings of wood were most common, although there were a number of brick--some residences, a jail, and "a substantial and handsome" courthouse. Completed in 1830, the latter was topped by "a superior clock," purchased and installed by the civic-minded Abram Feltus. Court Square, the center of town, was bounded by businesses, including the bank, rows of shops, a market house, lime-house, some lumber yards, hotels, a certain number of disreputable "grogshops and doggeries," and in 1829-30, the "café de Woodville," a coffeehouse and grocery which lent an air of respectability. In July 1832 a theater was opened, the actors to be "young gentlemen, citizens of the village." One wonders what James Ventress thought of their efforts.

By June 1829 there were sixty-six buildings in Woodville, in addition to the churches and bank, serving a

white population of 310, 164 of whom were males and 61 of those, like Ventress, unmarried and over twenty-one. A year later, the Republican editor updated his statistics: the town was seeking new residents, hoping to attract them because "in point of health, for white people, Woodville is equal to any town of the North, and every man may reasonably expect to reach the age of 60." Several new edifices had gone up, and the population had increased to 326, while the slave population had grown from 173 to 186. A wide variety of male occupations was represented, the most numerous being merchants and clerks, carpenters, lawyers, and idlers and loungers.[4]

Visitors also noted Woodville's healthy situation and Joseph Holt Ingraham called it "a beautiful village," surrounded by lush forests and "one of the wealthiest and most polished" neighborhoods in Mississippi. An anonymous commentator termed it "a delightful place," noting the "majestic looking" Royal Oak which shaded the "well built airy and capacious courthouse." The "appearance of . . . business and enterprize" was aided by the "mostly new"

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[4]Woodville Republican, September 1, 1827, June 2, July 28, December 8, 1829, April 24, May 29, November 27, 1830, July 7, 1832; Historical Committee of the Wilkinson County Civil War Centennial, Wilkinson County: Historical Facts and Legends (pamphlet, Woodville, 1962); Mahala P. Roach to Franklin L. Riley, October 12, 1901, Riley Papers, Miss. Archives; David C. Bramlette, "Pioneer Days in Wilkinson," Woodville Republican, July 19, 1924.

buildings and "wide, clear and regularly laid cut" avenues. Indeed, he was "highly pleased with the place and the polite and peaceable demeanor of its inhabitants."[5]

There were dissenters, though, to this portrait of rural calm and prosperity. William Haile, a former congressman and the friend who had aided in handling Ventress' property during his absence, complained that he longed to leave Woodville: "there is no restraint on morals. . . . The want of Books, of society--leads me too much in bad company. . . . I must not . . . live near, with my little sons, the tempting society of Wilkinson." Similarly, the wife of Judge Edward McGehee also regretted the lack of society: "that is a pleasure unknown here . . . . There is no literary taste in Wilkinson Co, & I do not believe that Feliciana [neighboring parish in Louisiana] can offer more." Few books were available and educational opportunity, especially for females, was a "mockery," or worse, a "corruption." The lack of adequate training, Mary McGehee wrote, resulted in a majority of women who were "vain, silly creatures, of empty heads & cold hearts." She found it most unsatisfactory to "converse with one who despises the Muses & depreciates every thing

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[5]Joseph H. Ingraham, The South-West by a Yankee (2 vols., New York: Harper & Bros., 1835), I, 178-79; Woodville Republican, June 23, 1828.

whose worth cannot be computed by $, & cts, or bales of cotton." But on the other hand, she had to admit that "any young man of talents (and not too disagreable) need not fear to come south, as such could hardly fail to find employment." She would have concurred with a young man in Port Gibson that "Mississippi is the place for making money, but not the place for making happiness."[6]

Whatever his goal, James A. Ventress apparently had decided at the age of twenty-nine that Mississippi held his future. His early attempts in the political sphere may have been inspired by the public service of his friend Haile, his relative Harry Cage, and the long tradition of supplying state officials from Wilkinson County. In 1830 local voters were proud that their townsmen held the offices of governor, lieutenant governor, and United States senator. The year before, on June 23, the Republican carried an article on the jealousy of other counties--especially proud Adams--toward Wilkinson because of its numerous elected officers. Not "haughty" but justly smug, the people of Wilkinson sought to teach by example, believing that Mississippians had chosen wisely.

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[6]Haile to John A. Quitman, July 25, 1834, Claiborne Coll., Miss. Archives; Mary B. McGehee to John Burruss, December 20, 1835, May 29, June 30, July 21, August 2, 1836, John C. Burruss Family Papers, Louisiana State University; Gab. Montgomery to Joseph A.Montgomery, May 2, 1839, Joseph A. Montgomery and Family Papers, Miss. Archives.

Residents of Wilkinson were guided by the Republican, which tried to steer a moderate political course. In 1824 it had strongly advocated the election of Andrew Jackson, on the strength of his popularity as the hero of New Orleans. Articles about the other candidates appeared but public meetings upheld the editor's choice. After Jackson made known his views on the tariff, however, the Republican suddenly fell silent about the election. By 1828 there were two editors, each of whom supported a different candidate. In response to requests from readers for pieces on the election, the Republican did publish some representative articles from other papers but in general thought that "enough of the public prints are already of a partizan character--that there will not be much difference in either event."

Soon after Jackson's cabinet was selected, the Republican began its long campaign against Van Buren, mainly because of his views on slavery. Following most of Mississippi in approving South Carolina's actions in the nullification controversy, the editor claimed to be a nullifier but also a unionist and an obvious admirer of Calhoun. The editors consistently opposed the protective tariff and interference with slavery, printing no articles before 1835 in defense of the peculiar institution but voicing fears of abolitionist infiltration and some insecurity about slave gatherings and weekend travel

privileges.[7] In line with the democratic ideas that Ventress himself supposedly espoused in the early 1830s, the citizens of Woodville sanctioned the new constitution, a liberal document which provided for an elected judiciary, limited executive appointment powers, abolished property qualifications for voting, and established easy residency requirements for candidates--for the house, two years in the state and one in the locale of the office sought.[8]

Even so, Ventress technically was not qualified to run for the legislature in 1835, unless he considered himself a resident during his years abroad. Yet on May 9, 1835, the Republican carried the following notice for the first time: "James A. Ventress, Esqr., we are authorized to announce, is a candidate for a seat in the House of Representatives in the next legislature." His opposition was formidable. They were Preston W. Farrar, son-in-law of Governor Abram Scott and a longtime Wilkinson legislator; George H. Gordon, an attorney and former representative; Stanhope Posey, another well-known lawyer; William L.

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[7]Woodville Republican, 1824-35, passim; Sara W. Hodge, Attitude of the Woodville Republican toward National Questions, 1823-48 (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1929), 6-8, 12-23, 29-32. See also Porter L. Fortune, "The Formative Period," in Richard A. McLemore, ed., A History of Mississippi (2 vols., Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), I, 252-83.

[8]Rowland, Heart of the South, I, 565ff.; Woodville Republican, April 28, 1832; Edwin A. Miles, Jacksonian

Brandon, brother of Governor Gerard C. Brandon, also a former legislator; and John W. Gildart, one of the incumbents, a justice of the peace, practicing attorney, and member of an old Wilkinson family. The two other incumbents, Francis Richardson and Gordon D. Boyd, did not choose to run.

During the previous year Ventress' name had been brought to the voters' attention on at least three occasions. Besides the publicized legal opinion on the jury challenge case in May 1834, he and his brother were on the arrangements committee for a barbecue and dance held on July 4 near Mount Pleasant, an annual event which attracted big crowds. More important for his political future was his participation in the "Great Whig Meeting" at the courthouse on October 27. "A large number of citizens" gathered to voice opposition to "the Proclamation and Force Bill, to the claim of Executive power asserted in the late protest of the President; and in general to those acts subvers[ive] of the Constitutional Government, and to a concentration of unlimited power in his own hands." Ventress, Farrar, Alfred Bynum (attorney, schoolmaster, and editor of the Republican), and three of Woodville's lawyers were named to draft a preamble and resolutions,

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Democracy in Mississippi (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), 37-43.

which were reported to the meeting the same afternoon.

Supporting the principle of separation of powers, these resolutions denounced the tendency toward the establishment by the executive of "a single, gigantic, and uncontrollable dynasty" which worked to the detriment of Congress and the judiciary. The only recourse was to the action of the people, "to rebuke those who promised them to disregard and put down the monster party," to curtail the presidential term of office, reform all departments, bring a strict economy to public spending, and protect the rights of the states. Finally, Jackson was charged with perverting the character of the government and condemned for removal of the public deposits and for attempting to intimidate Congress. The corruption in the post office, the appointment of congressmen to office, the internal improvements vetoes in anti-Jackson regions, the attempt to influence the press were all symptoms of "a general tenor . . . of the Administration . . . calculated and intended to excite and develope the corrupt passions of the human heart, and establish an irresponsible tyranny." Senator George Poindexter of Woodville, one of Jackson's most intractable opponents, was glowingly praised, and the final resolution named twenty-nine Wilkinson countians--including the Ventress brothers--to the state convention in Jackson. Adoption of the resolutions was

"entirely unanimous."[9] The meeting was one of many throughout the state in a year when criticism of Jackson crystallized, over patronage, state rights, usurpation of undelegated powers ("with all the sangfroid of a Metternich," the Republican declared), and the anticipation that Van Buren would be Old Hickory's personal choice as chief magistrate in 1836.[10]

Political issues in 1835 were a combination of national, state, and local concerns. In August "Lower Buffalo" addressed an open letter to all the candidates, requesting written replies to be published in the Republican. None was forthcoming, but the questions raised reveal voters' interests. "Lower Buffalo" wished to know if the campaigners were for Hugh Lawson White of Tennessee or Van Buren, for or against the election of Jackson partisan Robert J. Walker to the Senate. He also solicited their views on state rights, the Mississippi Union Bank, internal improvements, the establishment of a state penitentiary, and abolition of imprisonment for debt. The office-seekers undoubtedly had numerous opportunities

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[9]Receipt from William A. A. Chisholm, July 7, 1835, TVP; Woodville Republican, June 14, November 1, 1835.

[10]Woodville Republican, November 22, 1834; Miles, Jacksonian Democracy, 47-54, 84-85, and passim; Hodge, Attitude of the Republican, 23-24; David N. Young, The Mississippi Whigs, 1834-1860 (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabana, 1968), 8-12.

to answer questions from their neighbors in the course of daily life, and typically, there were several public meetings, such as a barbecue at Caledonia Springs on September 12, where they could be heard at length.

On November 7 the results were published. Farrar, Gordon, and Ventress, the "anti-Van Buren" men, were the winners. In five of the seven precincts, Ventress was among the top four but won the most votes only on his home ground, Mount Pleasant. He did not do well where he was least known, in the two western districts of Upper and Lower Homochitto (also both Jackson strongholds). Statewide, the election was close, as the Whig gubernatorial nominee Charles Lynch won by 400 votes.[11]

In early January, Ventress began his first journey to Jackson as a legislator. Troublesome and controversial problems awaited him, chiefly the election of a senator and the question of admitting representatives from the newly organized counties in the Choctaw and Chickasaw cessions, issues postponed from the previous session. Also to be decided were the matters of establishing a state penal institution, revision of the state code, and fiscal reform. It would be, as the Republican had predicted on December 19, "a long and tedious session."

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[11]Woodville Republican, August 8, September 19, November 1, 7, 1835.

After some delay because of bad road conditions, Ventress and his colleague Preston Farrar arrived late on Monday, January 4, opening day. They missed the election of the speaker, a Van Buren man, but on January 5 "Mr. James A. Ventress, a member elect from the county of Wilkinson, appeared, produced his credentials, was duly sworn and took his seat." He was appointed immediately to the standing committee on revisal and unfinished business. Four days later, after the presentation of the governor's message, the senatorial election took place--a test vote of whether Whigs could defeat Democrats in another state contest. The three Wilkinson Whigs held firm through five ballots for favorite son George Poindexter; Robert J. Walker won when Poindexter and the redoubtable Franklin Plummer split the "anti-Caucus and White party" vote. Likewise, in the elections for state printer and sergeant-at-arms, Ventress, Farrar, and Gordon voted on the losing side.

Ventress' participation in his first term was limited to committee work--concerning the West Feliciana Rail Road and deciding the location of branches and limit of capitalization of the proposed Union Bank. He introduced no bills and in common with most Whigs was usually

listed among the defeated in roll call votes.[12]

Achievements of the session included passage of several measures which he supported: the state penitentiary bill, establishment of an inferior court of justice in the river counties, repeal of a section of the West Feliciana Rail Road act which had called for a completion deadline, and reincorporation of Woodville, empowering the mayor and aldermen to control slaves when they came to town.[13] Left undecided were the issues of the state bank, the route to be granted to the New Orleans and Nashville Railroad, the admission of representatives from the new counties, and revision of an 1833 digest of state law.

The railroad and new counties were of vital interest to southwestern Mississippi, a section beginning to sense its waning influence. Ventress' political elders and allies, Farrar and Gordon, favored granting the New Orleans and Nashville line a route east of Pearl River. The rationale

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[12] Ibid., January 16, March 5, 1836; Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi (Jackson: G. R. and J. S. Fall, 1836), 7-9, 11, 77-83, 246, 462-63, 483, and passim [hereafter House Journal, 1836]; see also Jackson Mississippian, January 12, 1836.

[13] Laws of the State of Mississippi . . . 1836 (Jackson: G. R. and J. S. Fall, 1836), 20-38, 123-32, 357-72 [hereafter Laws, 1836]. Good summaries of the accomplishments of the various legislative sessions, including 1835-36, may be found in Rowland, Heart of the South, I, 586-650.

they gave included the following: the eastern route was shorter, the country was more level, more pine was available for construction, and the benefit would be greater to that portion of the state which lacked adequate market communication. Left unsaid were some economic and selfish reasons: a route west of the Pearl would bring the road into competition with the Mississippi, benefitting New Orleans at the expense of Fort Adams, Natchez, and Vicksburg. Similarly, admission of the new county representatives to the legislature was opposed on the high ground of unconstitutionality; calling Pontotoc and its surrounding counties "a hotbed of Van Burenism" betrayed the real basis for opposition.[14]

While these proposals were being considered during the recess, the 1836 election added fuel to partisan fires. Van Buren's inconsistency on the tariff, Mississippians' feelings of insecurity on the slavery issue, and unhappiness over a continuation of Jacksonian patronage and fiscal policies led the Republican to support White, who won a resounding victory in Wilkinson, 422-143. But in Mississippi Van Buren won narrowly, on the strength of the Old Hero's somewhat tarnished popularity and because of

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[14]Woodville Republican, May 5, August 13, September 3, 24, October 1, November 5, 19, 1836; Jackson Mississippian, January 31, February 5, 26, 1836.

"Mississippi's apparently never-ending prosperity."[15]

On January 2, 1837, the legislature reconvened. "After an able and very exciting discussion of nearly four days," the new county representatives were admitted by a vote of 31-29; the absence of two river county legislators was crucial. Ventress soon joined in several formal protests. Objecting that no reapportionment had been made, that the number of representatives was fixed by law at sixty-four, that the writs of election were improperly issued, and that the new members had, in effect, passed on their own admission since they had been allowed to help defeat a report by the committee on elections, Ventress and his friends believed that all laws passed by the session would be null. One observer noted the effects of the Whig dissension: "The Legislature are in confusion & doing nothing-- & [Seargent S.] prentiss swears they shall do nothing until they purge the House . . . of the new members."[16]

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[15]Young, Mississippi Whigs, 12-13; Hodge, Attitude of the Republican, 22-23; Miles, Jacksonian Democracy, 127-29. Unless otherwise noted, vote totals for the gubernatorial, congressional, and presidential elections are taken from the Tribune Almanac . . . 1838 to 1868 (2 vols. in one, New York: New York Tribune, 1868).

[16]Woodville Republican, January 14, August 19, 1837; George Winchester to John A. Quitman, December 24, 1836, Claiborne Coll.; House Journal, 1837, pp. 95, 128-29; "Address to the People of the State of Mississippi," January 18, 1837, offprint, PVF; Edward Turner to John A. Quitman, January 13, 1837, Claiborne Coll.

In fact, the legislature did pass two very important acts, organization of the Union Bank and a charter for the New Orleans and Nashville road, with a route west of Pearl River. Ventress voted for the former; it is assumed that he opposed the latter. Soon after the end of the short session--credited by the Republican to the "spirit of restlessness" caused by the new counties question and by the Jackson Mississippian to the protestors who "caused the embarrassment . . . and indirectly brought about the speedy adjournment"--there was a rash of resignations by those who felt most strongly about the unconstitutionality of the proceedings. Their absence was deplored, even by those who supported their stand, when the governor called a special session on March 31. Legislation was left in the hands of the Chickasaw counties "and their accomplices" at a time when experience and stability were most required.

In the spring, as the Panic of 1837 intensified, Governor Lynch summoned the legislature to deal with "the impending [financial] distress," provide relief for debtors, and reduce reliance on New Orleans commercial houses.[17] But in spite of the pressing need for action, the house and senate again submitted to the "malign

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[17]Woodville Republican, April 22, 29, 1837; Jackson Mississippian, January 27, May 5, 1837; Natchez Courier, January 27, February 10, 17, March 10, May 5, 1837.

influence of the Chickasaw question," electing a speaker who had denounced the last session as unconstitutional, and spending days with roll call votes on every motion.

On April 21, Alfred T. Moore, Wilkinson's senator, wrote home that "Mr. Ventress and myself have done nothing and will do nothing." Five days later Ventress joined Moore in the ranks of the "Resigners," addressing a terse note to the governor. "Circumstances of importance rendering it necessary," he wrote, "I hereby tender . . . my resignation . . . and beg that you will, from this time, consider my seat vacant." On May 13 the legislature adjourned, having done little to relieve the state's financial woes.[18]

No sooner was the session over than Mississippi began to stir at the coming special congressional election which resulted in the victory of the two incumbent Democrats. In Wilkinson and the other conservative river counties, the Whig nominees prevailed. There was another imminent election--November 1837--when new state officials would be chosen. Ventress' candidacy for a second term was announced on July 8; he and Farrar were the only two incumbents to run, Farrar for the senate. Ventress was

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[18]Woodville Republican, April 29, May 27, June 10, August 19, 1837; Ventress to Charles Lynch, April 26 [1837], RG27, Governor's Records, Vol. 23, Miss. Archives; House Journal, 1837, called session, passim.

opposed for the lower house by Stanhope Posey, Lemuel Scarborough, and Dr. Spencer Wood.[19]

To aid the voters in making a decision, the Republican printed statements of principle by Scarborough and Wood and came out strongly for the "Republican Whig" state ticket. In the legislative race, Scarborough announced himself for Jacksonian principles but not actions; Wood declared he had always been a Whig and was opposed to all of Jackson's fiscal policies. Ventress, identified as one of the "Bank men--Whigs" (presumably for his vote on the Union Bank and other "anti-Van Buren" actions), was once more silent in the public prints, but easily reclaimed his seat in November. As in 1835, he fared poorly in Lower and Upper Homochitto, but swept the eastern districts. Democratic state officers won across Mississippi, but so did the Whig candidates for Congress. The new legislature was nearly evenly divided, presaging a lively session.[20]

On New Year's Day 1838 Ventress and Wood presented their credentials and immediately Ventress took a more

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[19]Woodville Republican, June 3, July 8, July 15, August 12, 1837.

[20]Ibid., September 30, October 28, December 2, 1837; Natchez Weekly Courier and Journal, December 1, 1837; Jackson Mississippian, December 1, 1837; Young, Mississippi Whigs, 13-14; James E. Baxter, Congressional Redistricting in Mississippi from 1817 to 1938 (M.A. thesis, Duke University, 1939), 23.

active part than he had in 1836-37. On January 2, he addressed his first open letter to his constituents, about the vote for speaker:

> I announce to you, that for a day and a half in both Houses, have we fought the champions of Van Burenism, and it was not until to-day, noon, that victory alight (I hope forever) upon our standard.--The battle was long and fiercely contested.

He included a tabular statement of the voting, indicating that both the speaker and the senate president were "stout Anti-Van Buren men." Democrats outnumbered Whigs in the senate, but not in the house.[21]

When the elections were over, the house settled down to the business at hand. Banking and the condition of the state treasury were still issues of prime concern, but Ventress took little interest in them and was often absent or not voting on fiscal matters. The 1838 session did bring up three issues which were to become his specific projects: establishment of the University of Mississippi, a state geological and agricultural survey, and the construction of public buildings in Jackson.

Kemp S. Holland's bill to provide for a state university was read twice before being referred to a joint

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[21] House Journal, 1838, pp. 3, 5, 10; Woodville Republican, January 13, 1838; Jackson Mississippian, January 5, 1838; Natchez Weekly Courier and Journal, December 1, 1837.

select committee, where it languished until 1840. Provided for by an 1819 statute, the university was to be funded by the proceeds from the lease and sale of the seminary lands. Successive governors had recommended that the school be organized, but by the time an act was passed creating a seminary fund, the money collected had been invested in the ill-fated Planters' Bank. In any event, public support for the university was lukewarm as those interested in higher education continued to send their sons to Virginia and northeastern schools. Political and sectional jealousies were also factors.[22]

Impetus for the state agricultural and geological survey came from Jefferson College and the Washington (Mississippi) Lyceum. Until it closed in 1964, Jefferson was the oldest endowed college in the southwest and during the early antebellum years a center of learning and advanced ideas. Its guiding spirit was the remarkable Benjamin L. C. Wailes, whose interest in science, history, and the dissemination of knowledge was lifelong and of immeasurable value to his adopted state. The lyceum,

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[22] House Journal, 1838, p. 126; Grover C. Hooker, The Origin and Development of the University of Mississippi with Special Reference to its Legislative Control (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1932), 31-39. See also Chapter V.

whose members were the teachers and trustees of Jefferson College along with professional and well-educated men of Washington and nearby Natchez, first petitioned the legislature in 1836 for a survey.[23] On January 23 Ventress was named to a select committee on the petition and nearly two weeks later the Natchez representative on the committee reported "an act to provide for a geological and mineralogical survey of the State." This initial effort was doomed to years in limbo, even though local agricultural societies, newspapers, and journals continued to request and petition. Not until March 5, 1850, was an enabling act finally signed into law, authorizing research into geology and agriculture.[24]

The third of Ventress' chief concerns was construction of the state public buildings--the capitol, executive mansion, and penitentiary. The need for all three was pressing. Since the admission of the senators and representatives from the Indian cession counties, the small statehouse on Capitol Street was definitely inadequate.

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[23] Sydnor, Wailes, 144-48; Moore, Agriculture in Antebellum Mississippi, 80-82.

[24] House Journal, 1838, pp. 186, 288-90, 400; Sydnor, Wailes, 182-83. A dozen states had already completed such surveys--see George P. Merrill, ed. and comp., Contributions to a History of American State Geological and Natural History Surveys (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 537-38; for Mississippi surveys, see 255-73. For more on the state survey and Ventress' role, see Chapter V.

The governor, meanwhile, would have welcomed even cramped official quarters since he had none. As early as 1833 money was appropriated for the mansion and capitol but work proceeded slowly. A state architect appointed in December 1833 was dismissed less than two years later for incompetence, his plan pronounced undesirable by a legislative committee, and the work already done ordered demolished. Englishman William Nichols was named state architect and construction supervisor in 1836, but as of January 5, 1837, the capitol had cost Mississippi nearly $62,000 and was still unfit for use. In 1838 a committee, including Ventress, was ordered to search for alternative housing should the present halls be deemed unsafe; somehow, the legislature managed on Capitol Street for one more year.[25]

Completion of the mansion, first in the nation, was even further in the future. After Nichols' plan was approved, construction began in 1839; it was fit for occupancy (though incomplete) in 1842. The third public building, the penitentiary, had been proposed for several

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[25]David N. Young, History of the Construction of State Buildings in Jackson, Mississippi, 1822-1860 (M.A. thesis, Mississippi College, 1954), 1-42; House Journal, 1838, p. 15; Jackson Mississippian, December 30, 1836.

years before a bill was passed in 1836, along with an appropriation of $75,000. In April 1837 the contract was let for excavation of the foundation but it was 1840 before the first prisoners could be admitted.[26]

All three projects were thus in various stages of completion when Ventress became involved. From a joint committee he reported a bill to appoint a commissioner of public buildings in order to expedite construction. After several days' consideration, a heated debate, and five ballots, former Whig governor Charles Lynch was named to the post and $100,000 appropriated for completion of the capitol. The appointment proved a wise one as construction moved forward more rapidly and efficiently. Ventress' bill to consider moving the location of the penitentiary to or near the Hinds County stone quarry from its eight-acre plot north of the governor's mansion passed the house, but did not reach the senate in time for action in 1838.[27]

During this session Ventress was more conspicuous in introducing legislation for his constituents' benefit.

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[26]Young, History of Buildings, 54-64. On the early years of the mansion, see David G. Sansing and Carroll Waller, A History of the Mississippi Governor's Mansion (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), Ch. 1-3.

[27]House Journal, 1838, pp. 230, 269, 340-41, 386; Woodville Republican, March 3, 1838.

He offered several resolutions for the relief of various citizens and presented the accounts of several others for payment of diverse services. Further, two of his bills--incorporation of the Fort Adams Baptist Church and an act to change the time of holding sheriff's sales--were noted with appreciation in the Woodville paper.[28]

The 1838 legislature, which adjourned after six weeks, could boast of some progress. A supplementary bill to the Union Bank was passed, enabling it to begin operation, and an "astonishing" number of state building projects such as turnpikes and railroads were incorporated. Consideration of the new legal code made little headway, following the trend of the three previous sessions. As one shrewd observer, himself an attorney, wrote, the legislators had the digest "under trial . . . few have read it perhaps none and I think it quite probable they will reject it. . . . the old Lawyers are opposed to any innovation."[29]

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[28] House Journal, 1838, pp. 69, 71, 77, 78, 101, 193, 258, 263; Woodville Republican, March 3, 1838; Laws, 1838, pp. 137-42, 177-88, 306, 324.

[29] Woodville Republican, February 17, 1838; Laws, 1838, pp. 9-33; Rowland, Heart of the South, I, 599ff.; Joseph E. Davis to Jefferson Davis, January 19, 1838, Monroe and McIntosh, eds., Davis Papers, I, 437-38; Claiborne, Mississippi, 473; see also Liberty Advocate, January 13, 20, 27, February 3, 10, 1838.

There was another election for senator in 1838, John Black having resigned following a belated censure by the legislature for his opposition to Andrew Jackson. On January 22, after only one ballot, James F. Trotter, Democrat from Holly Springs, was elected; Ventress and a number of others supported former Woodville resident and state rights Whig John Henderson.[30]

A short two months after the session closed, there was another election, this time for two congressional seats contested since the previous autumn when Whigs had been elected to replace Democrats. The April canvass in Wilkinson and the rest of the state gave Whigs the victory. Democrats, stunned by defeat, declared that the majority of their party were "staunch yeomanry of the country, who did not go to the polls" and noted that the Whigs had gained control of the towns and villages, "over which the banks and panic humbugs have spread their influence."[31] On May 11 the Mississippian, state Democratic

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[30]Dunbar Rowland, ed., Encyclopedia of Mississippi History (2 vols., Madison, Wis.: Selwyn A. Brant, 1907), I, 248; Woodville Republican, March 3, 1838; Jackson Mississippian, March 3, April 27, 1838; Liberty Advocate, January 13, February 3, 1838; House Journal, 1838, pp. 184-85, 410.

[31]Woodville Republican, April 28, May 5, 1838; Jackson Mississippian, May 4, 11, 1838.

organ, proclaimed that

> Parties are now to be organized on deep and broad foundations. The advocates of the Hamiltonian and Federal policy, together with abolition on one side under Mr. Clay, and the party of the constitution, of state rights and of free principles on the other under Mr. Van Buren . . . . the coming contest . . . emphatically a struggle between the Aristocracy of wealth, and the Democracy of numbers.

Unhappily for Democrats, the November elections to fill vacancies in the house and senate proved that the Whig victory in April was not an aberration.[32]

The session of January 7-February 16, 1839, was both animated and productive. For the first time the legislature convened in the new capitol. The "decidedly elegant" edifice was progressing rapidly, with courtrooms and library scheduled for completion in a few months. On January 11 a chandelier was hung in the senate chamber and various other amenities were added as the legislature continued its business.[33]

Before anything could be enacted, however, there was another senatorial election. "The dwarf of the North" (Trotter) had resigned in the summer of 1838 and was replaced by Thomas H. Williams, a gubernatorial appointee

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[32]Woodville Republican, October 27, November 3, 1838.

[33]Jackson Mississippian, December 7, 1838, January 12, 1839.

from Pontotoc and now the leading candidate for election. His opponents were Cotesworth Pinckney Smith, a nullifier and Democrat from Woodville, and John Henderson. Both Democrats and Whigs held their state conventions while the legislature was in session, undoubtedly counting supporters for the upcoming Senate vote. House Whigs, believing they had a slight edge, pressed the Democrats for an early decision. The senate, where Democrats held sway, resisted, alleging that one of their party was absent. Following a series of recriminations by both sides, Henderson was elected on the first ballot for a full six-year term while Williams won a consolation vote to serve Black's unexpired term.[34] Mississippi senators now reflected the almost even party division in the state legislature. In Woodville, news of Henderson's election was received with rejoicing. The cannon on Court Square was fired six times, "not so much at the elevation of Henderson, as at the defeat of the traitor Smith."[35]

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[34]Liberty Advocate, February 3, 1838, January 18, February 7, 1839; Woodville Republican, February 2, 1839; Jackson Mississippian, January 26, February 2, 1839; House Journal, 1839, pp. 204-6.

[35]Liberty Advocate, February 14, 1839.

Ventress' energies in the remainder of the 1839 session were concentrated on his participation as a member of the joint select committee on public buildings. His seven-page report, delivered on February 13, was passed the same day. The penitentiary was the major topic. Noting that considerable progress had been made, the committee anticipated receiving prisoners in the spring and completion by October. Clearly in response to some critical comments, the report stated that although the cells seemed small, they were actually "more airy and commodious than those of any other penitentiary in the Union." Questions about the essential plan of the institution was an objection raised by the committee members themselves. They would, they said, "have recommended a [scheme] adapted to the solitary labor system, and so constructed that the eye of the keeper could, unperceived by the convict, be cast, at any moment, upon him." In fact, were adjournment not so imminent, they would have suggested a "thorough investigation" of the subject. They believed that even though solitary confinement was "a punishment of considerable severity," the law which would tend to prevent propagation of crimes without abridging too greatly individual liberty was the best.[36] Ventress would have more to say on the subject

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[36]House Journal, 1839, pp. 61, 74, 105, 376, 387-93, 417, 471-73, 478; Laws, 1839, pp. 74, 76-77; Report of the Joint Select Committee on Public Buildings (Jackson: B. D.

of crime and punishment later.

Regarding the capitol, the committee reported that of the $280,000 appropriation (1833-38), only $21,000 remained, a statement rebutting a current report that the statehouse had already cost between $500,000 and $600,000. Despite the governor's "lynx-eyed watch" over the building, observations which had led him to believe there was little progress, the committee saw nothing but efficiency and zeal on the part of the architect, commissioner of public buildings, and laborers. The members refuted McNutt's claim that the expenditures were "extravagant," and appealed to the legislators to judge for themselves of the decor and furnishings:

> Who is he that would be glad to see raw-hide-bottomed chairs, tawdry calico tapestry, and bunglingly contrived tin lamp, supplant the neat, convenient and commodious chairs that members now occupy--the rich and elegant tapestry that beautifies all that surrounds it --and the brilliant useful and magnificent candelabra that adorns the Senate Hall.

The committee did not doubt that the legislature would grant the additional sums required for a finished capitol and hoped the state would see the advantages in "cherishing the fine arts" as a monument for future generations.[37]

Howard, 1839), 3-5, copy in PVF; Woodville Republican, March 16, 1839.

[37] Report on Public Buildings, 5-8, long quotation on 8; Young, History of Buildings, 42-44. Used by the governor, court, and legislature until 1903, the capitol is now the state historical museum.

In other matters, too, Ventress was active in 1839. He presented a petition in behalf of the West Feliciana Rail Road for another extension of time to complete the tracks, served on several select committees, introduced bills for the relief of two of his constituents, and reported from the committee on public buildings on a number of resolutions and petitions.[38] His name also appears on an interesting measure not unrelated to the later controversy over the university site.

Passed in February 1839 and entitled "an act to incorporate the City of Pearl, on the Gulph of Mexico," the law provided for a company of ten prominent Mississippians to establish a town at the mouth of the east branch of Pearl River. Five million dollars were set aside for construction of a "commercial emporium" with shipping facilities equal to those of New Orleans. Among the incorporators were Wilkinson residents C. P. Smith, George Gordon, and James A. Ventress, as well as a former Woodvillian, Senator John Henderson.[39] Pearl never came

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[38] House Journal, 1839, pp. 5, 196, 199-200, 289, 300, 340, 349, 352, 357, 380, 398, 418-19, 458-59; Laws, 1839, pp. 353-54; Woodville Republican, March 2, 1839.

[39] House Journal, 1839, pp. 432-33; Laws, 1839, pp. 390-96; Woodville Republican, March 2, 1839. See also Liberty Advocate, February 3, 1838, for a comment on Wilkinson's feelings about the state university site.

to be; however, in the light of the vote on the university site in 1840, it is logical to assume it was planned not only as a rival to the Crescent City but also as a desirable college town.

During the session, Ventress participated in the state Whig convention and was delegated to serve on a committee to compose a statement of policy and strategy for the fall election. Not surprisingly, the Jackson Mississippian derided the "Federal Whig, Hoco-Poco" meeting, saying Edward Turner, the gubernatorial nominee, was chosen only because "some half dozen Whig lawyers" wanted to be chancellor in his place. For Congress the meeting selected Adam L. Bingaman, "a consistent federalist," and Reuben Davis, because he was from northern Mississippi. The Woodville Republican and neighboring Liberty Advocate defended the convention's actions, even though Turner and one of the congressional candidates were believed to have "little personal appeal."[40]

In August, Ventress was among nine who signed the Whig address to the people of Mississippi, a lengthy exposition printed in several papers. The catalog of

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[40]Jackson Mississippian, February 2, 1839; Woodville Republican, February 16, 1839; Liberty Advocate, February 7, 13, 1839.

Jacksonian wrongs was familiar: despotism of party, vice and profligacy, an excess of executive power, fiscal irresponsibility, disastrous Indian wars, and more. For the needed "change of rulers" the committee suggested Henry Clay, "pre-eminent in usefulness," and as his running mate, John Tyler, a man of "high reputation." Clay's tariff stand was called questionable but the resolutions reminded voters that he believed a tariff should be temporary and that the bill of 1833 was designed as an emergency compromise measure. The committee blamed the "Van Buren party" for most of Mississippi's financial woes--the state banks were established during the Democratic ascendancy and the bill for issuance of postnotes was passed in May 1837, when the Van Burenites were in control. Ventress and his colleagues denounced the Democrats' constant use of the term "federal" to describe Whigs as a tactic "to delude the ignorant." Finally, urging support for the entire slate in November, the committee reminded readers that Clay <u>was</u> a southern slaveholder and that "all that energy and concert can effect must be expected of those who have a sinking party to sustain."[41]

Ventress may have been concerned for his own political future as well, since he announced for the house

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[41]Woodville <u>Republican</u>, August 17, 1839.

very early, in mid-March. Whig editors soon repeated the call for action during the summer, as candidates prepared to begin canvassing. In Wilkinson there was little excitement or visits from hopefuls because of the "fixed political principles of her citizens." As expected, Turner humiliated McNutt, 574-194, the Whig congressional candidates winning by similar margins. For the legislature there was no choice between parties. The race was among William A. Norris, editor of the Republican and a moderate Whig, Francis S. Mayes, "a thorough going Whig," and Ventress. The votes totaled 504, 319, and 474, respectively, a good indicator of the importance of name recognition. Ventress' strength in the various precincts remained about the same; he led only in his own neighborhood (Whitesville and Mount Pleasant) and in Pinckneyville. Statewide, Norris' election postmortem claimed that Whig successes were "equal to our expectations if not our desires." Most other counties returned Alexander McNutt, "a political weathercock and bank-monger," to the governor's office.[42] Whigs were never again to elect their gubernatorial candidate but were far from political demise.

In 1840 the news came early that Harrison and Tyler

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[42] Ibid., March 16, September 14, 21, 28, October 5, 12, 18, November 9, 23, 1839; Jackson Mississippian, November 15, 22, 1839.

had been nominated by the Harrisburg convention. Mississippi Whigs moved quickly to organize Tippecanoe clubs. But, before election fever became epidemic, the state legislature had to meet and conclude its business, and it was there that party strength was tested.

On the coattails of McNutt, Democrats had gained a majority in both houses by vowing to reform the bank bills. The session opened in the just-completed, "splendid" capitol at 11 a.m. on January 6, with Ventress temporarily in the chair and receiving four votes for speaker. Jesse Speight, candidate of the "locofocos," was chosen, however, and the Natchez Courier reported with disgust the "rowdy stomping on the floor" by the majority witnessing the Whigs' defeat. Ventress' fellow representative, William Norris, professed to see some hope in Democratic factionalism--"real unhesitating loco focos," the conservative "Bank democrats," and the main body of party followers.[43]

First priority in McNutt's annual message was the state's fiscal problems. He had declared war on the banks during his campaign and was determined that they be abolished. He also begged for revision of election laws, and asked action on Ventress' favorite issues, the

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[43]Natchez Courier, January 14, 1840; Woodville Republican, January 6, 11, 1840; House Journal, 1840, pp. 3-6.

university, the agricultural and geological survey, and completion of the executive mansion and penitentiary. Ventress continued to serve on the public buildings and judiciary committees; he was appointed to a select committee on the seminary fund, and, after his own suggestion that it be organized, to the new committee on education.[44]

It was on the selection of the university site and matters involving the public buildings that he was most active. On February 5 he reported from the seminary fund committee an act "to provide for the location of the State University," over which, one paper rightly predicted, "there [would] be great 'pulling and hauling'." Passed by the house on February 10, the bill was signed ten days later. On February 21, in accordance with a joint resolution authored by Ventress, balloting began to select seven possible sites and three commissioners.[45]

Forty-eight towns in all were suggested. Ventress nominated a site "one mile north of Mississippi City" and the Wilkinson senator suggested another only a few miles away, at the not-yet-established city of Pearl. Both Ventress and the senator, of course, were Pearl

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[44] House Journal, 1840, pp. 9, 11-39, 76, 84, 126, 128, 139-40.

[45] Ibid., 532, 472, 875; Natchez Courier, January 22, 1840; Woodville Republican, February 15, 1840.

incorporators. Competition was keen since a vast sum of state money would be appropriated for construction. In addition, local citizens would be able to give their children extraordinary educational advantages at relatively little cost. After six ballots, seven towns were chosen. Mississippi City and Oxford led the list, demonstrating that sectionalism was very much a factor. Elected commissioners were Ventress' nominee William L. Brandon, William L. Sharkey of Vicksburg, and Thomas H. Williams of Pontotoc.[46] The university was on its way.

On February 5, the same day that Ventress reported the bill for locating the school, he offered a joint resolution to choose a new commissioner of public buildings, and two weeks later reported four bills from the joint select committee: for the management and preservation of the capitol, to make appropriations for more construction, for the relief of a contractor, and to allow the commissioner to liquidate certain contracts.[47] All but the last were eventually passed.

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[46] House Journal, 1840, pp. 896, 989-903; Samuel T. Lyles, Conditions Relating to Sectionalism in Mississippi from 1838 to 1852 (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1932), 1-9; Louis Silver, "Ole Miss and Oxfordtown," Ole Miss Alumni Review, I (October 1947), 18.

[47] House Journal, 1840, pp. 433, 462, 894.

In the committee's formal report, signed this time by the senate chairman instead of Ventress, the penitentiary was deemed most needy. A temporary eighteen-foot wall was recommended to enclose a nearly completed wing, so that inmates could be admitted and put to work on construction. And the committee reversed itself on the acceptance of architect Nichols' design based on the "Auburn plan"--solitary cells at night and common labor areas. Nichols' attached report contained information on the executive mansion as well, and requested $82,000 for it, the capitol, and the penitentiary. The legislature responded with $62,000, voting to have their own quarters finished first and best.[48]

It was scarcely educational and architectural triumphs though, which consumed the most energy and commanded the most attention during the 1840 session. It was the banks. Governor McNutt had suggested that the Union Bank be liquidated and advocated repeal of the charters of others not fulfilling their obligations. A series of bank laws were initiated during the session, one observer noting that everyone wanted a hand in reform.

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[48] Ibid., 916-22; Young, History of Buildings, 72-81. See Mary W. Crocker, Historic Architecture in Mississippi (Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 75-78, for more descriptions and photographs.

"Speight's resolutions," declaring that the legislature could abolish bank charters and denouncing the courts as avenues for change, passed the house easily, even though the Whigs--Ventress and Norris among them--and some Democrats were opposed. There was reportedly "a friendly spirit in the Legislature towards the solvent banks," but there was great pressure, too, on the Democrats to deliver their campaign promises.[49]

A bank reform bill passed the house by a large majority on February 6. It required banks to pay in specie, a stipulation calculated to destroy most of them. Ventress and Norris voted against the bill, as did most Whigs. It had been said that "the Whigs participated as little as possible in Bank measures [because] they [were] looked on with the utmost suspicion by the democrats,"[50] but nineteen representatives, including Ventress, registered a formal protest against the "unconstitutional" and "repugnant" act. Democrats were furious. They attempted to prevent printing of the remonstrance, but by

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[49]Natchez Courier, January 22, 1840; Woodville Republican, February 1, 1840; House Journal, 1840, pp. 1-24. For Mississippi's financial history in the 1830s and 1840s, see Charles C. Alexander, A History of State-Banking in Mississippi (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1931), and James R. Sharp, The Jacksonians versus the Banks (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 55-88.

[50]Natchez Courier, February 19, 1840.

a majority of 50 to 31 it was entered in the journal.

The protestors noted that not only was the payment in specie an unnecessary stricture but also that in case of noncompliance the governor was authorized to foreclose at his discretion. For disobedience to such an injunction, a citizen could be imprisoned and fined without trial. Besides the wrongs inflicted on the Mississippi stockholders, outside creditors would be defrauded, further blasting "the already drooping credit of the State." The major point at issue was sanctity of contracts. In forfeiting bank charters, the legislature was assuming judicial powers, clearly an unconstitutional move. This act, the protestors concluded, was "palpably unconstitutional in its purpose, dangerous and disorganizing in its tendencies, grossly unjust in its enactments, and revolutionary in its principles and character." Despite the angry reaction, the bank bill also passed the senate.[51]

On February 15 a lengthy report from the joint select committee named to investigate the affairs of the Mississippi Union Bank showed why James A. Ventress should have been more than passingly interested in its future.

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[51] House Journal, 1840, pp. 449-55; Woodville Republican, February 6, 8, 18, 22, 1840. For a discussion of the actions of the 1840 legislature on bank matters, see Sharp, Jacksonians v. Banks, 69-71.

He apparently owed nothing either to the parent bank at Jackson or to the branch which served Wilkinson County, but had signed as security for several friends, his brother, and brother-in-law--eight notes totalling $33,266.[52]

As usual, the party faithful held their state conventions in early 1840, the Whigs meeting on February 11. After approving the nominees of the Harrisburg convention, a slate of electors was voted on and a committee named to draft an address to the people. Ventress was again among the latter. All Whig legislators were urged to call meetings, organize, and get out the vote in November. Norris took the hint and soon after returning home announced a local convention for March 31, hoping Wilkinson would be a good example "to her younger sister counties."[53]

One topic of conversation at the February convention was the governor's soon-to-be-released proclamation that the state would not honor its obligation to holders of Union Bank bonds. On February 28, Ventress stopped in Natchez on his way home from Jackson, "after a very

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[52] House Journal, 1840, pp. 544-804.

[53] Woodville Republican, February 29, March 14, 28, April 4, 1840; Natchez Courier, February 26, 1840.

disagreeable jaunt." While there he wrote a worried note to the secretary of state:

> People here speak much of McNutt's forthcoming proclamation concerning the Union Bank-- What in the name of God is he about-- Stop if you can the outrageous measure-- Were I to look to party success instead of the welfare of the community I should say go on Lord paramount for thy destiny will be that of usurpers--downfall & ruin, but as party is of secondary moment in my estimation I must decline its triumph when it is to be purchased by the ruin and degridation of my country.[54]

Ventress' and others' railings against the proclamation were obscured, at least temporarily, by the beginning of the "Log Cabin Campaign." Whigs who met in Woodville at the end of March were "numerous and respectable," if not terribly enthusiastic. They did record determination to rescue Washington "from the hands of those faithless, selfish and prodigal rulers who have reduced it to insolvency and degradation, and the people to almost hopeless ruin." Naturally, they also endorsed the national slate. Almost anti-climactically election day arrived and Harrison carried Wilkinson by nearly five to one.[55]

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[54]For the proclamation, see Jackson Mississippian, March 6, 1840; Ventress to Thomas B. Woodward, RG28, Secretary of State Records, Vol. 5, Miss. Archives.

[55]Woodville Republican, April 4, May 23, August 29, September 26, November 7, 1840; Natchez Courier, April 8, 1840; see Jackson Mississippian, October 9, 1840, for a slanted account of the October Whig convention.

Across the state, Whig unity combined with determined politicking to result in the only Whig presidential victory in Mississippi history. In common with a number of other states, particularly in the South, Mississippi Whigs had learned a valuable lesson from 1836. Then they had despised any formal organization, eschewed a convention, and criticized Democrats for electioneering. In 1840, by contrast, Mississippians witnessed electioneering on a grand scale, complete with expert use of the media. Lacking a dramatic national platform, Whigs appealed to a wide spectrum of voters and concentrated on "keeping it before the people." They utilized not only hundreds of column inches in newsprint months before election day, but also staged demonstrations and mass meetings everywhere--all the successful methods of their opponents.[56]

Their party victorious, Ventress and his fellow delegates traveled toward Jackson at year's end, arriving on January 1. Elections to fill vacancies in late 1840 had netted two more Whigs, giving the "federalists" an edge in

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[56]Miles, Jacksonian Democracy, 166-67; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968 (4 vols., New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), I, 584-98, 644; Jackson Mississippian, November 20, 1840; Young, Mississippi Whigs, 13-14, 89-91; Arthur C. Cole, The Whig Party in the South (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1962 [1914]),59-63. See also Robert G. Gunderson, The Log-Cabin Campaign (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957).

the house. The Vicksburg Daily Whig offered a collective portrait of the new legislature: of ninety-one members, only five were native Mississippians; sixty-three were planters, fourteen lawyers, seven merchants; ages ranged from twenty-two to sixty-nine.[57] James A. Ventress was one year younger than the average age of thirty-seven; his occupation was listed with the majority, as a planter.

Since Jesse Speight had resigned in the interim, there was a special election for speaker. On the first ballot Ventress was easily elected over two Democrats. His "chaste speech" of acceptance was brief and sounded a major theme of his leadership, the necessity of following parliamentary procedures, both to guarantee the "completion of measures proposed" as well as for "the protection of the minority." Speaking from experience, he recalled the recent history of the house, its "bad arrangement of business, the incoherence of action, the immaturity of decision, and an ever disposition to repeal than to replace laws." Finally, he asked his fellow representatives to enter their duties "unawed by labor and untrammelled by party . . . to rescue our State from the degradation into which she has fallen."[58] The obvious reference was to the

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[57]Vicksburg Daily Whig, November 13, 1840; Jackson Mississippian, January 22, 1841; Woodville Republican, January 2, 9, 1841; House Journal, 1841, p. 4.

[58]House Journal, 1841, pp. 4-5; Woodville

possible repudiation of the Union and Planters' bank bonds, which Whigs generally opposed.

The new speaker soon proved that his inaugural words were not merely rhetorical; one house member complained in January that they were not "engaged on any subject of much importance, except points of order which have become exceedingly vexatious." Messages, resolutions and local matters held the representatives' attention for several days but the major concern was still the bonds. "We must do something before we adjourn," one Whig declared. "We must at least inform the public abroad that we are not swindlers in Mississippi."[59]

Retrenchment in the face of the state's shaky financial condition brought bills to reduce state salaries and to abolish the offices of state architect and commissioner of public buildings. Responding to passage of these economy measures, the Mississippian questioned what the Whigs would do about the real economic problems of banking and snidely wondered what $2,000 chandelier (for the senate chamber) was bought by what "Whig

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Republican, January 9, 1841; Jackson Southron, January 6, 1841; for the text of his speech, see Jackson Mississippian, January 8, 1841.

[59]Woodville Republican, January 16, 23, 1841; House Journal, 1841, pp. 11-113.

furnisher."[60]

On January 20 one of Ventress' pet projects came up again. The state university commissioners reported on the seven sites they had examined as possibilities for the school. When balloting in joint session began on January 26, sectional considerations seemed the only criteria. Mississippi City led Oxford until the fifth ballot, when only three towns remained, the town with the least number of votes having been eliminated each time. On the last ballot it was a close 58-57 decision for Oxford and a defeat of "the sea shore humbug."[61] Further action on the university, however, was to be delayed.

Some decision on the Union Bank bonds was required during the remaining ten days of the session. Ventress and the majority in the house voted for resolutions stating the obligation of Mississippi to pay the bonds. The governor and senate president then threatened to resign if such measures were passed and one legislator prayed that they would pass, "if for no other purpose . . . that they

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[60]Woodville Republican, January 30, 1841; Jackson Mississippian, January 22, 1841; House Journal, 1841, pp. 158-59. See RG27, Governor's Records, Miss Archives, Vol. 40, for public buildings expenses.

[61]House Journal, 1841, pp. 266-71, 281, 311-12; Woodville Republican, January 30, 1841; Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 1, 1841.

may be attended with these beneficient effects." At the state Whig convention on January 21 members favored payment of both the Union and Planters' bonds. The Democratic convention meeting four days later, said nothing about them. Governor McNutt received the Whig resolutions angrily, believing them "a direct censure" of himself and reaffirming his persuasion "that the sale of the Union Bank bonds was void and not binding."[62] His veto of the house resolutions was sustained.

In the remaining days of the "rule-ridden legislature," numerous articles covered the speaker's table and at the end only a few notable pieces of legislation were recorded: amendment of the penitentiary code, reapportionment of the legislature, retrenchment in salaries, the selection of the university site, and a general appropriation bill.[63]

On February 6 "the thanks of this House" were "tendered to the Hon. James Alexander Ventress, the Speaker

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[62] Jackson Southron, February 6, 1841; Woodville Republican, February 6, 1841; House Journal, 1841, pp. 491-504. See also W. P. Grayson to John A. Quitman, February 9, 1841, Claiborne Coll., for a detailed analysis of the bank question.

[63] Laws, 1841, pp. 89-93, 96-105, 105-9, 143-45; Woodville Republican, February 13, 1841.

thereof, for the able and impartial manner with which he has discharged the duties of his said office."[64] Before the motion to adjourn was put, Ventress addressed his colleagues in a valedictory not only to the session but to the house.

Praising the accomplishments of the session, Ventress looked ahead to the criticism he and his peers would face because of certain measures calling for increased taxation. To reply, he advised that members tell their constituents "of the condition of the treasury . . . of the taunts of the stranger . . . of the foul blot of dishonor" affixed by repudiation. Quoting the popular Irish patriot Robert Emmet, Ventress urged his fellow legislators "to forward the cause of morality . . . and above all, to endeavor to elevate the elective franchise." Praying for an end to "party rancor," he nonetheless realistically believed that "immediate consummation of such a hope" was not at hand. He concluded with his own thanks to the house for the resolution in his honor, one "that will cause me to cherish the fond recollection of having . . . performed my duty." Ventress may not have known at the time but should have guessed that his appeal to voters on their sense of honor about repudiation would fall on deaf ears, especially since "the price of that honor was

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[64] House Journal, 1841, p. 542.

higher taxation."[65]

Although Ventress had been mentioned as a possible gubernatorial candidate by former Whig nominee Edward Turner, he instead returned to Woodville and announced himself for the state senate in March 1841. The election was, of course, partisan, but this time more bond-payer versus anti-bonder than Whig versus Democrat. Whig gubernatorial candidate David O. Shattuck, a New England-born Methodist minister and circuit judge, was "a prompt and powerful debater," who later became a college president. Tilghman M. Tucker, the reluctant nominee of the Democratic convention, was a blacksmith-attorney from Columbus. Described by a contemporary as "illiterate, slow and prosy," he was also shrewd, humorous, and popular with the democracy. Whigs had not forgotten the lessons of 1840 and though theoretically opposed to caucuses, saw that "no party in an organized state can long maintain its ascendancy over one which may be drilled and disciplined under the caucus system." Accordingly, they organized more mass meetings and urged attendance at candidates' speaking appearances. In Wilkinson, "the most thorough-going Whig County in the State," there was no real contest as bond-payers won by

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[65]Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 13, 1841--for the full text, see Appendix B; Clark L. Miller, Voter Participation and Political Realignment (M.A. thesis, University of Minnesota, 1977), 73.

large majorities. Indeed, the Jackson Southron repeated a comment indicating that there was only one anti-bonder in the whole county.[66]

Ventress, apparently silent as ever during the summer and fall, was unopposed for the senate. In a three-way race among Whigs, Norris and Douglas H. Cooper won the representatives' seats. Anti-bond voters were more numerous than expected, however, even in Whiggish Adams County, and the defeat of Whigs, wherever it occurred, was ascribed to "powerful influences . . . operating . . . on a debt-ridden community," and to over-confidence, a legacy of 1840. When the final results were in, the repudiators had won. Tucker was elected by 2,303 votes, his strength predictably in the poorer northern, eastern, and southeastern sections of the state.[67] Counted in the legislature were four political parties: anti-bond Democrats, bond Democrats, anti-bond Whigs, and bond Whigs. Ventress, Norris, and Cooper

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[66]Turner to John A. Quitman, January 14, 1841, Claiborne Coll.; Claiborne, Mississippi, 433; Woodville Republican, March 20, April 3, May 15, 1841; Jackson Southron, September 23, 1841.

[67]Woodville Republican, November 6, 13, 1841; Jackson Southron, November 3, December 2, 1841; William L. Coker, Repudiation and Reaction: Tilghman M. Tucker and the Mississippi Bond Question (Floral Park, N.Y.: Graphicopy, 1969), 26-40.

were among the latter and were vastly outnumbered.[68]

The longest of the sessions in which Ventress participated, 1842 was also his busiest. He returned, no doubt gladly, to affairs concerning public buildings, the state university, and his constituents. And he was instrumental in establishing a state agricultural society, an idea proposed several years before but dormant during the financial crises.

Since the capitol had been completed and the last payment made in October 1841, all that concerned the committee on public buildings was its maintenance. Ventress moved an appropriation for its "better preservation" on January 19 and the same day reported a bill to expend state funds on furniture for some of the rooms. Both measures passed. Of the $4,000 appropriated, the committee voted to spend nearly $1,400 on brass and lighting fixtures from Cornelius & Company, Philadelphia, a well-known, stylish firm.[69] Apparently they were undisturbed by derisive comments on extravagant purchases during Mississippi's hard times. Ventress must have been impressed with the

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[68] Vicksburg Daily Whig, January 14, 1842.

[69] Senate Journal, 1842, pp. 294, 352, 363, 372, 374-75; Laws, 1842, p. 89.

quality of Cornelius' work, since he later bought accessories and lamps from the firm for his own home.

Work on the penitentiary continued, the first prisoners having been admitted in April 1840 and put to work making bricks to complete construction. Over $133,000 had been spent by 1841 but the formidable-looking structure was not finished until 1860 when the fourth story of cells was opened. Early in the 1842 legislature Ventress moved, and it was agreed, that the joint select committee on the penitentiary, of which he was a member, "be instructed to take into consideration the propriety of introducing into the penitentiary, power looms and spinning jennies, for the purpose of manufacturing cotton, woollen and worsted fabrics, and cotton bagging."[70] He was obviously still interested in machinery and concerned with making the prison a profitable venture. In 1844 a long report came from the committee; the plan was eventually implemented and proved financially viable.

As another evidence of his interest in the public buildings, Ventress served on a committee which determined that the old capitol be used henceforth for federal district and circuit courts. He was among three senators named to examine the condition of the state library and

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[70] Young, History of Buildings, 64-69; Senate Journal, 1842, p. 355.

presented a number of petitions for claims against the state on account of the public buildings.[71]

Encouragement of the state agricultural society was the subject of another bill he introduced in January 1842. A national farm organization had been established the month before, as had state societies in Alabama and Louisiana. All provided an impetus for the agricultural reform movement in Mississippi. The most tangible proof of the new spirit was publication of a newspaper and a monthly magazine--the Raymond Southwestern Farmer and the Natchez Southern Planter. Ventress was a charter subscriber to the latter and, in January 1842, a delegate to the Jackson state agricultural convention. With several others he was asked to report on the expediency of establishing a farm-oriented paper for the whole state--deemed impracticable--and to recommend a bill to the legislature. Requesting $500 from the state treasury for the society, the bill was rejected on first vote, but the persistent Ventress moved a call of the senate, absentees appeared, and the bill was passed, 19 to 8.[72]

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[71] Senate Journal, 1842, pp. 396, 418, 461, 477, 609; Laws, 1842, p. 263.

[72] Moore, Agriculture in Mississippi, 86-91; Senate Journal, 1842, pp. 453, 465-66, 474; Jackson Southron, January 27, 1842; Natchez Southern Planter, I (January, February 1842), 2, 7-9. Ventress was also active in the Wilkinson County Agricultural Society in 1843-44--see Woodville Republican, June 3, 1843, May 11, 1844.

About the university little was done in 1842. A report appeared from Ventress' committee on the seminary fund and his resolution was passed which asked the governor to appoint a commissioner to control the university land in Oxford and spend $3,500 to secure it "from waste." Ventress also moved for appointment of a permanent senate committee on education, including himself and four others, to cooperate with a house committee on the issues of a public education system and the university.[73] The next regular session would be more productive for the yet-unorganized school.

Miscellaneous matters of various sorts consumed much of Ventress' time as his name appeared in virtually every day's proceedings. One of his more historically valuable contributions was an amendment to the state printing bill providing "that the public printer shall affix to the journal of each branch of the Legislature an index." Undoubtedly as a result of his obvious familiarity with such matters, Ventress was appointed to a committee which revised the senate rules and must have been gratified to note that his successor as speaker, Robert W. Roberts, was "a master of parliamentary law."[74]

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[73] Senate Journal, 1842, pp. 234, 517-18, 651.

[74] For the resolution on indexing, see ibid., 398. For Robert W. Roberts, see John F. H. Claiborne, Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964 [1880]), 451n.

Finally in the 1842 session, Ventress recorded his support for several resolutions to Congress. Approving the 1798 Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions "as universally true at all times," criticizing passage of the distribution bill, and opposing the protective tariff, he voted against companion measures which denounced a uniform bankruptcy law, disapproved a permanent national debt and loan bill, and opposed recharter of a national bank.[75] Likewise, on the resolutions concerning the still unresolved affairs of the Union and Planters' banks, Ventress voted against repudiation of the Union bonds and against placing the Planters' Bank in liquidation. The final vote was just the opposite, according nicely with the governor's principle that "the toiling million never should be burthened with taxes to support the idle few."[76]

Reviewing the results of the wearisome session, which ended on February 28, Whig newspapers consistently condemned the actions of the Democratic administration, calling the governor a "prince and leader of anti-bondism," and blaming the legislators in general for delaying action

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[75] Senate Journal, 1842, pp. 562-75.

[76] Ibid., pp. 21, 531, 612-13, 620; Coker, Repudiation and Reaction, 40-57; Woodville Republican, February 26, March 5, 1842; Charles H. Brough, "History of Banking in Mississippi," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, III (1900), 336-38.

on important measures, every day of inaction costing the state money it could ill afford.[77]

Afterward, political activities were limited for some eighteen months, even though the state elections of 1843 were looked to as a further test of sentiment on repudiation. An election for state auditor in August 1842 proved the Democrats generally still in favor (not in Wilkinson).[78]

Also in 1842, passage of a new protective tariff provoked response in Woodville and elsewhere, as most Whigs supported the measure. The staunchly Whiggish Republican did not favor it and a reader sharply attacked Senator John Henderson for not being present to vote against it. The editor also took to task Ventress and the other signers of the 1839 Whig address for supporting Clay and his tariff stand, while "A Genuine Whig of 1840" penned two telling articles in opposition to Clay. On January 31, 1843, a mass meeting was held at the courthouse during which Whigs and Democrats who opposed the tariff and supported John C. Calhoun elected delegates for a state meeting in Jackson.[79]

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[77]Liberty Advocate, January 15, 1842; Natchez Courier, January 13, 1842; Vicksburg Daily Whig, January 5, February 19, 1842; Rowland, Heart of the South, I, 624-29.

[78]Woodville Republican, August 6, 1842.

[79]Ibid., December 10, 17, 1842; Hodge, Attitude of the Republican, 10-11, 22-23, 25.

Soon after, local Whigs began to organize themselves for the November contest. The degree of uncertainty among them, except on the repudiation issue, is reflected in the Republican editor's description of one gathering: "whether it is to be tariff, anti-tariff, or hermaphrodite, we do not know." In an account printed later Ventress was not mentioned and for once, was not a delegate to Jackson. Resolutions favoring free trade, low duties, retrenchment, and opposing distribution were rejected by a narrow vote and alternate resolutions of a more general nature adopted. In spite of the Jackson Southron's hopeful comment that "the most perfect harmony pervades the Whig ranks,"[80] there was waffling as many "genuine Whigs of 1840" deserted.

In the midst of organizing by both sides, on May 31, 1843, Governor Tucker called a special session to deal with the "lamentably embarrassed" treasury and other pressing matters. Among them was the defalcation of state treasurer Richard Graves in the amount of more than $51,000, revealing the need for more stringent laws and higher bonds for that office. Tucker also called for collection of state taxes in March or April in order that proceeds of the last cotton crop could be used, and

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[80]Woodville Republican, May 27, June 7, 1843; Jackson Southron, June 23, 1843; Young, Mississippi Whigs, 14, 100, 137-40.

reiterated his belief in repudiation, citing the unconstitutional manner in which the Union Bank bonds had been issued.[81]

On July 10, in "great confusion," the two houses convened. Norris reported that the Democrats were still divided in three factions: bond-payers, anti-bonders on the Union Bank, and "subterranean or strait-out repudiators." Nevertheless, the legislature managed to work together for two weeks, the senate praised by the Jackson Southron for its "virtue and intelligence" and the house said to exhibit "little of either" and "engaged in much frivolous legislation."[82]

Although the main item of business was banking and revenue, a number of other measures were enacted. Ventress introduced several successful bills, among them an act to provide for the collection and investment of the seminary fund--necessary for the organization of the University of Mississippi--a measure to allow use of the Homochitto ferry, and a bill providing state funds for Jefferson

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[81]Coker, Repudiation and Reaction, 62-72; see Senate Journal, 1843, called session, 6-45, for the text of Tucker's message.

[82]Woodville Republican, June 22, 29, 1943; Jackson Southron, July 20, 1843.

College.[83]

Ventress' interest in the Adams County school shows his concern for higher education was not limited to his dream of a state university, since Jefferson College would surely be a competitor. Closed in the late 1830s, Jefferson had recently reopened but was struggling to survive, in spite of a good general reputation. An anonymous article in the Woodville paper proposed establishing a local college to rival the "partly torpid" Jefferson and had called on wealthy local residents such as Ventress' brother-in-law and cousins to support it. Another article in May reiterated the idea and suggested that various people, including "the Ventresses . . . rush to the rescue."[84] James Ventress, however, proved himself a true friend to Jefferson, perhaps because of his long acquaintance with B. L. C. Wailes, a dedicated supporter of the institution.

The stated mission of the special session was accomplished on July 26, 1843, the day the governor signed the "Briscoe Bill," providing the "forfeited charters

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[83] Senate Journal, 1843, called session, 53, 72, 82, 85, 93, 95, 103, 205.

[84] Woodville Republican, April 23, May 14, 1843. See Sydnor, Wailes, especially 204-15, for the history of Jefferson College and Wailes's connection with the school.

would revert to the state and that banks would be prohibited from collecting debts due them." A Whig amendment allowed banks to realize something from their creditors and in its amended version the bill passed the senate. Apparently swayed by the amendment, Ventress voted with the majority.[85] Far from dead as issues, the Briscoe Bill and repudiation would haunt Mississippi politics for decades to come.

During the July session Mississippi Democrats held their second state convention of the year. A meeting on January 22 had given the gubernatorial nod to Albert G. Brown of Copiah County. Whigs, in the meantime, met in early June, nominating Judge George R. Clayton for governor. A university graduate and former Georgia legislator, Clayton was a prosperous Columbus attorney and planter. Thomas H. Williams of Pontotoc, bond-paying Democrat, was also a candidate for governor, a fact which contributed to Brown's eventual victory since Williams and Clayton split the anti-repudiation vote.[86]

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[85]Woodville Republican, August 5, 1843. Discussions and descriptions of the Briscoe Bill are numerous. See, for example, Sharp, Jacksonians v. the Banks, 84-87; Miles, Jacksonian Democracy, 157; Senate Journal, 1843, called session, 200-202; Jackson Southron, July 26, 1843.

[86]Albert G. Brown to John F. H. Claiborne, January 4, 1843, S. J. Gholson to John A. Quitman, March 7, 1843, and

Whig leaders, including Ventress and his cousin T. Jones Stewart, were urged by the press to get out the vote, guard against election shenanigans, and see to the rejection of the repudiators. By September 1 a Wilkinson countian reported that "this county never was infected with repudiation . . . . I do not think the repudiators will get more than twenty votes." On October 12 another letter from Woodville predicted that Wilkinson would give the largest bond-paying majority in Mississippi. The forecast was accurate as Clayton and Williams garnered 629 votes to Brown's 79, presaging one analyst's statement that the bond-paying Democratic ticket was a "half-way house for Whigs moving into the Democratic party rather than as a one election protest party." Other old Whig counties held firm, too, but the Democrats showed significant percentage increases everywhere. In state legislative elections four Whigs and ten Democrats were returned to the senate, thirty-two Whigs and forty-seven Democrats to the house.

As the Democratic state organ analyzed the coming session, Whigs would not be able to control the course of

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C. M. Price to Quitman, February 7, 12, 1843, Claiborne Coll.; Miller, Voter Participation, 70-71; Sharp, Jacksonians v. the Banks, 81; Woodville Republican, October 28, 1843; Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, I, 557; Coker, Repudiation and Reaction, 75-77.

legislation but were a strong, cohesive minority which might profit from Democratic divisions. After the election the New York Tribune praised Ventress' political allies:

> For two successive elections, with hardly an exception in their ranks, they have fought the battles of honesty and good faith against knavery and repudiation . . . . Who would not go a half a mile out of his way to shake hands with one of the noble Whigs of Mississippi?[87]

Anticipating another close presidential race, the legislature convened on New Year's Day to reconsider the Briscoe Bill and make some final disposition of the Planters' Bank. Of Ventress' pet projects, the university and the prison received more attention in 1844 than had been the case for some time, probably because Governor Brown's message emphasized both. Education had long been one of his priorities, especially the establishment of a free public school system and the university. The penitentiary, too, called for legislative action. Not only had the last report shown defects in construction, but Brown, a champion of the working classes, voiced serious objections to the convicts' being taught trades. Their activities as blacksmiths, wheelwrights, carpenters,

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[87] Jackson Southron, October 11, 1843; Natchez Weekly Courier and Journal, November 1, 1843, Jackson Statesman, September 16, October 28, 1843; Jackson Mississippian, November 22, December 20, 1843; Woodville Republican, November 11, 18, December 9, 1843; Tribune quoted in Liberty Advocate, December 23, 1843.

shoemakers, weavers, and brickmasons brought them into competition with free Mississippians. The possibility of having the inmates manufacture bagging and rope for plantation use, as Ventress' committee had suggested in 1842, Brown thought more appropriate.[88]

Regarding the prison, Ventress, Joseph W. Matthews, and J. Y. Thompson, members of the joint select committee, were allowed a clerk to help with their business and on January 5 were instructed to visit the facility and make a full report. They toured the institution on January 24-25 and on the 27th Ventress had a preliminary statement. After showing a profit of $2,000 for the fiscal year ending in November 1843, he proclaimed that "the whole institution is in a flourishing and prosperous condition." On February 16 he submitted an act and accompanying report for amendment of the penal code. Occupying twenty-one pages in the senate journal, the report was the result of thorough research and investigation.[89]

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[88]For the governor's message, see Senate Journal, 1844, pp. 11-33.

[89]Ibid., 123, 130, 133, 271-72, 578; the report is printed on 597-608, with ten additional pages of supporting documents. A special committee had been named to investigate poor prison conditions in 1841 but no substantial legislation had emerged as a result of the inquiry. See William D. McCain, The Story of Jackson: A History of the Capital of Mississippi, 1821-1951 (2 vols., Jackson: J. F. Hyer, 1953), I, 48, and E. Bruce Thompson, "Reforms in the Penal System of Mississippi, 1820-1850," Journal of Mississippi History, VII (April 1945), 51-74;

Prison reform, one of the key social goals of the Jacksonian era, had been spearheaded by New Englander Louis Dwight and his Boston Prison Discipline Society. The Auburn, New York system--the congregate system--a compromise between solitary confinement and communal labor, was an early development. It was also Dwight who encouraged prison industry. By 1825 Auburn and other similar institutions were paying their own way and continued to do so despite protests by mechanics' associations. New prisons on the frontier and in the South copied the basic Auburn plan, whose twin appeals were economical construction and potential profit. Mississippi's penitentiary, also known as "the Walls," was by contemporary standards a model prison.[90]

Ventress' report concentrated on the concern for justice and benevolence as well as on the state's interest in money. The committee pronounced itself in favor of the congregate plan--solitary confinement and total silence, even while working: "restriction, close and undeviatingly

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see also Jackson Mississippian, March 6, 1843.

[90]Blake McKelvey, American Prisons: A Study in American Social History prior to 1915 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1936), 7-13, 23-24, 29-35; David J. Rothman, The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 79-82.

rigid, is mercy to the guilty slaves to passion and criminality." The Mississippi system aimed "to make temptation voiceless" and "to relieve society, both from [the convict's] depredations and the cost of his sustenance." Workshops already in operation were found to be well-equipped and -ventilated, and their products "substantial and useful." Taking note of the mechanics' protests, the committee recommended that prisoners' activities be changed from their present trades to the operation of machinery for "the manufacture of coarse cotton fabrics," even though needed machinery would cost upwards of $13,000. Such a change would increase revenue, benefit the state by introducing a home manufacture made from a home staple, and relieve "reputable and faithful artizans" from hurtful competition with the more economically priced prison goods. To implement their suggestions, the committee recommended an immediate appropriation of $1,500 to develop an iron foundry and buy a wool carding machine. Included in the report were letters from the wardens of three other penitentiaries, all testifying to the accrued profits from prison industries. In the interest of increased efficiency, Ventress' committee recommended a change in bookkeeping procedures, and for security asked authorization to construct an iron door at the entrance and a roof over the prison yard: "let the free air and golden sunshine be for the free." The resolutions of the committee

were signed into law on February 24 and "the Walls" soon became "a model cotton mill [which] supplied labor for the well-disciplined prisoners and largely paid labor costs." By 1847 the prison boasted a new three-story building to house machinery for the manufacture of fabrics and continued to purchase up-to-date engines to run the machines.[91]

Ventress' other main concern in 1844, a bill to incorporate the University of Mississippi, was passed by the house on February 21. He subsequently introduced an act for the collection and investment of the seminary fund, enabling the institution to begin operations. He was named first among the thirteen charter trustees and thus officially recognized for his years of work in behalf of the school. Ninety-four years later, in a house resolution, he was praised for "his untiring efforts" and named "father of the university."[92] The original board,

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[91] Ibid., 33; Young, History of Buildings, 68-71; Jackson Clarion-Ledger, February 21, 1969, p. A-10; Mrs. Isaac H. Hilliard Diary, 34, Louisiana State University; McCain, Jackson, 45-49. Ventress joined many others in taking advantage of prison-produced goods (TVP, folder 302).

[92] Senate Journal, 1844, pp. 651, 655; Laws, 1844, pp. 227-28; Laws, 1938, extra session, 161-62. See Chapter V for Ventress' work as a trustee of the university, 1844-67.

entrusted with broad powers over the finances, curriculum, and construction of buildings, soon began meeting in annual sessions.

Naturally, Ventress was involved with other legislative matters and committee work in the 1844 session. He was on a select committee which saw to passage resolutions on the need for lighthouses and mail routes serving the growing Gulf coast, and again was part of a joint select committee to examine the state library.[93]

On two important votes in 1844--for United States senator and for liquidation of the Planters' Bank--his opinions are recorded. Major contenders for the Senate were all Democrats: Roger Barton, a brilliant criminal lawyer and the favorite of northern Mississippi; Jesse Speight, former Congressman, house speaker, and senate president; and Cotesworth P. Smith from Woodville, a former state supreme court justice. Ventress voted for Smith on the first ballot and for the winner, Speight, on the second. In this he joined other Whigs who saw that they could not elect Smith and therefore threw their support to Speight as the lesser of two evils.[94]

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[93] Senate Journal, 1844, pp. 9-10, 146, 181, 195, 200, 206, 210-11, 216, 272, 293-94, 477, 486, 540, 567, 574, 596, 633-34, 644-45, 657-58, 667, 673.

[94] Woodville Republican, January 20, 1844; Senate Journal, 1844, pp. 147-50.

Ventress also voted with his fellow Whigs to pay the Planters' Bank bonds; the institution itself was placed in liquidation. A report of the bank's operations showed Ventress' holding a suspended debt of more than $3,200 and having signed as security on another $5,000. Closely allied with the bond question was the Briscoe Bill, a watered-down version of which had passed in 1843. Democrats would reintroduce and pass it in its original form in 1846.[95]

One of the last acts of the 1844 session was election of a new president, Speight having resigned in order to take his seat in the Senate. Ventress received one or two votes on each of the eleven ballots; however, Parmenus Briscoe of Briscoe Bill fame was eventually elected,[96] a bad omen for partisans of fiscal responsibility in Mississippi.

Before leaving Jackson for home the legislators caucused for selection of presidential electors. At the Whig meeting on February 5 Ventress served as a vice president and was one of a committee formed to advocate

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[95] Senate Journal, 1844, pp. 335, 368-69; Laws, 1844, pp. 138-47; see also Sharp, Jacksonians v. the Banks, 86.

[96] Woodville Republican, February 17, 1844; Baxter, Congressional Redistricting, 25-33; Senate Journal, 1844, pp. 680-84.

Clay's election. Ventress' cousin T. Jones Stewart was named for the second time as a Whig elector, serving also as president of the Wilkinson Clay Club. Even though members raised "a monstrous Clay pole" in Woodville, named some orators to work for the ticket--Ventress, Cooper, and several other local attorneys--their total allegiance to the Kentuckian was questionable since they also voted to favor immediate Texas annexation. A letter from former Republican editor William Norris later stated that of the group only one was a true Clay supporter. It was also reported in passing that James A. Ventress had chaired a Texas meeting in Jackson on May 10.[97]

After a quiet summer--campaign activity was necessarily limited because of a severe yellow fever outbreak--the election returns showed that the Democrats registered gains even in Wilkinson, where the presidential vote was 441-355. Across Mississippi, eighteen percent of the 1840 Whigs voted for Polk, giving him an impressive majority of nearly 6,000, more than twice Harrison's edge in 1840.[98] Clay's unpopular stand on Texas and economic

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[97] Jackson Southron, February 7, 14, 1844; Woodville Republican, February 17, March 2, April 13, May 5, June 22, August 10, 17, September 28, 1844, August 24, 1852.

[98] C. Pinckney Smith to John F. H. Claiborne, June 16, 1854, Claiborne Coll.; Woodville Republican, October 12, November 9, 23, 1844; Miller, Voter Participation, 74-78; see also James E. Walmsley, "The Presidential Campaign of

distress were the main causes of defeat for the Whigs. They were demoralized and, despite "Clay poles," somewhat disorganized. As one of President-elect Polk's old Tennessee cronies wrote from Jackson:

> We have fought and achieved a signal victory . . . and have shaken the Gibraltar of persecuting Whiggery . . . many at first we[re] lukewarm in the cause. In Wilkinson there has been a complete resolution; for the very recent changes have been sufficient to neutralize the small majority of the 'American Republicans.'[99]

Somewhat exaggerated, his analysis proved fairly accurate. James A. Ventress evidently agreed, as coming events would show.

1844 in Mississippi," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, IX (1906), 179-97.

[99]Thomas Fletcher to James K. Polk, November 18, 1844, Polk Papers, Library of Congress; see also Young, Mississippi Whigs, 101, and Cole, Whig Party, 109-16.

CHAPTER IV

"THE UNION OF THE DEMOCRACY FOR THE SAKE OF THE UNION"[1]

With a change in the national administration, state Democrats were confident of victory in the 1845 campaign. Ventress submitted his reelection notice to the Republican on May 31, as usual, without evidence of his party affiliation. That was soon apparent. The local Whig caucus named Jones Stewart for the house and Horatio Simrall for the senate. A week later Ventress and Cooper, former Whig senator and representative, were endorsed by the Wilkinson Democrats, who voted to "cordially recommend them to the people for re-election, not only on account of the orthodoxy of their political principles, but also on account of their steady adherence to the interest of the county." In what seemed a return to the era of good feelings, the same meeting endorsed Stewart, noting that he was a sincere worker for local needs. As for the issues of the day, the Democrats came out against the protective tariff, for Texas, and for the public education system. Ventress, Cooper, and three others were appointed by the meeting to examine the condition of education in the county

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[1]Election flyer, 1848, TVP, folder 305.

and report their findings later in the year.[2]

Just why Ventress chose to change parties at this juncture can only be guessed. Many Mississippi Whigs deserted what they saw as a losing cause in the early 1840s, a large number of them on the issues of Texas and the tariff. Ventress was concerned with annexation and showed more evidence of expansionist tendencies both after the Mexican War and during the Cuba filibustering expeditions. Even so, he was not entirely comfortable as a Democrat.

In the course of the campaign Ventress attended the state convention in July, more candidates announced themselves for the house, and in September a Whig meeting reversed its earlier decision, naming Stewart for the senate, Simrall and Victor Netterville for the house. Such a state of affairs, pitting two complete tickets against each other for the legislature, was until then unheard of. As the state Whig paper declared, politics in Wilkinson County were "so 'mixed up' that the leaders do not know and cannot tell whether they are Harrison Democrats or Polk Whigs."[3] The Republican coped by running

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[2]Woodville Republican, May 31, June 14, 21, 1845.

[3]Jackson Southron, August 27, 1845.

both tickets on its pre-election mastheads. Open letters appeared, addressed to the house and senate contestants, but answers were not forthcoming in print, except on the mechanics' protest of convict labor. Ventress, Cooper, and C. P. Smith, who was also a candidate for the house, answered in a manner which sounded like Ventress' report on the penitentiary. The Whigs' letters to the tradesmen said virtually the same thing: the system should be changed, competition eliminated, and the convicts switched to the manufacture of coarse fabrics. Other issues, such as the Briscoe Bill and the public schools, were discussed, as the paper stated on October 25 that the candidates had addressed groups of citizens at nearly all the precincts in an "open and lucid manner."[4]

There had been the usual public barbecues in the summer and fall, including one in September which over 1,000 persons attended and where the candidates were "thick as blackberries in season." Ventress' remarks about public education were reported in the Republican. He minced no words on a subject dear to him:

> Mr. Ventress certainly showed that he had done something for education heretofore while filling a responsible station, and that he had

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[4]Woodville Republican, June 19, August 16, 30, September 13, October 18, 25, November 1, 1845.

> endeavored to do more and would have done more, had not the majority been against him. But in making out his case thus, he certainly threw a load of responsibility upon those who have been in places of trust and power, and who have not only neglected to do any thing for the people upon the subject, but who have thrown clogs in the way of those that were disposed to labor for the people's good.[5]

By November 1, with only four days remaining, Woodville was "alive and stirring . . . . Gentlemen are puffing cigars, and . . . candidates are puffing themselves. Our pumps and orators are spouting." When the returns were counted, some Democrats had won in Wilkinson! The Whig state ticket was victorious as were the senate and house candidates, but Democrats Francis Gildart and Stanhope Posey won the offices of district judge and district attorney. Ventress, losing every precinct except Upper Homochitto, where he had never won before, was an "out" for the first time in a decade. And he lost by a wide margin--357 to his cousin Stewart's 468. The state returns revealed a Democratic landslide.[6]

Certainly Ventress must have watched reports of the 1846 legislature with greater than ordinary interest. His replacement was named to his favorite committees--

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[5]Liberty Advocate, September 6, 1845; Woodville Republican, September 27, 1845.

[6]Woodville Republican, November 8, 29, 1845, January 24, 1846.

education and public buildings. More improvements were voted for the penitentiary and the last legislature was commended for "wisely" changing the method of bookkeeping (as Ventress' committee had asked). An appropriation was voted for purchase of an engine and other machinery to manufacture coarse cloth, the committee stating with pride that the prison had "ceased to be a burden" on the state. In education the governor demanded and received support for state reimbursement of the seminary fund.

Also enacted were laws supporting "common" schools, dividing the state into districts for future election of congressmen, and reapportioning the Mississippi legislature. The latter, clearly aimed at reducing Whig voting strength, gave Wilkinson only one representative; one senator was to be elected from Adams, Wilkinson, and Franklin counties combined. The Republican called the new scheme "rank injustice," which it was, considering the inequalities in constituents-to-representative ratios. As all the river counties undoubtedly agreed, "South Mississippi [was] now only a serf to the North."[7]

State politics, however, were soon drowned in a sea of war preparations. For the next eighteen months the news was all of Mexico. Ventress' political ally

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[7] Senate Journal, 1846, passim; Laws, 1846, passim; Woodville Republican, March 7, 14, 1846, April 17, 1847; Baxter, Congressional Redistricting, 26-39.

Douglas Cooper found a job as captain of the Wilkinson County Volunteers, which became Company B of Jefferson Davis' 1st Mississippi Regiment. Ventress himself did not enlist. At age forty-one he was not excluded but would have been among the oldest of volunteers. Woodville heartily supported the war effort and the Republican roundly castigated those who did not. The volunteers were praised and feted and the election of Davis ("almost a native" son) as colonel was applauded. With the return of Company B in June 1847, Ventress returned to public view. He was on a reception committee sent to welcome the heroes at Bayou Sara, Louisiana, where they "took the cars" of the West Feliciana Rail Road for home.[8]

In July 1847, Wilkinson Democrats met to propose their own war celebrity, Cooper, for Congress. Ventress, Cotesworth Pinckney Smith, and two others were selected to represent the county at a district convention in nearby Monticello. Late in July, Whigs renominated Jones Stewart for the senate and Claiborne Farish, a relative of Jefferson Davis', for the legislature. Shortly after, the Democrats announced that Cooper would run for the senate and Ventress for the house; both were recommended to the voters on account of their "abilities and sterling

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[8]Woodville Republican, June 27, 1846, June 12, 1847.

integrity." Once again, the Republican printed two party tickets on its masthead and published open letters to the candidates. This time both Cooper and Ventress responded,[9] undoubtedly evidence of the increased need for publicity in a district suddenly very much in question as to outcome. Also, thanks to the recent reapportionment, there were fewer seats to be won. The stakes were higher.

In his public letter dated October 13, Ventress stated that he would answer the September 18 queries of "Many Voters" in detail when he joined the Whig nominees on a ten-day speaking tour to six different locations. But in the meantime he confined himself to "answering each, seperately, plainly, laconically and unequivocally." First admitting the right of voters to question candidates and the obligation to respond, even though he had not done so publicly in previous races, he subscribed to the "Republican Doctrines" of the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions (just as he had in 1842) and preferred the revenue tariff of 1846 over the 1842 Whig measure. He was not in favor of distribution of the public land sale proceeds among the states, nor of reestablishment of the United States Bank (he had favored the latter in 1842). He

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[9] Ibid., July 10, 31, August 7, 14, September 4, 18, October 2, 9, 1847; Natchez Courier, September 29, 1847; Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, June 19, 1847.

advocated continuing the war until Mexico fully indemnified all claims, spoliation of property, and war expenses. And, if she could not settle those claims satisfactorily, he approved of "acquiring territory from Mexico." Finally, Ventress declared that he would not support a presidential hopeful who favored the Wilmot Proviso.[10] He sounded like a true-blue southern Democrat, indeed.

The campaign gained momentum in the last weeks of October, when the Republican said, "Our candidates have been giving it to each other, 'hip and thigh', and both parties are confident of success. May they all be elected!" The Natchez Courier forecast that Stewart, "an honorable, high-toned, intellectual gentleman," would be returned to the senate by a coalition of Whigs and Democrats. Across town, the rival Mississippi Free Trader had a few words to say in Ventress' support:

> If the people of that county appreciate worth, talents, sound judgment and long experience, and suffer them to influence their action, Mr. Ventress will certainly be elected. He has served them long and faithfully . . . always commanding the approval of his constituents, the respect and esteem of friends and political opponents.

Yet a third observer, a New York merchant in close contact with a Wilkinson planter, asked:

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[10]Woodville Republican, October 16, 23, 1847; handbill owned by James A. Ventress III, Woodville. For the 1842 opinions, see page 131 above.

> Could some way be devised for Stewart to run against Ventriss after the manner that the slim [Stewart] & fat man [Ventress] fought the duel. All that the slender man hit beyond the measure of his size, on the fat man didn't go. It seems to me that some computation might be made to make the game equal.[11]

It was during this canvass that Ventress' temper flared in an incident that would haunt him when he ran again four years later. As the Republican remembered,

> Mr. Simrall charged him with being an aristocrat, and opposed to changing the system of labor in the Penitentiary on the ground that the movement was got up by lazy loafing mechanics. Other Whigs industriously circulated reports that Col Ventress had said bad things about overseers, peddlars, etc.

To make matters worse, "some strong churchmen even charged that he was an infidel." At one point Ventress became so angry at the accusations that he "abruptly left the Courthouse" in the middle of a debate.[12]

When the votes were counted, Whigs Stewart and Simrall had won. Ventress lost by a mere ten votes, having carried four of eight precincts. In congratulating Simrall, "a no-mistake sort of Whig," the Courier noted that his

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[11]Natchez Courier, August 11, October 27, 1847; Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette, July 19, August 25, 1847, quotation from latter issue; Beaumont & Fletcher to John W. Burruss, September 2, 1847, John C. Burruss Family Papers, Louisiana State University.

[12]Woodville Republican, February 5, 1848, July 15, August 5, 19, 1851.

total was "every way flattering" since only a few years before his opponent was "the most popular Whig" in the "banner Whig county." Wilkinson's election results perplexed observers in 1847 just as they had in 1845. An article in the Jackson Southron called the county "'no what' --that is, she has not found out whether she is politically Polk-whig or Calhoun-Democrat, or indeed whether she has any political aspect or not." Labeling Ventress "a Calhoun-Whig-democrat," the Southron editor was baffled by the county vote totals, believing that the repudiators had moved in and most of the Whigs had moved out.[13] There also seemed to be a third active political group, "secederes from the whigs, very small in numbers, but the very deuce in the way of operating with 'the balance of power', which they manage by staying away from the polls . . . and hence they take the new party name of the 'skulkers'." The Mississippian praised Ventress' efforts and gave him credit for the notable Democratic gains.[14]

In the state election results, a Whig candidate for Congress triumphed in the third district, in spite of

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[13]Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, November 10, 1847; Jackson Southron, November 19, 1847; Natchez Courier, November 10, 1847.

[14]Jackson Southron, November 19, 1847; Jackson Mississippian, November 19, 1847.

Democratic gerrymandering. In the fourth district, which included Wilkinson and Adams, Albert G. Brown ran unopposed and Democratic state officers were elected generally by large majorities.[15]

Despite two consecutive losses, Ventress still yearned for an active political role. No less than Albert G. Brown encouraged him:

> Since receiving your letter . . . I have mentioned the subject of the Electoral ticket to several of our friends & as many as I have spoken to desire that you should stand for the 4th Dist. For myself I am for you for several reasons. You will exert yourself in the canvass. You have the means the disposition & the time to do it. You understand the Wilkinson Democracy better than almost any other man and can exert more influence with them. My advice will be given in favor of your nomination.[16]

Early in the new year Democrats held their state convention to nominate presidential electors. Surprisingly because he was a party newcomer, but obviously with the support of Brown, Ventress was named to stump his district. Like his fellow electors, he was chosen by a district caucus and unanimously accepted by the state gathering on January 8. Resolutions adopted by the convention were

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[15]Natchez Weekly Courier and Journal, November 24, 1847. For a Whig perspective on the years Ventress was most active in state politics, see [Dudley S. Jennings?], Nine Years of Democratic Rule in Mississippi (Jackson: T. Palmer, 1847).

[16]December 29, 1847, TVP, folder 246; see also George B. Augustus to Ventress, October 6, 1848, folder 245.

supportive of the Mexican War and the Polk administration, against adoption of the Wilmot Proviso (prohibiting slavery in the new territories) and any presidential candidate who favored it, and opposing internal improvements legislation.[17]

Back home, Ventress bided his time with other Democrats during early 1848, waiting for news of the national tickets. The Whig hopeful, Zachary Taylor, arrived in Woodville for a grand ball in February 1848 and was warmly received. Ventress had been named by a town meeting to be on the welcoming committee but did not participate.

Political sentiment in Wilkinson was divided so distinctly by 1848 that a new newspaper was needed. In January the Wilkinson Whig appeared, "a large sized, beautifully printed, well filled sheet" edited by Daniel O. Merwin, a local attorney.[18] In May, political meetings and organization began in earnest; in the early summer more state conventions named committees in each county "to get out the vote," and on June 6 Wilkinson Democrats endorsed the national slate, Lewis Cass and William O.

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[17]Jackson Mississippian, January 14, 1848; Woodville Republican, January 22, 1848.

[18]Woodville Republican, January 5, 29, February 26, 1848; Natchez Courier, February 2, 1848. The only known issues of the Wilkinson Whig, 1854-57, are owned by the University of Texas, Austin.

Butler. District and precinct gatherings were noted in virtually every issue of the Republican from June through October. There was a Rough and Ready Club to generate enthusiasm among "old line Whigs," and an impressive Democratic organization. As a Louisiana editor wrote in July:

> The political organization in Wilkinson county never before was so thorough. Especially is this the case on the democratic side. Douglass H. Cooper . . . is the democratic leader . . . and he has powerful co-adjutors in James A. Ventress, Truxton Davidson, George H. Gordon and C. Pinckney Smith. The county is laid out in districts and each plantation and every voter in these districts are carefully attended to and advised and refreshed with new political truths at exceedingly brief intervals by "committees of vigilance," all of whom act under the guidance of the gentlemen named.[19]

Admitting the personal popularity of Taylor, "a well meaning man," the Republican for the first time urged support of the Democrats in November: "Strengthen the ties which bind us, of the south, to our ONLY northern allies, the Cass and Butler democrats. . . . a frank, hearty, unwavering support of Cass and Butler is the only chance to beat Van Buren." In mid-September the journal printed a campaign song from an Alabama paper to spur the local effort and remind readers that a ballot for "Old Zack" was also a vote for Millard Fillmore who "loves the sooty

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[19]Vidalia Concordia Intelligencer, July 29, 1848.

face . . . and advocates the woolly race."[20]

Early in September, Ventress announced a formal speaking schedule with Congressman Brown, an accomplished, amiable campaigner. Their itinerary was long and full, slated to begin in Liberty on September 18. Thereafter, with intervals of at most two days, they traveled a circular route through all twenty-two counties of southern and eastern Mississippi until October 27, appearing at a mass finale in Woodville on November 4. As the Republican reported, the Democrats "spoke from every stump, hillock and toadstool."[21]

In his debut at Liberty, the elector from Wilkinson

> entertained and enlightened, an audience of about one hundred and fifty, in a speech of about two hours in length, clear, comprehensive, and farmer like. He took up all the points now at issue between the two great parties; and sustained himself throughout, by the strength of his arguments, and the facts which he presented to his audience; he read a number of General Taylor's letters, and pointed out the inconsistencies in them . . . his reasons and arguments were evidently satisfactory to the farmers of Amite.

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[20]Woodville Republican, May 1, August 29, September 12, 19, 1848. The Republican stated on April 10, 1847, that Taylor was not a Whig but "an independent republican." For a general review of the election, see Norman A. Graebner, "1848: Southern Politics at the Crossroads," The Historian, XXV (November 1962), 14-35.

[21]Woodville Republican, September 5, 1848, August 24, 1852. Ex-governor Alexander McNutt, the "bank-monger," was to have helped canvass the fourth district, but had died suddenly in October 1848.

The day after, following a speech at Holmesville in Pike County, a distinguished Whig wrote to a friend. "I regret to say that Mr. Ventress made a very favorable impression in Pike." The Holmesville Free Press confirmed that he was "discharging his duty in a manner entirely satisfactory to the democracy of the east. His speech in Pike, is spoken of in terms of high commendation."[22] Ventress and Brown apparently continued the entire schedule, the former returning home on October 29, two days after an address at Meadville.[23]

Pro forma, the voters were warned from both sides of possible election frauds and spurious ballots. But at last the hoopla ended and the vote was in. Old Rough and Ready carried Wilkinson, 455-291, but Cass won Mississippi, tallying 615 votes more than Taylor. While losing Wilkinson, Ventress' and Brown's work in behalf of the Democratic candidates in the fourth district netted 5,723 votes, 52 more than the Whigs received. It was the analysis of the Republican that many had voted Whig only because Taylor was so popular; by the editor's reckoning some seventy-three

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[22] Ibid., October 3, 1848; Holmesville Free Press quoted in Jackson Mississippian, October 13, 1848.

[23] Woodville Republican, October 10, 31, November 7, 1848; see also Jackson Mississippian, September 8, 19, 1848.

Democrats had crossed over for that reason. The rabidly Democratic Mississippi Free Trader in Natchez attributed the loss to an epidemic, "a whig fever . . . to exterminate democrats." True Whigs, "the large planters and extensive slaveholders," held firm while many democrats of "no principles but interest" also voted for the general. On December 13 the electors met in Jackson to perform "the 'last sad rites' in honor of Cass and Butler."[24] Mississippi was in the Democratic column to stay and James A. Ventress, lately "a genuine Whig," had helped accomplish the feat.

After the excitement of the presidential canvass, the temptation to rest awhile must have been strong, but like the yearly cycle of cotton cultivation, politics was a never-ending ritual. In the near future was one of the most serious crises the Union would face, a testing of basic issues which would force hard decisions, draw party lines tighter, and serve as prelude to war. Central to the controversies of 1850-51 was slavery.

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[24]Woodville Republican, November 14, December 19, 1848; Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, November 9, 1848; Jackson Mississippian, November 24, 1848; Consolidated election returns . . . November 7, 1848, RG28, Secretary of State Records, Vol. 26, Miss. Archives; Samuel Stamps to Ventress, November 18, 1848, PVF. Miller, Voter Participation, 89, states that nearly one-third of those who voted Whig in the previous state election voted for Cass in 1848; there was a corresponding but lesser shift among Democrats.

By 1850, Mississippians were largely committed to the support of the peculiar institution, "convinced that their social existence, economic prosperity, and political power" were bound to it.[25] Of the state's fifty-nine counties, twenty-six were Black Belt, each with a slave population of more than 50 percent. Nineteen, including Wilkinson, produced more than 10,000 bales of cotton yearly. Despite the overwhelming importance of slavery in Mississippi, the state had not taken the lead in pro-slavery discussions in or out of Congress but had supported the state rights stand of Calhoun and others alarmed by the implications of the Wilmot Proviso and the growth of the abolition movement. Slavery was an issue in the 1844 and 1848 elections, as Whigs emphasized that their candidates were slaveholding southerners. When the Thirtieth Congress convened, everyone was certain that slavery would be a prime topic of debate since the Mexican War treaty and territorial governments were to be discussed.

Almost immediately the House broached the question on bills providing government for the newly acquired

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[25] Cleo Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise of 1850," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XIV (1913), 13. The following account of events of 1850-51 relies heavily on Hearon's pioneering study. See also Kathleen B. Davis, Jefferson Davis and the Mississippi Gubernatorial Campaign of 1851 (M.A. thesis, Rice University, 1971), 18-73, and Donald M. Rawson, Party Politics in Mississippi, 1850-1860 (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1964), 24-95.

Mexican War territories and a bill concerning slavery in the District of Columbia. In response to what he considered a dangerous trend, Calhoun, supported by other southerners, composed an "Address of the Southern Delegates in Congress to their Constituents," a "cautious and moderate statement" of grievances and a warning that if the North were allowed to continue on its present course, slavery would be abolished. Signing the January 22, 1849, document were all of Mississippi's congressmen, one of only two united southern delegations.

Soon after the Southern Address was published, Mississippians began collecting in county and town meetings to approve the actions of their representatives and to prepare for the coming state elections. As early as March, three months before the state conventions, the Mississippi Free Trader ran a Quitman-for-governor masthead, predicting the Democrats' choice of the outspoken, pro-slavery leader. On May 7 a Jackson meeting "without distinction of party" issued a lengthy address and a series of resolutions confirming Mississippi's united front. Vowing attachment for the Union, the resolutions also asserted a belief in state sovereignty and in slavery as a beneficial system for blacks, lamented the activities of northern extremists, lauded the work of the Mississippi congressional delegation, and reserved judgment on the question of extending the Missouri Compromise line. Finally, they called for local

meetings in order that the people be heard.[26]

In Wilkinson the Democrats met on April 10. Once again Ventress served on the resolutions committee, a group which reported that Quitman was their choice for governor and Mexican War captain Cooper for Congress, but also pledged to support the party nominees. Ventress himself was named as a delegate but did not attend the state convention on June 18-19 in Jackson.[27] At that large meeting, where "the very spirit of harmony prevailed," Democrats chose Quitman to head a strong slate. Whigs of only eighteen counties meanwhile met in a "Mississippi Taylor Convention" and passed a set of resolutions similar to those endorsed by their opponents, but more deliberate and conservative, emphasizing answers within the Union and the Constitution. Their nominees were a lackluster group, who, as the Free Trader guessed, were not heard of again after November.

In a heavy voter turnout, Quitman and his slate swept the state with a majority of more than 10,000. Whigs made a respectable showing only in the legislature, where

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[26]Jackson Mississippian, May 11, 1849.

[27]Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, April 18, 1849; Jackson Mississippian, May 4, June 22, 1849.

they had forty-six members to the Democrats' eighty-three. In Wilkinson the Whigs were still very much alive: Jones Stewart, a holdover in the senate, was joined by his kinsman James D. Stewart in the house. For governor and other state offices, the Democrats polled about fifty votes less in each race.[28]

Democratic successes in other states, combined with the increasingly prevalent sentiment that Taylor was dominated by northern Whigs and the belief that California would soon be admitted as a free state, prompted more talk of resistance among Mississippians during late 1849 and early 1850. In January the legislature appropriated a sizable sum to send representatives to the Nashville convention of slaveholding states set for June, and set aside $200,000 to be used for the protection of state rights. Six Whigs and six Democrats were named as Nashville delegates (two were from Woodville), but both parties stopped short of advocating secession, expressed for the first time publicly in an October 19 state rights meeting.

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[28]Young, Mississippi Whigs, 106; Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, June 23, 1849; Vicksburg Tri-Weekly Whig, November 5, 17, 20, 22, 1849; Jackson Mississippian, November 30, 1849; Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 45-69; Miller, Voter Participation, 90-97.

On January 29, 1850, the Clay compromise measures were introduced in the Senate--to admit California as a free state, organize the other new territories without restriction as to slavery, adjust the Texas boundary and assume that state's debts, prohibit slave trading in the District of Columbia, and provide more stringent regulations on the return of fugitive slaves. Two weeks later Jefferson Davis replied, demanding extension of the Missouri Compromise line. On March 4, Calhoun made his final appeal for a constitutional amendment to guard state rights.[29]

News of the Committee of Thirteen--organized at the suggestion of Senator Henry S. Foote "to link the settlement of all the questions at issue in one bill"--was greeted with derision in the pages of the Republican and other state papers which opposed compromise. Not only were the committee resolutions deemed unacceptable, its ideas were called "false and humiliating."

To consider the congressional actions, Ventress and several others called a meeting for August 6, in the midst of the summer debate over the various compromise measures. The Mississippi senators had split over the specific issue of California, Davis holding to his Missouri Compromise

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[29]Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 70-113.

demands and Foote upholding the Committee of Thirteen. Instructed by the legislature to oppose the admission of a free California, both did so. But when the bill passed, Davis signed a formal protest and Foote refused. Eventually all the compromise measures were enacted, despite consistent opposition by most of the Mississippi delegation.[30]

At the August 6 meeting in Woodville, Whigs and Democrats united to form a Southern Party, patterned on the state party organized in Jackson the previous month. Ventress' name was conspicuously absent from the proceedings, even though he had signed the call for the gathering, only one of many held throughout the state in August and September. Most were largely Democratic, but the partisan press was quick to enumerate Whigs in attendance. In Woodville the Republican and the State Rights or Southern Party continued to endorse Davis, Quitman, and Brown. In November, 368 Wilkinson countians, among them Ventress, addressed a letter to Davis in which they expressed "approbation and admiration" for his actions "in the recent

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[30] Ibid., 113-46, quotation on 113; Woodville Republican, May 28, June 4, 18, 25, July 2, 16, 1850. For a succinct discussion of the compromise debates, see David M. Potter and Don E. Fehrenbacher, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 90-113.

struggle between Northern _might_ and Southern _right_."[31]

Opposition to the compromise was generally Democratic but there was, in addition, a division between the commercial-large planter class and the small planter-farmer group. By 1850, Ventress was definitely a member of the former, an alliance whose business ties with the North and larger investments in the slavery system bound them to support compromise. The sobriquets "disunionist" and "submissionist" soon became the more common party labels as Mississippians discussed their positions in 1850. Now talk of disunion was open. In an interesting twist, opponents of compromise called supporters the real disunionists because they sought to bring about conditions they knew the South could not accept.[32]

The alternatives of secession or submission were spelled out in numerous letters which Governor Quitman received, sent, and had published in 1850-51. Especially influential was his correspondence with public officials

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[31]Woodville _Republican_, July 23, August 6, 13, September 3, November 19, 1850; Jackson _Mississippian_, September 6, 1850; Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 150-53.

[32]Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 148, 154-55. One Mississippian used "free soiler" and "unionist" interchangeably (Robert Gordon Diary, November 4, 6, 1851, Miss. Archives). For a strong polemic on the Union side, see _The True Issues Stated . . . By a Union Man_ (Natchez: Adams County Union Association, 1851).

in South Carolina, who depended on Mississippi to sustain their opposition to compromise. The Mississippi governor, who had already decided that secession was the answer, called a special session of the legislature for November 1850 to consider the recent acts of Congress and to place the state in readiness for self defense against "the evils which impend over us." Among other influential Democrats, Albert G. Brown was a decided opponent of compromise. Davis was more cautious, proposing that the people should decide the issues in state and southern conventions. Speaking for compromise and increasingly vocal during 1850 were Senator Foote and William L. Sharkey, chief justice of the supreme court and late president of the Nashville Convention, which had in general sustained Davis' position while urging preservation of the Union at almost any cost.

Quitman's address to the special session suggested a convention of the slave states and demanded extension of the Missouri Compromise line. In response, the legislature passed resolutions opposing the compromise bills and censuring Foote. Following Davis' advice, they called a state convention for November 1851. While they deliberated, a noisy Jackson meeting of some 1,500 organized the Mississippi Union Party. Led by Foote, federal office-holders, and "the more dignified, if less effective guidance of the Whigs," the new party geared itself for battle with the state righters, headed by more popular

figures and backed by a formidable state government and party machine.[33] It was with the former group that Ventress cast his lot.

In May 1851, Foote was easily nominated by the Union Party for governor. The Southern Rights (also Democratic State Rights) Party was not so harmonious. Quitman, who had resigned in February 1851 to face Cuba filibustering charges, was seen as the front-runner for renomination, but many at the June convention considered him too extreme. He refused to withdraw, however, and was nominated. With the gubernatorial contest in the balance, a bitter campaign began for the September election in which delegates for the November convention would be chosen.[34]

In Woodville the battle lines were drawn early and were maintained by the two rival weeklies. Even so, party affiliations were often murky. At a Union meeting in July, Ventress was nominated as a convention delegate in opposition to his cousin Stewart, also a former Whig. Allied and speaking with Ventress in the canvass was

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[33] Woodville Republican, October 15, 22, 1850; Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 123-27, 159-87. See also John F. H. Claiborne, Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman (2 vols., New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860), II, 33-52, 114-43.

[34] Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 201-5.

Horatio F. Simrall, a Whig who had defeated him for the legislature in 1847. A voice most familiar with the local scene, the Republican was even confused on what Simrall and Ventress meant when they spoke of the "opposition party." Since both had fulminated against the compromise, the race seemed unnecessary. Additionally, once named a candidate, Ventress announced cryptically but "distinctly" that he reserved the right to return to his "old principles."[35]

His appeal to the voters was based on little more than his charge that Quitman was a disunionist, although several newspaper articles believed he had other reasons to criticize the popular fire-eater. Ventress was accused of having "held a confidential correspondence" with Quitman in the fall of 1850 in which he

> recommended that the Governor take the grounds in his message, that the South should not submit to the Compromise, unless Congress either bought or took viet armus, the Island of Cuba, and give it to us as an offsett to California.

Quitman refused, hence Ventress' ire. Ventress was also challenged to show how he could both agree with Davis'

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[35]Woodville Republican, May 27, June 3, 24, July 15, 22, 1851, March 16, 1852. Others were confused about Ventress' affiliation, also--see an appeal to him from the State Rights Association in December 1850 (TVP, folder 161), for aid in organizing Wilkinson.

position, which he had done in the public letter of November 1850, and speak for the Unionists in 1851. To the Republican, Ventress seemed to differ with Quitman only in the means of redressing grievances. On the basic issues, they agreed. The Republican further noted that Ventress received what was essentially the Whig nomination for convention delegate, yet said he was a Democrat. "We call upon our friends to examine his position," the editor challenged, "look at facts, and then vote knowingly." Accused by the Wilkinson Whig of resorting to "trifling personalities," the Republican averred its admiration for Ventress "as a man and a citizen," but still professed astonishment at his advocacy of "measures that Clay, Webster, & Co., say take from the South every thing but her honor."[36]

Ventress spoke frequently during the summer, even though one of his speeches on the Saturday before the election was called simply a "threadbare song" of "Quitman, Quitman, Quitman." He was once again termed an aristocrat, as he had been in 1847, because he supposedly

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[36]Woodville Republican, July 29, August 5, 19, 1851. Evidence of such a correspondence has not been found in the collections of Quitman's papers at the Mississippi Archives and the University of North Carolina. Nor has the most recent Quitman biographer discovered any letters on the subject (Robert E. May to author, April 13, 1977).

resorted to the old English practice of hiring substitutes to meet with "the laboring classes." And the Republican reported on September 2 that

> We are informed that Mr. Dennis, a colored gentleman, belonging to J. A. Ventress, is on an excursion . . . with a bag full of Wilkinson Whigs and True Issues [the latter a Jackson Union paper] for circulation among the people . . . to make submissionists of them.[37]

Despite such damaging accusations, the result was decisive. Ventress carried five of the eight precincts and lost one by only three votes. For a change, the state returns vindicated Wilkinson's stand. Union Party delegates to the November meeting were elected from forty-three of the fifty-nine counties, although a low voter turnout indicated that many were unwilling to cast a ballot for or against disunion. The Democrats tried to make the best of a bad lot, asserting that it was not a vote on party lines, and in Wilkinson, that assertion was true.

The usually solid Democratic precinct of Upper Homochitto voted Union and Woodville itself recorded less than its usual Whig majority. The Republican, reporting that the Unionists were more surprised at the result than the Democrats, expressed satisfaction that Ventress at least was "fully identified with the South in the last

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[37]Woodville Republican, August 19, September 2, 1851.

resort."[38]

John Quitman was more than surprised at the Union victory. He saw the election as a mandate against his position and promptly resigned from the governor's race. Called in at the last moment to bear the standard, Jefferson Davis tried to put aside the compromise issue and campaign on state and local questions, but his opponents had a winning platform and well-rehearsed arguments. A grueling campaign in September and October ended in Foote's victory by a bare 999 votes, quite a contrast with Quitman's landslide margin of 10,000 in 1849. Brown was the only state rights Congressman to retain his seat and the legislature was to be composed of sixty-three Union representatives (of a total ninety-eight) in the house and seven of sixteen in the senate. In Wilkinson governor-elect Foote won by only fifteen votes, a marked diminution of Ventress' September margin over Stewart.[39]

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[38] Ibid., September 2, 9, 1851; Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 209-11; Rawson, Party Politics, 79-80. For a map showing the vote by county, see James B. Ranck, Albert Gallatin Brown: Radical Southern Nationalist (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1937), 87.

[39] Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 211-16; Jackson Mississippian, November 19, 1851; Woodville Republican, November 11, 25, 1851; Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, November 12, 1851; Davis, Jefferson Davis and the Campaign, 59-73.

Just after his victory, Ventress had been approached by the Adams County Union Club asking whether he would run for state senator. While noting that his friends had urged "an affirmative and speedy answer," he replied that he was "a Democratic Union man," and if such an affiliation was not agreeable, his "feelings [would] in nowise be wounded by the club conferring the contemplated honor upon some other gentleman." Adams County unionists subsequently nominated Alexander K. Farrar, the eventual winner.[40]

On November 10 the long-awaited state convention met in Jackson. Although the Woodville Republican believed that "the public feels so little interest in it, that it requires a special notice to apprize them of its existence," other journals were more concerned, printing each session's proceedings. Of the ninety-eight delegates, forty-five were Union Whig, thirty-seven, like Ventress, were Democrats. Occupations were generally the ones reflected in the state legislature and in about the same proportions: thirty-two lawyers, forty-six farmers and planters, four merchants, five physicians, and a scattering of others.

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[40]Adam L. Bingaman to Ventress, September 3, Ventress to Bingaman, September 10, 1851, PVF; Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, December 3, 1851.

The average age was thirty-eight; Ventress was forty-six.[41]

Once called to order, the meeting elected officers. Ventress was nominated for chairman by the Franklin County delegate, but declined. Instead, by acclamation, Ventress was declared chairman of the all-important resolutions committee, the convention's own Committee of Thirteen, which consisted of three members from each congressional district as well as one at-large (Ventress). After announcing that "the committee desired materials to operate on," and that he and his fellows "wished to have the benefit of the views of the members," Ventress received seven separate proposals, which avowed: an attachment to the Union; that Mississippi would resist any interference with slavery; that abolitionists' activities were dangerous; that the right of secession was unlawful; that submission to the law was essential; that the Georgia resolutions be adopted (the basic platform of the Union Party--resistance possible if Congress interfered with slavery but professing a strong attachment to the Union); and that the actions of the convention should be submitted to the people.

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[41]Woodville Republican, November 18, 1851; table of delegates, PVF.

All the proposals were by Unionists, both Democrats and Whigs, but Ventress' committee revealed more interesting divisions. Four were Union Democrats, six Union Whigs, and three State Rights Democrats, the latter from a group of only thirteen at the entire convention. Also noteworthy is the fact that the convention's three major officers--the president, secretary, and resolutions committee chairman--were Union Democrats, who were outnumbered in the convention by the Union Whigs. For the latter phenomenon the Republican had an answer, saying the convention had "saddled the chief offices upon union democrats, in order to throw the responsibility of its actions upon the democratic party."[42] The "old coons," though lately fallen on hard times, were still cagey enough to make a comeback under cover of the Union Party.

During the afternoon session on November 13, Ventress offered eight resolutions for consideration. First, that although the people of Mississippi did not entirely approve the compromise measures of 1850, they would "abide by [them] as permanent adjustment of this sectional controversy." Second, that nothing in that legislation should be allowed to disturb the friendly

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[42]Woodville Republican, November 18, 1851.

relations between Mississippi and the federal government. Third, the convention believed Mississippi would continue to support the Union and abide by the Constitution. Fourth, the right of secession was "utterly unsanctioned" by the Constitution. Fifth, if violations of the people's rights should occur, i.e., congressional interference with slavery, then resistance was justifiable. Sixth, Mississippians believed that Congress would enforce "in good faith" all the recently adopted statutes. Seventh, it was desirable that "all further agitation of the Slavery question [should] cease" and that the convention action need not be referred to the ballot box. And finally, the November 1850 call of the legislature to hold the 1851 convention without submitting the idea to the voters "was an unwarranted assumption of power" and "an encroachment on the sovereign power of the people."

Reaction to the resolutions was swift. First came the minority report from the committee on November 14, essentially advocating adoption of the October 1849 state rights resolutions in addition to the declaration that the current convention was not illegal or unconstitutional. Further, the minority believed the resolutions should be submitted to the people of Mississippi. Following the acceptance of the minority report, the committee was discharged and Ventress himself granted a leave of absence on account of "indisposition." The fourth resolution proved

the most controversial in the ensuing debate in the press and on the convention floor, but was finally adopted after several amendments were rejected. On Saturday afternoon, November 15, Ventress returned to help sustain his committee's proposals. All eight resolutions were passed, some with slight amendments which did not affect the original intent.[43] They were not referred to the voters but stood simply as the last word on the compromise--for awhile.

After only two years, at the end of Foote's turbulent and unproductive administration, the Union Party leaders fell from power and influence. As evidence of its demise, even Wilkinson returned a Democratic majority for President in 1852, the victors stating correctly that they had "struggled against heavy odds" in that county for many years. In 1853 many prominent Democrats were returned to office and "the bewildered party" was "consigned to the grave."[44]

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[43] For a general discussion, see Hearon, "Mississippi and the Compromise," 216-19. See also Journal of the Convention of the State of Mississippi (Jackson: Thomas Palmer, 1851).

[44] Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, December 10, 1851; Jackson Mississippian, November 14, 1851; Jackson Mississippian and State Gazette, November 26, 1852. The best account of politics is Rawson, Party Politics, passim. For Foote's administration, see John E. Gonzales, The Public Career of Henry Stuart Foote (1804-1880) (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1957), 131-73.

Whigs and Unionists were never again to control state politics but in Woodville were influential and numerous enough both to support their own newspaper until late 1857 and occasionally to elect local officials. In state and presidential elections, except in 1855 when majorities were returned for the Know-Nothing candidates for governor and Congress, Wilkinson fell into the Democratic column. In 1852, for example, the residents of Woodville were "as cool and quiet as cucumbers. Whigs and democrats seem to prefer the shade, and its concomitants of lemonades and cigaritas, to the heat and strife of political excitement."[45]

Ventress' political activities in the prewar decade were negligible, due to the unpopularity of his Union position and his preoccupation with personal and plantation affairs. In 1853 he did chair two Woodville Democratic conventions, the first one in April at which twenty delegates were named to the state convention and another in June which chose a candidate for the legislature. Nominated for the house, he "respectfully declined standing a vote."[46]

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[45] Woodville Republican, August 24, 1852.

[46] Ibid., April 19, 26, June 21, 1853; Jackson Mississippian and State Gazette, April 29, July 1, 1853.

Two years later, in 1855, he began a flirtation with Know-Nothingism. Among the Wilkinson delegates to the Mississippi American Party convention, he was his neighbors' choice as the senate candidate. Again he declined to run. In July 1856 he was listed as a presidential elector, but after only two weeks, his name was dropped without explanation from the masthead of the Wilkinson Whig. In August he was invited to address a meeting of the "friends of Fillmore and Donelson" near Vicksburg, but did not respond. Finally, in mid-1857 his name was mentioned in a Natchez paper as a possible Know-Nothing gubernatorial candidate, shortly before he received a telegram asking if he would accept such a nomination.[47] He did not.

As in most states of the lower South, the American Party was essentially the Whig Party in new clothes, a conservative political-social movement which sought to ally "the isms" with "scatterd Whiggery" in warfare against Democratic Principles." Whigs saw an opportunity to reorganize on an appealing, emotional theme in a party which was secret and mysterious, and whose members were

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[47] Woodville Wilkinson Whig, June 19, 30, December 22, 1855, July 19, August 2, 1856; Natchez Daily Courier, June 20, 1857; Alexander K. Smedes to Ventress, August 5, 1856, TVP, folder 305; Vicksburg Daily Whig, August 21, 1856; F. S. Hunt to Ventress, August 3, 1857, PVF.

"sound" on slavery. In Mississippi the Americans ran a strong slate in 1855, even challenging John Quitman for Congress in the fourth district. The Know-Nothings triumphed in Vicksburg, but in Woodville they elected only part of the ticket. In 1856, American presidential nominee Fillmore lost by only 28 votes in Wilkinson, but by 10,000 in Mississippi.[48]

The last hurrah was in July 1857, when delegates from fourteen counties met to name representatives to the national convention in Louisville. Ventress and three other former Whig stalwarts were among those chosen, but the convention never materialized. With a platform based on "constitutionalism, Unionism, cessation of slavery agitation, slavery in all the territories, and a purified ballot with unnaturalized citizens barred," American Party candidates campaigned actively but lost by huge margins, carrying only Warren and Hinds counties, location of the state's two largest towns.[49] The Know-Nothings were dead as an organized movement.

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[48] Ferdinand L. Claiborne to William H. Whitehurst, April 10, 1855, Whitehurst Papers, Miss. Archives; Cole, Whig Party, 310-17; McLemore, History of Mississippi, I, 423-29; W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 119-22.

[49] Overdyke, Know-Nothing Party, 277-78. For a detailed history of the movement in Mississippi, see Rawson, Party Politics, 139-235.

One final effort to enlist Ventress as a candidate came in 1859, this time for the state senate. He replied on June 13 that he had not permitted his name to be announced in the Republican and desired that it not be considered:

> Furthermore, state to the convention that no lukewarmness for the Union or for the South has impelled me to this course. I shall heretofore as ever oppose the damnable political heresy of Cass and Douglass viz squatter sovereignty--a doctrine most certainly containing . . . all that the South has to fear. . . . I am in hopes that the Convention will not hesitate to pass a resolution strongly condemnatory of this foul heresy and moreover pledge the senatorial nominee to carry out the like views.[50]

Ventress' castigation of popular sovereignty--a doctrine that residents of new states or territories should decide the issue of slavery for themselves--was reaffirmed in 1860, when he supported the John C. Breckinridge-Joseph Lane Democrats rather than the candidacy of Stephen A. Douglas. As his friend Benjamin Wailes (a Unionist) recorded in July 1860:

> Mr. Ventress goes with the Breckinridge organization . . . but is not wholly satisfied with it. He is greatly exasperated with the present political aspects [,] bitter against the North and utterly unreasonable and frantic

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[50] Woodville Republican, February 2, 9, 1858; Ventress to Felix Embree, June 13, 1859, TVP, folder 251.

> in his denunciations. Is for breaking up the union & seems rather to desire the election of Lincoln to bring about that result. This I fear is the temper and feeling of a great many of our Citizens who [were] formerly Staunch supporters of the Union.

The Woodville Republican concurred:

> The election of Breckinridge will save the South and the Union; the election of Lincoln may save the South; but the election of [John] Bell or Douglas will surrender the South to the fanaticism of the North.[51]

On election day Wilkinson gave Breckinridge 404, Bell 324, and Douglas 34; Mississippi returned votes of 40,000, 25,000, and 3,300, respectively.

Ventress, in fact, felt so strongly about the election of Lincoln and secession that he wrote a public letter on the subject. A copy has not been located, but was praised by a business associate:

> I have read your letter . . . with care; it is my view on the subject to a Tee. . . . I say if we can stay in the Union, and have our rights let us stay, but on the other hand if we can not have our rights in the Union let us have it out of it.[52]

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[51]Wailes Diary, XXIX, 48-49, Duke University; Republican quoted in Percy L. Rainwater, Mississippi: Storm Center of Secession, 1856-1861 (Baton Rouge: Otto Claitor, 1938), 137. Miller, Voter Participation, 202-8, notes that of the Breckinridge partisans in Mississippi, forty-eight percent, like Ventress, were slaveholders. However, among those who held twenty or more slaves (like Ventress), almost all supported Bell or Douglas. See also William L. Barney, The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), especially 76-88, 111-12.

[52]Severin Porche to Ventress, February 1, 1861,

When Mississippi seceded, Ventress supported the Confederacy, as attested by his correspondence with Jefferson Davis and others. In June 1861 he wrote a long letter offering the southern government instructions on building some special armaments and sincerely trusting that "some one of them, if not all may be of service in driving the Black Republican blood hounds back howling to their dens." During the war and after, state politics were virtually at a standstill as most energies were devoted to the war effort. Too old for military service and somewhat isolated in Wilkinson, Ventress strove to survive, to protect his properties and family, and to market his cotton.[53] On May 24, 1865, he signed the oath of allegiance to the United States, the last recorded deed in a public career that had spanned three of Mississippi's most exciting decades.

In his later years, Ventress must have recalled his public service with satisfaction. "With a due regard for

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TVP, folder 265. The only other notice of the letter appears in a later biographical sketch of Ventress: "In 1860 he addressed an open letter to the mayor of Philadelphia, Pa., in which he emphasized his views on [secession]. This letter was widely copied by the newspapers and received favorable comment from the greatest statesmen of the country--Dunbar Rowland, Mississippi (3 vols., Atlanta: Southern Historical Publishing Association, 1907), III, 837.

[53]Ventress to Davis, June 18, 1861, unprocessed materials, Miss. Archives; Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 955. For more on Ventress'

the public weal," he had devoted vast amounts of time and energy to non-profitable enterprise, the state legislature. As one of his contemporaries noted, "a man of limited means has no business in public affairs. When its term is over he has professional life to begin anew--and the added cares of a family."[54] Ventress was more fortunate since his only profession was that of a planter and his affairs could be managed with the help of friends and family. After his marriage in 1848, he found personal matters more pressing and politics less appealing.

For the years 1835-48, however, his interest in state politics was unflagging. As a politician, he was only moderately successful; and for advancement, his choices of parties were not happy ones. Being a Whig he found himself nearly always in the minority in the legislature. As a Union Democrat and Know-Nothing he found no permanent political home. It was natural he should first be a Whig coming from Wilkinson, and if there were a "typical" Whig, he would have fit the pattern. One student of Mississippi Whiggery has demonstrated that the profile of a politically active Whig was closer in economic terms

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wartime activities, see Chapter VI.

[54]George T. Swann to Charles D. Fontaine, November 10, 1855, Fontaine Papers, Miss. Archives.

to the rank and file voters than to the party elite (those who ran for state and national offices) and not dissimilar to the profile of active Democrats. The difference between average value of real estate for Whigs ($4,204) exceeded that of Democrats by less than two dollars. Ventress' holdings in 1850 were greater (assessed at $6,550 in 1850), but he also lived in that section of the state where Whigs had the advantage in average land values. Place of birth, age, and occupation were relatively useless as indexes to Mississippians' voting preferences.[55] Except that he remained unmarried until age forty-three, Ventress seems to have fallen among the average or most numerous in several collections of biographical data on office-holders.

In Wilkinson County specifically, vote-seekers had to campaign on the stump and/or through the newspapers. Ventress seems to have generally eschewed the latter. Although he was reportedly an able orator and campaigner, the extant reports of his speeches show that there was much to be desired in the way of originality and incisiveness. Further, he could be contentious, as the 1845 and 1847 canvasses revealed. His inflexibility and belief in strict procedures--for instance, his term as speaker--seem

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[55]Young, Mississippi Whigs, 36-47, 81-87.

to connote aloofness and a stern, even arrogant personality little attuned to the folksy style preferred by many citizens. He displayed even less a spirit of compromise, saying many times that his watchword was "principles and not men (or party)." Finally, his Whiggish principles were unpopular with a growing democracy.

For the years he was in office, Ventress could point to a number of achievements, the state university and public buildings among them. Thanks to his leadership and perseverance on the floor of the house and senate and in committees, the university was open and the three major state buildings completed and occupied. His background and wide reading in many fields made him an obvious choice in matters involving education, architecture, and machinery. Likewise, he was frequently tapped for committees which composed resolutions for publication. Such groups were most often attorneys and other men of good training. Evidence of Ventress' European study surfaces in his speeches, even in those to the legislature on assuming and relinquishing the speakership. And undoubtedly Governor Quitman had that background in mind when he named Ventress a state commissioner to decide what items should be sent from Mississippi to the 1851 world's fair in

London.[56]

Ventress retired from the legislature reluctantly in the late 1840s, clearly believing he could still contribute something to Mississippi's progress and perhaps even hoping for higher office. In the mid-1850s when Democrats of a different stripe were in control, he must have felt a comeback would be impossible. By then, too, he was older and involved with his new family. His political career had been set against a dramatic tableau, when men like himself beheld limitless opportunity. His turning to private life, likewise, occurred when partisan politics in Mississippi had settled into a predictable pattern. Calling himself "a steadfast friend to the Union" as well as "a firm adherent, to the Rights of the States," and above all, "armed with reason and an ardent love of truth,"[57] Ventress must have entered political retirement confident that his principles were the right ones and that his distrust of strict party loyalties was well founded.

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[56]Undated drafts of speeches, PVF; Jackson Mississippian, October 18, November 1, 1850.

[57]Undated draft of speech, PVF.

CHAPTER V

"A GENTLEMAN OF SCHOLARLY ATTAINMENTS"[1]

In its early years the University of Mississippi was considered an exotic place, noted for its isolated rural calm, its fine classical buildings, its distinguished faculty, and its lively student body. By contrast, its governing body was seemingly a distant, faceless group of powers to whom attention was paid only when need be, at commencement, and in time of unpleasantness. The board of trustees was, in short, a necessary evil without which the university could not legally function.

James A. Ventress served the university for nearly a quarter century, from 1844 until his death in 1867. Only one charter member served longer. Ventress' eight collegiate years in Europe, his role in the legislature as shepherd of education bills, his obvious concern with the subject generally and with related matters such as the geological survey, fitted him well for his position. As trustee he continued his work for the survey and his interest in handsome, practical public buildings. He

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[1]John N. Waddel, Historical Discourse Delivered on the Quarter-Centennial Anniversary of the University of Mississippi (Oxford: Press of the Holly Springs Reporter, 1873), 14.

supported with pride the university's pioneering efforts toward the study of experimental science, his own avocation. Neither the most devoted of board members nor the most lax, he took his duties seriously, served on a number of special committees, and was present to help solve many of the controversial issues faced by the trustees in the antebellum years.

Long before the board was constituted, the university was planned. An 1819 federal statute had set aside "a quantity of land . . . for the support of a seminary of learning."[2] Four years later the legislators selected the sections authorized and in 1825 leasing began to provide a source of income. "As these were agricultural lands, generally covered with heavy timber, and as other lands were abundant," the legislature could count only $8,402 in revenue by 1831. Low profits and deterioration thus forced the sale of most of the land in 1833. The notes obtained were invested--foolishly, as it turned out--in the Planters' Bank which failed in 1840. Successive governors in the 1820s and 1830s had urged measures to guard the school moneys, but not until 1843 was an act passed to protect

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[2]H. M. Sullivan, comp., All the Laws and Public Resolutions in Relation to the University of Mississippi (Oxford: no publisher, 1879), 3.

the remainder, henceforth called the seminary fund. By then nearly $130,000 had been lost in careless investments: on the day the fund was established, only $61,718 could be redeemed. In 1846, Governor Albert G. Brown, an early advocate of public education, strongly recommended that the university be indemnified by the state treasury in the amount of $251,356.[3]

As has been noted elsewhere, establishment of the institution was impeded not only by a paucity of funds but also by intrastate jealousies and the "affection of the people for the older southern and northern universities."[4] Ventress' role in the selection of a site and his authorship of the bill which finally organized the school in 1844 is acknowledged in the university's Historical Catalogue: "To the organization, equipment and maintenance of the University of Mississippi he devoted his talents and his

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[3] Historical Catalogue of the University of Mississippi, 1849-1909 (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce, 1910), 4-5; J. Allen Cabaniss, The University of Mississippi: Its First Hundred Years (2d ed., Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1971), 4-6; Grover C. Hooker, Origin and Development of the University of Mississippi (Ph.D. dissertation, Stanford University, 1932), 31-41, 51; Nathaniel C. Hathorn, Financial History of the University of Mississippi (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1938), 1-14.

[4] Hooker, Origin and Development, 373.

large political influence."[5] The incorporation act, signed into law on February 24, 1844, named thirteen distinguished men to be the first trustees. Six were from northern Mississippi, four from the central part of the state, one from Mississippi City, and only two--Ventress and John A. Quitman--from the old Natchez district. In addition to Quitman, both Jacob Thompson and William L. Sharkey had long political careers. John N. Waddel compiled a notable academic record, while Francis L. Hawks, historian and Episcopal bishop, later became first president of the University of Louisiana. Other board members were noted as attorneys and civic leaders. Enabled to perform a wide variety of legislative, administrative, and supervisory functions, the board was given control of the seminary fund and had absolute powers in adopting a curriculum and selecting the faculty, as well as filling vacancies on the board itself. It was, as one source called it, "a self-perpetuating corporation."[6]

On January 15, 1845, the group convened in Jackson for an organizational meeting. Ventress' absence was unexplained; the only other absentee was William Gholson, who had resigned shortly before. The eleven present

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[5] Historical Catalogue, 6.

[6] Ibid., 7; Hooker, Origin and Development, 59, 68.

proceeded to elect supreme court justice Alexander M. Clayton president, Thomas H. Williams of Pontotoc as secretary-treasurer, and an executive committee. Regular meetings were scheduled for Oxford on the second Monday in January and July, except when the January meeting fell during a legislative session. In that case the board would convene in Jackson. The next order of business was a report on funding--a dismal accounting in which the state treasurer said there was $89,989 in "auditor's warrants & cancelled. There is no cash on hand." Undaunted, the board moved ahead with building plans, accepting the drawings and report of state architect William Nichols, and looking toward a more productive July meeting.[7]

Ventress' participation at the next six sessions--July 1845, January and July 1846, April 1847, January and February 1848--was limited almost exclusively to an investigation of university finances. Undoubtedly because of his previous expertise in the legislature, he was named to committees which researched the history of the seminary fund, drafted a bill for indemnification, and composed a memorial to the legislature for annual appropriations.

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[7]Florence E. Campbell, Journal of the Minutes of the Board of Trustees of the University of Mississippi, 1845-1860 (M.A. thesis, University of Mississippi, 1939), 1-8. Campbell's transcription of the manuscript proceedings was found to be virtually flawless and is cited extensively in lieu of the original journal, located in the archives of the university.

In July 1845 he admitted that his committee was

> unable to reconcile the discrepancy contained in the several reports of the State Treasurer and upon examination they find a great discrepancy exists in the several executive messages of 1838, 1839 and 1840.[8]

On January 15, 1846, Ventress presented a lengthy account of his inquiries, which had involved analysis of treasury records since 1829. He found that the fund theoretically was valued at upwards of $352,000, most of which was uncollectable.[9] The same day there was a heated debate in the legislature on a bill to repay the university for the virtual disappearance of the fund. One of the chief opponents of restitution was Ventress' political rival from Woodville, Horatio F. Simrall. Himself later a member of the board of trustees, Simrall argued in 1846 that the university would benefit only northern Mississippi and should not be supported to the extent proposed. In spite of such strong opposition, the measure passed on January 26. It provided that the fund be controlled in the future by the state instead of the trustees and that $50,000 be set aside for the university in 1846-47 "out of any money . . . not otherwise appropriated."[10]

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[8] Ibid., 13.

[9] Ibid., 21-23.

[10] Hooker, Origin and Development, 43-55; Edward

With that sum the board could authorize construction of university buildings and begin to plan for the reception of students.

As one historian of the university declared, the years 1846 and 1847 were ruled by "the trowel, the plane and the ledger."[11] Reports from the building committee, headed by Quitman, were heard in 1845 and 1846. At Ventress' suggestion, the board named William Nichols school architect, voting him an annual salary of $1,000. His plan for the first building, the lyceum, was also adopted on Ventress' motion. Memphis and Mississippi papers carried the required advertisements for contractors, and on July 14, 1846, the cornerstone was laid. During the subsequent board meeting four more edifices were planned for residences and eating halls. Reported as progressing very slowly in September 1847, the buildings were in good enough condition by October 1848 that the architect was dismissed.[12]

Mayes, History of Education in Mississippi (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 133-34; Sullivan, Laws, 11.

[11]Mayes, History of Education, 135.

[12]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 15-16, 23-25, 30, 32, 78; Cabaniss, University, 9; James M. Howry to John A. Quitman, June 26, 1846, and Benjamin F. Dill to Quitman, September 7, 1847, Claiborne Coll.

At their January 1846 gathering, the trustees adopted John Quitman's resolution that the university be established "upon the usual plan of an American University, or College for instruction in the higher branches of learning." Ventress cast the only negative vote,[13] perhaps an indication that his ideal model was one of the European schools he had attended. More than a year later, when construction was well underway, the board again turned its attention to the curriculum, appointing a committee of three to correspond with faculties of established colleges as well as "others conversant with literary institutions" on the subjects of rules and regulations, a plan of education, and the number and duties of professors. A committee offered a preliminary report in January 1848 and a more complete one the following July. Ultimately the trustees accepted William L. Sharkey's plan for five faculty members, including the president. Newspaper notices again were placed and the election of a faculty set for July in Oxford.[14]

The well-circulated advertisement for applicants boasted that the countryside around Oxford was "elevated

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[13] Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 20.

[14] Ibid., 38, 56, 59-60; Cabaniss, University, 9-10.

and healthy and the society moral and religious." Base salaries were set at $2,000 for the president and $1,500 for other professors, as well as "perquisites arising from tuition fees" and "suitable" housing free of charge. Applicants were advised to present themselves at the meeting or "furnish ample testimonials of their fitness." Seeking "to procure an able faculty . . . and to furnish the means of making ripe and finished scholars within the limits of [their] own State," the trustees vowed they would be "governed but by one motive,--the desire to make the best selections in their power."[15]

Ventress was urged by board president Clayton to attend the July meeting, which was clearly "more important than any subsequent one." Clayton noted quite correctly that "the election of a faculty--the framing of a mode of government & prescribing a course of study--are all matters of the first moment. They will demand the wisdom of all the members."[16] But probably because of his recent marriage and resettlement on a new plantation in addition to the upcoming presidential canvass, Ventress was absent from three board meetings in 1848, at which the faculty

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[15]Jackson Southron, March 24, 1848; William J. Feltus to Ventress, May 14, 1848, TVP, folder 52.

[16]Clayton to Ventress, June 12, 1848, TVP, folder 249.

was chosen and the curriculum and university regulations adopted.

An important session, the July meeting became a stormy one when a heated discussion took place over having ministers on the faculty and on the teaching of "evidences of Christianity," as called for in the recently submitted plan of instruction. In fact, trustee John J. McCaughan, called by one observer "a bold, pronounced infidel," resigned over the issue. Two others "carried on the battle" but finally the course was accepted. The defeat by one vote of the Reverend Augustus B. Longstreet's election to the faculty was probably a sign of compromise.[17]

In July 1848 a trustees' committee defined composition of the faculty and outlined the general course of instruction. The curriculum was to be "closed," i.e., there were prescribed inflexible courses of study which led inevitably to a bachelor of arts degree in the arts and sciences. Considering his own checkered educational experience, Ventress must have had some reservations about that decision. Refined later, the plan provided for a ten-month school year, during which each professor would

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[17]Waddel, Historical Discourse, 14; Historical Catalogue, 7; Hooker, Origin and Development, 61-62; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 60-61; Cabaniss, University, 23.

conduct two classes. In addition to the president, who would teach three courses--philosophy, logic and belles lettres, political economy and international law--there were professors of mathematics and astronomy, natural science, ancient languages, and modern languages. Of the 180 men who presented themselves or their testimonials, 17 applied for the presidency, 60 for mathematics and astronomy, and 67 for ancient languages. After five days of balloting, the trustees announced their decision: for president, George Frederick Holmes; for mathematics and astronomy, Albert T. Bledsoe; for science, John Millington; and to teach both ancient and modern languages, John Waddel. Described by a latter-day university chancellor as a faculty of "cosmopolitan breadth,"[18] the professors proved good choices, with one exception. All accepted their appointments and prepared to move to Oxford for the opening of classes on November 6.

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[18]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 59-60; Workers of the Federal Writers' Project (WPA), comps., Mississippi: A Guide to the Magnolia State (New York: Hastings House, 1949), 260; George H. Steuckrath, "The University of Mississippi--Its History, Condition, and Prospects," DeBow's Review, XXVII (September 1859), 355; Alfred Hume, Dr. John Millington . . . and Others during 100 Years of the University of Mississippi (New York: Newcomen Society, 1950), 13. For sketches of the four faculty members, see DAB; Bledsoe's career at the university is covered in Willard M. Hays, Polemics and Philosophy: A Biography of Albert Taylor Bledsoe (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1971), 224-59.

Prior to that time the trustees directed their efforts to the university laws and regulations, published during the first session. "The qualifications for admission" into the four classes were to be "substantially such as are required in the best regulated universities in the United States." Fees were established, no student under age fifteen would be accepted, furniture was received, and provision made for the admission of "irregular" students, those who attended on a part-time basis. Generous provisions were made for the enrollment of "free" students: each senatorial district was allowed to select one deserving student and sons of ministers were to be admitted gratis.[19]

Classes began on November 6. Six trustees, the four-man faculty, eighty students, and some interested citizens marked the occasion with ceremonies which included "an elaborate and chaste oration" by Holmes, "an address on the part of the Trustees" by Jacob Thompson, and installation of the faculty in the chemistry lecture room of the stately lyceum.[20] Because of the coincidence of

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[19]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 66-68, 84-99; Mayes, History of Education, 139.

[20]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 79; Cabaniss, University, 11; Historical Catalogue, 8.

the presidential election, the opening of the university received little notice in the public press. There are descriptions of the campus, however, by Professor Waddel and by James E. Pope, a later student. Waddel remembered it as a place "of great natural beauty" which provided an ideal setting for the three-story lyceum with its "six large and handsome columns," two dormitories, and a faculty house. "The beautiful inclination of the grounds," Waddel recalled, "and the grand old oaks which tower above and over-shadow the campus, made the spot one to endear the University to those who have been privileged to enjoy its priceless advantages." Pope, who considered the campus as it must have looked to George Holmes, wrote perhaps more honestly that Oxford was after all "only a small country town" and that the university itself was "fully a mile away." Waddel's "grand old oaks" Pope called "'black jack' trees," noting that "the stumps of those which had been cut down were the only objects of ornament to the grounds." In short, "the campus seemed more like an unexplored wilderness, than the location of a university."[21]

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[21]Waddel's recollections are quoted in Cabaniss, University, 13-14; James E. Pope, "Reminiscences of Dr. George Frederick Holmes," University of Mississippi Magazine, XX (December 1895), 3.

To such a place in 1848 came young George Frederick Holmes from the faculty of William and Mary. Only twenty-eight years old, he was praised as "a profound scholar, and . . . one of the most forcible reviewers of the day."[22] He was unknown personally to the trustees but had been highly recommended. Unfortunately, his English prejudices, lack of personal magnetism, and inability to deal decisively with disciplinary and administrative matters made his tenure as president both unhappy and controversial.[23]

On the other hand, it is only fair to say that the conditions he faced were less than ideal. Besides the isolation which impelled students to provide their own diversions, there was a critical lack of teaching materials, the physical facilities were incomplete, and the pupils themselves were young and poorly prepared. Indeed, Waddel remembered that

> very rarely, if ever was an Institution attended by a body of Students so disorderly and turbulent . . . . in point of morals and intellectual advancement, the large body . . . were idle, uncultivated, and ungovernable.

Holmes, educated abroad and accustomed to more genteel

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[22] Southern Literary Messenger, quoted in the Vicksburg Tri-Weekly Whig, May 17, 1849.

[23] Pope, "Reminiscences," 4-5; Cabaniss, University, 14-15.

surroundings, had a well-intentioned goal of student discipline through student responsibility. Sadly for him, he tried to reach it too early and too suddenly. The first year of the university ended with thirty-three of the eighty students expelled, withdrawn, suspended, or simply absent. Public confidence in the school was severely shaken, especially since it already was viewed by some as a hotbed of "infidel tendencies" because of the squabble over faculty selection the previous summer.[24]

As Holmes wrote later, "the anxiety and the difficulties attending the organization of a new university under the most unfavourable circumstances" and the "dangerous illness" he suffered while on a trip in the spring of 1849 combined with the trustees' discontent with his performance, leading to his removal in July 1849. The board minutes record simply: "for cause unsatisfactory to this Board the term of office of George Frederick Holmes . . . is terminated." According to a friendly commentator, Holmes had written to the trustees early that summer explaining that he was stricken with typhoid fever, but the friend entrusted with the letter forgot to deliver

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[24]Waddel, Historical Discourse, 12; Cabaniss, University, 17-19; Neal C. Gillespie, "Ole Miss: A New Look at her First President," Journal of Mississippi History, XXX (November 1968), 275-77, 282-90.

it. The board meanwhile decided that Holmes was essentially absent without leave and that the "vital interests of the University required prompt and decided action"--hence the election of the popular Longstreet as president.[25]

After he had recovered from his illness, Holmes sped back to Oxford, but too late. Unwilling to accept gracefully what he believed to be unfair and humiliating treatment, he addressed letters to several of the trustees, including Ventress. Pleading that he had "fallen a sacrifice to accident and illness, and untoward events," Holmes protested the "hasty and unprecedented" action of the board. He also tried to justify his disciplinary methods:

> I was opposed to violence, harshness of action, espionage and hasty procedure on suspicion or without conclusive evidence, in the case of the Students. Others, both trustees and professors thought differently.

Board president Clayton advised Holmes to seek assistance from the legislature if he was dissatisfied with the board action, to which Holmes replied he sought only to clear his name. He did admit some "hope of pecuniary gain"

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[25]Statement dated March 1, 1850, George Frederick Holmes Letterbook, 221, Duke University; Pope "Reminiscences," 3; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 103; Oxford Organizer, July 14, August 11, September 29, 1849.

to one of the trustees[26] but asked Ventress simply to support his application for a reconsideration of the whole affair.

A letter from Edward C. Wilkinson, Holmes wrote, had informed him that he "was also indebted for [his] election to [Ventress'] flattering opinion and support." Holmes frankly hoped for similar assistance when his case was reviewed at the next board meeting. He believed that a change in the composition of the board "from what it was last July would be more likely to ensure a full re-examination." Ventress is not known to have replied nor was he present in July when the board passed a resolution denying Holmes any additional salary. At the same time the trustees did note that the incident should not reflect upon his character or scholarly reputation. Holmes' "harassing correspondence which grew out of [his] removal" thus ended and two friends wrote that he was fortunate in having escaped from "a set of men who were led on by that infamous dog, [Jacob] Thompson" and whose "malignant imbecility" had "lacerated [Holmes'] feelings." Holmes subsequently had a long and productive career at the

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[26]Pope, "Reminiscences,"3; Holmes to Edward C. Wilkinson, January 24, 1850, and Holmes to Thomas H. Williams, January 24, 1850, Holmes Letters, Duke University.

University of Virginia but evidently never forgot his unpleasant tenure in Mississippi.[27]

As revealed in the board proceedings of October 1850, Ventress did not know of the July meeting when the Holmes matter was reviewed. In July 1849 the by-laws had been altered, making the regular meeting during university commencement and abolishing the January sessions in Jackson. That information did not reach Ventress and at least one other trustee, who journeyed in vain to the capital. By Ventress' own resolution on October 28, 1850, the by-laws were re-amended to provide for a January meeting during regular legislative sessions.[28]

Besides missing participation in the election of a new president, Ventress had not been able to add his voice to discussion of one of his longtime interests, the state agricultural and geological survey. Provided for by the legislature in March 1850, the survey was to be managed by the university. Alexander Clayton duly submitted resolutions suggesting that the professor of

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[27]Holmes to Ventress, March 26, 1850, TVP, folder 255; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 131; statement dated March 1, 1850, Holmes Letterbook, 221; Charles Dabney to Holmes, October 26, 1849, and Robert Saunders to Holmes, May 10, 1850, Holmes Letterbook; Cabaniss, University, 21-22. No correspondence with Ventress was found in the Holmes collection at William and Mary (Margaret Cook, archivist, to author, August 8, 1978).

[28]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 101, 137.

chemistry (John Millington) also begin to teach geology and that an assistant professor of geology be hired to undertake the survey field work. Money was set aside for instruments and other materials and a correspondence initiated with "scientific gentlemen" to obtain recommendations for Millington's assistant.[29]

During the October meeting, election of the latter was postponed and several other routine matters attended to. Progress at the university was noted, as student enrollment began to increase under Longstreet's more pacific administration. The library accessioned several hundred volumes, among them a generous bequest from Jacob Thompson. Lucius Q. C. Lamar was appointed assistant professor of mathematics, a new faculty position. And socializing was lively since John Millington and his wife had organized "Levees for the Students and Towns people."[30]

In July 1850 the board turned once more to the survey, electing Oscar M. Leiber assistant professor of geology and approving resolutions to govern expenditure

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[29] Ibid., 117, 124-32; Bahngrell W. Brown, "The First Hundred Years of Geology in Mississippi," Southern Quarterly, XIII (July 1975), 299.

[30] Cabaniss, University, 24, 31, 153-55; Historical Catalogue, 9; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 102, 136; Stueckrath, "University," 355; Vicksburg Weekly Whig, April 10, 1850; Oxford Democratic Flag, March 10, 1852; John Millington to Holmes, August 25, 1850, and Ann Millington to Holmes, April 3, 1850, Holmes Letters.

of the appropriations allowed by the legislature. At the regular January 1852 meeting Ventress moved that Leiber appear before the board. Instead, on the next day Leiber's letter of resignation was read, an indication that "some unfortunate misunderstanding" had occurred between Leiber and Millington. During the same meeting the board accepted the donation of Dr. Stephen C. Farrar's collection of mineral specimens and some "valuable works" on geology, mineralogy, and botany, an auspicious sign that the survey might yet proceed. On January 15, Ventress nominated his friend B. L. C. Wailes of Washington, Mississippi, to be assistant professor of geology. Wailes was instantly elected.[31]

Long active as a promoter of such worthy causes as Jefferson College, agricultural societies and publications, natural science investigations, and the history of Mississippi, Wailes had applied for the geological survey position in July 1850. Longstreet had promised to present his letter to the board in September but lack of a quorum postponed the issue.[32] After the October meeting

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[31]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 148-50, 159-62; Wailes Letterbook, 8, Old Court House Museum, Vicksburg.

[32]Wailes Letterbook, 1-3; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 135.

Ventress wrote Wailes, urging him to press his application, and observing that the other applicants were "persons who could not distinguish between a sapphyre and a pudding stone." He suggested that Wailes contact the other trustees and provide "certificates of ability," concluding that such a certificate from Sir Charles Lyell would be "of incalculable benefit." Lyell, an eminent British scientist who had visited Mississippi in 1845-46, was well acquainted with both Millington and Wailes and had inspired many Mississippians to learn more about their state's geology. Wailes accordingly addressed the board in July 1851, mentioning that he was well known by Ventress, Sharkey, and Cotesworth P. Smith, as well as Sir Charles.[33]

For two years following his election Wailes traversed the state, making voluminous notes and careful drawings. Millington's duties at the main campus precluded his active involvement and by 1853 his ill health and advanced age made it clear that Wailes would have primary responsibility for the final report. One of his first ventures in connection with the survey was a week-long trip to Wilkinson County, where Ventress entertained him.

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[33]Ventress to Wailes, November 13, 1850, and Wailes to the board of trustees, July 5, 1851, Wailes Letterbook, 4-7; Brown, "Geology," 296-98.

In his diary Wailes commented on "a new specimen of winter grass" shown him, noting that he had "furnished Mr. Ventress with specimens [of shell marl and fossils] as a guide in searching for similar deposits in his neighborhood."[34]

Wailes also pursued his historical interests while traveling and saw to the establishment of a "cabinet" of mineral and geological items in the state capitol. Not a professionally-trained scientist, Wailes' greatest contribution was as a collector, organizer, conscientious reporter, and "an indefatigable student of nature itself." He made numerous visits to Oxford to confer with Millington, still nominally director of the survey. Between trips Wailes studied, fretted with writing and editing, and was constantly chagrined at the slowness and inadequacy of payment by the board.[35]

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[34]Brown, "Geology," 299; John Millington to Wailes, May 8, 1852, and Wailes to Millington, April 1, 1852, Wailes Letterbook, 36-37, 39-41; Millington to Wailes, February 9, 1854, Wailes Papers, Miss. Archives; Wailes Diary (typescript), II, 1-3, Duke University. Ownership of the manuscript journals of B. L. C. Wailes is divided between Duke (Vols. V-IX, XIV-XXXVI) and the Mississippi Archives (Vols. I-IV, X-XIII).

[35]For a summary description of Wailes' work on the survey, see Sydnor, Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region, 182-98, quotation on 182; Wailes Diaries, II-IX, passim; Wailes Letterbook, 26-211; Merrill, Contributions to a History of Surveys, 259-60.

Wailes' "somewhat voluminous report" of "345 pages and 14 finished drawings" was presented to the trustees on January 9, 1854. The board convened after supper in the "Cabinet" room of the capitol, Ventress and three others having arrived just that afternoon. As Wailes recorded,

> after some conversation & various propositions it was referred to a Committee consisting of Judge Sharkey, Judge Wilkinson Mr Ventress & . . . Col Thompson to meet at some place tomorrow morning at Half past nine.

The next day the committee met for Wailes' reading of the introduction and "about one third of the Historical sketch" (some 37 pages in the printed version). At noon the board attended the inauguration of fellow trustee John J. McRae as governor, then spent the afternoon with other business. After supper Ventress, Wilkinson, and Thompson again met with Wailes and heard the remainder of his "historical outline" and the chapter on land titles. On January 11 the board reconvened but action on Wailes' opus was postponed. Wailes

> observed Col Thompson & Mr Ventress take it up and read several portions of it . . . but all the Board disclaiming any knowledge of geology seemed embarrassed in manner to report to the Governor, whether to endorse the report --speak in commendation of it--or to pass it over to him without comment or remark.

Wailes concluded that it was "more evident than ever that the committing of the survey to the control of the Trustees of the University was a great mistake. It was no

other effect than to impede and embarrass the prosecution of the work."[36]

For their part, the trustees seemed more than happy with Wailes' work, since one of them hinted that he might be chosen professor of geology to succeed Millington. Wailes was not so rewarded, however, as Lewis Harper (né Ludwig Hafner) was elected professor of agricultural and geological science as well as director of future surveys. The same day, January 12, the examining committee pronounced themselves "well pleased with the research and ability which are manifest" in Wailes' manuscript, which was sent to the governor "without amendment or alteration." Finally, after months of struggling with printers and illustrators, The Report on the Agriculture and Geology of Mississippi was published.[37]

Wailes continued as assistant professor through most of 1854 but was increasingly unhappy with Harper, whom he considered dishonest and incompetent. On June 26, Wailes met Ventress at the popular Mansion House in Natchez, where they "had a long chat . . . about the

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[36]Wailes Diary, IX, 76, X, 8-14; Wailes Letterbook, 213-15, 254-55, 267-81; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 194-200; Sydnor, Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region, 198-200.

[37]Wailes Diary, X, 15-23, 27-28, XI, 13-16, 64-68, XII, 27-32, 42-62, 134, XIV, 22, 34, 43-44; Wailes Letterbook, 279-81. For Harper, see Herbert Weaver,

Geological Survey." In the course of their visit Wailes told of his plan to resign, "to which [Ventress] seemed very averse." The next month trustees Thompson and Smith also protested against Wailes' resignation, but on December 26 he asked to be relieved of his duties as of February 1, 1855, and submitted his last statement of expenses.

He watched smugly the turmoil caused by Harper's appointment. Complaints by the university, the trustees, and his new assistant eventually led to Harper's dismissal in November 1856. But only two months later, after responsibility for the survey was taken from the university at the trustees' request, he was appointed state geologist by the governor. Harper's report of the second survey was called by his successor "a literary, linguistic and scientific curiosity . . . the labored attempt of a sciolist to show erudition," and its publication discredited the author in every quarter. The trustees, who had elected him and then sought complete disassociation from him and the survey, gave the report a lukewarm reception. "Great industry had been used and great accuracy aimed at," they said, resulting in a work which

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"Foreigners in Antebellum Mississippi," Journal of Mississippi History, XVI (July 1954), 160-61.

contained "matter of deep interest to the agriculturist and the enquiring scholar."[38]

Credit for the "sciolist's" appointment was claimed by no one and he vanished rapidly from the pages of Mississippi history. His unpopularity with at least some of the board members, Ventress included, probably can be attributed not so much to their particular dislike of him but to their personal regard for Benjamin Wailes. The latter's diary also indicates that those inclined to Know-Nothingism did not care for the German. Wailes himself found Harper "quite voluble with quite a strong foreign accent" and also considered him exceedingly egotistical. At least one state senator was "very much out with the University for the appointment of Harper--as a foreigner and disposed to have the law authorizing the Agricultural Survey . . . repealed."[39]

After Harper's resignation in late 1857, another German, Dr. Eugene W. Hilgard, became state geologist.

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[38]Wailes Diary, XV, 81-82, XVII, 22, 42, 78; for Wailes and Harper see Sydnor, Gentleman of the Old Natchez Region, 201-2; Brown, "Geology," 299-300; Eugene W. Hilgard, "A Historical Outline of the Geological and Agricultural Survey of the State of Mississippi," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XII (1900), 218-19; Merrill, Contributions to a History of Surveys, 263-64. Harper's report appeared as Preliminary Report on the Geology and Agriculture of the State of Mississippi (Jackson: E. Barksdale, 1857).

[39]Wailes Diary, XI, 13, XIV, 156-57; Hilgard,

Endowed with impressive academic credentials and reputation, Hilgard's appointment evidently incurred little opposition. The survey was swiftly returned by the legislature to the province of the university as Hilgard, later a figure of international renown in geology and agricultural chemistry, managed to regain support for the now unpopular survey.

His 1860 report emphasized geology--which Harper had not treated adequately--but also contained about a hundred pages on agricultural features. During his survey of the southern river counties in the summer of 1855, Hilgard conferred with Ventress, who suggested to him a means of distributing silt-marl, a fertilizer used on plantation land. As Hilgard wrote:

> Whenever the material can be obtained at the surface, an excellent method of effecting its distribution on the large scale (suggested by Col. J. A. Ventress, of Wilkinson) would be the employment of the well known Railroad Excavator-Cart, which shovels up and conveys away the loosened material in one and the same operation. A very small force could thus very conveniently effect the marling of a whole plantation.

Perhaps in exchange for his valuable idea, Ventress received a detailed soil analysis which confirmed that his land was of great natural fertility but that decades of

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"Historical Outline," 219. Brown, "Geology," 300, also suggests Harper's unethical conduct in "probably" plagiarizing his assistant's notes in 1857.

cultivation had sapped its potential.[40]

Ventress' connection with the survey effectively ended when he secured Wailes' appointment as assistant geologist. As has been shown, he had worked in the legislature to ensure that such a survey would be undertaken, encouraged its support as a trustee, and cooperated in the field work. Once Hilgard was given control, the project was in capable hands. The legislature continued its support through the 1860s, appropriating his salary even in the war years, when the survey itself was suspended.[41]

During the 1850s, while the survey was underway, the university was experiencing a notable period of growth, ostensibly on its way to becoming the "literary Gibraltar of the South." On the heels of a Ventress resolution requesting further investigation of the lost seminary fund came Jacob Thompson's memorial to the legislature, signed by all the trustees. Submitted in January 1856, it announced that the college was successful "beyond the anticipations of its most sanguine friends," that the

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[40]Brown, "Geology," 300-301; Hilgard, "Historical Outline," 212-31; Hilgard, Report on the Geology and Agriculture of the State of Mississippi (Jackson: E. Barksdale, 1860), 321; soil analysis, December 31, 1855, PVF; Merrill, Contributions to a History of Surveys, 264-70.

[41]Hilgard, "Historical Outline," 226-27.

number of students had increased (233 in 1855-56), that they were coming from neighboring states as well as Mississippi, and that the faculty were distinguished, capable "governors of youth." Thompson's timeless memorial lamented that the university's needs, too, were great--a larger staff, better library, more scientific apparatus, more laboratories and more dormitory space. Additionally, the memorialists noted that the university fund had "suffered enormous and lamentable losses" while "held in trust by the Legislature" and should be repaid through generous appropriations. Thompson continued with an appeal for support of a public school system and with mention of the need for more adequate funding of the university, whose financial condition was "absolutely mean" in comparison with other southern schools. Finally, he said, the attractions of the University of Mississippi must be made comparable to those of eastern schools: "It is impossible that while manifesting a sensitiveness so lively in regard to cultivation of southern hearts, we should be altogether forgetful of the claims of southern heads."[42]

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[42]Steuckrath, "University," 355; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 258-77; Mayes, History of Education, 147-50; Oxford Constitution, March 29, June 14, September 27, 1851; Jackson Mississippian, April 9, 1858.

In response to his eloquent appeal the legislature voted to appropriate $20,000 yearly for 1856-60, enabling the trustees to plan new buildings and purchase more books and equipment. By the time the funds were made available, the university had a new president to help spend them. Frederick A. P. Barnard was hired in 1854 as professor of mathematics, had taught chemistry, and in 1855 undertook an independent investigation of the seminary fund, a report used as the basis for Thompson's memorial. Barnard seems to have been particularly favored by the trustees from the start and was an effective promoter, especially of the school's scientific endeavors, an area with which few of the board members were well acquainted.

Barnard was Massachusetts-born and had taught at various institutions since his graduation from Yale in 1828. He was, like Longstreet and Waddel, an ordained minister, but of the Episcopal persuasion. Enthusiastic about the prospects of the university, he saw the "need of infusing [it with] a new spirit." Once elected president (1856), Barnard spent the next five years devoted "earnestly to the task of broadening the curriculum and equipping more completely the scientific

departments."[43]

Those departments had inherited several valuable pieces of equipment from John Millington, a collection which Barnard augmented in the mid-1850s. Chief among his accomplishments was the construction of an observatory, completed in 1859, which he called his "monument." But he also amassed physics and astronomy equipment "equal, if not superior, to that of any institution in the United States." In fact, the apparatus in physics was "practically an exact duplicate of the equipment at the Ecole Polytechnique," the same instruments described in Jules Jamin's standard text, Cours de Physique.

Barnard ordered such expensive equipment from Europe, he said, to aid in his efforts to turn the University of Mississippi "into a university proper." His crowning achievement, once the observatory was erected, was to be installation of the largest astronomical telescope in the world. Ordered from Massachusetts, the instrument was not completed before war broke out and was subsequently bought by the Chicago Astronomical Society

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[43] Cabaniss, University, 37-38; Hooker, Origin and Development, 83; John W. Johnson, "Sketch of Chancellor Barnard," University of Mississippi Magazine, XX (March 1896), 21; "Autobiographical Sketch of Dr. F. A. P. Barnard," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XII (1912), 109-13; Historical Catalogue, 73. For Barnard's career, see DAB and William J. Chute, The Life of Frederick A. P. Barnard (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1951).

for installation in the Dearborn Observatory (1889).[44]

Ventress must have been more than mildly interested in all the scientific improvements and doubtless noted that Barnard was buying "everything that is of any use in illustrating Natural Philosophy or Chemistry." When he attended a board meeting in November 1857, Ventress proposed purchase of "a regulator of time or Astronomical clock," one of his direct contributions to the science boom in Oxford.[45] In November 1859 he rallied to the cause of science once more when he asked that the board contract for a building constructed of non-magnetic materials as well as for the purchase of instruments needed "to carry out the proposition of Professor

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[44]"Autobiographical Sketch," 107-8; Natchez Mississippi Free Trader, June 27, 1859; Sanford C. Gladden, A History of the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of Mississippi, 1849-1932 (typescript, University of Mississippi Archives), 10, 139-54, 186, 188-90; W. L. Kennon and Gladden, "Historical Apparatus at the University of Mississippi," American Physics Teacher, VI (February 1938), 1-7; Mayes, History of Education, 194-201; Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the University of Mississippi . . . 1856-57 (Memphis: Memphis Bulletin, 1857), 15, 24-37; Barnard letters to various persons, July 1856-January 1858, Barnard Collection, Columbiana, Columbia University (on microfilm, University of Mississippi); John W. Johnson, "Biographical Sketches of Judge A. B. Longstreet and Dr. F. A. P. Barnard," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XII (1912), 142-44. Photographs of some of the equipment can be seen in the Kennon and Gladden article.

[45]Barnard to Edward C. Herrick, March 18, 1857, Barnard Collection; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 335.

[Alexander D.] Bache on the Subject of Magnetic Observations." Barnard's public letter to the trustees (March 15, 1858), which detailed his long-range plans for the school, mentioned the possibility of joining Bache's survey, a world-wide effort to compile statistics on terrestrial magnetism. Indeed, Barnard reported that necessary maps already had been sent from Washington for use in the observations. Constructed near his "monument," the magnetic observatory was not equipped with the additional instruments suggested by Ventress until 1875.[46]

For all Barnard's success, he was unhappy with the support accorded him by the board and the legislature. An ardent Whig,he was exasperated by dealings with Mississippi Democrats. He was also depressed by waste in the budget and the incompetence of workmen and some faculty members. In one letter he called the trustees "so heartless, so ungenerous, so ungrateful," but on the other hand he must have known that he had been treated to a rare measure of cooperation in his development plans.

Such a clock was not purchased until 1925 (Gladden, Department of Physics, 195).

[46]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 388-92; Kennon and Gladden, "Historical Apparatus," 7; Barnard, Letter to the Honorable, the Board of Trustees of the University of Mississippi (Oxford: University of Mississippi, 1858), 109-10.

The university seemed prosperous in spite of a slowly declining enrollment in the Barnard years, attributed by one observer to the establishment nearby of two denominational colleges. The faculty had increased and a school of law was organized, along with the obvious increase in the number of campus buildings, scientific equipment, and volumes in the library--from 3,000 in 1854 to more than 5,000 in 1860. The university was known particularly for its path-breaking efforts in scientific education, its healthy location, and its liberal provisions for those in financial need. By 1859 there had been 240 graduates in the arts and sciences and 34 in law. Nonetheless, a commencement speaker that year felt obliged to refute certain criticisms of the school, i.e., that it was a rich man's college, that it catered to the northern part of the state, that there were too many ministers on the faculty (three of nine), and that the university catalogs were printed "at the North." Following him, Barnard spoke briefly on the general "degree of good order, harmony of feeling, and conscientious discharge of duty" by the students, in keeping with his hopes that the university would "yet be a valuable institution."[47]

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[47] See, for example, Barnard to Eugene W. Hilgard, October 3, 18--, July 14, 1857, February 6, 1860, and Barnard to J. E. Hilgard, February 11, 1857, Barnard Collection; Cabaniss, University, 38-40, 44-45;

Soon after this declaration of contentment and optimism, Barnard was the focus of a scandal which led to emergency meetings by the faculty and board and even brought Ventress back to Oxford. He had been there in June 1859 but before that had attended meetings at the school only three times, the last being October 1850. In early 1860 he not only hastened north himself but issued a "pressing invitation" to fellow trustee William Sharkey to join him.[48]

At Barnard's insistence, the board decided to investigate the chancellor's role in the expulsion of Sampson B. Humphreys, a part-time student from Port Gibson. The affair began on the night of May 11, 1859, when Humphreys and another student were accused of having entered Barnard's house while he was away, "with shameful designs" on the "defenceless female servants," one of whom was badly beaten. A faculty member witnessed the students leaving the house and reported the incident to Barnard on his return. Humphreys was arraigned by the

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Stueckrath, "University," 355-58; Catalogue of Alumni, Officers and Students . . . 1859-60 (Jackson: Mississippian, 1860), 49. See Wailes Diary, XXXII, 35-38, for a description of the scientific attractions at the university in September 1860.

[48]Sharkey to Ventress, February 27 [1860], TVP, folder 267.

faculty on May 23, a majority of the professors deciding that he was guilty but that the evidence was not sufficient to convict him. The evidence, of course, was the testimony of one of the black servants. Humphreys withdrew from the university after a conversation with Barnard but reapplied for admission in September. In the meantime a number of students took umbrage at Humphreys' dismissal and rebelled by withdrawing themselves and enrolling at Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee. They were subsequently invited to return; Humphreys did not win readmission.[49]

By January 1860, Barnard was aware of a "whispering campaign" begun by Dr. Henry R. Branham of Oxford, a son-in-law of former president Longstreet and a Barnard critic even before the Humphreys affair. Barnard's having taken his servant's testimony against students was the keystone of Branham's charges, which were remarkably well-traveled. He also noted that Barnard was "unsound on the Slavery question," a serious allegation in that tense year. At last, on March 1, 1860, the trustees assembled at the university to hear

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[49]Cabaniss, University, 46-47; James L. Goodloe, "Reminiscences of the University of Mississippi," University of Mississippi Magazine, XXVI (December 1902), 24; Record Book of the Faculty of the University of the State of Mississippi, 129-38, University of Mississippi Archives; Historical Catalogue, 133.

Branham's charges and Barnard's statement.

Barnard claimed correctly that the doctor's charges tended "to undermine [him] in the confidence of the people . . . and thus by injury to [himself] to affect very seriously" the progress of the university. "Without the intervention of the Board of Trustees," he continued, "the ordinary business of the University would no longer be harmoniously prosecuted." In support of his position Barnard stated that Humphreys was "a student of bad character," that Barnard was "but doing [his] duty as a Christian master" in protecting his servant, that "college government is a parental government," and that he, a slaveholder, was as sound on the slavery question as Branham or any member of the board.[50]

Immediately after hearing the charges and statements, Ventress moved that each member of the board who knew anything about the scandal be required to testify and name witnesses, and further, that three trustees submit a plan for carrying out the investigation. The three decided that both Branham and Barnard should be examined and that if the former's charges were found true, Barnard would be considered "unfit" as president. Seventeen

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[50]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 395-96; Cabaniss, University, 47.

people, including the principals, were questioned in the course of the hearing on March 1 and 2, 1860.[51]

Dr. Branham was the first to be heard. Denying that he had accused Barnard of being an abolitionist, he said he did believe the man was a free-soiler because: 1. "he admitted Negro testimony . . . against a student"; 2. "he wanted the University catalogue printed at the North"; and 3. "he entertained a proposition for a place in Yale College." Others testified as to the identification of the accused parties and on Barnard's general character. There were implications by two faculty members that he had intrigued against Longstreet and that he had "used his influence with the Board of Trustees to procure from them an increase of his powers." Sometime after dusk the hearing ended with the unanimous vindication of Barnard and the trustees' statement that "the confidence of the Board in the integrity of Dr. Barnard and his fitness to preside over the University is increased rather than diminished." To allay further any damaging rumors, the proceedings were printed in pamphlet form, although Ventress' suggestion to have them entered on the board

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[51]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 403-6; Cabaniss, University, 48-49.

minutes was rejected.[52] According to Benjamin Wailes, the trustees were determined to sustain Barnard "against all the persecution of the faculty [and] on account of his being a northern man." Their efforts apparently were successful, as public interest soon died in the face of more important political issues. Wailes did note in his journal that Governor John J. Pettus, ex-officio president of the board, pronounced himself "not well pleased" with either Barnard or the faculty in the wake of the scandal.[53]

Not only because of the Barnard affair, the year before the war was a particularly troubled one, the occasion of considerable disorder and even violence because of "the excited state of the public mind." A military company, the University Greys, was organized, mustered into state service in February 1861, and into Confederate service on April 26. In June the trustees decided that general operations of the university would be indefinitely suspended after the September session.[54]

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[52] Record of the Testimony . . . Branham v. Barnard (Jackson: Mississippian, 1860); see also Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 408-9, 412.

[53] Wailes Diary, XXIX, 58-59.

[54] Cabaniss, University, 49-54; "Autobiographical Sketch," 115-17; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 439.

Early in 1861 Barnard was directed by the board to investigate the feasibility of converting the university to a military school; he suggested on November 11 that it not be made an entirely martial institution. Past successes and general prosperity were recalled with pride in Barnard's report, the presentation of which was his last official act. His resignation, offered in May 1861 but not accepted by the board, was resubmitted in the fall and he returned to the North. In early 1862 he offered his services to Jefferson Davis "in connection with the niter and mining bureau" of the Confederacy. Davis accepted the offer with pleasure but Barnard never entered upon his duties. Living in New York in the 1860s, he did aid some of his former students unfortunate enough to be incarcerated in prisoner-of-war camps. Unlike Holmes, Barnard evidently harbored no ill feelings toward Mississippi at the end of his administration. He was justifiably proud of his record and accomplishments.[55]

Barnard's official resignation almost coincided with Ventress' unofficial one, for after March 1860 he attended no more board meetings. Like Barnard, he must

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[55]Barnard, Report on the Organization of Military Schools (Jackson: Cooper & Kimball, 1861); Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 439-40, 445; "Autobiographical Sketch," 116-18, 121; Johnson, "Sketch of Chancellor Barnard," 26-27.

have been satisfied with his contributions. Beyond those already mentioned, his interest extended to the students' physical facilities and curriculum. For example, he was an avid supporter of the unusual provision for admission of "irregular" students, those not pursuing a degree or attending part-time. Possibly this was true because he had been such a student himself. Also, he had advised construction in 1857 of "a gymnasium for the encouragement of healthful bodily exercise." A curious lattice-sided structure was built, resembling a gazebo and "not at all suitable in bad weather." It was well used anyway, since in October 1860 the faculty dealt with prevention of "a repetition of such gross insults as are daily offered by the students to persons who chance along the road by the gymnasium."[56]

And it was Ventress, no doubt remembering fondly his own participation in the Hunterian Medical Society in Edinburgh, who saw to it that the students' all-important literary societies were permitted convenient meeting places. His election as an honorary member of the Hermean Society in 1849 must have spurred his interest but one wonders what

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[56]Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 335; "Editor-in-Chief's Quill," University of Mississippi Magazine, XX (December 1895), 21; Record Book of the Faculty, 150.

he thought of the students' proclamation that "alone of all the college exercises" they believed their societies would "do [them] practical good." Whatever his motives, Ventress was instrumental in providing for each of the societies "a large hall finely furnished" in which to study and socialize.[57]

During the war years the fledgling school, abandoned by all but a few faculty members, survived virtually unscathed. Its buildings were used by one side, then the other, as office and hospital facilities. Precious scientific equipment and the library were saved, and although the much-vaunted magnetic observatory became known as the "dead house" from its use as a morgue, none of the buildings was burned or seriously vandalized. Nearby, some 700 Union and Confederate soldiers lie in unmarked graves in "God's Acre." Most of them died on campus, many from lack of food and medicine.[58]

After the war the trustees met regularly, first to examine what remained of the university, and afterward to reorganize the faculty and restore equipment and buildings.

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[57] James L. Smiley to Ventress, April 17, 1849, TVP, folder 267; Campbell, Journal of Minutes, 196; R. P. Willing to "Tom," September 30, 1854, quoted in Cabaniss, University, 28.

[58] Jemmy G. Johnson, "The University War Hospital," Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XII (1912), 94-106; Cabaniss, University, 55-59; Hilgard, "Historical Outline," 227.

"Emerging from overwhelming calamities," the university reopened in September 1865. A new chancellor and faculty were selected and the state was petitioned as usual for additional appropriations. By the spring of 1867 more than 200 students were enrolled and the future seemed sure.[59]

Ventress did not participate in the renascence, however, succumbing on June 26, 1867, after a long illness. A year later the trustees adopted the following resolution:

> Since the last meeting of our Board it has pleased Almighty God in His Providence to remove the Honl. James Alexander Ventress a member of this board. He was one of the original members of the Board and in its early organization was one of its most active and efficient members.
>
> As a mark of our appreciation of his worth and respect for his loss, be it--
>
> Resolved,
>
> That the Board will wear the usual badge of mourning [black crepe on the left arm] for 30 days, and that the Faculty be requested to unite with us, in this testimonial of respect for his memory.
>
> Resolved,
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> That the Editor of the [Jackson] Clarion be requested to publish these resolutions, and that the Secretary be requested to furnish the family of the deceased with a copy thereof, and that the same be read on this day [commencement] as a part of the proceedings.

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[59] Record of the Board of Trustees of the University of Mississippi, 1860-1882, pp. 53, 55-56, 83, 111, 123, 125-26, RG39, Institutions of Higher Learning, Miss. Archives; Cabaniss, University, 66-70; Jackson Daily Clarion, November 7, 1866, January 25, 1867; Natchez Weekly Democrat, April 8, 1867.

The faculty passed a similar resolution in memory of Ventress, whose passing left only one charter trustee still active. Ventress' spot was filled by Jackson attorney William Yerger after the appointment of a "rebel general" was believed "unwise."[60]

Ventress' descendants continued to support the university: two young family members, a nephew and his son Lawrence, were "partial course" students in 1856-57 and 1869-70, the latter "pursuing select studies"; in 1883 Ventress' youngest son William secured a law degree. In the twentieth century, grandson L. T. Ventress attended in the 1910s; a great-grandson, James Alexander Ventress III, graduated from Ole Miss in 1958; James Alexander Ventress IV belongs to the class of 1984.[61]

Ventress' sporadic attention to the trusteeship can be accounted for in a number of ways. First, his appointment began as his public life was ending. After his stint as an elector in 1848, his only other service was as an officer of the 1851 convention. Second, his

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[60]Record of Board of Trustees, 143-44, 147; James M. Howry to Benjamin G. Humphreys, July 6, 1867, RG27, Governor's Records, Vol. 68, Miss. Archives; Historical Catalogue, 81.

[61]Howry to Ventress, February 17, 1857, TVP, folder 249; Historical Catalogue, 112, 127, 153; Record Book of the Faculty, 71.

home was several hundred miles from the trustee's usual meeting place on campus. Transportation from Jackson north especially was problematical and July in Mississippi, after all, was not a pleasant time for travel. Most important, beginning in 1848 Ventress had new property and family responsibilities requiring constant attention. Because of his lifelong belief in the importance of education, it is certain that had the university been established in a location closer to Wilkinson County, his involvement would have been deeper.

CHAPTER VI

"PERPETUATING OUR PROPERTY IN OUR FAMILIES"[1]

While James Alexander Ventress was studying abroad, being elected to public office, and serving as university trustee, he was supported financially by his properties in Wilkinson County. His plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, was not a source of income until the 1850s, and other holdings in Mississippi and Texas were speculative. His marriage in 1848 to a Yankee heiress greatly increased his property base. Indeed, the large plantation she inherited--LaGrange--became the heart of the Ventress family fortune.

To make a living before 1848 Ventress relied on his undivided third of the plantation established by his father. His mother's will provided that he share the "Old Ventress Place" with his brother William and sister Eliza Feltus. In fact, however, the tax rolls and other public records indicate that the two brothers were joint owners until 1840, when William moved permanently to Louisiana.[2]

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[1]Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790).

[2]Wilkinson County tax rolls, 1818-40, Miss. Archives; Chancery Court Inventories and Accounts, V, 174, Wilkinson County; land conveyance, William C. S. Ventress to Ventress, October 14, 1865, TVP, folder 242. Sometime before August

Afterward, James worked the land alone, probably sharing the proceeds with one or both siblings.

Called Lone Hall in one legal description, Lovick Ventress' farm comprised 1,300 acres at the time his widow died in 1825. By the terms of Elizabeth Ventress' will, the land and slaves were divided among the children, although William and James apparently later made a separate settlement with their sister.

Elizabeth Ventress had claimed forty-nine slaves in 1825, the Ventress brothers claimed fifty-two in 1827. Thereafter James Ventress' share increased from only twenty-two in 1833 to forty-nine in 1850. His ratio of cleared acres per slave in 1850, when he reported 850 acres of improved land, was thus a very high seventeen to one. Most planters averaged between nine and eighteen. His land and slaveholdings, too, were almost double the average for Wilkinson in 1850, as the following figures demonstrate:

	Wilkinson	Ventress
average acres/farm	707	1,310
percentage improved	40	65
average slaveholding	26.3	49

1873, the homestead had passed from ownership by James Ventress' family--Deed Book W, 300-301.

Among Mississippians, Ventress' slaveholdings placed him among the 17.7 percent who owned twenty or more.[3]

Land and the labor force on it were the bulk of Ventress' fortune, but certainly not his only valuable possessions. He owned a small amount of rather ordinary kinds of personalty: a carriage (perhaps the "gigg" inherited from his father), one watch, and one clock. In addition, he had over 300 head of livestock valued at $2,600 in 1850. With a few exceptions, Ventress' animals presumably were the typical "cheap and hardy crossbred range stock." (He did purchase a red heifer from Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, in 1844, and a stray cow and calf at an 1843 auction of "found stock.")

The variety of his stock equalled the variety of his produce. In a time when diversification was a common cry, Ventress actively supported the crusade. Elected vice president of the Wilkinson Agricultural Society in June 1843, he also served on the committee for stock and farm products for that year's fair. The following summer he was reelected vice president. In April 1845 he served on judging committees for farm implements and machinery, and

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[3]Wilkinson County tax rolls, 1818-48, Miss. Archives; 1850 census, population, family 573, agricultural, pp. 865-66; Moore, Agriculture in Mississippi, 112; Charles S. Sydnor, Slavery in Mississippi (New York: D. Appleton-Century, 1933), 14; Wilkinson County averages taken from a lecture by Sam B. Hilliard, University of Tennessee, April 30, 1976.

for cotton. When the May 7 fair was over and the winners were announced, Ventress won prizes in three categories: a certificate for best boar; a subscription to Coleman's Agricultural Journal for the best Saxony ram; and not surprisingly, a butcher's cleaver "for the largest quantity of meat saved, in proportion to the number in family."[4]

On his farm there was more than token diversification, as proved by the number of different types of products he reported in 1850. As the agricultural historian of Mississippi noted, speaking of the financially depressed period of 1837-49:

> King Cotton was not dethroned by his Mississippi subjects during these years, but he was reduced from the status of an absolute despot to that of a constitutional monarch. Cotton continued to be the principal source of farm income, but other crops began to receive proportionately larger shares of the available supply of labor. On many plantations in the early 1840s, livestock breeding, development of pasture lands, cultivation of corn, small grains, and other foodstuffs, planting and management of orchards, and conservation of the soil became almost as important as the production of cotton itself.[5]

In 1850, Ventress' cotton crop was 95 bales, or about 38,000 pounds. Since a crop of 400 pounds of ginned cotton

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[4]Woodville Republican, June 3, 10, November 11, 1843, May 11, 1844, April 19, May 17, 24, 1845; receipts of John R. Bryant and Abram Wilhite, November 1, 1844, and Thomas Johnson, October 24, 1843, TVP, folders 246, 256; for Ventress' activities in the state agricultural society, see Chapter III.

[5]Moore, Agriculture, 93; see also DeBow's Review, I (May 1846), 434-46.

per acre was a very respectable amount--even the dedicated horticulturist Martin W. Philips could expect only 3/4 bale per acre--Ventress evidently had no more than 100 acres in cotton.

Lone Hall also produced 1,500 bushels of corn. Considering an average productivity of 25 bushels per acre, it is clear that Ventress had switched much of his cleared land from cotton. Additionally, he reported 600 bushels of oats, an unusually large amount in a county where few planters even grew the grain. His sheep yielded 250 pounds of wool, most of which was undoubtedly spun into clothing; there were 1,000 bushels of sweet potatoes, a crop whose production jumped dramatically during the 1840s, and 200 bushels of peas and beans. Most noteworthy in the list are the 150 pounds of butter and the 60 pounds of beeswax and honey, both rare commodities in Wilkinson County. Butter production in the entire South was ten pounds or less per capita in 1850 and only seven in Mississippi. In Wilkinson Ventress virtually cornered the market, producing more than one-third of the total reported.

Most of the unusual crops must have been for his own consumption. Oats were primarily a feed grain for livestock; sweet potatoes were a staple for both swine and humans; peas were often planted with great success among the corn rows, the peas themselves harvested for human and animal food, the vines left to dry for hay. Honey was a

common sweetener and beeswax was used for candles. Because dairy products were generally not fed to slaves in quantity, if at all, Ventress' gigantic production is hard to explain unless he used the butter for bartering.[6]

In spite of his diversified garden and field, and in common with his peers, Ventress ordered considerable amounts of foodstuffs and other items from New Orleans and Woodville merchants. Many were to be expected: bagging, rope, and twine for shipping his cotton, and manufactured articles such as a spinning wheel, furniture, "fire dogs," shoes, eating utensils, dry goods, and waffle irons. Sundries and farm supplies were also on the lists: paper, scythes, axes, buckets, a mill saw, powder, shot, gig springs, a ginstand, brooms, nails, traps, and chains. And there were some personal and luxury items: whiskey, wine, tobacco, claret, hat boxes, and shaving brushes. Among the most frequently ordered edibles were coffee, sugar, salt, flour, and pork. He also received occasional shipments of fish, molasses, corn, rice, wheat, rye, meal,

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[6]1850 Wilkinson census, agriculture, pp. 865-66; Moore, Agriculture, 60-61, 112-13, 115, 123-28; Sam B. Hilliard, Hog Meat and Hoecake: Food Supply in the Old South, 1840-1860 (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 52, 131-32, 135, 141-44, 168-69; Lewis E. Atherton, The Southern Country Store, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1949), 49; Herbert Weaver, Mississippi Farmers, 1850-1860 (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1945), 102-3.

lard, sardines, olive oil, and tea.[7] In addition to the things he purchased on credit in Woodville and in New Orleans, Ventress had access to penitentiary products. His insistence while in the legislature that convicts engage in trades had led to the availability of a wide spectrum of goods. In 1844 and 1845 he purchased for cash thirty pairs of Negro shoes, 171 pounds of plows and sweeps, 120 pounds of hinges, hooks, rings, and staples, and 2 knives. He also paid $150 for items "bought or repaired" in the prison blacksmith shop.[8]

Payment for all these goods and services came from the sale of the cotton crop, both from shipments of ginned cotton to New Orleans and, in 1848-49 at least, from cotton seed. Good strains were always in demand and the seed could also be used as a nutritious fodder.[9] Happily, Ventress' return from Europe in 1833 coincided with a boom in the cotton market. When he left home in 1825 prices

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[7]Accounts current of Ventress with the West Feliciana Rail Road, 1841-47, TVP, folders 249, 250, 261, 266, 271.

[8]For the penitentiary workshops, see Chapter III; receipt, February 29, 1844, TVP, folder 253; Ventress memoranda, 1845-46, folder 302.

[9]Hilliard, Hog Meat, 139; Moore, Agriculture, 155-60.

averaged nearly 12 cents per pound, dropping in the six succeeding years, and climbing again until the Panic of 1837. From an average 13.3 cents per pound for the 1837 crop, the price plummeted to 9, rose to 12 in 1838, then continued to decline to 5.5 in 1844 before rising to nearly 12 in 1850.[10] During the years of general economic depression, caused by the government's hard money policies and by a decline in the world demand for raw cotton, Mississippi planters went bankrupt, fled to the frontier, or, like Ventress, managed to survive by diversifying and working to reduce operating costs.

The operations of his plantation required attention year round. Since Ventress did not have an overseer, he must have had help from his brother and friends while serving in the legislature. Furthermore, the sessions normally convened in January and February, the time of year when cultivation of the cash crops demanded least attention.

Care of the slaves was Ventress' own concern, too. He did have professional medical care for them, and of course provided considerable amounts of food and clothing. Also, much of the wool and foodstuffs produced at Lone Hall were undoubtedly consumed there by the work force.

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[10] Stuart W. Bruchey, comp., Cotton and the Growth of the American Economy, 1790-1860 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1967), table 3-P.

Most of the master's clothing, however, came from Woodville, Jackson, and New Orleans tailors: merino pants, a satin vest, silk coats, muslin shirts, silk drawers, "superior" black dress coats and pants, a velvet vest, "one fancy French capt p[an]ts, one striped black satin vest, one fancy satin cravat & stiffener."[11] Money or credit for all these purchases came from the sale of his cash crops.

In the 1840s and early 1850s, Ventress dealt with one cotton factorage and commission firm--Reynolds, Byrne, & Company (later J. B. Byrne & Company), New Orleans. Both James Reynolds and John B. Byrne were longtime Crescent City merchants, working as partners for some fifteen years, 1831-46. They performed for Ventress the usual marketing chores and offered banking services as well as attending to the shipment of supplies and personal items. They charged the standard two-and-a-half percent commission on cotton sales in addition to a number of other fees. For example, in a sale of six bales in November 1842, on a total weight of 2,313 pounds, the gross profit was $138.68 (6¢ per pound, the average that month). After subtracting $6 for freight, $3 for drayage, storage, labor, and weighing, 63¢ for river insurance, 69¢ for fire

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[11]Sydnor, Slavery, 26-30; Bernard M. Johnson receipt, August-September 1843, Montross & Stilwell receipt, March 31, 1846, and J. W. Shaw receipt, January 23, 1846, TVP, folders 256, 262, 267.

insurance, and the commission fee, the factors credited Ventress' account with $125. A comparison of the prices Reynolds and Byrne obtained for Ventress' cotton with the average selling price over a period of several years reveals that Ventress' profits were at or slightly above average. Ventress gave his factors directions on when to sell; they in turn kept him abreast of market fluctuations and speculated on future conditions.[12]

Most of Ventress' cotton seems to have been "common Mexican," a hybrid which in the 1830s "became the standard breed of antebellum American cotton and parent of most of the modern American strains as well." He tried the new, widely advertised, and highly priced Mastodon in the mid-1840s, but was discouraged in 1847 when Byrne informed him that common Mexican was preferred, bringing 1/4¢ more per pound. Mastodon was also too bulky for easy handling.[13]

In the pre-war years Ventress' profit margin must have been good, since he added to his real estate holdings

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[12]Atherton, Country Store, 28-29; Reynolds & Byrne accounts current and correspondence, TVP, folders 247-48; for average prices, see Bruchey, Cotton, table 3-P.

[13]Moore, Agriculture, 34; Byrne to Ventress, July 29, 1847, TVP, folder 247; Albert G. Seal, "John Carmichael Jenkins: Scientific Planter of the Natchez District," Journal of Mississippi History, I (January 1939), 25.

in several different areas. In 1836 he spent $600 for twelve arpents (about 320 acres) at Bay St. Louis on the Mississippi coast. Three years later he bought at auction 1,320 acres in Yazoo County for approximately $2.40 per acre and before 1838 some 1,750 acres in Bolivar County. Also, he could afford to send an undetermined amount of cash to his elderly uncle, James Ventress, in Tennessee.[14] All his land and slaves were heavily mortgaged in the 1830s, though, to pay seven bank notes totalling $29,886. One, for more than $12,000, was Ventress' own, payable to the Commercial Bank in Natchez; the other six, signed jointly with his brother-in-law, were promissory notes to one George Martin, payable at the Woodville Planters Bank.[15]

Beyond the routine of plantation duties, how did the master of Lone Hall spend his time? A small notebook records that he continued his interest in scientific experimentation. In it he listed and described carefully a number of measuring instruments--thermometer, pyrometer, electrometer, hygrometer, galvanometer, barometer, registering thermometer, and time thermometer--and noted the construction and purposes of a surgical reflectoscope,

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[14]Yazoo County Deed Book I, 378-80, 398-403; Hancock County Deed Book A, 48-49; tax receipt, Bolivar County, April 12, 1839, TVP, folder 244; James Ventress to Ventress, June 4, 1843, PVF.

[15]Levin R. Marshall to Ventress, September 5, 1842,

an "improvement upon the insertion of firearm tubes," and a method of affixing a safety gun hammer. In 1836 he detailed a way "to force thunder from clouds": by firing "a great gun" loaded with "Lyden vials" charged with electricity. In 1842 he described a "method of finding out the place of retreat of the Florida Indians in the swamp," making "use of a captive baloon & spyglass on the border of the swamp." About the same time his notes show he was still considering improvements in steamboats, the invention of a sugar cooler and a sugar mill feeder, as well as a method for preventing the percolation of water.

The notes on sugar cane include a way of improving production, suggesting that Ventress may have tried growing cane in 1840-41. Another Wilkinson planter, John C. Jenkins of Cold Springs and Elgin plantations, attempted to cultivate cane, but found it too expensive and not easily marketable. Perhaps Ventress had the same experience.[16]

In addition to his scientific and agricultural pursuits, Ventress supplemented his library in the years after

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TVP, folder 269; Wilkinson Deed Book M, 596-97, N, 169, O, 495-96, P, 5-7, 127-31.

[16]Ventress notebook, 1836-60, PVF; Seal, "Jenkins," 26.

his return from abroad. Beyond the reading matter he already owned, he subscribed to the Woodville paper, the Natchez Southwestern Planter, and undoubtedly other journals from Jackson, Natchez, and New Orleans. In the 1840s he purchased at New Orleans auctions more than seventy-five new titles, representing a myriad of subjects: Indian Wars of the United States; a law compendium; American Oratory; a medical lexicon; an optics text; a biography of Napoleon; Scenes in Spain; Charles Lamb's works; several encyclopedias; Benthamana; Seneca's Morals; The Cattle Doctor; John Frost's history of the United States; a book on animal magnetism; Eliza Acton's Modern Cookery; The Farmer's Library; Light & Shadows of Scottish Life by his old Edinburgh professor, John Wilson; a United States directory; Thiers' History of the French Consulate and Empire; a treatise on surveying; several contemporary novels, including the popular Fredericka Bremer's; "Walker's Pathology"; a poetry anthology; a primer on food and diet; works by Carlyle, Bacon, and Scott; The Odyssey; The Bible: Its Own Refutation; Phrenology Vindicated; and Jean Aicard's Un million de faits, aide memoire universel des sciences, des arts and des lettres.[17]

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[17]Sales receipts, April 15, 18, May 17, 1842, March 26, 27, 1846; February 5, 6, May 11, 12, 1847, TVP, folders 243, 245, 246, 261, 263; see also J. J. Person & Company to Ventress, May 15, 1856, notifying him of the shipment of a lot of books, folder 35, and a receipt for his subscription to the American Journal of Science,

With all these cerebral trappings, it is easy to picture the bachelor planter at home, studying and experimenting during idle hours. A friend's letter in 1842 adds some detail: apologizing for not writing sooner, Samuel Plummer explained that he had hoped to visit, to "take a comfortable glass of old wiskey tody in one of your comfortable armed chairs. Since those chairs are introduced I readily imagine you have increased in corporation some few lbs."[18]

Personal affairs are veiled in the fiteen years after his return from Europe in 1833. Curiously, there is no indication that Ventress was in contact with his foreign friends and except for occasional invitations from his Stewart cousins (to dinner, a fishfry and shooting match), his social life is a mystery. If he had so desired, courtship was surely possible. As a young Woodville matron wrote to a relative in 1836, there was a "phalanx of Old Maids and Widows" available, "at least a dozen here who would cu[t] capers at the bare possibility of getting married."[19]

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folder 267.

[18]TVP, folder 265.

[19]Emeline Shaw to Amelia F. Montgomery, February 24, 1836, Joseph A. Montgomery Papers, Miss. Archives.

Beyond the local scene, Ventress must have mingled in Jackson society during his years in the legislature and in 1836 traveled upriver and overland to the fashionable White Sulphur Springs in Virginia, with the Randolph family, his brother's in-laws. By contrast with earlier romantic conquests, his social graces were far from admirable, according to Cornelia Randolph. She complained in 1837 from Shieldsborough (a Mississippi watering spot) that Ventress was a total failure in his relationship with a Virginia belle:

> she dressed with much taste, and is . . . very pretty and peaceful, she is very angry with Judge [Harry] Cage and James Ventress because they do not visit her and offer their horses, she says James V is a perfect Goth and runs behind a tree when he sees a lady coming.[20]

Whether or not such behavior was usual or a temporary aberration, James Alexander Ventress overcame his shyness in 1848. At the age of forty-three, he married Charlotte Davis Pynchon of LaGrange plantation. Born in Brimfield, Massachusetts, in 1815, Charlotte was the descendant of a Bay Colony pioneer, the founder of Springfield. Her father Stephen (1769-1823), a Yale alumnus, the Brimfield postmaster, and a state legislator,

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[20]Cornelia Randolph to Sarah Stewart, June 14, 15, 1836, August [7?], 1837, Randolph-Yates Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

died when she was a child, leaving her mother, Sarah Trask Pynchon, with six children. Each of them evidently received a good education: one was a Yale honor graduate, another a banker, one a Boston merchant, and a son and daughter became schoolteachers in Georgia.

Charlotte, the youngest, was educated in Springfield, living there with her mother and maiden aunt until 1834, when she joined the household of her bachelor uncle, James Lawrence Trask, at LaGrange. Her brother William had preceded her, pursuing a career as a merchant in Woodville before accidentally drowning in 1823. About three years after Charlotte moved to LaGrange, her sister Elizabeth Sewall Pynchon, the Georgia schoolmistress, also moved there. In 1839, Elizabeth married Augustus T. Welch, a cousin who had been living for some years at LaGrange with his widowed mother, and whose Amherst education was financed by the same uncle James. Shortly after the death of her first child in October 1840, Elizabeth Welch died, leaving Charlotte and Augustus to help manage the plantation. James Trask unofficially adopted both of them and subsequently left them the bulk of his considerable estate.[21]

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[21]For the Pynchon family, see: Joseph C. Pynchon, Record of the Pynchon Family in England and America (Springfield, Massachusetts: Weaver, Shipman, and Co., 1885), 14-15; DAB, s.v. "William Pynchon"; Augustus T. Welch to Charlotte P. Ventress, April 7, 1860, PVF; gravestones, LaGrange cemetery; Clifton Johnson, Hampden

Also a Brimfield native, James Trask followed his older brother Israel E. to Mississippi in 1805. After studying law and serving in the army for two years, Israel resigned in 1800 and on the advice of Alexander Hamilton, emigrated to the Mississippi Territory. In Natchez he married well, established himself on a fertile Second Creek plantation, became a militia officer, was admitted to the bar, and prospered until ill health forced his return to Massachusetts.

In the meantime, James Trask also settled in Mississippi, buying in partnership with his brother the first tract of what was to be LaGrange, as well as some acreage in Concordia Parish, Louisiana. "A man of remarkable energy and business tact," and a person "of considerable ability," Trask apparently had acquired a good basic education and in spite of numerous financial and familial burdens, amassed a large fortune--land and other property appraised in 1838 at $352,605.

County, 1636-1936 (3 vols., New York: American Historical Society, 1936), II, 818. On Charlotte Pynchon at LaGrange: Israel E. Trask to James L. Trask, December 26, 1834, TVP, folder 147. On Augustus and Elizabeth Pynchon Welch: John B. Cooley to Trask, October 6, 1827, folder 20; Trask to Briggs, Lacoste, July 22, 1837, folder 9; power of attorney, September 19, 1840, folder 4; Edward E. Pynchon to Sarah Pynchon, November 21, 1840, folder 90; Jane Randolph to Bethia L. Richardson, November 3, 1839, Caffery Papers, Southern Historical Collection.

Two other Trask brothers, Augustus and William P., a physician, along with their sister Emily Trask (Mrs. Bela) Welch, also emigrated to Mississippi early in the nineteenth century. All five died and are buried at LaGrange. Of the Trask siblings, only Charlotte Pynchon's mother remained in Massachusetts. James Trask took seriously his responsibilities as head of the family, overseeing the education of his nephews, one of whom was a ne'er-do-well, and providing a comfortable home for them and many other relatives over the years. He was active, too, in local affairs, as a bank director, Whig candidate for the legislature, subsidizer of the Woodville Presbyterian and Baptist churches and the Brandon and Woodville Female academies, and director of the West Feliciana Rail Road.[22]

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[22] On Israel E. Trask: W. S. Tyler, History of Amherst College during Its First Half Century, 1821-1871 (Springfield, Massachusetts: C. W. Bryan, 1873), 22-24; Charlotte V. Bryan genealogical notes, PVF; Laura D. S. Harrell, "Index, Transcript of Will Book B," Journal of Mississippi History, XXVII (February 1965), 88; Harold C. Syrett, ed., The Papers of Alexander Hamilton (25 vols., New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-77), XXII, 117. On James L. Trask: Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 956; Woodville Republican, April 5, May 19, 1827, November 25, 1828, March 30, 1833, January 10, 1835, January 13, 1838, April 2, 1842, November 11, 1843; Woodville Wilkinson Whig, September 1, 1855; Augustus T. Welch to Charlotte P. Ventress, April 7, 1860, PVF; subscription to Baptist congregation, May 5, 1826, TVP, folder 67; Gerard C. Brandon receipt, January 13, 1834, folder 8; subscription to Presbyterian Church, July 25, 1838, folder 151; Union Bank appraisal certificate, August 14, 1838, folder 183; Charles Beach

The seat of the Trask-Ventress clan is a 5,300 acre estate on the road between Fort Adams and Woodville (see Figure 2). Nearby are two other family properties, Mount Pleasant and Prospect, smaller tracts managed and worked from LaGrange. Trask and his kin at first lived in a group of "cabbins" but about 1824 moved into the first brick house in Wilkinson County,[23] situated on a knoll approximately one mile east and nearer the main road, some six miles from Woodville.

Just how and when Ventress met Trask and his niece is not known, although they must have been acquainted for many years. Ventress' brother-in-law had served with Trask on the Planters' Bank board of directors and had been William Trask's business associate in a Woodville general store in 1818-25.[24] As one of the county's richest planters, Trask was a well-known local character. His niece was equally recognizable in the small community.

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receipt, January 22, 1852, folder 5. On Augustus Trask, William P. Trask, and Emily Trask Welch: Woodville Republican, March 17, 1827; Augustus T. Welch to Charlotte P. Ventress, April 7, 1860, PVF; gravestones, LaGrange cemetery.

[23]Mahala P. H. Roach to Franklin L. Riley, October 21, 1901, Riley Papers, Miss. Archives; Augustus T. Welch to Charlotte P. Ventress, April 7, 1860, PVF.

[24]Statement of partnership, August 31, 1818, TVP, folder 168; Woodville Republican, February 24, 1824, March 9, 30, 1833.

Described years later by friends who knew her before marriage as a "handsome lady" as well as "affectionate and warm hearted," Charlotte Pynchon was a talented household manager, a gifted seamstress and pianist, and a devout Presbyterian. Her not having found the proper man was a subject of considerable comment by her "relations." In 1840, a Boston cousin wondered if she were "yet flirting with some despairing swain." The next year he wished she could find "a clever fellow for a husband when [she] is willing to have such an appendage." In 1844, a friend of Augustus Welch's advised that she go to Natchez in search of a mate. Solicitous of her situation, a New England acquaintance in New Orleans wrote on May 10, 1848, to ask if she were engaged, since a certain Mr. Peck (John A. Peck, a commission merchant) had recently returned from a visit to LaGrange, "much pleased with you." Less than three weeks later, however, Peck's hopes were dashed. Charlotte Pynchon, aged thirty-three, married James Alexander Ventress on the morning of May 29, 1848, in the Woodville Presbyterian Church.[25]

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[25]Orlando Dorsey to James A. Ventress, Jr., June 29, 1877, TVP, folder 191; John Walsh to Trask, June 24, 1845, folder 158; Joseph G. Tappan to Augustus Welch, March 13, 1840, and Tappan to Trask, December 4, 1841, folders 159 and 139; William St. John Elliot to Welch, January 25, 1844, folder 147; A. Hayden to Charlotte Pynchon, February 9, 1847, May 10, 1848, PVF; Woodville Republican, May 30, 1848.

James Ventress thus left Lone Hall to reside with Charlotte and her adoptive father at LaGrange. Since Augustus Welch had remarried in 1845 and was living with his family at Trask's Grand Cut-Off plantation in Louisiana, Ventress soon assumed the role of general manager for the aging Trask.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s Trask suffered increasingly with rheumatism, which considerably slowed his activities. Aged sixty-seven when Charlotte married, he was eventually confined to a "locomotive chair" and was less and less able to supervise his business. He took a final trip north in 1853, still enjoyed visits from relatives and friends, and reveled in the company of the three Ventress boys, born in 1850, 1853, and 1854. On August 25, 1855, only months before the birth of Charlotte Ventress' fourth child, James Lawrence Trask died at LaGrange. Following a funeral complete with "a fine coffin," hired hearse and horse, the procession was accompanied by many of his servants to the family cemetery, where five years later an imposing marble monument was erected by Charlotte and James Ventress. One local paper offered an assessment of Trask's life:

> As a citizen, he was honorable and upright, and faithful to his promises; as a friend, he was steady and reliable; as a master, kind and considerate, and devoted to the welfare of his servants. . . . Educated under religious influences, the mind of the deceased took a firm hold upon the truths of the Bible, and was

> convinced of their personal importance and and value. . . . Another link which bound us to the past is broken.[26]

Only ten days before his death, "in very infirm state of health. . . [but] at the same time being in sound mind," Trask composed his will. In August 1848 he had given LaGrange and Prospect to Charlotte, "in consideration of the natural love and affection" he bore her as "his niece and adopted Daughter." The gift had included all the livestock, farming utensils, and 155 slaves. In his will he bequeathed to her his Mount Pleasant plantation, his Woodville town lots, and 133 more slaves. Cash bequests were assigned to his one surviving sister and several nieces and nephews, to be paid only from the proceeds of the Mount Pleasant cotton crops and from the sale or rent of the Woodville lots. None of the other property was to be sold for the payment of legacies. Charlotte, in addition, received five named slaves. Her husband and Augustus Welch, named executors, were excused from all debts. At the final settlement of the estate, after the cash legacies were paid, the stock and slaves on Mount

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[26]William E. Trask to James L. Trask, September 19, 1845, TVP, folder 155; Trask to J. Remsen Onderdonk, October 15, 1848, folder 152; Onderdonk to Ventress, November 28, 1853, folder 264. Isaac H. Stanwood to Trask, June 2, 1853, folder 137; T. Kingsbury receipt, August 27, 1855, folder 68; Woodville Wilkinson Whig, September 1, 1855.

Pleasant were to be divided between Charlotte and Augustus.[27]

James Ventress suddenly was master of a vast range of property. The Trask estates produced enormous amounts of cotton and food compared to his previous experience at Lone Hall. For example, in 1850 Ventress' basic crop was 95 bales of cotton and 1,500 bushes of corn. LaGrange, Prospect, and Mount Pleasant among them accounted for 600 bales and 4,000 bushels. But there was not as much diversity as at Lone Hall: 600 bushels of oats (Lone Hall also had 600); 100 pounds of wool (Ventress had 250); and 600 bushels of peas and beans (compared to Lone Hall's 200). Ventress personally continued to take "much interest in gardening" at LaGrange, experimenting with ice-rind watermelon, a "luxuriant" winter grass called Illinois Rye, green (English) peas, and a variety of fruit trees ordered from John Hebron's well-known LaGrange Nursery and Orchard near Vicksburg--apple, pear, peach, nectarine, pomegranate, fig, and plum.[28]

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[27] TVP, folders 154 and 183; also recorded in Wilkinson Deed Book Q, 531-32, and Will Book II, 107-11. Although "given" to Charlotte, LaGrange was acknowledged as Trask's property on the tax rolls and census tracts.

[28] 1850 Wilkinson census, agriculture, pp. 863-66; B. L. C. Wailes Diary, I, 3; Hebron invoice, December 15, 1857, TVP, folder 255; Lewis C. Pynchon to James L. Trask, July 3, 1855, and Samuel D. Goodall to Ventress, March 21, 1868, PVF.

Like Ventress, Trask dealt with the firm of Reynolds & Byrne in New Orleans for about twenty years. But he also had a business connection with Goodhue & Company, New York. With so many northern relatives, especially his brothers' heirs, expecting annuities from the crop proceeds, it was convenient to have an eastern banker. Goodhue, in turn, had close relationships with Brown Brothers, an international merchant banking firm. Parts of Trask's cotton crop also passed through the hands of the Browns' New York and Liverpool offices in the 1830s and 1840s. In addition, Trask's nephew by marriage, John G. Tappan of Boston, handled cotton shipments for him in 1839-41.[29]

After Ventress joined the family, the bulk of Trask's cotton was factored by Curry, Person & Company of New Orleans (after 1856 J. J. Person & Company), whose accounts with Trask and Ventress extended over a period of sixteen years, 1850-66. Until Trask's death the accounts were maintained separately, although the cotton was jointly shipped and sold. The bales were marked individually with the brand of the originating plantation. For example,

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[29]Accounts and correspondence, Reynolds & Byrne, TVP, folders 94-129, Goodhue, folders 57-59, Brown Brothers, folders 10-12, and John G. Tappan, folder 139.

JLT and JLT indicated bales from Mount Pleasant and Pros-
M P

pect. LH or JAV-LH showed that the cotton came from Ventress' Louisiana Plantation (Lake Home).[30] Curry & Person, like Reynolds & Byrne before them, handled not only the routine of cotton merchandising but attended to personal chores as well.

In the matter of a "rascally negro" named Henry, whom Ventress had bought through Curry & Person in 1855, the factors volunteered to watch for the runaway and promised to "soon nabb him" if he appeared in New Orleans. Once he was apprehended, Curry & Person tried unsuccessfully to have his former master buy him back, then placed him temporarily in the care of a slave dealer. A few weeks later, the firm reported that Henry "is getting very sick of city life & is quite anxious to return to you." Ventress took Henry back for only a few months before selling him. The $1,200 received was a good price, according to J. J. Person, because Henry's "character is well known here."[31]

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[30]Records of Curry, Person & Company, TVP, folders 21-46.

[31]Ibid., folder 25.

Curry & Person naturally saw to the purchase and shipment of food and plantation supplies; Ventress' nephew Lovick Ventress Feltus provided personal attention as he worked for the company in the mid-1850s. At various times, the firm supervised the repair of a sewing machine, Charlotte Ventress' shoes, a clock, and a washing machine. They worried sincerely about Ventress' recovery from cholera in 1854, performed some banking services, and booked passage on a New York-bound steamer for the family's 1860 trip north, to "the land of the Philistines."

As in the years before his marriage, Ventress bought merchandise from numerous stores and businesses, most of them in Woodville and New Orleans. With his greater prosperity and growing family, Ventress' bills increased rapidly. In particular, his invoices for clothing and household goods showed notable changes. Included on the accounts current were jewelry, "fine scissors," a wide variety of dry goods for dress clothing, children's clothes of all sorts, a subscription to Mother's Magazine, toys, dresses, and accessories from Paris, china, silver, and table linens.[32]

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[32]See, for instance, Ventress' accounts current with W. Dyer & Co., 1852, TVP, folder 257, Simon, Frank & Co., 1855, H. S. & T. W. White, 1855, and M. Simon & Co., 1856, folder 267, W. H. Noble, 1849, folder 263, J. Remsen Onderdonk to Ventress, November 28, 1853, folder 264; Mrs. F. Fryer to Charlotte P. Ventress, December 8, 1848, May 27, 1851, and S. Frank to Charlotte Ventress, July 3, 1867, PVF.

The Ventresses' prosperity also showed in LaGrange. In 1860 a massive restoration began, resulting in a much larger, more impressive dwelling, which amply accommodated the Ventresses and their children. On a six-month trip to New England, Philadelphia, and New York, Ventress consulted an architect and purchased a variety of fixtures, furniture, and accessories which made LaGrange the most luxurious home in Wilkinson County.

The architect in charge was Samuel Sloan of Philadelphia, author of a popular two-volume pattern book, The Model Architect. A rags-to-riches success story personified, Sloan was a carpenter-builder who began calling himself an architect in the 1840s. Proclaiming that his designs were "strictly original," Sloan promoted a dazzling array of styles and buildings in his books. For the South, in particular, he offered two plans, both Italianate. He was also aware of southern advantages and needs. For one thing, there was more land and cheap labor. Other considerations were the necessity for good ventilation and protection from the sun, extra bedrooms to accommodate guests, and detached kitchens and servants' quarters. For his clients Sloan not only provided drawings and floor plans, but also offered assistance with craftsmen's contracts and details of masonry, plastering, ornamentation and furniture. Ventress certainly discussed some of these topics when he met personally with Sloan

during the last days of July 1860. According to Sloan's biographer, the builder appealed particularly to self-made men of the 1850s, since "he understood their pride, their ambitions, and their business methods."[33] Ventress evidently trusted Sloan completely and relied heavily on his advice.

Among the items purchased on the trip, mainly in Philadelphia and New York, were: two oil paintings, "Byron's Farewell to Greece" and "The Bay of Genoa," from a New York auctioneer for $30; a square piano--the rage since Steinway exhibited one at the 1855 world's fair--from Hugh Hardman, an Englishman who had successfully built pianos in New York since 1840; a lot of silverware in New York for $215; $363.97 in wallpaper from a Philadelphia company for room numbers 2-6, the library, the observatory, parlor, two halls, nursery, gallery, and billiard room; 135 feet of gold molding and 10 "pieces of columns" [paper ?] for the hall; from Cornelius & Baker, the Philadelphia firm which supplied the expensive chandeliers for the state capitol, brackets, reading lights,

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[33] Harold N. Cooledge, Jr., Samuel Sloan (1815-1884), Architect (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1963), 6-25, 54, 57, quotation on 52; Samuel Sloan, The Model Architect (2 vols., Philadelphia: E. S. Jones, 1852); Sloan to Haller Nutt, July 30, 1860, Nutt Papers, Duke University; Ina M. O. McAdams, The Building of "Longwood" (Austin, Texas: Ina May Ogletree McAdams, 1972), 56.

shades, chandeliers, pendants, and two bronze figures ($125 each) for a total sale of nearly $800; "divers articles of carpeting &c" from James H. Orne of Philadelphia, for $1,721.98; and several marble mantels.

The two figures, described as "Hunter and Indian," were undoubtedly those remembered by Charles G. Ventress, a grandson, who described them as an Indian and "a man dressed like a frontiersman." Other family members claimed they were Daniel Boone and Tecumseh, life-sized statues placed in marble niches at the bases of the stairways.[34] The Ventresses also chose a lot of fashionable furniture from the large "warerooms" of Gottlieb Vollmer, 1108 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia. A southern sympathizer by his own admission, Vollmer worried about the inability of Ventress, "a perfect gentleman," to pay his debt during the war and later granted favorable re-payment terms to Charlotte Ventress.[35]

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[34]McAdams, Longwood, 73; T. Gouldsmith bill of sale, November 20, 1860, Freeman & Bennett bill of sale, November 27, 1860, Cornelius & Baker bill of sale, December 4, 1860, Howell & Brothers bill of sale, December 8, 1860, Hardman guarantee, October 23, 1860, Johnston & Johnston to Ventress, July 1, 1867, PVF; Charlotte V. Bryan, A Backward Glance (Booneville, Miss.: no publisher, 1976), 13-14; interview with Charles G. Ventress, July 28, 1976; for Hardman, see Alfred Dolge, Pianos and Their Makers (New York: Dover, 1972 [1911]), 48-52, 290.

[35]For Vollmer, see J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884 (3 vols., Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, 1884), III, 2333-34; Vollmer

Work on LaGrange continued while the Ventress family was away, but the house was still "stirred up" on their return. Sloan's assistant (later partner) Addison Hutton stayed at LaGrange for several months in 1860, supervising construction and identifying himself as the architect on the final drawing. Happy in his work, Hutton wrote home that his client was satisfied, too: "He is a mighty rich old gentleman and seems to have taken a fancy to me."

During the time that Hutton remained at LaGrange, some of Sloan's workmen hurried to complete Longwood, an Oriental fantasy near Natchez and the home of Dr. Haller Nutt. The Longwood laborers and craftsmen left for home on March 16, 1861. Before leaving, some of them signed a public testimonial that they had received good treatment in the South, a development which pleased Nutt, who said it would counter "the Report about Col. Vantress hands." Gottlieb Vollmer himself had visited LaGrange in August 1860 "to arrange the furniture." As he remembered later, he worked diligently but "nearly lost [his] life in the process." In December 1861, Sloan commented that

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to G. B. Envess, February 7, 1866, Charlotte P. Ventress to sons, February 13, 1872, January 23, February 23, March 30, April 10, 1873, PVF.

> we have found it to be a fact that [the workmen] have been drove from Col. Vantresses building. One of the workmen wrote from Cincinnati yesterday that such was the case and that they barely escaped with their lives and without any cause whatever as they were particularly cautious to avoid everything that would give the slighest reason for molestation.

Hounding northerners may well have been the work of a local vigilance committee. Organized throughout Mississippi in 1861, the self-appointed watchdogs of southern rights meted out their own quick justice to agitators and insubordinate slaves. In the autumn of 1861, "an extensive plot of Insurrection was discovered in Natchez and adjacent neighborhood and great excitement existed," undoubtedly the reason Ventress' laborers were forced to leave LaGrange.[36]

With local labor, the house was eventually finished. Originally planned as a three-story building, LaGrange had been roofed after the first story because Trask feared tornado damage. Charlotte and James Ventress added another floor of rooms, an enormous attic, and a capacious cupola which served as Ventress' personal laboratory and observatory. A large two-story ell on the northwest provided extra bedrooms, storage and space for the kitchen.

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[36]Vollmer to Envess, February 7, 1866, Delia Wyles to Charlotte P. Ventress, February 8, 1861, PVF: Elizabeth B. Yarnell, Addison Hutton: Quaker Architect, 1834-1916 (Philadelphia: Art Alliance Press, 1974), 32-34, quotation on 33; John K. Bettersworth, Confederate Mississippi: The People and Policies of a Cotton State in

When it was destroyed by lightning in 1909, LaGrange was "the most palatial house of the old regime [in Wilkinson County] . . . . everything that money could buy was used in beautifying this pile of brick and mortar."

There were other ways to describe the Ventress home, in style a pleasant blend of the popular Greek temple and one of Sloan's specialties, the Italian revival (see architect's rendering on page 268 and the photograph on page 269). A fenced "upper yard" enclosed flower gardens, wild peach, dogwood, and china trees, all of which could be seen on the approach from the road, through an allée of elms.

In size as well as appearance, LaGrange was impressive, easily accommodating the family of five and occasional house guests. Each of the two main floors comprised nearly 4,000 square feet. Downstairs, a central hallway with double stairs measured about 30 by 20 feet; each of the front rooms was 24 by 20. Stretching nearly the breadth of the house on the back was the "dining hall," opening onto a "large back porch" through "massive double doors" over which was a "lovely fan shaped glass panel." In a typical Mississippi mansion of the time, the dining

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Wartime (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943), 25, 252-53; McAdams, Longwood, 53, 63-64, 66, 69, 83, 95.

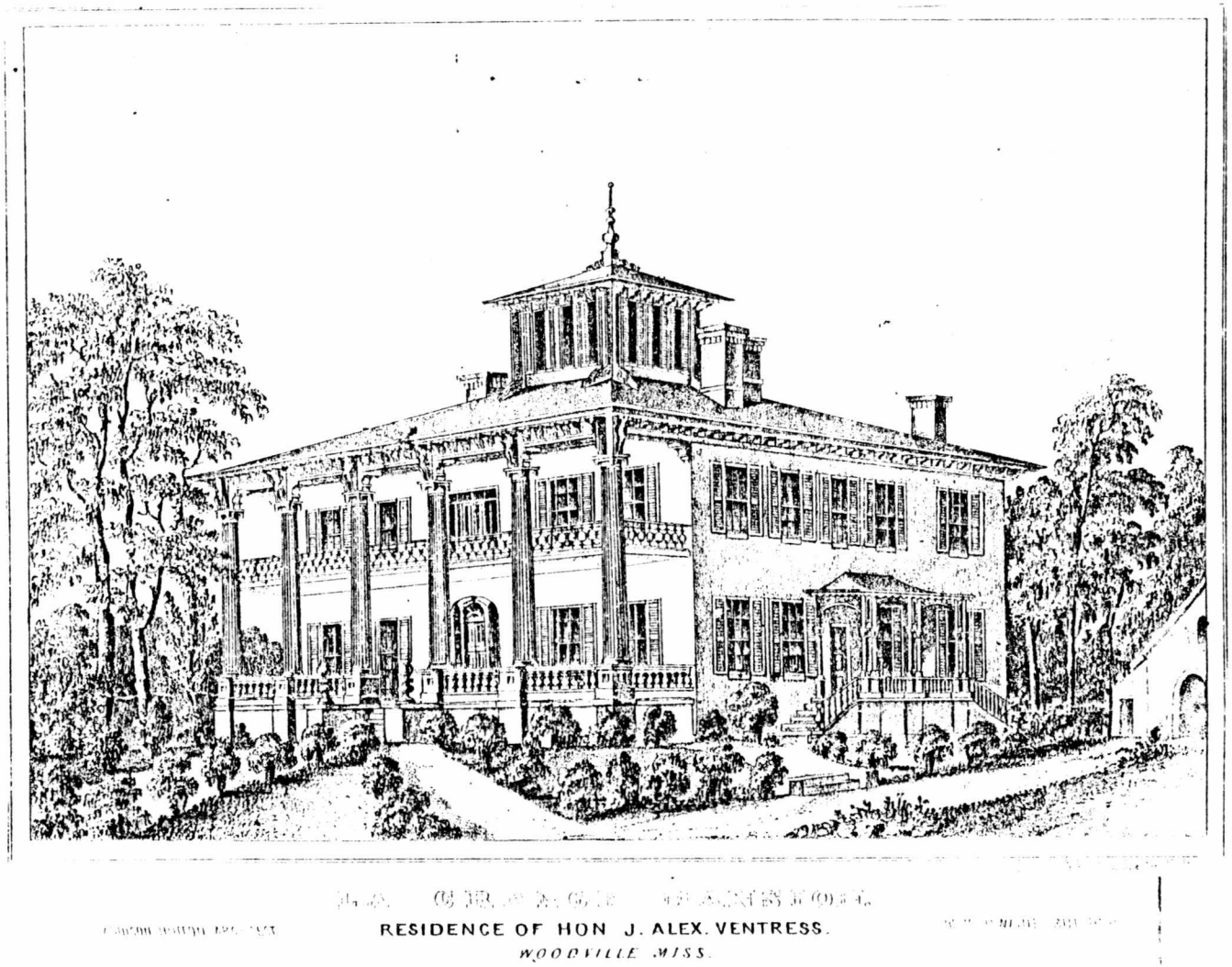


FIGURE 3. Drawing of LaGrange



FIGURE 4. Photograph of LaGrange

room would have been on one side of the central hallway. Trask's northern background perhaps accounted for the unusual placement, an existing veranda may have been enclosed, or the entire floor plan may have been adjusted during remodeling. Furniture in the dining room included three sideboards--of mahogany and elegantly carved--two serving tables, a table which could extend the length of the room, and twelve dining chairs, likely the "dozen French make chairs" bought for $69.99 in April 1859.

On the east side of the central hall were the parlor and the living or sitting room. On the west was Ventress' own bedroom. Elaborate painted designs "trimmed in pale shades" highlighted all the plastered walls downstairs. The parlor itself was called a "dream room" by Ventress' granddaughter Charlotte, who grew up in LaGrange. She remembered:

> There was a massive gold leaf mirror over the marble mantel, and on two sides of the room were mirrors to the ceiling and at the other end of the room was a long pier mirror that rested on a white marble foundation. The two large sofas and chairs were upholstered in gold brocade and at the floor length windows were heavy drapes in the same gold color brocade.

Reportedly facsimiles of the furniture in the drawing room of Buchanan's White House, the parlor pieces were termed nothing less than magnificent by a later observer. "The sitting room," Charlotte Ventress Bryan recalled,

> was less formal and more modern in its furnishings with easy chairs, a piano and reading table together with a large iron safe. There was a large fire place. . . . From the living room one would walk out upon a large side portico with iron grill work railings.

The downstairs sash windows were eleven and a half feet high and could be covered with painted blinds.

Upstairs, past the niches guarded by Tecumseh on the right and Daniel Boone on the left, were four bedrooms, the billiard room, and the library. Designated the blue, green, rose, and red rooms, these sleeping chambers all had fireplaces and were furnished with mahogany and bird's eye maple beds, washstands, chairs, and armoires. The blue room may have been Charlotte Ventress'--"Exquisite Dresden" and Limoges china pieces adorned the dressing table and washstand; the chairs and couch were in blue damask. China washstand sets, in fact, were part of each bedroom's decor, along with mirrored wardrobes, ample closets, and in the green room "Italian bead work on the pin cushions and footstools." A billiard room accounted for nearly half the west side of the second story. Its floor was marble, the table mahogany, and the walls were covered with cases holding "all equipment needed for a rousing game."

Most memorable, it seems, was the library, located above the dining room and accessible both from the outer gallery and from inside. "It was carpeted in a two toned

green carpet," the granddaughter recalled.

> The furniture was upholstered in dark green. There were book cases on all walls extending from floor to ceiling. . . . My grandfather, you see, had a decided weakness for books . . . . This collection contained books on almost every subject and in varied languages . . . . It also contained a set of the original Audubon bird books.

Confirming the existence at LaGrange of the Audubon folio, a newspaper account added that the library "was one of the finest in the South." It contained "all the classics" as well as "rare bibliographical treasures" such as a sixteenth-century book "bound in sheep skin," and numerous letters, "among them some from General Lafayette, Baron von Humboldt and Sir Walter Scott." Illuminated by a crystal and brass chandelier, the room held globes, map stands, and one fascinating piece of furniture that could be quickly converted from a large reclining chair into "a strong set of steps by which books on the high shelves could be reached without any trouble."

Above the family bedrooms and library was "an old curiosity shop." The high-roofed insulating attic stored "enough in the line of old beautiful furniture . . . to have given several families" a houseful. Accessible by stairs from the upper back gallery, the attic held yet another staircase "that carried you to the observatory and to . . . Ventress' well equipped chemical laboratory."

Out of doors, the galleries front and rear were decorated with "heavy iron railings in a lace work design." The front gallery boasted six brick columns overlaid with stucco to resemble marble. On the back porch, a set of brass bells "of perfect Pitch" and clear tones, called the servants to various rooms. Connected to that porch on the northwest, the ell housed the kitchen (another unusual feature in a region where kitchens were almost always detached), cistern, milk, and grocery rooms on the ground floor, and above, a large pantry and bedrooms for travelers.

A short distance from the brick wing a small building housed the "gasometer" to pump the fuel for lighting the home as early as 1859. Other outbuildings included the frame carriage house (shown on page 268) and next to it a brick smokehouse and pigeonnier. The latter was a building about 12 by 12 feet, set above ground level "on big brick pillars." Beyond lay the stables, barns, and quarters. The family cemetery, surrounded by an iron fence, is some 75 yards northwest of the ell.[37]

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[37] Ventress himself provided some room dimensions in notes evidently made while he was planning the remodeling (PVF). For descriptions of the house and grounds: Bryan, Backward Glance, 13-18; interview with Charles G. Ventress, July 28, 1976; quotation about LaGrange's beauty from Woodville Republican, May 1, 1909. See also invoice, J. J. Person & Co., April 2, 1859, TVP, folder 41; diary of James A. Ventress, Jr., 1870, and Charlotte P. Ventress to sons, November 6, 1871, PVF. Struck by lightning on

Because the Ventresses resided there, more is known of LaGrange than the other family properties. All, however, were important in maintaining the standard of living to which they were accustomed. In Woodville itself Ventress owned several town lots, some with houses on them, which he rented to various persons. The management of Mount Pleasant and Prospect, the smaller plantations near LaGrange, was not difficult since there was usually an overseer in charge. There was no "big house" at either place, only gins, service buildings, and quarters, and at Prospect a grist mill. As on LaGrange, both farms produced cotton, corn, and other crops. On Mount Pleasant and Prospect in 1844, the acreage in cotton and corn was listed at 1,297. Prospect then comprised over 744 acres; Mount Pleasant had 155 fenced acres (98 in cultivation) in addition to a horse lot, gin field, oat field, and vegetable garden. In 1860, Ventress' Wilkinson County

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April 24, 1909, LaGrange burned to the ground. Among the items saved were the parlor furniture, the piano, some of Charlotte Ventress' personal possessions, and a table setting of silver. Charlotte Bryan remembered that most people believed "the gas pipes acted as conductors of [the] lightning causing the entire building to burst into flames. . . . With a slate roof and brick and stone walls, they formed a perfect furnace for an intense interior fire." The brick wing, which happened to hold the family papers then, was saved by the efforts of "an organized bucket brigade." The exact location of the slave cabins is not known. There were a number of them across the road on Prospect plantation; in fact, the area is still referred to as "the quarter" and is the location of a black cemetery. In 1838 Trask reportedly had sixty-one "negro cabins" on Wilkinson properties (TVP, folder 183).

property was reported at 5,640 acres (1,200 improved) with a cash value of $30,000 or $40,000, farm implements worth $5,000, and 95 head of stock and swine valued at $4,000. His personal estate was reported at $300,000.[38]

The other family property, Trask's Cut-Off (or Grand Cut-Off) plantation in Concordia Parish, was owned by Charlotte Ventress' cousin Augustus Welch. After the death of Uncle James, Charlotte and Augustus were estranged over the division of property, thus the two families seem to have remained only civil toward each other in the years after 1855.[39]

Also in Louisiana, but in Pointe Coupee Parish, were the holdings owned by Ventress himself, purchased in the two decades before 1865. As one reporter described the

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[38]Field survey notes, 1844, TVP, folder 67; receipt of James F. Clayton, January 26, 1857, folder 249; John H. Leatherman to Ventress, December 24, 1851, folder 257; Augustus Welch to Trask, June 3, 1853, folder 160; receipt of W. A. Bradley, 1856-57, folder 246.

[39]1860 Concordia census, population, family 578, agriculture, p. 21; Joseph K. Mann, The Large Slaveholders of Louisiana, 1860 (New Orleans: Pelican, 1964), 210-11; Marriage Book G, 746, Adams County; Augustus T. Welch to Ventress, May 31, 1863, PVF; Welch correspondence, 1845-59, TVP, folder 160; Sarah Welch to Charlotte P. Ventress, February 20, 1869, TVP, and [1862-64?], PVF; Robert D. Calhoun, "History of Concordia Parish," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, XVI (January, July 1933), 101, 456, 457; Natchez Weekly Democrat, April 15, 1867.

region in 1860, it was unexcelled "in point of wealth, population and value of productions." One of the most interesting natural features of Pointe Coupee was False River, an oxbow lake in the former bed of the Mississippi, a

> huge coil thirty-five miles long in its circuit, but with the termini less than three miles apart. . . . The waters of False River are always below the level of the Mississippi, are affected only by rains, and never vary in level more than three or four feet. . . . on its fertile borders . . . are thickly clustered the fine residences of large planters or the picturesque cottages of the Acadians.[40]

Blacks greatly outnumbered whites in Pointe Coupee --11,000 in a total population of 15,500. The parish counted 311,000 acres in its confines, about "28,000 of which [were] in cotton, 17,000 in cane and 18,000 in corn." According to a reporter for the New Orleans Crescent, planters in 1860 were tending more toward sugar cane than cotton because of declining prices for the latter. A list of the "larger planters" in Pointe Coupee in 1860 did not include Ventress, undoubtedly because he, like nearly half the nabobs, was an absentee owner. Among the sixty-three planters who owned fifty or more slaves, four were members of Ventress' family, himself and three Stewart cousins.

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[40]Walter Prichard, ed., "A Tourist's Description of Louisiana in 1860," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, XXI (October 1938), 1137-38.

Ventress' property fronted the east side of False River, between the parish seat, New Roads, and Waterloo, the busy port, which "straggl[ed] along the banks of the Mississippi behind a low and irregular levee" some 150 miles above New Orleans. The first acreage Ventress owned was a 1,000-acre tract of prime cotton land, bought in 1848 for $25,000 from Samuel A. Plummer, a New Orleans attorney. Over the next seventeen years Ventress added to his holdings by the purchase of numerous smaller adjoining parcels until he owned nearly 4,000 acres. As early as 1852 he employed overseers, but still watched his Louisiana lands closely, visiting frequently and earning a reputation as a particularly good manager.[41]

Totalling about 3,500 acres in 1860, Lake Home and Caledonia plantations were valued at $87,500. Maintaining the 900 improved acres were one or two white men overseeing 112 slaves. Lake Home had a substantial plantation house; both plantations had gins, and one a sawmill. The profile of Ventress' holdings shows that he was somewhat wealthier

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[41] Ibid., 1141, 1139; Menn, Slaveholders, 97, 316-23; conveyance records, entries, 681-7294, July 3, 1848-December 22, 1865, passim, Pointe Coupee Parish; S. Bell & Co. to James L. Trask, April 23, 1852, TVP, folder 6; P. Joffrion to Ventress, November 18, 1860, folder 253; Lansford O. Ireson to Ventress, November 10, 1863-April 20, 1864, folder 256; Charlotte P. Ventress to Charles Gallagher, February 22, 1871, folder 211.

than the average large planter in Pointe Coupee, and was "generally known" as a "rich man."[42]

During his years of peak prosperity, 1856-60, Ventress invested in substantial improvements of the Pointe Coupee property. In 1859 he erected a large complex of buildings for a steam sawmill and gin, ordering lumber from New Orleans and fifty-eight boxes of machinery for a cider press and mill from the American Machinery Works in Springfield, Massachusetts. The latter company he had visited while on vacation a few years earlier. He was on friendly terms with S. R. B. Lewis, the proprietor, his agent N. F. Moreland, and his superintendent-designer, Philos B. Tyler.

In late summer the machines began to arrive. Although Ventress complained of neglect by Moreland in September, Lewis continued to supply some of the Mississippian's needs in machinery and tools for two more years. Lewis had visited LaGrange himself in the spring of 1859 and evidently had taken orders then and afterward for engines and mills for Ventress' nephew Henry J. Feltus,

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[42]Menn, Slaveholders, 38-41; J. J. Person to Ventress, October 23, 1858, and T. J. and W. H. Cooley to Ventress, January 8, 1862, TVP, folders 37 and 249.

a neighbor named Levi Babers, Edward McGehee, Dr. Haller Nutt, and others.[43]

Ventress' association with American Machinery's P. B. Tyler, the inventor, extended beyond their business relationship. Tyler became a personal friend who shared Ventress' scientific interests and eventually was his partner in a proposed marketing of gas lamps in Louisiana. Tyler owned several patents and had traveled through the South for some twenty years, mainly on business connected with cotton machinery. His "Tyler Press" was called "a superior piece of mechanism," especially when allied with his almost smokeless furnace. He also invented a "repeating match," sold it, and offered shares in the company, some of which Ventress bought. The Tylers and Ventresses even exchanged visits in the 1850s. On learning of Ventress' death in 1867, Tyler wrote Charlotte a warm letter of condolence:

> The news contained in yours of the 1st inst has fallen upon me like a great disaster. . . . Mr Ventress was indeed a true friend, and I had so long enjoyed his friendship that his association with my affairs south was so intimate and generous on his part, that I had come to look upon him,

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[43] J. J. Person & Co. to Ventress, October 23, 1858, July 7, September 13, 17, 27, 1859, folders 37, 42, 43; Saxton & Seabury invoices, July 1-September 29, 1859, folders 41-43, passim; agreement with John S. Ogle, March 20, 1859, folder 244; correspondence with S. R. B. Lewis, June 1, 1857-March 27, 1861, folder 258, and Lewis to Ventress, March 26, 1859, folder 40; N. F. Moreland to Ventress, June 8, 1859, folder 262; inventory of property,

> almost as a near & dear relative. Though our acquaintance commenced in business matters, our intimacy grew out of a congeniality in scientific ideas, for I had never met a man whose mind was more prolific in the highest scientific asperations. He could not be appreciated in his own neighborhood for there was no opportunity for his great mind to show itself. . . . The happiest and most satisfactory hours of my life have been spent in his company & his death is to me a great affliction.[44]

It may have been Tyler's help or inspiration which in 1857 prompted Ventress to apply for a patent on his own ideas for improving cotton gins. With an associate, J. L. Tuttle of Bridenburg, Pennsylvania, Ventress applied for a patent in 1857 but was rejected. On May 8, 1858, Tuttle wrote that patent commissioner Joseph Holt "has decidedly overleaped that liberal view to inventors, which he pledged them upon taking office." Tuttle claimed that Holt's duties did not include judging "new and useful inventions." At Tuttle's suggestion, the Mississippian tried again, with help from Senators Albert G. Brown and Jefferson Davis. On June 29, 1858, Ventress received patent number 20,747.

The Franklin Institute journal described his

December 10, 1867, folder 319; insurance policy, December 26, 1868, folder 308.

[44]Agreement between Tyler and Ventress, February 7, 1867, TVP, folder 244; Tyler correspondence, October 13, 1856-May 27, 1866, folder 269; Mobile Register and Journal, February 25, 1847; Tyler to Charlotte P. Ventress, July 21, 1867, PVF.

invention as follows:

> In combination with the ribs set close up to the saws, forming a clear space between the ribs at that point where the teeth of the saw carries the cotton through them, to prevent said cotton from being brought in contact with said ribs.

After all his work, the disappointment of rejection, and triumph at success, the results were nil. Ventress' widow clearly stated the case in 1871: "as nothing has been made from it I shall not have it renewed."[45]

The culmination of the relationship between Ventress and Tyler was their partnership in February 1867 to introduce and sell improved lamps in Louisiana. Having purchased two patents and after investing $1,500 of Ventress' money in improvements, Tyler was to market the fixtures. Ventress died only a few months after they signed their partnership agreement and again, nothing came of the venture. The same was true of his investment in the Repeating Light Company of Springfield, Massachusetts,

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[45]Albert G. Brown to Ventress, June 13, 1858, TVP, folder 246; J. L. Tuttle to Ventress, November 4, December 11, 1857, May 8, 1858, folder 269; Rufus R. Rhodes to Albert G. Brown, June 12, 1858, folder 266.; A. B. Stoughton to Ventress, June 19, 1858, folder 268; Scientific American to Ventress, n.d., folder 293; Jefferson Davis to Joseph Holt, May 31, 1858, Stoughton to Ventress, December 7, 1857, Ventress to Stoughton, May 19, 1858, and Ventress' petition to Holt, November 19, 1857, all in RG241, Records of the U.S. Patent Office, Patent No. 20,747, National Archives; "American Patents," Journal of the Franklin Institute, LXVI (September 1858), 187; Charlotte P. Ventress to sons, December 10, 1871, PVF.

another of Tyler's businesses. When Charlotte Ventress' cousin inquired about the firm for her in 1867, he found that the stock "has no market price." In 1888 one of the surviving founders of the company told Ventress' sons that the business was dissolved and the stock worthless.[46]

Ventress' willingness to gamble on the lamps and his widow's grasping eagerly for any potential profit underlines their troubled situation after the war. Ventress himself was too old to serve the Confederacy and his sons were too young. Thus the family remained at LaGrange, trying to maintain a normal pattern of life.

As a former Whig but also a Union Democrat, it would have been natural for Ventress to support the Constitutional Unionists. Instead he voted for Breckinridge and in December 1860 wrote a strong public letter advocating secession. A few months later "all Mississippi [was] in a fever to get to the field." Caught up in the enthusiasm of volunteering and on the advice of Jefferson Davis' two nephews, who lived nearby, Ventress wrote to the Confederate leader. Apologizing because "sickness and numerous business affairs" had delayed him,

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[46]Agreement between Tyler and Ventress, February 7, 1867, TVP, folder 244; RG241, Patent Nos. 40,566 and 38,859, National Archives; Joseph C. Pynchon to Charlotte P. Ventress, October 12, 1867, PVF; Edward Morris to Ventress Brothers, January 16, 1888, TVP, folder 293.

Ventress offered his inventions for arms improvements--including the one developed for the Prussians in 1831--in the hope that they might help in driving away "the Black Republican blood hounds."[47] Davis' answer, if any, is not recorded, but at least it would be many months before Ventress saw the dreaded enemy.

In 1861, Wilkinson County sent four companies of young men to war and local women soon organized a Soldiers Sewing Society, to which Charlotte Ventress contributed yarn. The McGehee cotton factory worked full time producing cloth. Indeed, almost everyone seemed willing to sacrifice all for "Southern institutions." Some local merchants left town after the war began but many others remained. Planters began raising more sheep and food, less cotton, as the legislature resolved they should. Tobacco and salt were soon in short supply but molasses and sugar remained plentiful. In May 1862 a young woman confessed to her brother guilt at having enjoyed a Sunday

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[47] Severin Porche to Ventress, February 1, 1861, TVP, folder 265; Ventress to Davis, June 18, 1861, unprocessed materials, Miss. Archives; U.S. War Department, War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (128 vols., Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. 4, I, 277. Breckinridge carried Mississippi over Bell, 40,000 to 25,000. Later in the war, Ventress offered advice to the Mississippi governor, John J. Pettus (March 3, 1863, RG27, Governor's Records, Vol. 55, Miss. Archives), urging that the levee west of the Yazoo canal be cut to strand the enemy gunboats there.

School exhibition, while noting that so far, there were few actual inconveniences. However, she also described wagonloads of cotton being transferred from town "to the woods, ready to be burned." Such was the governor's order for any bales liable to be seized by the federals.

Another dark cloud was the fear of invasion. Few able white men could be found, except for a home guard established in 1862--called by one jaundiced planter the "windy warriors" whose pretended eloquence had failed to win them army offices. And salt continued to be a major problem, the supply critical by late 1862. By early 1864 Ventress himself reported to Governor Charles Clark that some people had even dug up the foundations of their smokehouses for salt.[48]

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[48]W. C. Miller, comp., List of Officers and Privates who Volunteered in the Confederate States Service from Wilkinson County, Mississippi, 1861-1865 (Woodville: Zoller's Job Print, 1903); Janet S. West to Charlotte P. Ventress, September 11, 1862, PVF; John K. Bettersworth, ed., Mississippi in the Confederacy: As They Saw It (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 217, 220-22; Betty Beaumont, Twelve Years of My Life: An Autobiography (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1887), 169-173, 175-76, 179; Kate Burruss to Edward M. Burruss, May 4, 8, 30, 1862, and John W. Burruss to Edward M. Burruss, May 12, November 6, 1862, John C. Burruss Family Papers, Louisiana State University; Robert W. Dubay, John Jones Pettus, Mississippi Fire-Eater: His Life and Times, 1813-1867 (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1975), 121-29; petition from Woodville citizens, September 23, 1862, RG27, Vol. 49, and Ventress to Charles Clark, February 6, 1864, RG27, Vol. 57, Miss. Archives. On planters' adjustments to the war, see James L. Roark, Masters without Slaves: Southern Planters in the Civil War and Reconstruction (New York: Norton, 1977), 38-55.

LaGrange seemed to have ample supplies. In June 1862 a neighbor asked to borrow some whiskey ("for medicinal purposes") and salt from Ventress' storerooms, a cousin begged for shoes, and Augustus Welch, still on his river plantation in Louisiana in 1863, was profoundly grateful for some bacon. Available accounts for the war years show that Ventress' requests to his factors listed only the necessities--plantation supplies and basic foodstuffs. For their part, New Orleans cotton merchants were virtually starved by the blockade, reporting prices at five and six times the normal level, with nothing available on credit. In short, as one wrote a client, "the condition of things here is fearfull." Inflation continued to spiral: a Confederate greenback was worth about 20¢ in early 1863. Bartering became more and more common as cotton could be exchanged for goods in Woodville as well as in New Orleans--the latter trade technically outlawed but widespread. During 1863 the presence of roving bands of both persuasions added to the tension. Raids were "a constant dread," travel dangerous and restricted, mails slow and uncertain, and rumors abundant.[49]

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[49]Henry B. Pettibone to Ventress, June 11, 1862, TVP, folder 265; Penelope J. Stirling to Ventress, January 4, 1863, folder 268; Augustus Welch to Ventress, May 31, 1863, PVF; M. Gillis to St. John Richardson Liddell, October 25, 1861, March 26, 1862, Moses and St. John Richardson Liddell Family Papers, Louisiana State University; Beaumont, Twelve Years, 186-88, 208-9, 226.

In 1863, after the river had been completely closed to Confederate traffic, Ventress took obvious steps to protect his crop. Until then he seems to have survived well, whether by bartering, selling, smuggling, or simply living from his larder. In the summer he negotiated with a Baton Rouge commission merchant, Charles S. Lobdell, to secure his Louisiana cotton. Having taken the oath of allegiance, Lobdell acted as Ventress' agent. He advised the Mississippian in June to date his contracts prior to May 7, since no property was transferable after that date, except by "loyal subjects." During the summer, trading arrangements were so unsettled that nothing could be moved on the Mississippi. As one Yankee observed, there were more cotton factors than bales of cotton in New Orleans that year.

By September, Ventress must have been feeling even more anxious. He began to sign contracts on behalf of his neighbors and himself with Charles W. Lewis and Richard Lloyd, both Englishmen. The planters sold entire crops for $1 and protection as far as Liverpool, expecting to divide the proceeds. If the cotton were seized or destroyed, Lewis and Lloyd would present claims and split the refund with the owner. As the Englishmen's agent, Ventress would receive a commission of fifteen percent. Under this arrangement, more than 2,000,000 bales were consigned

by Ventress and his friends.[50]

Fear of losing the cotton was, of course, the impetus for such actions, but Lobdell immediately accused Ventress of breach of contract in disposing of his Louisiana cotton to Lloyd and Lewis, writing on November 7, 1863: "You appear to have been terribly and I think uselessly frightened about the burning of Cotton. . . . In a word you have shown no great capacity to contend with the times." By late 1863, Ventress' situation was more desperate. He needed supplies, especially at Lake Home and Caledonia. One of his British partners reported on October 10 that even with foreign protection federal gunboats prevented any landings along the river. And Ventress received word from Lake Home that "the Negroes will not do anything," that shoes and clothing were desperately needed, and that army worms had badly damaged what little crop there was. Furthermore, raiding parties were stealing

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[50]Charles S. Lobdell to Ventress, June 1863, TVP, folder 192, August 23, 1863, folder 259; Thomas W. Knox, Camp-fire and Cottonfield: Southern Adventure in Time of War (New York: Blelock & Co., 1865), 396; Ventress agreements with Lloyd and Lewis, September 16, 30, 1863, TVP, folders 244, 258; Lewis affidavit, September 11, 1863, folder 190; Henry B. Pettibone to Ventress, September 26, 1863, folder 265; Ventress' receipts for cotton, August 11, 16, September 1863, folders 319 and 331. In general on cotton policies, see Ludwell H. Johnson, Red River Campaign: Politics and Cotton in the Civil War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958), 49-78, and Bettersworth, Confederate Mississippi, 174-82.

mules at will and even ripping away fences.[51]

In October 1863 a state election placed Ventress' old friend Charles Clark, an ex-Whig and Confederate brigadier, in the governor's mansion. The following February, Ventress sent him an impassioned plea for assistance:

> The agents of distruction are around and amongst us. Anarchy hovers over us, and Despotism--that bloodhound of humanity, is on the trail: law and order exist no more: the Judge no longer visits the county, and the sheriff is powerless. . . .
>
> Notwithstanding these calamites, the people of the county (up to the destruction of the Woodville Factory), clothed and shod their own brave soldiers in the field--have ever paid their taxes. . .and have during the whole war contributed their labor, their means, and their blood voluntarily, in defense of the country.
>
> You can not well conceive, with what astonishment--nay horror these people look upon an order sent to Capt Scott ordering him to burn all the cotton in the Felicianas and in Wilkinson County. . . .
>
> The premature burning of cotton immediately after the fall of New Orleans was evidently based upon the apprehension that the Enemy would seize and confiscate all the cotton that might fall into his hands; such however, is now proven not to be a fact; and will our government knowing this now destroy that cotton that the Enemy will respect. . . . cotton is our All--without it we cannot live. Without it we can not pay our taxes. . . . In a word destroy our cotton and you sever the tendon Achilles of the war--there can be no further progression; the sword of the

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[51]Lobdell to Ventress, November 6, 7, 1863, TVP, folder 259; Lewis to Ventress, October 10, 1863, folder 258; L. O. Ireson to Ventress, November 10, December 24, 1863, folder 256.

> warrior will drop from his hand; and the end of this long and bloody struggle will be at hand--our country will be no more. . . .
>
> I pray you therefore, to do all that you can to prevent the burning of our cotton: also to make every effort to obtain a permit that we can have some of the most needful necessaries of life brought within our lines. If we are not permitted to get some Bagging Rope and twine, I am sure there will scarcely be any cotton made this year; for our houses are filled with cotton that was ginned last year for the purpose of getting seed to plant, and if we can not gin we certainly cannot plant. This dilemma is well worth your consideration and speedy action.[52]

Ventress might have added that there was a need for defense against raiders as well. Some feared that the populace would simply surrender if attacked; an Illinois officer reported from Wilkinson that "many citizens" wanted a Union force to protect them from "marauding guerrillas." Already the vital Woodville cotton factory was in ruins and many citizens had lost livestock, slaves, and other property. And, before sunrise on Valentine's Day, 1864, a scant week after writing to Clark, Ventress found the war on his doorstep.

Edward M. Burruss, in the army in Virginia, received a description of the raid from his father:

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[52]Ventress to Charles Clark, February 6, 1864, RG27, Vol. 57, Miss. Archives. A brief excerpt is printed in Bettersworth, ed., Mississippi, 251-52. See also Harry Lewis to Mrs. Lewis, February 15, 1863, Lewis Papers, Southern Historical Collection; and OR, Ser. 1, XXX, Pt. II, 818.

> The Ys. left Natchez at 2 o'clock P.M. on Saturday last, reached Ft. Adams at 8, left there at 9, reached Woodville at 3-1/2 or 4 in the morning. . .robbed the stores, arrested the citizens, gathered some 100 horses and mules, some 50 or 75 Negroes by sunrise, (expeditious work) & were off for Natchez by 2 oclock Sunday morning. . . . Mr. Ventress was the largest loser tho' not the greatest sufferer. He lost some 40 Negroes & as many mules. others lost . . . all they had & every animal.[53]

A few months later, in July, Ventress' gin and cotton were burned. It may have been then that LaGrange barely escaped a like fate. A Union raiding party had already set a fire in one of the upstairs bedrooms when the officer in charge learned that Ventress spoke German. According to the oft-recounted tale, the man was so pleased to exchange conversation in his native tongue that he ordered the home spared. For the next forty years the room was left partly burned and never again used. The same was true of other damages, as Ventress' granddaughter recalled:

> a German officer rode his horse down this hall and with his sword broke off the head of Tecumseh. In my memory, I can still see this Indian head reposing at the base of the statue. It was never mended but seemed to have been left as a reminder of the destruction of

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[53]John W. Burruss to Edward M. Burruss, February 18, 1864, Burruss Family Papers.

> property by the ravages of war. There still remained the shod hoof prints of the Yankee officer's horse in the floor of the hall.[54]

Certainly it must have seemed true in 1864 that southwestern Mississippi was "abandoned pretty much by our government." During another raid in October, the county's best known citizen, the venerable Edward McGehee, lost his precious Bowling Green plantation, the railroad machine shop was burned and the track ripped up, some $100,000 in Confederate commissary stores burned, the telegraph office seized, and the store of Emanuel Marx razed because he was a known southern sympathizer. Woodville was demoralized, "the people stripped of everything and not knowing how to pick up again."[55]

However worrisome, the continuing threats from outlaws and scattered raiders were only sidelights to Ventress' main concern, marketing his cotton. Confederate

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[54]Alexander K. Farrar to Ventress, July 16, 1864, TVP, folder 252; Bryan, Backward Glance, 13-14; interview with Charles G. Ventress, July 28, 1976. One source implies that the incident took place in October 1864--Wilkinson County: Historical Facts and Legends (Woodville, 1962), 12.

[55]Beaumont, Twelve Years, 266-68, 291; John W. Burruss to Edward M. Burruss, February 18, 1864, Burruss Family Papers. On the October 5-6, 1864, raid, called in one source the Battle of Woodville, see: OR, Ser 1, XXXIX, Pt. I, 457-58, 829-42, Pt. III, 122-23; Edwin C. Bearss, Decision in Mississippi (Jackson: Mississippi Commission on the War Between the States, 1962), 466-89.

money was useless, forcing the larger planters to fall back on Liverpool bills of exchange whenever possible. Ventress' Louisiana agent, Lobdell, was able to ship thirty bales from Point Coupee in February 1864. Some weeks later he transported to New Orleans about forty-six of the seventy bales ginned at Lake Home in addition to the thirty from Caledonia. Twenty-seven bales were "old" cotton and prospects for the new crop were gloomy. There were no mules and only seven plows on both places, Negroes who insisted on being paid, and a scarcity of supplies. On each plantation the overseer estimated about one hundred acres would be planted in corn and at Lake Home, fifty in cotton. He added that taxes were due and as a final blow hinted broadly that he could make more money working for the Yankees.[56]

At last, in Natchez on May 24, 1865, Ventress took the oath of allegiance from an infantry lieutenant in command of black troops. At the age of sixty he found himself alive, his land intact but his labor force greatly diminished and now requiring payment. His family responsibilities were many--three sons to educate and his

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[56]Lansford O. Ireson to Ventress, February 14, 23, March 1, 21, April 20, 1864, folder 256; correspondence with Lobdell, May 1859-April 1865, folder 259; Beaumont, Twelve Years, 314-15; St. John R. Liddell to Mary M. Liddell, July 23, 1864, Liddell Family Papers.

sister's family to provide for, since his brother-in-law died in 1861. After the war Ventress bought the Feltus plantation on Old River at a tax sale, conveying it to his namesake, James A. V. Feltus, for $5,000 to be paid later and to be held in trust for Feltus and five of his siblings. Likewise, to aid his brother William, who was "financially ruined by the war," Ventress bought some 678 acres in Wilkinson County, 1,650 in St. Martin's Parish, 875 in Ascension Parish, and 1,280 in Houston County, Texas. Included in the Wilkinson parcel was William Ventress' share of their father's farm, along with Caledonia Springs, a Randolph family property (William Ventress' in-laws), "kept in order . . . as a retreat in summer." At tax sales Ventress also added other small parcels to his holdings.[57]

He continued to augment his Pointe Coupee properties, too, acquiring a third plantation there--Goula --soon after the war. In 1867 he leased Lake Home for the first time, to an Englishman from the West Indies. Although Ventress' factor assured him that the "Island places" could yield $25,000-$30,000 annually if kept in

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[57]Oath of allegiance, PVF; Woodville Republican, November 24, 1866; deed, November 19, 1866, TVP, folder 244; conveyances, July 4, 1864, July 1, 1862, June 20, July 19, 1865, folders 176 and 188; Charlotte P. Ventress to Orlando Dorsey, February 24, 1873, folder 191; gravestone, Woodville cemetery.

good repair, the proceeds were skimpy by pre-war standards.[58]

Clearly, the years immediately after the war were the most difficult at LaGrange. Lack of capital, the end of reliable cheap labor, Ventress' age and increasingly poor health, worries about the future of his family, and management difficulties of all sorts contributed to send the properties "into a spiral of disintegration." Taxes and debts increased while cotton yields and prices plummeted: the Ventresses experienced privation for the first time. Charlotte reminded her children in 1873, as though they could not remember, that she had been "preaching up poverty to [them] ever since the war."[59]

For nearly two years, 1865-67, Ventress continued to manage his holdings from LaGrange. In January 1867, however, he gave almost total control of the Pointe Coupee plantations to Joseph B. Gribble, his New Orleans factor.

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[58]Correspondence and accounts current with Joseph B. Gribble, November 1865-December 1867, TVP, folder 254; notice to Charlotte Ventress from U.S. marshal, New Orleans, March 20, 1868, folder 230; Lawrence T. Ventress to Charlotte Ventress, September 23, 1871, folder 231; correspondence and accounts current with Gribble, January-June 1867, PVF.

[59]Roark, Masters Without Slaves, 85; Charlotte P. Ventress to sons, May 17, 1873, PVF.

During the spring of the same year Ventress suffered from an unnamed malady which confined him to bed much of the time. Until then, except for "a severe struggle for life" in late 1854 because of cholera, he seems to have enjoyed general good health. Far from the "happy and high-spirited and aspiring" character a friend remembered, Ventress was sick and despondent during the last months of his life.[60]

On June 26, Ventress died at home and was buried near the grave of James L. Trask. A local reporter belatedly eulogized the master of LaGrange,

> whose memory is cherished with sincere feelings of gratitude and respect. . . . [and] whose character . . . was often misunderstood by many who had but a partial knowledge of its peculiar traits. The late James Alexander Ventress was no ordinary man. Gifted by nature with fine abilities, the faculties of his mind were improved by diligent culture, and foreign travel. Well versed in literature, he was especially fond of scientific investigation; but, as a Democrat of the old school . . . politics shared largely his attention and study.

Noting Ventress' service in the legislature and work for the university, the reporter also remembered his pro-Union stance in 1850-51. While maintaining "State Rights under the Constitution," Ventress mourned the results of the war:

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[60]James L. Trask to Curry & Person, December 10, 1854, TVP, folder 24; William C. S. Ventress to Ventress, July 5, 1849, folder 242; Orlando Dorsey to James A. Ventress, Jr., June 29, 1877, folder 191; Joseph B. Gribble to Ventress, May 25, John A. Grow to Ventress, June 14, 1867, PVF.

"These reflections tended greatly to sadden his last hours, and accelerate the bodily prostration from which he had long been suffering."[61]

Into Charlotte Ventress' capable hands fell full responsibility for LaGrange, her home for upwards of three decades. No thought of moving is recorded. Instead, she plunged energetically into all facets of plantation and estate management, even though it was "a new thing" for her "and a very hard task for a Lady unused to such." Because Ventress died intestate, she petitioned the local chancery court to be administrator of what she described as a "small personal estate worth not more than three or four thousand dollars." She dutifully filed annual reports until October 23, 1876, when all three of her sons had reached adulthood. In 1876 the estate was valued at just over $24,000.[62]

Charlotte Ventress and sons were also concerned with the disposition of other Ventress land holdings, especially those in northern and east central Texas and the Mississippi

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[61]Woodville Republican, July 27, 1867.

[62]S. Frank to Charlotte P. Ventress, July 3, 1867, VFP; Chancery Inventories and Accounts, XIX, 85-680, passim, and Final Records, III, 14-15, Wilkinson County.

Delta. The Texas property was located in Cooke, Wichita, Burleson, and Falls Counties; in addition, Ventress and his brother owned in partnership land in Houston County, one-third of which belonged to a mutual friend who acted as their agent.[63]

Ventress' property in Hancock, Yazoo, Coahoma, and Bolivar (later Sunflower) counties amounted to several thousand acres, purchased by Ventress beginning in the 1830s. In 1836, 1843, and after, he had speculated with his brother on a number of Gulf coast lots in Waveland, Hancock County.[64] The first piece of land Ventress bought in Yazoo was acquired in 1839--920 acres for $1,612.40. Other similar properties were added in 1843 and 1846. By 1860, Ventress had divested himself of most of it, for handsome profits. In Bolivar County, Ventress

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[63]Correspondence of Orlando Dorsey with Ventress and survivors, May 1858-November 1877, TVP, folder 191; J. H. Gillespie to William C. S. Ventress, April 21, 1854, folder 253; A. S. Broadus and A. W. McIver to James A. Ventress, Jr., December 26, 1877, folder 278; Dorsey to James A. Ventress, Jr., August 15, 24, October 5, 1877, folder 280; H. W. Keller to James A. Ventress, Jr., September 18, 1877, folder 285.

[64]Correspondence of Charlotte P. Ventress with J. C. Monet, 1869-71, TVP, folder 231; Monet to Charlotte Ventress, January 26, October 7, 1872, John J. Bradford to Joseph B. Gribble, March 9, 1867, 1884 tax receipt, and conveyance, Ventress Brothers to T. W. Young, February 9, 1892, folder 313; Hancock County Deed Book A, 48-49, B, 78-79, 133-34, C, 41-44, 268-70, J, 457, K, 227-28, 358, 581.

began paying taxes in 1838, with the assistance of James L. Alcorn, who also helped with land taxes in Coahoma. As Alcorn advised in April 1860, Ventress could invest $4,000-$5,000 "very profitably," perhaps reaping a 50 percent return. Ventress seems not to have taken advantage of the opportunity, but continued to pay his state, county, levee, and military relief taxes there during the war.[65]

During her ten years of widowhood Charlotte Ventress fretted over the "many sad changes" in her life --debt and troubles with the freedmen's contracts, unreliable overseers, poverty, the education of her children, loneliness, taxes, and short crops. She lamented the want of ordinary pleasures such as a turkey for Christmas dinner; and sacrificing her pride, she put her sewing talents to use as a money-making endeavor. After 1860 she made only one more trip north to visit relatives, in the summer of 1876 during celebration of the centennial. On May 10, 1877, after an illness of a few months' duration--perhaps cancer--she died at LaGrange, just days short of her sixty-second birthday. Her

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[65]Ventress correspondence with William May, January-August, 1859, TVP, folder 261; Alcorn to Ventress, February 18, March 15, May 10, 1860, folders 244 and 245; John H. Echols to Ventress, April 29, 1864, folder 251; Robert S. Holt to Ventress, May 11, 1850, folder 255; H. Vaughn to Ventress, February 2, 1853, February 1, 1860, folder 270; A. M. Harlow to Charlotte P. Ventress,

hometown newspaper remembered her as she had appeared the year before, "in all the matured beauty of her girlhood, and in full brightness of intellect . . . [despite] the tribulations of the war of the rebellion, of which she was a victim."[66]

The Ventress brothers then jointly owned LaGrange and other family properties for another thirty-four years, until 1911, when William P. S., the youngest, died of cancer. James A., Jr., followed him only two months later, leaving the grief-stricken Lawrence, the eldest. The mainstay of his mother and then of his sisters-in-law, Lawrence Trask Ventress continued to manage LaGrange, living there longer than anyone--all of his eighty-two years.

It cannot be said that James A. Ventress was an unusual Mississippi planter, although some features of his life were atypical. In the 1830s and 1840s, for instance, he was especially sensitive to the need for diversification, actively experimenting with new crops and methods. Later, as did many others, he invested heavily in new cotton

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November 25, 1867, PVF; Coahoma Deed Book J, 249-50, Bolivar Deed Book N, 583.

[66]Charlotte Ventress correspondence with William P. S. Ventress and James A. Ventress, Jr., October 21, 1871-June 28, 1873, PVF; Brimfield newspaper clipping, [1877], PVF.

lands. On the strength of his pre-war prosperity, he greatly improved his home but rather than relying on pattern books and local builders, enlisted the assistance of a professional northern architect. In business affairs, like his peers, he depended on credit and the skills of New Orleans factors.

Marrying later in life than most, he strove to provide well for his family and took pains with the education of his sons. When he married, he settled down easily to plantation management but obviously remained keenly aware of and interested in state and national politics.

Nor did his wartime experiences set him apart from others in like circumstances; many did not fare so well. All large planters tried to market their crops, resisted burning, and many resorted to illegal trading. Almost everyone who could stored cotton in the hope that regular business channels would reopen. Suffering raids was commonplace and Ventress was deemed fortunate to have survived the war with his home intact. How he saved it was an unusual story.

Unlike many of his peers, Ventress was not active in Woodville civic and religious affairs, perhaps because he lived some distance from town, but more likely because he found home and family duties both time-consuming and fulfilling. Also, it is clear that he maintained and

cherished an unusual interest in science and reading. His warmest friendships outside the family circle were with fellow inventors and machinery experts, not with neighboring planters. LaGrange was clearly the center of his life, although perhaps for practical rather than sentimental reasons. For Charlotte Ventress and their descendants, LaGrange was not only a physical but also an emotional bond.

CHAPTER VII

THE "INTERESTING CIRCLE" AT LAGRANGE[1]

Daily activities at LaGrange did not involve everyone totally in the business of cotton. Ventress himself was most closely connected with it, of course, but reserved time for his family and his personal avocations--scientific investigation, experimenting with machinery, and reading.

Social activities seem to have been limited to family gatherings and visits with Charlotte Ventress' closest friends, the Misses Amanda and Theodosia Calder, Massachusetts-born teachers who lived in Woodville for some fifty years. Neighboring planters such as the Kaigler family, attorneys in Woodville named W. H. and John P. Dillingham (also New Englanders), and various merchants and factors in New Orleans and Woodville rounded out the circle. Beyond LaGrange, Ventress maintained some long-time friendships with fellow legislators J. C. Monet, William L. Sharkey, and Albert G. Brown, and with some business associates, particularly P. B. Tyler, John J. Person, N. F. Moreland, and S. R. B. Lewis.

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[1]S. R. B. Lewis to Ventress, September 14, 1857, TVP, folder 258.

Because she lived so far from home, Charlotte Ventress cherished her family relationships. Many letters record memories of visits back and forth, stays that lasted for weeks at a time. Also, Ventress' brother William was frequently counted among the family at LaGrange, as were Eliza Feltus and her children.

Of Ventress' own five children, three reached maturity. Lawrence Trask, born in 1850, was followed by James A., Jr. (1853), and William Pynchon Stewart (1854). Eliza Trask, born in November 1855, barely reached her first birthday; Lovick died as an infant in 1857.

Given their backgrounds, it was natural that the Ventresses would devote great attention to education. Taught at home by their parents and tutors until their teen-aged years, the Ventress brothers were close to each other and to "Ma" and "Pa." Not only formal "book learning" but also "manly education" were components of upbringing at LaGrange. It is certain that the boys received instruction in horsemanship--as adults, they raised fine racing horses and bred prize stock of several sorts--and in shooting, one skill in which Ventress took particular interest. A charming letter signed by all three to "Dear Pa" in 1866 reveals that he took pains to provide them the best of educational implements and that he challenged them to learn and serve:

> We return thanks for the Geographical Mathematical Philosophical & Chemical apparatus. Through the printing press, the last of your favors [we] will endeavor to show by our labors in that line, that we are not unworthy of the gift[.] May your life be spared to see in us the realisation of your fondest expectations by beholding us grow up useful and intelligent members of society. . . . May you never regret your doting care and love bestowed on us.[2]

Encouraged to write, the three boys exchanged letters with their parents even while all lived under the same roof. When they later went away to school, weekly communications were the rule. At an early age, each seemed to find a special niche which fit the family needs, receiving what one of them called their parents' "best legacy . . . equipment for life's work." Lawrence was the ablest in practical skills of plantation management, including everything from carpentry and gardening to negotiating freedmen's contracts. James A., Jr. (called Alex like his father), was the businessman and bookkeeper, his mother's most helpful amanuensis, the one who experimented with machinery, and later, the family genealogist. Youngest of the three and somewhat frail as a child, Willie was "studious and smart," an attorney who followed his

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[2]Children's vital statistics from gravestones at LaGrange, Woodville city cemetery, and Grace Episcopal Church, St. Francisville, Louisiana. For elements of "manly education," see Joseph H. Ingraham, The Sunny South; or, a Southerner at Home (Philadelphia: G. G. Evans, 1860), 270-73. The Ventress boys' letter is dated June 27, 1866, PVF.

father's footsteps to the legislature and who admitted that he, like his parents, was a "regular crank . . . on educating my children."[3]

Although "delicately raised at home," all three left eventually tc attend college. Lawrence spent a year at the University of Mississippi (1869-70) "pursuing select studies" in literature, but did not graduate. While he stayed home with his mother, the younger boys were sent to Norwood School in Virginia (1871-72) and to the University of Virginia (1872-73). Willie completed his law degree at the University of Mississippi in 1883. Years away from LaGrange broadened their horizons and cemented useful friendships--Lawrence's with classmate Walter Sillers, later a power in Mississippi politics, and Willie's with John Sharp Williams, a fellow student in Virginia.[4]

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[3]Interviews with Charles G. Ventress, July 28, 1976, February 20, 1980; William P. S. Ventress to James A. Ventress, Jr., February 13, 1908, Samuel D. Goodall to Ventress, March 21, 1868, PVF; Joseph Gribble to Charlotte P. Ventress, September 21, 1867, TVP, folder 254.

[4]Charlotte P. Ventress to headmaster, Norwood School, November 9, 1871, PVF; Historical Catalogue, 153; Catalogue of the University of Mississippi . . . 1869-70, 30; interview with Charles G. Ventress, July 28, 1976; see also George C. Osborn, "John Sharp Williams and the University of Virginia," Journal of Mississippi History, VII (January 1945), 11-22. For biographical sketches, see Mississippi Historical Society Publications, XII (1912), 19 (William), and Woodville Republican, July 19, 1924 (Lawrence).

All three married, like their parents, rather late in life: Lawrence in 1881 to Mary Ellen Holmes of Natchez, Willie in 1893 to Willie Estelle Galloway, daughter of Mississippi's Methodist bishop, and Alex in 1901 to Sallie Mathews of Greenwood plantation near St. Francisville, Louisiana. Associated in business for several decades as Ventress Brothers, the three were well known in the area as a tightly-knit unit. Even after each had his own household--Lawrence at LaGrange, Willie in Woodville, and Alex at Greenwood--they relished reunions. "Whenever the three brothers would get there [at LaGrange] together," a grandson remembered, "they had the biggest time in the world. They were very congenial and that was always quite an occasion. . . all three brothers were there laughing and talking."[5]

Good conversation, and communication by letter when apart, was clearly an important part of life at LaGrange. Younger members of the family sought Ventress' advice and found it useful. William J. Feltus, attending college in Philadelphia in 1848, wrote a detailed account of his activities to "Dear Uncle" in May 1848, remarking that he was so determined to enter the junior class he

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[5]Interview with Charles G. Ventress, July 28, 1976.

studied nine hours a day for nine months, and adding disgustedly that Philadelphians were not very interested in him or his efforts since "their entire mind seems bent on making money." William Trask Plumbe, Charlotte's cousin, who studied at Oakland College (Lorman, Mississippi), appreciated more than just the financial aid sent by Ventress: "I would like to profit by the advice of Mr Ventress; for the little time I have been with him I have learnt more practical knowledge than I ever learnt at College."[6]

Yet another nephew, Charlotte's brother Edward's only son, Lewis Charlton Pynchon (1830-97) lived at LaGrange for awhile after receiving his M.D. in Philadelphia in 1852. In 1857 he asked Ventress about a loan to pursue his studies in Europe: "I write to you as you are a man eminently qualified to judge of the advantages in every sense of the word, as you have from experience amply tested them." Many years later Pynchon reminisced to Alex about the

> happy hours I passed at "LaGrange" in the long time gone by, & the pleasant & profitable evenings spent in conversation with your Father, when he communicated to me the experience of his long residence in Europe, rehearsing

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[6]Feltus to Ventress, May 14, 1848, TVP, folder 52; Plumbe to James L. Trask, February 14, 1842, folder 88.

> incidents of his life, & anecdotes of prominent persons whom he met & whose names have become historical. How Aunt Charlotte would call your Father & notify him that it was 11 oclock & repeat the call 2 or 3 times at about 10 minute intervels, & then in disgust desist, & leave us to continue our discourse 'til midnight & sometimes 'til one or 2 A.M.--I, an interested listener & he a fascinating narrator.[7]

Other visitors noted "the princely hospitality" of their host, his catholic interests,

> the delicacy of his attentions to our smallest wants . . . polite--without ostentation--intelligent, without any attempt at display--refined & elegant, while almost concealing those traits. . . . a gentleman in the broad full meaning of that word.

B. L. C. Wailes, who spent the night at LaGrange in 1852 while surveying Wilkinson for the state geological survey, recorded "a very hospitable reception" and a pleasant time examining Ventress' vegetable garden and flowers. Of course, in addition to the graciousness of their host, many visitors were impressed with his home. One New York acquaintance termed it "a paradise," admitting envy "even though the 'Force' might not be palatable to my northern

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[7]For Edward Elliott Pynchon and family, see Robert M. Myers, ed., The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1650; Woodville Republican, August 23, 1853; Lewis C. Pynchon to Charlotte P. Ventress, March 14, 1851, PVF; long quotation from Pynchon to James A. Ventress, Jr., March 22, 1891, PVF; Pynchon to Ventress, February 2, 1857, TVP, folder 331.

stomack!" Others happily remembered the large rooms, "pure water" and "beautiful magnolias," while M. L. Meecher indicated his feelings by addressing a letter to "LaGrange Pallace."[8]

Without question, the Ventresses lived well. But what of life for the other denizens of LaGrange, Mount Pleasant and Prospect? There is no reason to think their basic physical needs were not met. Items of clothing--"negro shoes," "negro blankets," and hundreds of yards of coarse cloth--and more food than the family could consume appear on the factors' accounts. As on other plantations, medical help was available from local physicians, holidays were special occasions, and there were house servants and field workers. Various lists of names grouped together indicated they lived in family units, as was customary. According to one recent study, an ordinary slave cabin housed five or six; the ratio on the Trask properties in 1838 was lower, 224 in 61 houses. A later listing by Ventress shows the average to be about four per cabin.[9]

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[8]? to Charlotte P. Ventress, August 10, 1867, PVF; B. L. C. Wailes Diary, II, 2-3; Peter Gassner to Ventress, May 29, 1855, TVP, folder 243; A. Hayden to Charlotte Pynchon, February 9, 1847, PVF; Meecher to James L. Trask, August 11, 1852, TVP, folder 74.

[9]Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 524; Union Bank appraiser's certificate, August 14, 1838, TVP, folder 183; undated list by Ventress, PVF.

As individuals, most cannot be portrayed, but some were given special mention: "old Robert" and "old Caesar" were remembered fondly by one of Charlotte's cousins; "old Moosa" was still a faithful tenant in 1872; "old Jeff" worked for Charlotte Ventress as a gardener until his death that same year; "Mammy" was not forgotten by Alex and Willie while they were in Virginia; Dennis and Dick frequently served Ventress as messengers in the 1850s; Adolphe, aged twenty-four, was a talented cook purchased for $3,000 in 1859; Henry was the "rascally" runaway sold in 1856.[10]

The Ventresses' personal feelings about their black dependents are difficult to assess since the blacks were rarely mentioned. James Trask did opine in 1851 that his slaves were "the most independent people in the world," delighting in their pleasure at Christmas festivities. Ventress' views are unrecorded, although it seems discussion of slavery was part of the conversation of LaGrange. Peter Gassner, writing after a visit in 1855, offered the

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[10]F. H. Tappan to James A. Ventress, Jr., April 22, 1891, Charlotte P. Ventress to sons, March 28, 1872, PVF; William P. S. Ventress to Charlotte P. Ventress, February 24, 1872, TVP, folder 235; J. M. Anderson to Ventress, April 6, August 18, 1850, folder 245; William J. Bryant to Ventress, undated, folder 246; John H. Leatherman to Ventress, December 24, 1851, folder 257; L. H. Trudeau to Ventress, February 13, 1860, folder 269; J. P. Harrison receipt, June 22, 1859, folder 255; Curry & Person correspondence, December 1855, folder 25.

conclusion he had reached after more meditation on the subject, saying equivocally, "It is and it is not an Evil." He added an explanation: "as children, they are incapable of self supports & self Government and to Enlighten such capacities . . . would be a real calamity to them."[11] Ventress must have felt, in common with his peers, that emancipation or abolition would have been an even greater calamity.

It was his survivors who dealt longest with freed blacks. For example, Lawrence Ventress reported from Caledonia in 1871 that to motivate the tenants he would do his best, using a strong dose of "persuasion (as is my usual modus operandi)." Charlotte Ventress, surrounded by freedmen at LaGrange, mentioned them in almost every letter to her sons away in college, saying "the negroes all ask about you." Many of her lessees were former family slaves, some surnamed Trask. With all the trials their contract negotiations caused her, she admitted that "the negroes are great torments but in my opinion preferable to low white people." Whatever their personal feelings, she and her children did not fail to notice changes and act accordingly. Upon hearing of an incident at a concert in

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[11] James L. Trask to Israel C. Trask, December 27, 1851, TVP, folder 145; Gassner to Ventress, May 29, 1855, folder 243.

Virginia in 1872, Charlotte regretted that poverty had prevented her sons' attendance but was glad they did not go: "you may have been shot if you had been in company with the foolish boy who struck the negro. The day for striking negroes is past--and it is best for white people to let them alone." James A., Jr., showing similar realization, concluded a letter to his mother with greetings to the "neg black people."[12]

Another important set of relationships is that of Ventress and his siblings, particularly Ventress and his brother, both "honorable gentlemen . . . much attached to each other," as an old friend recalled in 1873.[13] Only a year or two apart in age, they maintained warm personal and business attachments for all their lives. They invested together, bought land from and sold it to each other, and occasionally vacationed together. Marrying much earlier but also into a wealthy family, William settled in Louisiana. A sugar planter with holdings in Ascension and Iberville Parishes, he lived near Donaldsonville with his

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[12]Lawrence T. Ventress to Charlotte P. Ventress, September 23, 1871, TVP, folder 231; Charlotte Ventress to sons, October 28, 1871, February 9, November 21, 1872, PVF; James A. Ventress, Jr., to Charlotte P. Ventress, April 20, 1872, TVP, folder 240.

[13]Orlando Dorsey to Charlotte P. Ventress, March 6, April 28, 1873, TVP, folder 191.

wife Augustus Maria Randolph and their six children, two of whom died of yellow fever in 1844. The second eldest was named for his uncle James. Described as "very wealthy" and "generous" before the war, William Ventress was listed among the large slaveholders of Louisiana in 1860. In Ascension Parish his estate was valued at $220,000; from his Ascension and Augusta (Iberville) plantations he produced 1,205 hogsheads of sugar in one year (1861-62).[14] After the war, however, he declared bankruptcy, selling much of his realty in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas to his brother. According to Charlotte Ventress, some of his problems had their roots in his generosity; she reported that before the war he had signed too often as surety for friends.

Charlotte had little patience with "Uncle William" in the years after her husband's death, since settlement of the estate was complicated by the brothers' unwritten financial agreements. She was also unsympathetic with William's drinking problem. In addition, she was annoyed and skeptical about his grandiose schemes to regain his

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[14]William P. S. Ventress to James Ventress, November 19, 1842, PVF; 1850 Ascension Parish census, family 701; Menn, Large Slaveholders, 123-24, 239; Louis Bouchereau, Statement of the Sugar and Rice Crops Made in Louisiana, 1871-72 (New Orleans: M. F. Dunn, 1872), 14, 17; Sidney A. Marchand, The Flight of a Century (1800-1900) in Ascension Parish, Louisiana (Donaldsonville: no publisher, 1936), 206.

fortune, especially when he tried to borrow $10,000 from her. But because he was a rather tragic figure, or, as she wrote privately, "a strange old case," he was received warmly at LaGrange. A mutual friend wrote to Charlotte from New Orleans in 1871, explaining her brother-in-law's situation:

> You ask me what W C Ventress was doing in the City The old Gentleman I think is in childhood and reflects on his Old days in New Orleans of trade & trafic negotiating for the cultivations of crops &c &c cant realize this kind of business is all at an [end] in the City.
> He boarded at Cassideys & when last in the City informed me He had quit acoholic liquors which he told me this time he found did not suit him so well.

By 1877 he had settled at Linwood Place in Ascension Parish, apparently with his eldest daughter Florence and her family. His sons Peter Randolph and James A. were also sugar planters, Peter on Bayou Maringouin near Rosedale in Iberville and James in Ascension on Magnolia and Stella plantations (St. Gabriel post office).[15]

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[15] Bouchereau, Statement of Sugar and Rice, 13, 15, 18; P. A. Champomier, Statement of the Sugar Crop Made in Louisiana, 1858-59 (New Orleans: Magne & Weisse, 1859), Iberville, 8; Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Louisiana (2 vols., Chicago: Goodspeed, 1892), I, 321; Menn, Large Slaveholders, 123-24; Moses Liddell to St. John R. Liddell, September 28, 1851, Liddell Family Papers. Charles Gallagher to Charlotte P. Ventress, December 9, 1871, TVP, folder 215; Charlotte Ventress to sons, November 27, 1872, February 23, 1873, William C. S. Ventress to Ventress brothers, May 25, 1877, PVF.

Ventress' sister Eliza Feltus and her several children lived in Wilkinson until the war, evidently moving then to New Orleans. They continued to spend long periods of time with the Ventresses after the war, one of them commenting that "dear LaGrange . . . feels more like 'Home sweet Home' to me than any other place." Charlotte felt keenly the drain on her patience and her purse during their long stays and Alex wrote frankly in 1872 that he hoped Aunt Eliza would not "sponge off you again all this summer."[16] Still the cousins all kept in touch and seemed genuinely interested in each other. Ventress' namesake nephew James A. V. Feltus attended Ole Miss, served in the 16th Mississippi Infantry, and became a Washington County planter known as "the father of Leland" because he founded the town in 1884. His older brother Lovick Ventress Feltus (1831-1904) worked for his Uncle James' New Orleans factors in the 1850s, also served in the 16th Mississippi, and after the war occupied himself as a sugar planter on Forest Home plantation, a Randolph family estate.[17]

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[16]Eliza Feltus to ?, December 3, 1871, and Charlotte P. Ventress to sons, November 29, 1871, PVF; James A. Ventress, Jr., to Charlotte Ventress, May 3, 1872, TVP, folder 236, May 20, 1873, folder 240.

[17]Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi, II, 172; Rowland, History of Mississippi, III, 244-45; "Last Roll," Confederate Veteran, XII (December 1904), 597; Bouchereau, Statement of Sugar and Rice, 1873-74, 14.

Ventress' large family seems to have commanded his spare-time hours. He did not seek the sustenance of religion or a wide circle of friends, relying instead on his relatives and his own devices for solace, mental stimulation, and recreation.

Coming to Wilkinson County as a child, Ventress never considered any other home. Among the "First Families of Mississippi," the Ventresses of his generation grew to maturity with the state itself. Aged twelve in the year of statehood and fifty-six at secession, Ventress was in his prime during the "flush times" preceding the war, the period of his most important public service.

A Whig, then a Union Democrat, he found in the 1850s that he was out of step with the democracy which, even in staid Wilkinson, had turned to fire-eating. Never strictly a "party man," he was somewhat overbearing and impatient of opposition, holding to principles not always popular with the electorate. When he began his political career, in a county whose noblesse oblige was not an empty slogan, Ventress was a natural choice. He was not a brilliant orator nor an enthusiastic campaigner, but played by the rules, worked his way from a quiet freshman representative to speaker and senator, did his committee work, and labored for special projects. The university, completion of the public buildings, and the agricultural

and geological survey, while not the most controversial of issues, were important matters to a person of better-than-ordinary educational background and interested in Mississippi's status vis-à-vis other states. His key work for the university was in the early stages, shepherding the bill through the legislature and speaking whenever possible for the general needs of education. The "father of the university" then seemed content to allow others to direct routine business. For the penitentiary, Ventress was concerned less with the construction than with penal theories. Obviously a serious researcher, he molded the legislative committee reports to fit current philosophy, at the same time revealing his practical bent--the institution must show a profit and produce useful items for an agricultural economy. As a scientist and planter, he also helped spearhead the drive for agricultural diversification. Undoubtedly, his observations of heavily populated European farmlands and the deterioration of once-fertile soils in southwestern Mississippi prompted his actions. He admired and promoted the ambitions of B. L. C. Wailes, like himself a man of learning, an aristocrat who was concerned as much for the future of Mississippi as for his own prosperity.

Never a serious statewide politician, Ventress exerted his influence and energies for the old Natchez district and for himself. Not averse to speculation in

land, he invested wisely, both on his own and in partnership with his more venturesome brother. By 1860 he had parlayed his undivided third interest in his father's farm into an estate of some 11,000 acres valued in 1860 at upwards of $500,000. Although his marriage to Charlotte Pynchon certainly was a major contributing factor to his prosperity, his properties elsewhere in Mississippi, Texas, and Pointe Coupee Parish were his separate estates. Managing and financing the vast domain were no small feats, requiring constant attention and shrewd business sense. Short of cash on occasion and suffering reverses from poor market conditions and natural disasters, Ventress nonetheless maintained his inherited land and the Trask properties intact, never selling, always augmenting and improving.

Likewise, he continued always to improve his mind and broaden his horizons. His inventing and experimenting began in Europe and continued until the month before his death. Not many of his peers enjoyed similar avocations, a circumstance noted frequently in published notices, both during his life and afterward. Travel, too, was a practical indulgence. After his eight years abroad, Ventress was content at home for some time, only occasionally joining his brother on vacations. In the 1850s, however, he traveled to the North--not unusual in itself--but he did not frequent the resorts. Married to a New Englander, he

centered the sojourns on her family and the machinery shops from which he and other planters purchased most of their equipment. In 1860, on their last trip North, the Ventresses also trekked to Philadelphia, specifically to select furnishings for the renovation of their home. Few Mississippi planters interested in home improvement consulted professional architects and fewer still chose a Philadelphian with a national reputation. Once again, Ventress stepped from the mainstream.

As his obituary noted, he was "no ordinary man." Blessed with a quick mind, nurtured by extraordinary learning experiences, and "stimulated by a laudable ambition to be useful in his day and generation,"[18] James Alexander Ventress used his talents to good advantage in the service of Mississippi.

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[18]Both quotations from Woodville Republican, July 27, 1867.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

DESCRIPTION AND DRAWING OF A STEREOMETER

Art. XXX.--Description of a Stereometer. By James Alexander Ventress, Esq. Communicated by the Author.

The bulk of a known weight of solid, or irregular figure, is generally obtained by immersion in water. In the common weighing bottle for ascertaining the specific gravity of solids in the state of powder, a known weight of the powder is introduced into a phial, and the interstices filled up with water, the difference between the quantity of water required to fill the phial when empty, and after the powder is introduced, being evidently the bulk of the powder. But if the powder dissolves in water or the liquid employed, we obtain by this means not the space which the substance occupies in the solid state, but that which it occupies when in solution. The difference is considerable and irregular.

The stereometer which I propose is not liable to error from this source. In the coniometer of Captain Say and Mr. Leslie errors of this kind are also avoided, although in a way totally different.

To illustrate the principle of the instrument proposed, let us suppose a quantity of any powder or saline body, which we wish to examine, to be introduced into the

common weighing bottle, and a phial full of water adroitly inverted over it, so that the system was air-tight. The water in the superior phial would descend, and fill up the interstices of the powder, while the displaced air would ascend and occupy the upper part. It is evident that the quantity of air in the upper phial will represent the interstices of the powder, or the difference between the bulk of the powder and the capacity of the weighing bottle, which is known. In the weighing bottle we learn the bulk of the solid by marking the quantity of water necessary to fill up the interstices; in the stereometer proposed, by measuring the air which previously occupied these interstices. The following construction is found to be particularly convenient for that purpose.

As in the illustration, two vessels, A and B, are employed (See Plate II, Fig. 2), A being analogous to the weighing bottle, and B to the inverted phial. A is ground so as to fit into B air-tight, and is intended for the reception of the solid. B contains a glass stop-cock near that extremity into which the vessel A is ground to fit. Through its performation, the vessel B is filled with water previous to each experiment. Upon joining the two vessels and turning the stop-cock, the water in B descends and displaces the air in A, which is made to contain just as much water as the ball and stem of B. If, therefore, the vessel A were empty when the water is allowed to descend,

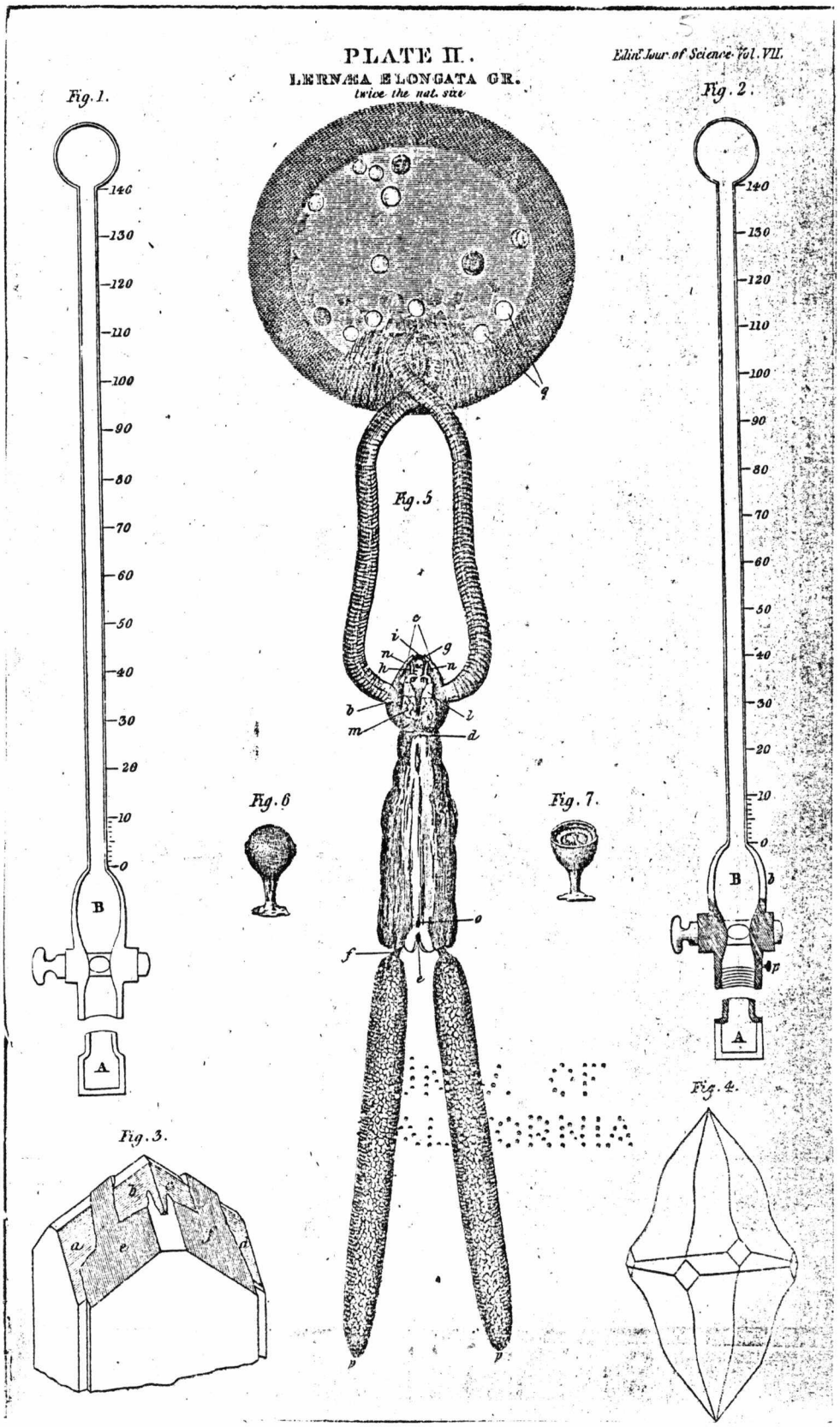


FIGURE 5. Drawing of a Stereometer

the air which it contained would evidently occupy the whole of the ball and stem of B; but if a quantity of solid matter has been introduced into A before the water is allowed to descend, the air which rises into B will be diminished by the bulk of the solid, and the water will not fall to the bottom of the stem as in the former case, but stand at a certain height in it. That the height at which the water stands in the stem may be easily appreciated, it is graduated from the bottom upwards into hundredths of a cubic inch of its capacity. If, with a known weight of powder, the water stood at the point marked 50 on the stem, the bulk of the substance would therefore be 50/100, or 1/2 a cubic inch. Knowing thus the weight of a certain bulk of the substance, we have only to compare it with the bulk of the same weight of distilled water, to obtain an expression for the specific gravity of the substance on the usual scale.

In the instrument which has been constructed, and which is represented in the figure, the lower vessel, or rather the lower vessel together with that part of the upper vessel which is beneath the stop-cock contains 2.33 cubic inches, which is also the sum of the capacities of the ball and stem. The stem itself contains 1.40 cubic inches, is long (sixteen inches) and widened into a ball at the top, the only one of which is to enable us to dispense with a great length of tube, which would inevitably follow from its being so small as above described, and which

smallness is requisite for the delicacy of the instrument.

The construction of the instrument might perhaps be considerably facilitated, by making the part of B (see Fig. 2) under b, of brass, with a brass stop-cock. To the neck of A a brass ring might be cemented, and the two vessels made to fit into each other by screwing. To avoid the slight compression of air in A, which it would be difficult to avoid in screwing, a minute hole might be drilled into B at p, into which a small screw should be passed after the connection between A and B is completed.*

Should a portion of the substance of which we wish to ascertain the specific weight be dissolved by the water, which occurs in nearly all saline bodies, the liquid would be slightly expanded, or contracted from that cause, and consequently the air above would be proportionally condensed or rarified. When solution takes place the liquid more generally contracts, as the density of a solution is generally greater than the mean density of its constituents. The air above is therefore in most cases of solution slightly rarified.

But this is easily corrected by separating the parts A and B under water, and then sinking B till the surface of the water in the stem coincides with the surface of the

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*Stereometers, with such modifications, may be had handsomely executed, from John Dunn, optician, 25, Thistle Street, Edinburgh.

water without. In this way we obtain the true specific gravity of the substance in the solid state.

It is proper always to employ water which has been recently boiled, and which contains little air, to fill the upper vessel, as many salts, when dissolving, appear to disengage the air which water holds absorbed, which, mixing with the air from the interstices, would derange the calculation. It has been found that air passing up so rapidly through the boiled water, as it does in the present case, is not sensibly absorbed, so that no error of an opposite kind is committed by employing water previously deprived of most of its air.[1]

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[1] Edinburgh Journal of Science, VII (July 1827), 143-45.

APPENDIX B

SPEECH TO THE LEGISLATURE (1842)

The time has arrived for the close of our legislative duties. The social relations created by our labors for the common good of our country, may be for many merely suspended, while for others, perhaps, forever destroyed.

During the progress of our legislative action, I have observed with much satisfaction, that forbearance and civility have ever characterized the intercourse of member with member, and party with party.

In casting a retrospective glance at the past, it will be perceived that great as have been the obstacles opposed to our progress, nevertheless, we have so far vanquished them as to have accomplished business, equal in amount and importance to that performed by any previous legislature.

Should your constituents, gentlemen, complain of the increased taxation, which you have thought proper to impose upon them--tell them of the condition of the Treasury--of the depreciation of the State warrants--of the taunts of the stranger--and, above all, tell them of the foul blot of dishonor which, by these means, has been imprinted upon the State's escutcheon.

Hereafter the records of these times will be read

with deep interest--for the character of a Republican people is chronicled by the acts of their representatives. The prejudice and misrepresentation, which have been sent abroad hand in hand to stab the reputation of the State, will then be unmasked, and our efforts within this Hall, to raise her from her fallen condition, will be properly appreciated.

Well might the people of Mississippi, at this time, in one voice and in the spirit of an Emmett, exclaim,-- "Write not my history until the present generation has passed away, and another shall have arisen to rule for its time the destinies of the nation."

Think not, gentlemen, that, in retiring from this Hall, your duties are completed. You are called upon in your retirement, as citizens and as legislators, to forward the cause of morality--the only sure basis of proper legislation--and above all, to endeavor to elevate the elective franchise. When party feeling and party rancor shall have subsided--when national happiness and national prosperity shall have become the only incentives to the actions of the politician and the statesman--then, and not till then, will the ballot box become the recorder of political capability, and political virtue. To entertain, however, the remotest idea of the immediate consummation of such a hope, would, when properly viewed, appear to be nought else than the adumbration of a mind untaught by observation, and

unpracticed by experience.

Compelled as we are to abuse our expectations, of practical results from the regions of abstract philosophy, we are nevertheless called upon to strive industriously to attain to its nearest approximation.

Anxious as each member upon this floor must be to return to his home, his family and friends, I am assured by my own sensibilities, that he cannot bid farewell to his co-laborers of this Hall, without experiencing feelings akin to those awakened in the mind by the plaintive eloquence of the falling leaf, which ever betokens the approach of the destroying blast of winter.

In return, gentlemen, for the honor you have conferred upon me, by the adoption of the resolution, placed in my hands by the Clerk, permit me to thank you, and, in conclusion, to say, that will cause me to cherish the fond recollection of having, in the opinion of this House, performed my duty.[1]

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[1]Vicksburg Daily Whig, February 13, 1842.

APPENDIX C

GENEALOGICAL CHARTS

Applies to all charts:

bb: born before

c: circa; approximately

db: died before

m: married

*: see separate chart

underlined data unconfirmed in primary sources

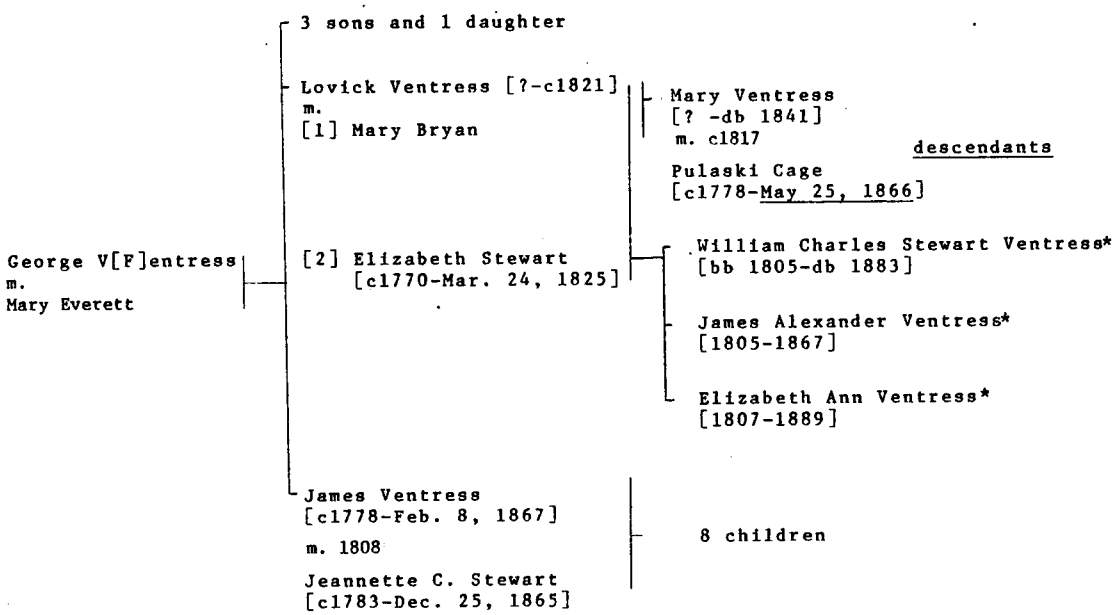


FIGURE 6. Genealogical Chart -- George V(F)entress

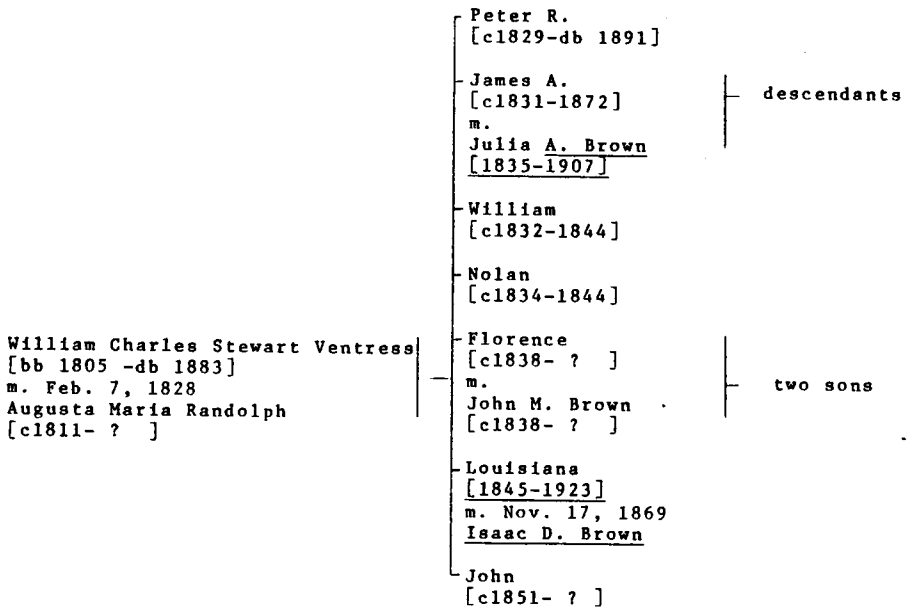


FIGURE 7. Genealogical Chart -- William C. S. Ventress

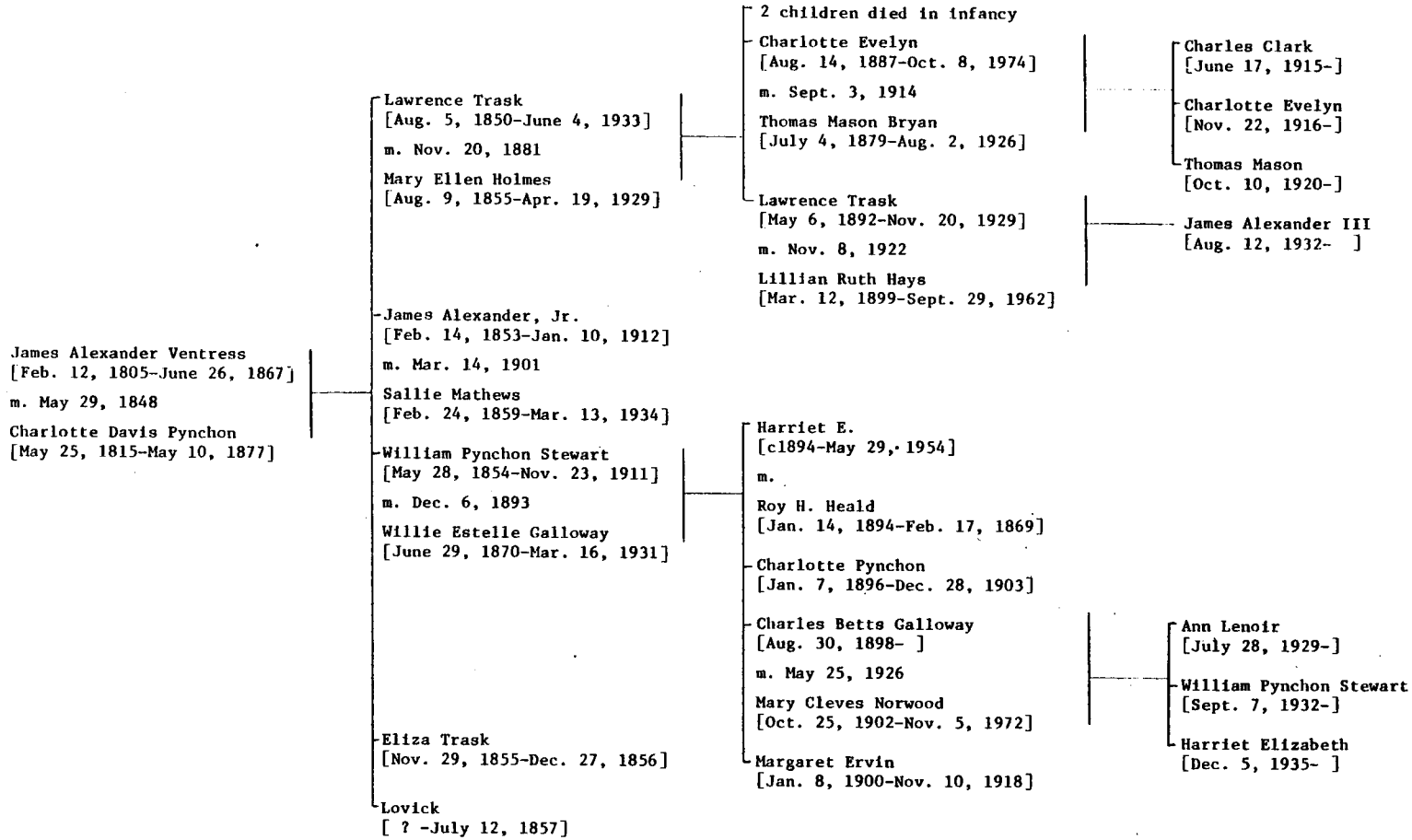


FIGURE 8. Genealogical Chart -- James A. Ventress

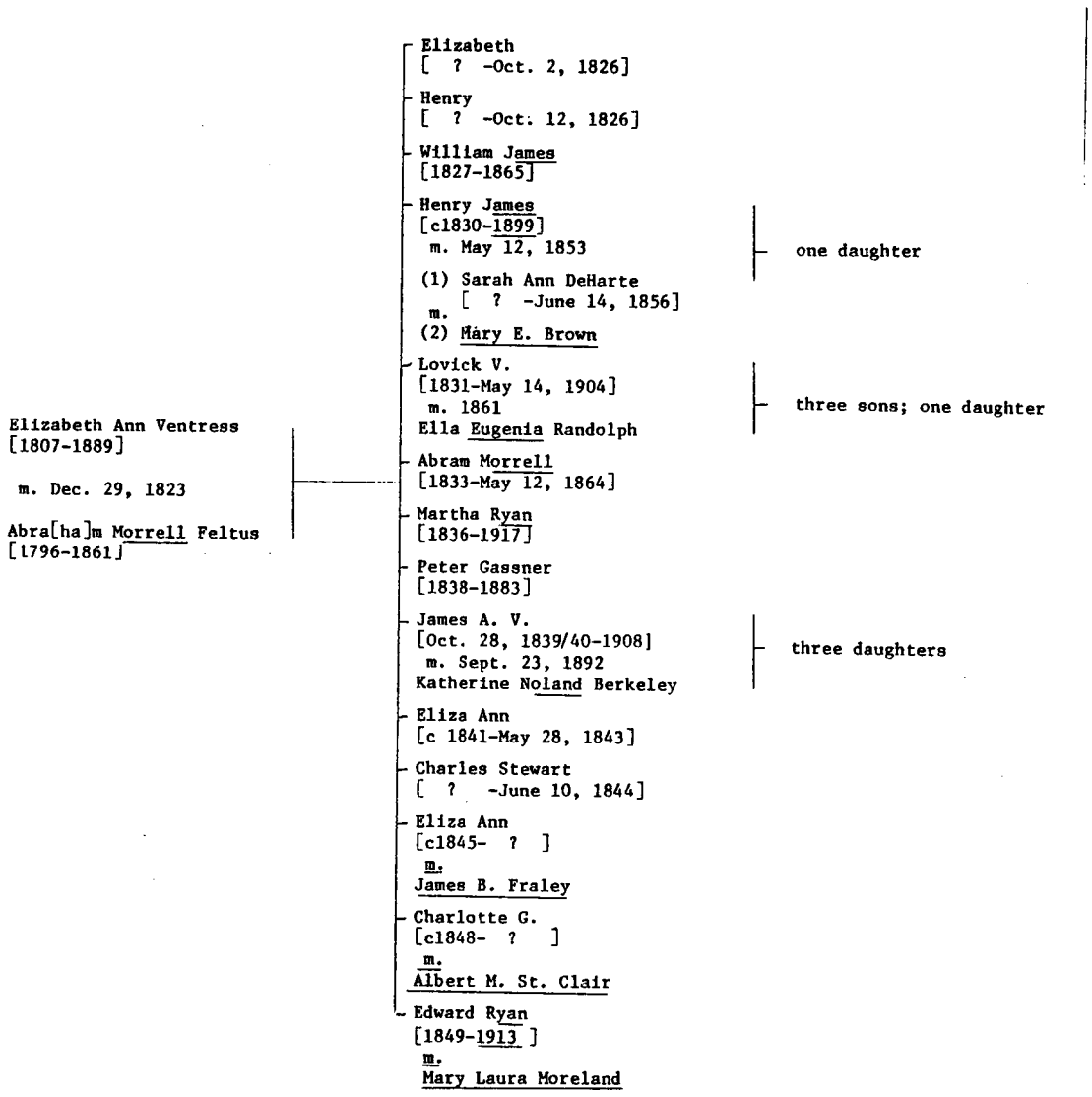


FIGURE 9. Genealogical Chart -- Elizabeth A. Ventress

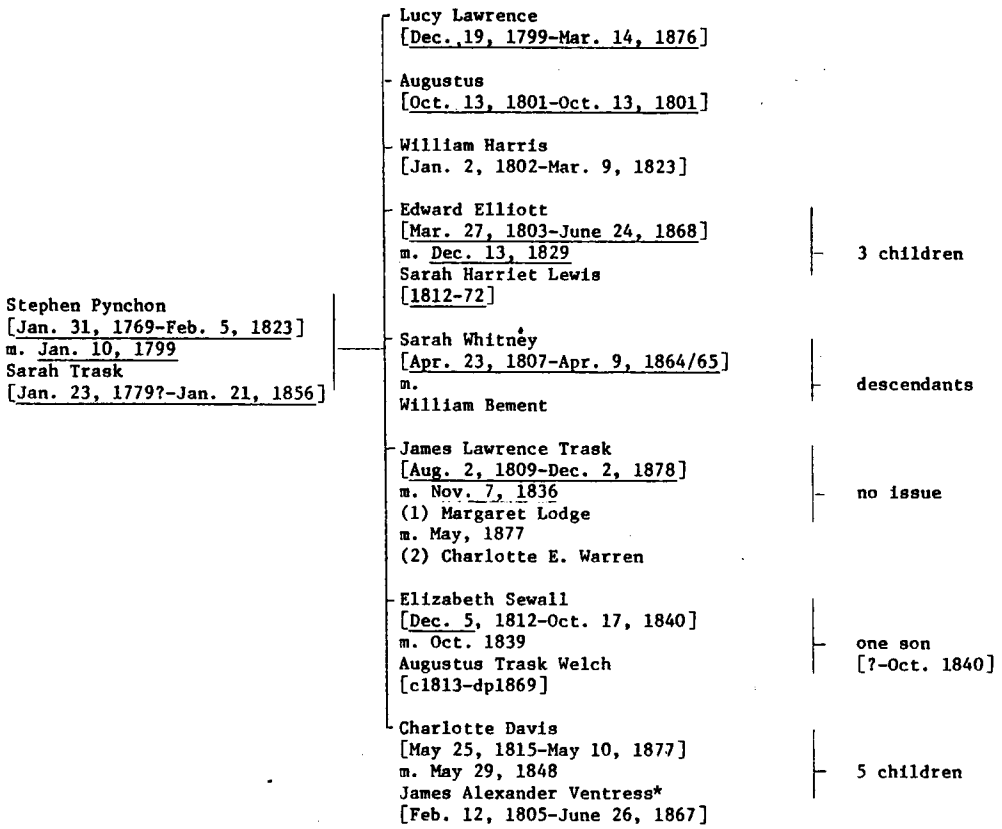


FIGURE 10. Genealogical Chart -- Pynchon Family

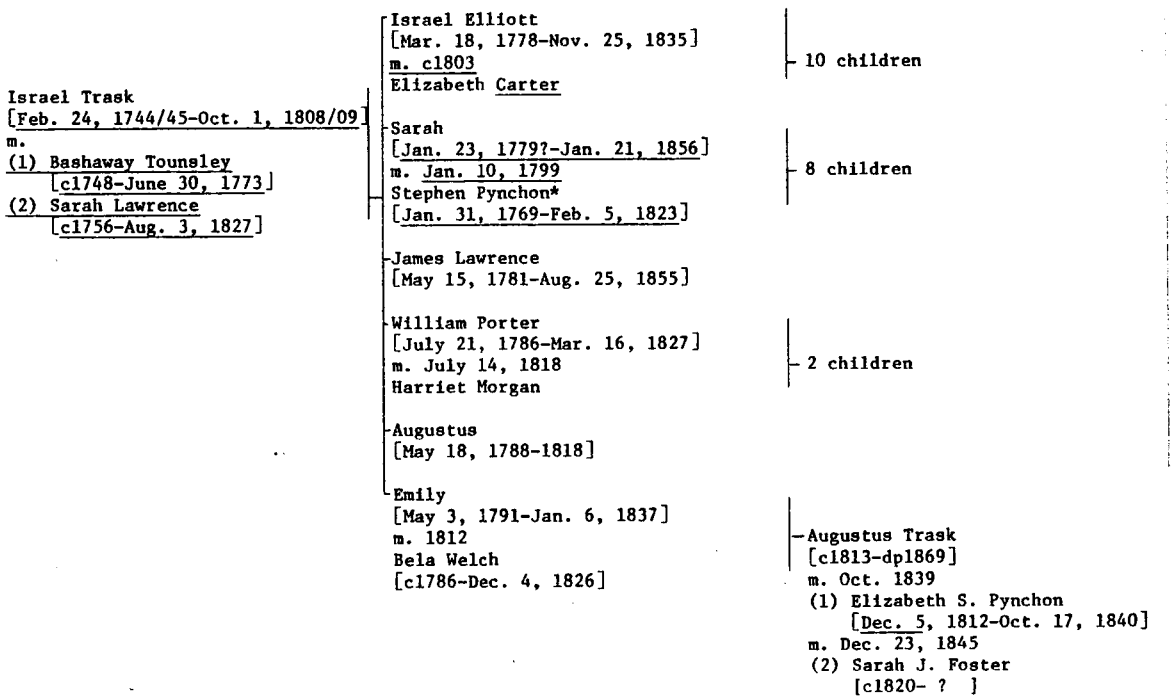


FIGURE 11. Genealogical Chart -- Trask Family

VITA

Lynda Lasswell Crist was born in Bay City, Texas, on November 3, 1945. She attended public schools in Montreal, Canada, and Houston, Texas, Marymount College in Rome, Italy, and graduated from Jesse H. Jones Senior High School, Houston, in 1963. Enrolling in Rice University in 1963, she graduated in 1967 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in French and History. She received a Master of Arts in History from Rice in 1969.

After three years as assistant editor of The Papers of Jefferson Davis, Rice University, she entered the Graduate School, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, in September 1973. She was graduate assistant, The Papers of Andrew Johnson, from 1973 until completing her course work in 1976. She received the Doctor of Philosophy degree in American History in August 1980. She is a member of Phi Kappa Phi and Pi Delta Phi.

From October 1976 until May 1979 she was associate editor of The Papers of Jefferson Davis and was named editor in May 1979.

She is married to William B. Crist, Sr., an electrical engineer and master electrician.