# William Clifton Mabry

## Aug. 28, 1877-April 3, 1950

***First board chairman at East Central Community College, Newton County superintendent of education, sheriff, senator, newspaper publisher, and postmaster***

**By Kent Prince**
**His Grandson**
**Revised September 2019**

When the family asked William Clifton Mabry about his ancestors in 1940, he dictated a history to his daughter Annie Rose, relying mainly on memory and family tradition that traced out a fairly accurate account of migration into Newton County after the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek opened up Choctaw lands. He would be amazed at the detailed history now available — not only about his great-grandfather, whose name he could not remember, but back to the man who started the family line in Virginia in the late 1600s and maybe even a couple of generations earlier in England.

The most complete account of the updated information comes from Don Collins, whose book on the Mabrys has full detail on all those first generations. That work compiles the vast research by individual family members in the United States and Britain to trace the family lineage.[1] Collins even coordinated a DNA project to nail the genealogy as it weaves through the many spellings of the name. Maybury is the one used by the probable ancestors in England, but as late as 1880 we find the census in Mississippi spells it Maybry in the first reference to William Clifton, then 2 years old.

Using Collins, we can track William Clifton's ancestors back to Francis Maybury who arrived in Virginia in the 1670s. There are no records on Francis' parents, but Collins speculates he was born in the English midlands with earlier family roots in Sussex. The DNA project revealed that most of the Mabrys, Mayburys, and Mayberrys who trace back to Francis are descended from a

[1] The Mayburys, by Donald E. Collins, 2011, 3377 Mill Vista Rd., #3207, Highlands Ranch, CO 80120.

common ancestor, John Maybury, who lived for at least twenty years in Sussex County, England -- an ironworker who married in the village of Brightling in 1565.

In America, Francis was a farmer, but the English Maybury family was full of ironworkers, a large number of whom immigrated separately into Pennsylvania and started a whole other line of cousins. Francis settled in Henrico County, near Jamestown, but he left no tracks from his arrival until 1685 when he witnessed an indenture paper and, later that year, married Elizabeth Gilliam, a widow with five children. Her family was well established in Virginia, having been in America for years, possibly since 1635. They were prominent, closely associated with the Randolphs whose later generations included President Thomas Jefferson, Lighthorse Harry Lee and Robert E. Lee.

Francis and Elizabeth can be tracked from Henrico County to Charles City County and Surry County (including living along the Jones Hole Swamp) in the 27 years of their marriage. The tracks are listed in detail in Collins' book — land records, a dispute over a medical bill, witnesses to legal documents, and, of course, their own wills with inventories of their estates. There were seven children, including the youngest son who was named Hanchey (or Henchea or Hinchea — the link to Clifton's family tree), born between February 1697 and February 1698. Hinchia's name can possibly be traced to Elizabeth's mother being born a Henshaw. Elizabeth's brother was named Henshaw, and the name crops up in later Mabry generations.

Francis' will, written March 22, 1712[2], is signed with a full signature, indicating he could read and write. Collins notes that of the nine members of the Maybury family, only Francis and his son Charles are thought to have been able to read and write. The others signed with a mark which was sometimes the first letter of the name (Elizabeth marked with an E). Francis' inventory doesn't have much of a library — two bibles, a psalter and primer, and "two pares of specticalls."

That kind of detail, and more, is spread through Collins book as he works down the generations — Hinchea to his son Ephraim to his son Joel to his son Walter to his son Joel to his son Daniel to our William Clifton. Mabrys are in the Revolutionary war, suffer Indian attacks, and are on constant migrations to better land. One anecdote bears repeating: it falls in the late 1700s amid the Great Awakening, when religious fervor swept the land, and the home of Joel and Winnifred in Greensville County, Virginia, became known as Mabry Chapel, a gathering place for the growing Methodist movement. Bishop Francis Asbury, one of the founding pillars of Methodism, preached there several times. With an arbor built over the yard to accommodate hundreds of people, it was site of a quarterly conference in July 1775, and in his papers Asbury noted a congregation of 4,000 there in 1785. Ten years after Joel's death, Asbury moved the 1794 Virginia Conference meeting to Mabry Chapel because of an outbreak of smallpox in Petersburg. And he noted that the chapel had expanded again by the time he preached there on April 4, 1804.

**Walter Mabry,** who was born about 1782 in Fairfield County, South Carolina, and died in 1861 in Newton County, could be called the "domestic crossing relative" whose peripatetic travels brought the family line from the east coast into Alabama and then Mississippi. He married Elizabeth Allen Westbrook in Franklin County, Georgia, in 1805 or 1806. She was born April 2, 1787, and died after 1850.

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[2] The date on the will is March 22, 1711. That is under the old Julian Calendar. The modern calendar is a year later.

We get details about the lives of Walter and his children from other researchers rather than Collins, mostly a professional genealogist in Alabama who was hired to trace the family in 1980. In addition to the land grants in Franklin and Morgan counties in Georgia, these records show that by 1810, when Walter was in his mid-20s, he had moved to Tennessee and then to Clarke and Greene counties in what is now Alabama, at the time part of the Mississippi Territory. The 1812 census shows him and his wife with four children under 21, four boys and one girl.

Things were changing rapidly in those days, with a move underway to split the sprawling Mississippi Territory into two states. In 1817, Walter Mabry's name shows on a petition to Congress from west Alabama residents opposing settlements across the Tombigbee in what was soon to become Mississippi. A year later in 1818, a new border had been set along the Tombigbee, and Mississippi and Alabama were divided into separate states. Under pressure from the unstoppable influx of land-hungry pioneers heading west, Choctaws signed the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830 and a swath of land, stretching from the Tombigbee to the Mississippi, opened up to settlers. Walter, despite his earlier objection, was one of the many migrants who headed west and his name shows up in the 1840 census in east Mississippi in Lauderdale County. In 1850 the census finds him a few miles away in Newton County; he is 69, a farmer, living with his wife Elizabeth, 63, and a daughter Eliza, 21, with other Mabry relatives across the line in Lauderdale. His name is not in the 1860 census.

**Joel Mabry** was Walter and Elizabeth's fourth child, born about 1812 in Clarke County, Alabama. He married Elizabeth Bryant, the child of William and Rhodicey Bryant, on Jan. 11, 1837. She too was born in Alabama, according to census records, but the marriage took place in Talbot County, Georgia, where her father's will was probated, although he had died across the line in Tallapoosa County, Alabama. Records don't explain the comings and goings between Alabama and Georgia, much less Mississippi, which first shows up in a sale of property on June 14, 1844, in Oktibbeha County. The Alabama researcher said she could find no record of his purchasing that Oktibbeha land, so she could not determine when he moved to Mississippi. She also noted that his wife did not sign for the sale, indicating Elizabeth may have died by this time.

Just as the move into Mississippi is unknown, so is the date of Joel's marriage to his second wife Jane. She co-signed a land deal in August 1845, indicating they were married by then. The move to Newton County came in the early 1850s. On April 22, 1853, Joel sold back the 40 acres he had bought from James Scott in Oktibbeha County. Joseph Loper of Newton County acknowledged the sale, in which Scott paid $130, and it was recorded in Oktibbeha County, July 16, 1853.

The 1860 census lists Joel, 49, and Jane, 36, with seven children in the house in Newton County. Three are the children of Elizabeth: Rebecca, George and Abraham. Elizabeth's oldest daughter, Eliza, now about 23, has moved on. In addition, the family includes four of Jane's children: Eli, 10, Daniel, 8, Walter, 5, and Mary 3. Daniel, born Dec. 3, 1852, is the link to the W.C. Mabry family.

Joel, a farmer, last appears in the 1870 census, when he is 57 and Jane 44. He is not in the 1880 census, and Jane Mabry, 55, is listed as widowed. She is living with her son Eli, 29, and his wife Louisa and three small children. Also in the house is Jane Williams, Eli's 90-year-old grandmother.

**Daniel R. Mabry Family, c. 1895**
**From left: Front row -- Daniel, twins Noda and Nona, Nora, and Elizabeth Gilbert Mabry**
**Back row --Eli Clinton, Stephen Carther, William Clifton, and John Cosmer**

**Daniel Mabry**, Clifton's father, had a farm west of Meridian, near other Mabry families. The area (not too far from the aptly named Lost Gap) lies in the rocky hills that Clifton's daughter Lorene called the Toes of the Appalachians, too small to be the Foothills. The house, north of Chunky, had a "dogtrot" center hall, and sat on a hill with a field in front and native rock walls in the yard. There was a swamp a mile away, and family members loved telling how one hot night when Daniel was asleep on the floor in the dogtrot a panther woke him up, bumping under the house.

Daniel was full of fun, witty, "one of a kind." For generations, almost everyone who talked about him hauled up the same anecdote about what a joker he was. It centered on a lumber company's narrow gauge rail line that went by the Mabry fields. Engineers would toot their whistle when they passed, egging him to stop work and wave back. One day Daniel saw the train coming, stripped off all his clothes and waited in the corn. When the engineer drew close, he jumped out in the open, waving madly, buck naked.

Daniel also grew his own tobacco. Family accounts describe him as going to bed at dark and getting up at 4 a.m. He would start a fire and sit for two hours, smoking his pipe, waiting for his breakfast. The smell of tobacco "stunk up the whole house." In recounting the history, Annie Rose Mabry, his granddaughter, wrote — and struck through — "Grandpa did not read or write,

and to the consternation of his children, wouldn't try to learn to do this. Grandma Mabry (Elizabeth Jane Gilbert) did all of that for the family."

He also suffered from asthma — stories tell of his standing with his head on the mantel, trying to breathe. Being allergic was a trait passed on to later generations -- to Clifton and some of his children and grandchildren.

At a family reunion, somebody remembered Daniel's funeral. It was Nov. 11, 1930 — winter, and raining. Two men had to get down in the grave with buckets, throwing out the water. The weather was so bad that it was mentioned in the family's brief "card of thanks" to mourners, published in The Newton Record which was edited then by D.R. Mabry's son Clifton: "We desire through the medium of The Record to express our deep appreciation to our friends for their sympathy, and for the many kind deeds during the last illness and death of our father. Especially do we appreciate your faithfulness shown in braving the rain and mud to assist in the last sad rites, and are grateful for the beautiful floral offerings."

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## Mississippi Mabry Ancestral Line of William Clifton Mabry

**Great Grandparents**

WALTER MABRY, b. About 1782, Fairfield County, South Carolina; d. 1861, Newton County.

ELIZABETH ALLEN WESTBROOK, b. 02 April 1787, d. After 1850. Married in Franklin County, Georgia, in 1805 or 1806.

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**Grandparents**

JOEL MABRY, born about 1812, Alabama; died between 1870 - 1880, Newton County.

2 marriages (1) ELIZABETH BRYANT 11 Jan 1837 in Talbot County, Georgia (2) JANE WILLIAMS about. 1842, daughter of WILLIAMS and JANE (MNU). She was born about 1826 in Alabama, and died after 1880 in Newton County.

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**Parents**

DANIEL RICHARD MABRY born 03 Dec 1852 in Mississippi; died 11 Nov 1930 in Chunky.

2 marriages ELIZABETH JANE GILBERT, 11 Nov 1876 in Newton County. She was born 23 Aug 1853 in Chunky, and died 12 Sep 1915 in Newton County; (2) ELIZA MCCORMICK JOHNSON 13 Oct 1917 in Newton County. She was born 22 Sep 1851 in Newton County, and died 17 Dec 1932 in Newton County.

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**Siblings**

WILLIAM CLIFTON MABRY, born 28 Aug 1877, Newton County; died 03 Apr 1950, Newton.

STEPHEN CARTHER MABRY, born 13 Feb 1880, Newton County, died 03 Mar 1950, Canton.

ELI CLINTON MABRY, born Nov 1881, Newton County; died 03 Aug 1952, Madison County.

JULIA L. MABRY, born 17 May 1884, Chunky; died 02 Dec 1885, Chunky.

JOHN COSMER MABRY, born 1886, Chunky; died 24 Mar 1952, Canton.

NONA MABRY, (twin) born 05 Oct 1888, Newton County; died 30 Nov 1927, Moore's Mill, Newton County.

NODA MABRY, (twin) born 05 Oct 1888, Newton County; died Nov 1966, Jackson.

NORA MABRY, born 10 May 1892, Newton County; died 29 Nov 1980.

HERMAN MABRY, born about 1900, died in infancy.

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**Children**

WILMER CLIFTON MABRY, (W.C. MABRY Jr.) born 27 Oct 1903, Stratton; died 13 Aug 1986, Gulfport.

LORENE VIRGINIA MABRY, born 19 Jan 1906, Union; died 28 Jan 1978, Newton.

WILLA BOLTON MABRY, born 09 Oct 1909, Decatur; died 09 Dec 2001, DeFuniak Springs, Florida.

ANNIE ROSE MABRY, born 06 Oct 1913, Decatur; died 03 Sep 1989, Newton.

# Clifton Mabry, Educator

Mabry Cafeteria at East Central Community College is named for William Clifton Mabry, one of the founders of the college who was the first man appointed to the board and elected its first president. He served as chairman for 35 consecutive years and remained a board member until 1948. The cafeteria, a conspicuous landmark on campus, honors only one phase of Mabry's lifetime in public service. He also served as county superintendent of education, sheriff, senator, newspaper publisher and postmaster.

It was quite a career, especially considering his country upbringing on a farm out from Chunky — and considering that his father probably couldn't read or write. We don't know what propelled him off to boarding school at 15 and to the life he pursued, but one role model may have been his Uncle Thomas Jefferson Reynolds Jr.

Reynolds, who was married to Clifton's father's sister, was the first mayor of Chunky, a school teacher for 40 years, a deputy sheriff, and the county superintendent of education. A 1st lieutenant in the Confederate Chunky Heroes, he was severely wounded in the battle of Franklin, Tennessee, the same battle in which Clifton's grandfather Stephen R. Gilbert was killed. Clifton would have been well aware of the history: Stephen's widow Delilah Loper Gilbert lived on the Mabry farm for years.

Clifton's father Daniel Richard came from a long line of farmers, and we have no indication that Clifton found life on the Mabry farm particularly unhappy as he grew up. They lived west of Meridian, near the farms of other Mabry families. Later generations remembered Daniel's sense of humor, but Clifton did not inherit it. One cousin, in rare criticism, said Clifton was just too serious: a teetotaler, prohibitionist, Methodist steward, staunch moralist, educator and altogether upright citizen. Tall, thin, stern, a fastidious dresser -- he seems to have been oddly strait-laced in that family. "He got all of it," remarked one cousin. "There wasn't any more to go around." She said the only time she could remember him having fun was when he was playing with the children. His daughter Lorene also remarked on how he loved his grandchildren, taking them with him as he drove on business. She said he was the one who saw her off to college, the one who sent her cookies and cakes, and the one who wrote her every week.

**Clifton and Virgie Mabry 1942**

Clifton was the eldest of seven children. He was born Aug. 28, 1877, and left home in 1892 to attend Cosdetta High School at Melon. Further education came at the South Mississippi Boarding School at Poplarville where he was deeply influenced by W. I. Thames, whom he lauded as the "Moses of South Mississippi." [3]

[3] He took advanced courses later as a special student while county superintendent of education, from 1909-11 at the Agricultural and Mechanical College, now Mississippi State University.

Back home in Newton County Clifton took a job working in a post office and met Virgie Thornton, who was teaching at Macedonia School. They were married Oct. 19, 1902. He was 25, she was 23.

Within a year Clifton had launched his career in education, first as teacher-principal at Stratton (1903-05), then at Union (1905-07). In those little one or two teacher schools, Clifton must have heightened his sense that students get better education in places like the boarding school he attended. Consolidation, he thought, was the answer — a controversial subject since it meant closing small local schools and making students travel to the centralized location. It was an idea he took with him as he moved into politics. He was elected county superintendent in the1907 fall primary, succeeding W.W. Coursey, who had served for eight years. In a later history of county schools, Mabry wrote "the outstanding event of Coursey's terms being the securing of a sufficient tax levy to extend the school term to 5 or 6 months…."

Consolidation was an idea taking hold, and in 1910 the legislature authorized counties to consolidate schools, add necessary transportation, and set up agricultural high schools. Opposition, however, was swift and probably should not have been surprising. Tensions rose and the controversy erupted into public opposition. People didn't like giving up their little schools and worried that taxes would go up. Mabry wrote a history of education in the county, published in the Newton Record in April 1936, but he doesn't go into any of that. Instead, he proudly covers his own tenure as if he were writing about someone else:

"Taking advantage of these new laws, W.C. Mabry at once put on an extensive campaign through the county in an effort to acquaint the people with the potential opportunities offered by this new legislation. At that time, there were between 20 and 30 white schools in the county consisting largely of one and two teacher schools, providing only for the study of grammar school textbooks. Therefore, the superintendent proposed a county system of consolidated grammar schools in order to provide a graded system of two to four teacher schools, and a county wide Agricultural High School which would offer high school opportunities at a nominal cost. All the towns by this time had their own separate district high schools. The A.H.S. was located at Decatur in 1910 but not built because of lack of funds. In 1911 the advent of the cotton boll weevil so upset the whole economic system of the county that these plans were greatly retarded."

With the A.H.S. project hanging, Mabry ran for re-election. His opponent was W.W. Coursey, who campaigned to return to the office he had left four years earlier. It was a close race, and Coursey edged past Mabry by a scant nine votes in the August 1911 primary, the only election he ever lost. The official count: Coursey 1,322, Mabry 1,313. Mabry failed to carry his home town of Decatur, 187-131, and was tied in his birthplace Chunky 83-83. Newton went for him overwhelmingly, 283-118, but that wasn't enough to get him re-elected.

Coursey eventually got the A.H.S. established and the first session opened in September 1914 with 40 boarding students. Over time, according to Mabry's history, super-consolidation reached its peak and — as he put it — the Depression caused great anxiety, but the schools remained consolidated.

In a concluding note, the history turns to how the county took care of the segregated schools for blacks. "During the administration of W.C. Mabry, about 1909, he succeeded in securing an appropriation from the Schlater Funds to pay the salary of a county supervisor whose duty it was

to go into the schools of the county and teach Home Science, which included sanitation, cooking, sewing, etc. Also, the salary of a full-time teacher of the same subjects was furnished for the Newton negro school, and in 1911 an appropriation of $1,500 from the same source was secured to supplement a fund for the establishment of a Training School for teachers in connection with Newton colored school. It is said that this was the first appropriation for this purpose in Mississippi."

Advocating schools for black children, just as advocating for school consolidation, went counter to the prevailing sentiment among Mississippi's rural electorate. At the forefront were white supremacists like James K. Vardaman, who had been governor from 1904-08 and was running for the U.S. senate against incumbent William Alexander Percy in the 1911 campaign, the first time the office was up for election instead of appointment. The raucous race dominated state and local politics, but we have no information on whether it filtered into attitudes toward the county superintendent, although we can guess it did. The Newton Record at the time was a staunch supporter of Vardaman and wrote about the campaign in almost every issue.

Although out of the superintendent's office, Mabry continued to work for education while remaining in other jobs in county government[4] — first as a deputy sheriff and tax collector, 1912 to 1919, then as sheriff for a four-year term. In 1924, after he did not run for re-election as sheriff, Clifton moved to Newton and in 1926 bought the Newton Record. Throughout he was advocating the expansion of the agricultural high school, and in 1928, following legislative authorization of a statewide system of junior colleges, the A.H.S. in Decatur added freshman college work. Eighteen students enrolled for the first semester. As Mabry described it in his history, "This was the starting point in the establishment of the East Central Junior College," now East Central Community College. Mabry was first president of the EC board and remained a member until illness forced his retirement in 1948.

"The dominant personality of the trustees and county officials in the history of the college is generally conceded to be W.C. Mabry," wrote James B. Young and James M. Ewing in their book The Mississippi Public Junior College Story, the First Fifty Years 1922-1972. "The first man appointed to the board and the first chairman of it served thirty-five consecutive years as chairman. From 1914 to 1948 he presided over sessions leading to the establishment of the college, the addition of the outlying counties, and the growth and development of the plant…."

An incident in Newton in 1929 also illustrates Mabry's continuing interest in education even after he left public service. Dessie Pilate, whose husband Noah Hannibal Pilate came to Newton in 1928 as principal of the segregated school for black children, told the story years later in a conversation with Carol Mabry, Clifton's grand-daughter-in-law. Mrs. Pilate said their school burned down the year after they arrived and she praised Mabry for helping get it rebuilt. The way she described it, the quick construction would never have happened without his work, although Mrs. Pilate said she wasn't sure exactly what he did or where all that money came from. Nancy Williams' history of Newton reported that financing originated in part through the fund named for Julius Rosenwald, a philanthropist who was chairman of the board of Sears, Roebuck and Company and a supporter of education for blacks. The quick construction produced a one-story

[4] W.C. Mabry's focus on education was almost genetic: all four of his children earned college degrees, three of them taught school, two grandchildren taught in college, and two great-grandchildren are teaching now.

building that was expanded later, with some work done by students from the school shop class who were paid by the National Youth Administration, a New Deal program.

With the opening of the Rosenwald School, black enrollment began to expand. At the time, schools scattered out in the county taught the first eight grades, but black children from Decatur, Lawrence, Hickory and even Jasper County came to Newton and boarded with families for high school classes. Among them, Mrs. Pilate said, were Charles and Medgar Evers, brothers later famous in the Mississippi civil rights movement, who walked 12 miles from their home at Decatur to attend school in Newton, staying in town through the week and going home for weekends.

Mabry's career in public service went one further step when he was elected to the state Senate in 1932 in the midst of the Depression when the state's finances were all but ruined. Among the legislative votes he faced was one to cut funding for junior colleges, one of the many wrenching financial proposals before the legislature. The bill was to reduce by one-third the $170,000 that had been appropriated in 1930 — down to $115,000. Local tax collections were also falling, while enrollment was rising, so the effect was multiplied. There were fears colleges would opt to close rather than deal with the reductions. Nevertheless, Mabry joined in the 42 senators voting for the cuts. Seven did not vote but there were no nays. And as it turned out, all the junior colleges remained open, with growing enrollment.

When Mabry died in 1950, the East Central board passed a resolution recognizing his "long and faithful service." The resolution went on to "commend his example of loyalty and of recognition of the power of education for good in the world."

## Sheriff W.C. Mabry

Family legend says that when Sheriff W.C. Mabry hanged a murderer in 1922, it so distressed him that his hair turned white overnight.[5] The family didn't talk about it otherwise, for gruesome reason: the botched hanging left the prisoner dangling in a slipped noose that did not break his neck. He strangled for 18 minutes before he could be declared dead.

It must have been horrible, and certainly not something W.C. Mabry planned on when he campaigned for the office. We can be certain he was more interested in administration and tax collection than the law enforcement part of the job. Teetotaling Methodist Sunday School superintendent, he hated the pistol he was required to wear and he certainly was no cool-headed executioner.

It was not the sheriff's job to hang prisoners. The sheriff was the manager and administrator — not the hangman. The state had a traveling executioner who went to the various counties to see that the condemned were hanged on the date set by the courts. In this case, however, the

[5] Early gray hair is a family trait. This from Peggy Goetz, whose grandmother was W.C. Mabry's younger sister: "Interesting about his hair turning white overnight. My grandmother's hair was snow white by the time she was 30. The story in the family was that she got her hair cut some time after her marriage and my grandfather (her husband) was so angry he made her wear a wig and the trauma of the experience made her hair turn white by the time it was long enough not to wear the wig."

hangman failed to show. Mabry's son, Wilmer C. Mabry, who was 19 that year, told how the grim duty unexpectedly fell on his father. There are no records on who tied the knot incorrectly. But we know from the Newton Record that the sheriff himself pulled the trap.

There was no doubt that the condemned man, Robert Moncrief, was guilty under the law. His wife had apparently moved out and was at her uncle's, when Moncrief went over there, killed three people and set the house afire. Here's the account from the Newton Record:

> *Moncrief, who was about 25 years of age, went to the home of Tom Johnson, in the southwest part of the county, the latter part of December, 1919, and proceeded to kill and burn all the occupants, five in number, his wife being one of the five. While he failed to kill all of them, he murdered three and burned the house, the home of his wife's uncle. He fired a load of shot into the house on entering, killing Annie Belle Johnson, wife of Tom Johnson, and badly wounding his own wife. Johnson jumped up and he was shot down and killed. Before dying, however, he called to C. Ford, a negro preacher who was occupying another room, and when Ford rushed in the room of the tragedy, he met the same fate, and was shot down.*
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> *Moncrief's wife, who was able to get up, begged her husband not to kill her, promising to go anywhere with him and keep his crime a secret. After sticking a match to the building, Moncrief left with his wife. After going a short distance, he thought of the fact that there was another occupant of the house, a crippled negro known as "Cripple George," decided that he had better go back and finish him. Returning to the scene of the crime, he saw the cripple man trying to get out of the burning building, fired at him, and the load knocked his hat off, when the man dropped down as if he was shot, afterwards making his escape. Moncrief returned to join his wife, who in the meantime had made her escape, and then Moncrief took flight. "Cripple George" made his way to the home of R.D. Whatley and reported the tragedy.*
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> *For some time Moncrief eluded the officers but was finally captured in New Orleans, brought back, tried and convicted in the circuit court. An appeal was taken to the Supreme Court, affirmed, and the date of the hanging fixed for March 25.*

The gallows was inside the jail, to avoid a ruckus like the 1910 public hanging of Robert Thames, a black man who killed James Madison "Reb" Willis, a white man. (See box at end.) Someone took a photo at that hanging, showing white women and children spectators as well as officials and the condemned. The county historical society once had a print, but it has been mislaid. The spectacle and prospect of a lynching prompted C.E. Cunningham, editor of the Record, to call for an end to public executions, and by 1922 when Sheriff Mabry hanged Moncrief, it was done inside, no longer open to the public.

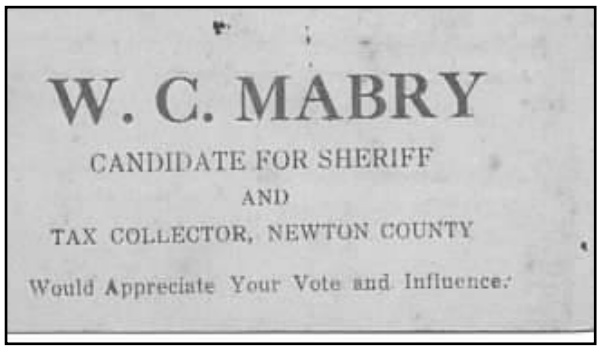
The jail, built in 1900, now holds the county historical archives. Back then, the small front room was the office, the cells were behind, and the execution chamber was off to the front right. A big iron eyehook still protrudes from the ceiling, where the rope was looped. Historians say a trap door was beneath it -- now filled with concrete.

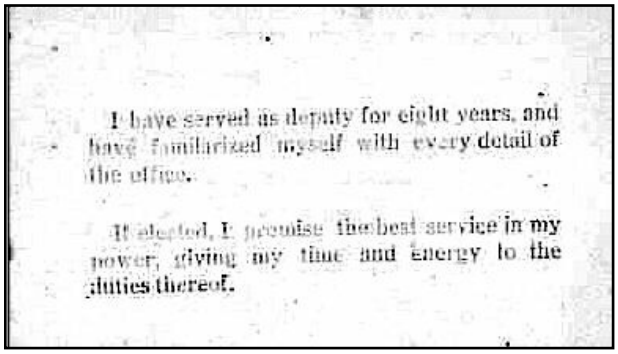
W.C. Mabry, who served as an appointed deputy sheriff from 1912-20, was elected high sheriff and tax collector on Aug. 7, 1919. Votes reported in the Newton Record showed he won with 1,589 votes to J. D. Rogers' 963. Mabry led in all but 4 of the 27 precincts.

Rogers had served as sheriff from 1912-16. He was the sheriff who first hired Mabry as a deputy. That was 1912 when Mabry found himself out of public office after narrowly losing re-election as county school superintendent by a scant 9 votes. In announcing Rogers' candidacy, The Newton Record hailed him as "worthy of all the praise that can be bestowed" and added: "It was a common saying when he held the office for the term ending 1915, that there was not a county in the state which had a better sheriff and tax collector than J. D. Rogers."

The Record was equally warm in praise of Mabry in the Jan. 13, 1919, announcements:

> "*He needs no introduction to the people of his native county, where he has spent his life and been identified with everything that was for the upright and advancement of the county. He is no doubt known to every voter in the county, all of whom are familiar with his upright integrity and honorable traits of character. He is an excellent, christian gentleman, faithful to duty, and well qualified for the office he seeks, having served as deputy sheriff for the past eight years and therefore familiar with every detail connected therewith.*
>
> "*In former years, Mr. Mabry was one of the county's most competent teachers and later made the race for county superintendent of education, being elected to this office in 1907. It is proper to say that the county never had a better superintendent than he, and a great deal was accomplished for the county during his administration of the educational affairs. That he would bring the same painstaking fidelity and efficiency to the office of sheriff, if the choice of the people, goes without saying. He has the ability to fill any office in the county with credit, and his loyalty to the county would prompt him to a careful and painstaking performance of the duties. If successful in his race, he promises to give the best service of his life to the duties thereof. He is worthy of the confidence of the people and deserves their careful consideration when voting time comes."*




The election came eight months after that announcement, but unlike today's campaigns there was little — if any — news coverage of what was happening. We have a faded calling card, asking for a vote for Mabry, but nothing else, no accounts of speeches or public appearances, although there must have been many hands shaken. His son, a teen-ager at the time, said he drove the horse and buggy that made the rounds during the campaign, but we didn't get any stories. We don't even know how the candidate saw the job he was running for, but it is probably significant that in one of his later resumes when he looked back on his time as deputy, Mabry listed it as assistant tax collector, not some kind of law enforcement officer. Willa, his daughter, remembered that he disliked wearing the pistol. She said he put it under the bed.

We have only a few tales from the days of law enforcement, and one or two are worth recounting. In September, nine months after he took office, he arrested a moonshiner. The

Newton Record reported it on page 1, Sept. 2, 1920, not long after the Prohibition amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution. Mississippi had been constitutionally dry since 1908 and was the first state to ratify the federal amendment.

### *Illicit Still Run In Center of Hog Pen*

#### *Negro Operator Arrested But Made His Escape*

*A few days ago it was discovered that an illicit distillery in crude form was being operated at Decatur in a hog pen near the Agricultural High School, owned by a negro named Quincy Jordan. The negro was employed with a section crew on the G.M.&N. railroad, and Tuesday was working up near Stratton. After learning of the "moonshine factory," Sheriff Mabry went up the road on the morning train, arrested the darkey and started back to Decatur on the next train. While the sheriff was engaged in conversation with the conductor and not watching the negro, he made a dive out of the window, while the train was running at full speed, and evidently hit the ground running, as the train was stopped to get him, and he was not in sight when Sheriff Mabry got off, and has not been seen since, or at last report had not.*

*The negro had a very large hog pen, and in the center of the pen had erected a little shanty. In this shanty he pretended to keep feed for his hogs only. It was noticed not long since that he kept the little house locked, and when asked what he did this for replied that he kept his hog feed in it. However, on investigation, it was later found that he had two or three barrels of mash, and paraphernalias for operating a still therein, hence the arrest.*

It was not the only escape in the family tales. Another involved a prisoner being taken to Parchman who bit Mabry on the arm, broke free and escaped. "Bit a plug out of him," was the way Willa described it. But we have no other details.

It also was not the only moonshine raid he was involved with. Just before the election in 1919 when still a deputy, he assisted Sheriff May in arresting Mollie Pickens, "a well known negress," for possessing liquor. She pled guilty and was fined $100 in justice court. Cautioned not to repeat, the sheriff told her it would go harder on her next time. As the Record reported it, "He also told her he had been advised she was operating a house of prostitution, and if such was the case it would be well for her to discontinue that, or she would have to answer for another charge."

Some other murder cases also fell on Sheriff Mabry's watch, and they make good reading. One involved a shootout in the road at Chunky — wild enough to make the New Orleans Times-Picayune on May 31, 1923:

### *Fatal Duel Laid to Man's Arrest in 'Moonshining"*

#### *Victor Says Antagonist Tried to Kill Him Before and Failed*

*Meridian, Miss., May 30 — J.C. Barber, 37 years old, saw mill man and farmer residing near Chunky is in the county jail here, having surrendered to Sheriff Mabrey of Newton county to face charges of killing Taylor Fountain, 28, the shooting occurring*

*yesterday in the public road near Barber's home, just across the Lauderdale county line in Newton county.*

*Barber was brought to jail here at his own request by Sheriff Mabrey. According to Barber's statement Fountain had been under the impression that Barber had caused his arrest some time ago on a charge of moonshining and last Monday Fountain had made an attempt on his life by firing three shots at him. After this attempt, Barber says, he armed himself.*

*When he and Fountain met in the public road yesterday, Barber asserts Fountain drew his pistol and fired and Barber returned the fire with a shotgun that he carried, only one barrel of which was loaded, then throwing the gun to the ground he, too, drew his pistol and simultaneously with his antagonist fired several shots, one of which proved fatal to Fountain and another wounded Charlie Stokes, 25, who was riding in the buggy with Fountain. The bullet that struck Stokes caused a flesh wound in the shoulder.*

*Barber said that he would waive a preliminary hearing tomorrow at Decatur and expected to be allowed to make bond.*

A notorious case that started while Mabry was a deputy was sent back to Decatur in May 1921. The state Supreme Court ordered a new trial for George Hawie who killed a 16-year-old girl when she refused to break off with a rival — blasted her three times with a shotgun in front of her mother and then went and surrendered. He was convicted, but part of the trial testimony centered on whether he was sane. The Supreme Court ordered a new trial on grounds that sanity should be determined in separate hearings before evidence of the murder was presented. The case disappeared from the news, and I have no record of how it came out.

About the time of the sheriff's election, The Newton Record's county correspondence column reported simply on Sept. 16, 1920: "Sheriff Mabry has sold his farm where he is now living to T.E. Spivey and the former probably will locate in town in the near future."

Research by the Newton County Genealogical and Historical Society shows that Mabry moved to Decatur from Union in 1908 when he took office as county superintendent of education. He had one son Wilmer who was 5 and a daughter Lorene who was 2. Curiously the house (built in 1900) was on a lot that his wife's Uncle Bartow Henton sold in April 1908 to E.J. Leslie, who turned right around and sold it in October to W.C. Mabry. The family lived there until 1920, by which time there were four children. In 1920 he sold it and moved into one built for him.

He served four years as sheriff and moved to Newton when his term ended in 1924. His daughter Willa said he wanted "out of Decatur." In Newton, he sold insurance and later bought the Newton Record newspaper.

## *Racial Mobs in Newton County*

*Two raw incidents, both involving the murder of white men by blacks, loomed large in Newton County at the time W.C. Mabry entered politics. One was a 1908 lynching in which three blacks were murdered by mobs. The second was a 1911 public hanging that drew such attention that a 50-man police guard was mustered to protect the convicted murderer. Mabry would not have been directly involved in either case — he was elected county superintendent of education in 1907 — but both must have been overwhelmingly compelling events around Decatur where he was in office.*

*The 1908 lynchings were memorialized in 2019 with a ceremony by descendants of the victims and the Equal Justice Initiative, an Alabama nonprofit that commemorates lynching victims. The victims were the father-in-law and two friends of a black man accused of killing A.J. Wall, a white farmer. Accounts of what led to the killing are not included in newspaper accounts, nor is anything about the evidence against the accused, Shep Jones. In the face of the allegations, Jones fled. A mob, said to be at least 50 whites, searched futilely for him with bloodhounds. Unable to find him after a couple of days, they grew frustrated and on Oct. 9, 1908, went to the house of William Fielder, Jones' father-in-law. When he refused to say where Jones was, the mob tortured him until he implicated Dee Dawkins, then hanged him. Then the mob searched out Dawkins and shot and killed him. They also shot and killed Frank Johnson, whose only offense was that he knew Jones. The two bodies were left near Good Hope Church Road south of Hickory. Although the mob searched for Jones for a month, they never caught him. During the rampage, however, other violence was linked to the mob, including the burning of a church and hall at Garlandville.*

*Two years later, March 29, 1910, James Madison "Reb" Willis, a white man, was murdered by Robert Thames, a black man who lived on Willis' land in Newton County. The murder is covered in great detail in the Newton Record: Thames fled to the Delta but was tracked down through the mail or family members and was arrested and convicted. Because of fears of lynching, he was held in a jail outside the county until time for his execution when he was brought to Decatur under protection of 50 guards and was hanged May 12, 1911. The clamor of the crowd to get close to the gallows on the lawn was so great that the editor of the Record called for an end to such public spectacles.*

*People at the archives said they had seen a photo taken at the execution, showing white women and children spectators as well as officials and the condemned, but they could not find a copy for me. The newspaper detailed how the sheriff escorted the prisoner to the gallows and a deputy pulled the hood over his head.*

*At the time of the execution, W.C. Mabry was running for re-election as county superintendent of education — a post he lost by only 9 votes out of 2,635 cast (1,313-1,322). Upon leaving office early the next year, he was hired as a deputy sheriff under J.D. Rogers. Notably, one of his resumes lists the post as assistant tax collector, not deputy sheriff. Mabry, a deputy four years under Rogers and four more years under J.A. May, was elected sheriff in 1919, defeating Rogers who ran for another term after being out of office for four years.*

# State Sen. W.C. Mabry

W.C. Mabry had less than one term as state senator, but it covered what was arguably the most tumultuous legislative session in state history. He was a supporter of reform Gov. Mike Conner who was trying to straighten out the mess left by Gov. Theodore Bilbo and the Depression. The state debt was $12 million or more, and bankruptcy was a real possibility; Conner proposed a 3 per cent sales tax — unprecedented and incendiary. In addition, legislators had to deal with congressional reapportionment, as well as all the controversial reforms Conner wanted, like revising the highway commission.

W.C. Mabry voted for Conner's program, which brought him death threats. He had state police escorts for the trips to Jackson. The session, 96 days, was the second-longest in state history up to that time. It was accompanied by mobs in the halls of the capitol and a dizzying array of legislative maneuvering that finally resulted in a 2 percent compromise — one of the first sales taxes in the nation.

A key argument was that a sales tax — seen by Conner as a consumption tax— would offset the state's reliance on property tax. In the depths of the Depression, almost half the land taxes were in default. Besides, Conner argued, many people were paying no taxes at all because they owned no taxable land. In an article in The Journal of Mississippi History, Gov. William Winter (whose father was in the Senate with Mabry) described the dire circumstances:

> *"The financial condition of the state was unbelievably bad. According to the published report of the state auditor, on January 1, 1932, there was a total of $1,326 in the State Treasury and outstanding warrants had been issued against that amount in the sum of almost $ ,000,000. There were many school districts in the state where teachers had not been paid in full for almost a year. Equally as serious was the impending failure of the state to meet its payments on its full faith and credit bonds.*
>
> *"In a word, the state of Mississippi was broke. When the legislature convened for the 1932 session, one of its first acts was the passage of a concurrent resolution authorizing the chairman of the State Tax Commission to borrow $750 with which to purchase postage stamps so as to be able to mail out income tax notices. The members of the legislature themselves could not cash their salary warrants immediately, and many stayed at the Edwards Hotel and other places in the city through the tolerance and generosity of those establishments."*

W.C. Mabry was selling insurance and running a newspaper in Newton when he decided to run for the open seat to represent Newton and Scott counties. He won the Democratic primary on Aug. 4, 1931, the results of which were described in the Newton Record as "equivalent to election" since no Republicans ever ran in the November general. Official results for the 13th District, as reported in the Aug. 13 edition:

| | Newton County | Scott County | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| W.C. Mabry | 2,690 | 2,804 | 5,494 |
| T.I. Doolittle | 2,383 | 1,599 | 3,982 |

## LEGISLATIVE PROBLEMS

W. C. Mabry, Candidate for State Senator, from the Thirteenth District composed of Newton and Scott Counties, announces the Principles for which he proposes to stand, if elected to serve in that office:

Retrenchment in Expenses on the one hand, and Enacting Laws That will provide for The Taxing of Wealth Now Exempt on the other hand, pointed out as the fairest way to reduce taxes on real estate which is now being confiscated under the burden of taxes, he thinks; and will propose the following legislation to that end:

1. Abolish State Tax Collector's Office. The duties of that office may be taken care of through the Attorney General's Office who has authority to collect back taxes.

2. Abolish Agricultural Service Department. This office duplicates the duties performed by the Commissioner of Agriculture, and the extension department of the A. & M. College.

3. Abolish all unnecessary assistants and stenographers in all the departments and institutions.

4. Abolish fee system in state and counties, putting officials on a salary basis.

5. Oppose the Establishment of any more bureaus.

6. Repeal Nuisance Tax Laws.

7. Oppose Further Building Program for Eleemosynary institutions and Colleges. They have plenty of room for a number of years, I think.

8. Reduce Representatives to One Member from Each County. The House would be reduced by about 60 members and do better work than with larger membership and save $60,000.00 per session in salary alone.

9. Seek to Find ways of assessing property now exempt which represents wealth of state—the only way to save lands from confiiscation.

10. Maintain graduated Income and Inheritance Tax. Persons receiving a large income are able to pay taxes. He enjoys the protection of the Strong Arm of Government, enabling him to pursue a trade or profession to bring income.

11. Tax Motor Freight and Passenger Busses in Proportion to Railroads.

12. No Bond Issues, except for Refunding present indebtedness, and except for Higway System to be paid by Gas Tax.

13. Remove, as far as possible, State Colleges from Politics.

14. Vote No Appropriation Bills Until a Feasible Revenue plan is adopted.

Thomas Irish Doolittle, the man he beat, was brother of Newton Doolittle, for whom the town is named. He had been in the legislature from 1912-16 and was described as a master farmer who was instrumental in getting the Agricultural High School opened in Decatur. Not much remains to illustrate the campaign. The newspaper did not report on speeches, public appearances, or issues, other than a campaign statement listing legislative problems Mabry wanted to fix. These included finances, but he did not mention sales tax. He said wealth now exempt should be taxed, to relieve taxes on property now being confiscated for non-payment. In a 14-point program, he proposed eliminating the state office of tax collector and abolishing the fee system for state and county offices. He also called for abolishing all unnecessary assistants and stenographers, as well as for getting rid of all nuisance tax laws and for removing all state colleges from politics.

People must have compared the two candidates, on their education record if nothing else, although it had been 20 years since Mabry was county school superintendent and almost that long since Doolittle left the legislature.[6]

In the same election, S.T. Roebuck, a friend in Newton, was nominated – hence elected – to the House of Representatives with 2,584 votes. The way it was reported, all eight candidates were apparently running for two seats, and Roebuck won one outright. There was a runoff for the other. The Record's report of official vote:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| S.T. Roebuck | 2,584 | L.Q.C. Williams | 1,574 |
| R. Lee Vance | 1,613 | O.J. Gordon | 933 |
| W.H. Harrison | 942 | Ben Frank Coursey | 1,696 |
| Ben Dearing | 889 | Emmett Walker | 278 |

Mabry was editor and publisher of the Record at the time. (He bought the paper in December 1926, two years after moving from Decatur to Newton.) The paper's coverage of his election was not flashy. He ran his picture, one-column at the top of page 5 of the edition that came out two days

[6] W.C. Mabry remained active in fighting for better schools after he left the superintendent's post. While a deputy sheriff, he was, like his opponent, instrumental in setting up the county agricultural high school and was the first president of the high school board. In 1928 when the legislature established the nation's first statewide junior college system Mabry was key in expanding the high school into East Central Junior College. He served on the EC board continuously until he became too ill in 1948.

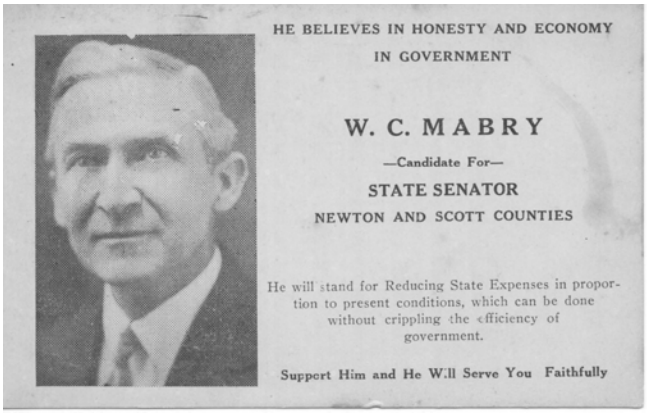
after the voting – a week before the count was official but with the election-night numbers showing him the clear winner. The caption under the picture said he won by 1,500 votes. A short letter from him thanking voters ran on the same page along with some other similar thank yous from other candidates. The front page had a huge picture of the governor, along with big pictures of other state officials.

It was a turbulent legislative session with the state teetering on financial ruin. The tax, despite all the fire it drew, did not always take top headlines in the Daily Clarion-Ledger, for these were interesting times: the Lindbergh baby was kidnapped, Al Capone went to jail, and Amelia Earhart took off attempting a Lindy-like solo flight to Paris.

The Newton Record's legislative coverage appears on page 1 in each edition. Although there are no by-lines, it clearly wasn't staff-produced, and the accounts are sometimes attributed in the headline to Lt. Gov. Dennis Murphree who focused mostly on the key issue of the proposed tax. One short editorial on March 10, 1932, endorses the tax, followed by a long reprint of a McComb paper's editorial also arguing for it. Most of the Record editorial space, however, is devoted to columns that do not appear to be written locally and deal with less interesting stuff.

The newspaper's stand came when the tax reached the floor of the legislature, enraging the "antis" and energizing the protests of businessmen and others. The House passed a 3 percent version and sent it to the Senate. Murphree's March 24 account details how thousands marched on Jackson in protest. A mob followed a Negro band (described elsewhere as a makeshift, three-piece drum and fife corps) and a parading donkey wearing a placard that a sales tax would make the state into "one of these." Despite one man drawing a gun at the governor's office door, and much other commotion, the gathering was not totally unorganized. It had been advertised in advance on the front page of the Daily Clarion-Ledger with instructions on how and where to gather. The mob decried Conner for abusing the power of office to ruin the state. Murphree's account calls it the first time in history such a thing had happened. Legislators in both houses responded with strong resolutions denying it. (The vote was unanimous in the House, but there was bitter debate in the Senate before it passed 33-1 with several abstentions.) Conner said afterwards that if the resolutions had not been offered voluntarily he would have asked for impeachment proceedings against himself so the matter could be tried in the Senate and the truth determined.

Oddly, coming out of the demonstrations was a people's committee which was allowed to meet with the Senate Finance Committee. A compromise of 1 percent was rejected by the committee, although the measure went to the whole Senate anyway. It failed 23-25, with Mabry — a supporter of a sales tax — among those opposed. In casting his ballot, he explained: "I vote no because I do not think a one per cent tax will yield sufficient revenue to balance the budget, even in the face of drastic cuts proposed in appropriations."




Day after day in the House, votes on the 3 percent tax fell one or two short of the necessary three-fifths majority, until

eventually a 2 percent tax passed, barely pushed over the edge by a dramatic last-minute vote change from the Bolivar County representative in the back of the house. It was among the first sales taxes in the nation.[7]

According to family stories, both Mabry and Roebuck needed a state police escort on trips to and from home. There were death threats amid the widespread and violent opposition because they supported the tax. In Mabry's obit in 1950, the Newton Record proudly described him as "one of the original group of legislators to see the possibilities of a state sales tax as the means of getting Mississippi on a sound financial basis."

If the sales tax was a wrenching vote, legislation to cut funding for education must has caused personal distress. Mabry's commitment to education was extraordinary, a life-time passion. As county superintendent of education he had championed school consolidation and helped establish the agricultural high school in Decatur. When one of the state's first junior colleges opened in Decatur, he became first chairman of the board and still held the position some 20 years later as the legislature debated slashing state funds. Saving every cent was essential, and the $170,000 that was appropriated in 1930 was cut a third to $115,000. Local tax collections were also falling, while enrollment was rising, so the effect was multiplied. Nevertheless, Senator Mabry joined in the 42 voting for the cuts. Seven did not vote but there were no nays.

**W.C. Mabry in the state Senate**

Although a freshman, Mabry was an active participant on the floor, joining Conner forces consistently. He was assigned to six committees: vice chairman of the nine-member committee on Fees and Salaries, and a member of County Affairs, Education, Municipalities, Printing, and Public Health and Quarantine.

At one point he reported to the Senate on the conference committee considering conflicting proposals to revise privilege taxes, another of the sweeping revenue bills aimed at saving the state. The bill was long, and the Senate Journal sets out the multi-page list of business and operation taxes, item by item. Interestingly, the compromise added a new section for a tax that would affect Mabry directly, a $50 privilege tax for operating a newspaper in a small town (like Newton), compared to $250 for newspapers in cities.

Because of an overlap in inaugurations, legislators were sworn in before outgoing Gov. Bilbo left office. Consequently, Bilbo launched Mabry's session. In a long, long speech, he blamed the financial mess on the legislature and said only two things would stave off bankruptcy: one, a 100

[7] Mississippians often call it the first statewide sales tax, although West Virginia (1921) and Kentucky (1930) claim to have passed earlier versions of a similar tax.

per cent assessment for property tax, which he acknowledged was impossible and impractical; or, two, a general sales tax — anticipating Conner's explosive proposal.

It was Mabry's only session. The legislature met every other year, and he resigned before the next convened. He was probably happy to avoid more of the political chaos in Jackson, but the specific escape valve was his being named acting postmaster in Newton on Aug. 1, 1933. At the same time, he turned the newspaper over to his son W.C. Mabry Jr., who left the post he had held for about two years as school superintendent in Chickasaw County to move back to Newton.

Conner called a special election on Aug. 22 to fill the Senate seat which was won by L.Q.C. Williams, whom the Newton Record had all but endorsed. Williams, who had previously served in the senate, was a fellow advocate of education who had sponsored the bill that provided first state funding for junior colleges.

Conner, who failed to win election to another term, wrote Mabry a letter in 1939, thanking him for being a true friend who shared his ideas and ideals. It is typed, probably similar to, if not the same as, notes sent other strong supporters, but it is warm and personal:

> *"I shall always be grateful to you and our other friends. I cannot write to everyone who voted with us, and I want you to express my deepest gratitude to those of our friends with whom you may come in contact. Principles are always above men, and the principles for which we stand will live always and ultimately triumph."*

Conner asked for an assessment of the failed campaign and scribbled a note at the bottom, without further explanation: "Come to see me. I need to talk to you." It's signed Mike.

## W.C. Mabry, editor and publisher

W.C. Mabry was not trained to be a newspaperman. But he was well educated and seldom let an opportunity pass. When C.E. Cunningham died and left his widow struggling to run The Newton Record, Mabry bought the paper and took on a new adventure.

It was December 1926. He had moved from Decatur two years earlier when his four-year term as sheriff ended and was the Reliance Life Insurance agent in Newton. The newspaper looked like a good investment. Cunningham had founded it in 1901 and had built it into what was later described as one of the best weekly newspapers in the state. It had a good Linotype, rotary press and folder, along with cases of moveable type and make-up stones. It was housed in a building Cunningham constructed on Church Street (next door to what is now the theater).

A native of Brandon, Cunningham had been talked into moving to Newton by friends. At the time the town was said to have a reputation as a "newspaper boneyard" -- too poor to sustain the publications that opened and closed. But Cunningham had 10 years experience as a printer and had just returned to the state after a year on a ranch out west where he had gone for the open air to restore his health. Married, with four children, he made a success of the paper. But in 1926, after facing deadlines for 25 years, he suddenly died at the age of 53, leaving his widow in over her head trying to handle the pressures of the publication.

Four months later, she sold the Record to Mabry. Under his editorship, the paper grew along with the town, attempting “to be the voice of the people.” As described at mid-century in a retrospective note, the paper was described as always striving “to promote the betterment of our people and the needed changes that bring progress. Always, the Record has striven to be on the side of the right, to help formulate a healthy unprejudiced public opinion.”

Mabry was always active in politics and participated vigorously in civic affairs. However, he did not see his paper as a platform for his political positions so much as it was a moral force to promote the common good. The paper carried news reports of final actions by city and county government without describing the push and pull of debate. Editorial positions were broad strokes; news articles were the way to publicize and promote. All the while, however, Mabry’s extensive correspondence with his congressman and state officials shows a constant, vigorous engagement in civic affairs, from recommendations for government appointments to appeals for paved streets and a town airport, as well as offers of advice on topics of the day.

Family stories tell of the financial stress of the Depression, which left Mississippi in dire straits. The newspaper was under stress, too -- chickens and produce were bartered for subscriptions -- but it came off the press every Thursday without interruption. Despite the unrelenting pressure of weekly deadlines, Mabry returned to politics in 1931 and was elected to the state senate to join Mike Conner’s reform administration. He continued as editor and publisher, commuting to Jackson to the capitol.

After the session adjourned, but before his four-year term ended, Mabry capitalized on his connections -- he was a staunch Democrat, a Roosevelt elector at party conventions -- to win presidential appointment as postmaster in Newton. He took the office in 1933, resigned the legislative seat, and handed over reins of the paper to his son Wilmer C. Mabry.

Sharing his father’s initials, but not his name, Wilmer used W.C. Jr. to keep things straight. He was 30, a graduate of Millsaps who had been teaching math and coaching in Mississippi public schools for seven years. He ran the paper for four years before moving to Jackson to become manager of Dixie Advertisers Inc. With his departure, W.C. Mabry turned to his son-in-law, Winner Prince, who had few qualifications to run a paper but had lost his state job in the Depression and reluctantly agreed to take on the newspaper. As Prince put it, he reckoned he could run the machinery although he didn’t know anything about the newspaper business. Mabry, still postmaster, resumed the job of publisher, but kept his involvement at arms length, and Prince grew into the editorship. The purchase loan was soon paid off, and The Newton Record became an extended family operation. Annie Rose Mabry, the youngest daughter, had been working in the front office since her graduation from Clarke College in Newton. Her sister Lorene, Winner’s wife, was tapped to write news stories and editorials.

Annie Rose, her walk somewhat restricted by the little-known disease Charcot-Marie-Tooth, managed the office supply business and became a champion proof reader and copy editor. It was said she could spot a typographical error at 20 paces, even if it was already in metal type, set in reverse characters and already locked on the stone. Unabashed, she’d demand that the Linotype operator open the form and recast the line. In addition, she knew everybody and their relationship to everybody else and could craft articles about weekend visitors without checking any notes -- even in the hen-scratching of handwritten reports from county correspondents. It was her sunny disposition -- never a cross word -- that set the demeanor for the office.

Lorene's work was part-time, unpaid, and done from home until the baby grew old enough to free her from the house. Sitting at the kitchen table, she could whip out columns of editor's notes and accounts of weddings in one short session. Sometimes after lunch, editor Prince would dictate details of what happened at meetings he attended and she would turn out page after page of handwritten prose -- first draft final. Like Mabry, Winner, Lorene and Annie Rose believed the purpose of a newspaper was to instruct and lead, especially morally. Public service was the point. As the paper grew, so did their use of editorials to take a more explicit stand "to serve the people."

With the newspaper in good hands, Mabry stepped back and let it run. His term as postmaster was extended, and he held the post for 12 years. It was during his tenure that the present Newton Post Office was built (in 1936) with its colorful WPA mural celebrating farming and industry. He retired in January 1944 because of ill health, but the masthead on the editorial page continued to list him as publisher. When he died in 1950, the Record framed the entire front page with his obituary in bold black borders.[8]

**William C. Mabry Family 1942**

**From left: Willa McClenahan, Lorene Prince, W.C. Mabry, Virgie Mabry, Wilmer Mabry, Annie Rose Mabry**

[8] The family operated the newspaper until the Princes retired in 1972 and sold it. Annie Rose remained on the staff under the new owners until her retirement a few years later. With subsequent changes in ownership, publication continued until 2009 when Alabama corporate owners closed it down permanently. The Union Appeal, the county's other weekly newspaper based on the Newton-Neshoba county line, moved into the void, expanding with the new name The Newton County Appeal and began circulating throughout the county.

# Mabry and Thornton Civil War

The Civil War loomed large on both the Mabry and Henton sides of the family. Clifton's grandfather was killed at the Battle of Franklin and an uncle was severely injured. Sherman ruined the Henton farm outside Decatur on his march across the state. Both Clifton and Virgie grew up beside the older generation with their memories and stories. Clifton's grandmother, a Civil War widow for 50 years, lived in his household outside Chunky. Virgie, who was raised by her grandmother, would have heard about Sherman's men stealing the family silverware and best horse when he ransacked their farm.

Clifton's forebears joined the 3rd Mississippi infantry, in a unit mustered into Confederate service as the Chunky Heroes. On Nov. 30, 1864, the Heroes made up Company D of Featherston's Brigade in the bloodbath at Franklin, Tennessee. The battle, sometimes called the Confederacy's Last Hurrah, is less well known than many earlier battles, partly because historians simply overlooked its devastating effect on the Confederate army in the blurred swirl at the end of the war. It wasn't until the late 1900s that the magnitude of the slaughter caught widespread attention. Confederate casualties totaled about 7,000 in only five hours, bloodier than even Gettysburg. In all, 424 Mississippians died, many in a futile charge across an open field under heavy Union artillery and rifle fire. Those who made it through the fusillade found themselves little more than sitting ducks when they came up against an impenetrable shield of osage thorn bushes 50 feet in front of the Union line. A survivor was quoted as saying the Confederates fell in ranks, killed as if they had voluntarily lain down in good order.

The battle was joined when General Hood's Confederates caught up with Union troops and tried to stop them from reaching Nashville. After the fight, the Yankees resumed their march east. In his report to headquarters, Hood congratulated his men and downplayed the casualties. But he had reduced his command to a shell of itself. As Shelby Foote put it in his history of the war: Hood had wrecked his army.

Stephen R. Gilbert, Clifton's grandfather, was among those killed; his uncle, Thomas Jefferson Reynolds Jr., was severely wounded. Also in the unit were Abel P. Gilbert and a non-com officer Jno W. Gilbert who are believed to be relatives. Stephen Gilbert died four days before his 30th birthday. He left his widow, Delilah Ann Loper Gilbert, and four children, including Elizabeth Jane who became Clifton Mabry's mother. A grave marker — in Section 22, plot 12 of the Mississippi section at McGavock Confederate Cemetery at Franklin — is inscribed S.R.Gilbert. Some transcriptions of the cemetery book erroneously identify it as S.B. Gilbert, but the marker is correct. (In addition to Foote's trilogy, two excellent books give details of the battle: Five Tragic Hours, by James Lee McDonough and Thomas L. Connelly, University of Tennessee Press, 1983; and The Confederacy's Last Hurrah, by Wiley Sword, University of Kansas Press, 1992.)

Virgie's link to the war was just as direct. Her grandfather, Sanford Marion Henton, also died in uniform. We have no war records, date of death or burial site. But family history, passed along through the generations, said he died at Grenada (or Kosciusko) when he caught measles. (Historians estimate as many as 11,000 Confederates died of measles during the war, a cause not as well known as the more virulent typhoid and malaria.) It was said Henton got soaked in a rainstorm and died. One version said he was in camp, another said he was on his way home. All the stories said he was identified by his name sewn into the collar of his coat.

His widow Mary Ann Johnston Henton remarried after the war, but her boys didn't get along with her new husband. The family story, related by Annie Rose Mabry, was that "she spun thread, wove cloth, made him a suit of clothes, gave him a horse, and sent him on his way. He was heard of later in Texas. Divorce was unheard of in that day — perhaps 1868 — so at her death the name of Henton was placed on her tomb in Decatur Cemetery."

General Sherman's scorched earth path across central Mississippi passed through the Henton farm a mile northwest of Decatur. The family story — echoing what was said by many who were in Sherman's devastating marches — was that the Yankees found the food and silverware that was hidden in the woods and rode off on her best mare.

Annie Rose was specific about it being the Henton farm that Sherman pillaged: "It was from this farm that our mother, Virgie Eddie Thornton, rode behind Great-Grandmother on her horse wherever she went." Other accounts of the Yankee campaign do not mention her farm, and the courthouse burned so there are no legal records. Hickenlooper's map — he was the engineer on Sherman's campaign — shows the column passing through a Thornton farm, and current residents west of Decatur said they live at what was originally the "App Thornton place," but we have not traced that to the family. Brown's History of Newton County (1894) said Sherman stopped at the S.B. Gilbert farm, but the family tree has no Gilbert there.

Sherman's march from Vicksburg to Meridian and back is less well known than his Atlanta campaign. It was winter, cold and wet, and involved 30,000 troops in Sherman's experiment to see if he could travel without a support column and live off the land. It was almost impossible to drag the wagons and 60 heavy cannon through the swamps west of Decatur, All the bridges had been burned. Legend has it that the Yankees buried heavy equipment in hopes of picking it up on the way back. The swamps were so soft that they had to build 3,000-feet of corduroy roads, but the logs were soon pounded into the mud and the troops reported standing in the frigid water.

The ordeal is colorfully described in Margie Riddle Bearss' book, Sherman's Forgotten Campaign – the Meridian Expedition (Gateway Press, 1987), and in Sherman's memoirs, in which he laughs about the close call when he stopped to spend the night at a house he didn't burn in Decatur. In a misunderstanding, his guards moved out, leaving Sherman "perfectly exposed." He described awakening to shouting, halooing and pistol shots. Looking out, he found himself surrounded by Rebel cavalry. According to county legend, he was wearing only his red long-john underwear, but he put nothing like that in his memoirs. He was about to take cover in a corncrib, when the regiment of guards galloped back and diverted the Confederates. "Otherwise I would surely have been captured," he wrote. In other words, the Rebs didn't know who they nearly had or they might have pushed harder to get him.

Another Civil War connection is Jack Amos, a Choctaw Indian scout for the Confederate Army who became famous for his heroic rescue of more than 20 soldiers after a train wreck on the Little Chunky Creek bridge. Amos' grandmother is believed to be Nahotima, a sister of Choctaw Chief Pushmataha, one of the signers of the 1830 Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek that opened Mississippi lands for white settlement. Assuming Jack Amos' mother is Nahotima's daughter Natima, Clifton Mabry is Amos' cousin four times removed. Annie Rose Mabry proudly displayed a photo she had of Amos, who lived in a small house on the farm of Clifton's great-great-grandfather north of Chunky after the Civil War. That photo, along with Greg Boggans'

essay on Amos, can be seen on the Newton County Historical and Genealogical Society webpage:
https://www.nchgs.org/html/jack_amos_e-aht-onte-ube.html

As might be expected with a story about Choctaws after the treaty, much about Amos is unknown and speculative. Boggan was able to piece together significant details because of Amos' heroics after the train wreck and his prominence with the 1896 Dawes Commission to get federal help for displaced Indians. Amos' name is the first on a class-action suit at the turn of the century, trying to get land long-promised but never-given to Choctaws who remained in the state.

In the war, Amos was among Confederates defeated at a battle at Ponchatoula, Louisiana, but he was one of the lucky ones who escaped and returned to Newton County. On February 19, 1863, a troop train en route to Vicksburg derailed on a washed-out railroad bridge between Chunky and Hickory, killing more than 60. Amos and other Choctaws jumped into the water and saved a reported 22.

After the war he lived on the Gilbert farm where family history says he taught some of the children Choctaw. It is not known where he is buried, but on January 18, 2004, a Confederate marker to honor him was placed on an unmarked space among family graves at Blue Springs Cemetery north of Chunky. A photo of the marker is on the NCHGS web page, taken before the stone inexplicably went missing. There was no sign of it in 2019, and we have no word on who moved or stole it, or when.

Dr. Harold Graham posted Amos' genealogy on the NCHGS website. It shows links to Greenwood Lefleur (Jack Amos' first cousin) and Pushmataha, as well as Mabry:

**Choctaw Connection to W.C. Mabry**

NAHOTIMA (b. 1766, d. after 1824) married more than once, including Jean Cravat; among their children was Natima, possibly Jack Amos' mother. Graham identified the patriarchal grandfather of Jack Amos as a Choctaw mingo named simply Amos (b. abt 1751), the father of Mary Lucretia Amos and Amos Jr., our Jack Amos' father.

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**Great-Great-Great Grandparents**

MARY LUCRETIA AMOS (d. 1858, Iredell County, North Carolina) married AARON LUCKY SPEAKS (b. 1764 in Iredell County, North Carolina). They met in Coosha, Lauderdale County, where he was posted in the military.

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**Great-Great-Grandparents**

WILLIAM RICHMOND SPEAKS (b. 1785, d. November 1, 1820) married on April 12, 1812, Madison County, Alabama, to SUSANNAH ELIZABETH JONES, daughter of Freeman Jones Sr. and Christina Paris.

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**Great-Grandparents**

ELIZABETH JANE SPEAKS (b. August 3, 1814, Madison County, Alabama, died March 28, 1902, Chunky).
EVAN S. (Shelby or Samuel) GILBERT (b. August 8, 1809, Stewart County, Tennessee, d. June 2, 1883, Chunky), son of Stephen H. Gilbert and Hannah Edmonds.

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**Grandparents**

STEPHEN RICHMOND GILBERT, (b. Dec. 4, 1835, d. Nov. 30, 1864, Civil War battle Franklin, Tennessee)
DELILAH ANN LOPER GILBERT, (b. Dec. 23, 1834, d. Nov. 7, 1922) widow 58 years, married Oct. 21, 1852

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**Parents**

ELIZABETH JANE GILBERT (b. Aug. 23, 1853, d. September 12, 1915, Chunky) married Nov. 1, 1876, to
DANIEL R. MABRY (b. Dec. 3, 1852, d. Nov. 11, 1930, Chunky)

# Ancestral Line Of Virgie Thornton Mabry

**Henton Great-great-grandparents**
PETER HENTON, SR. born between 1760-1765, Petersburg, Virginia; died about 1840, Elbert County, Georgia. (Served in Revolutionary War.)
MARTHA (MNU). No information on her birth and death.
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**Henton Great-grandparents**
JOHN LAWSON HENTON, born 29 June 1806, Ruckersville, Elbert County, Georgia; died 20 Nov 1857 in Georgia.
ELIZABETH T. HULME born 02 Dec 1808 in Georgia, died 26 Sep 1883, Whitfield County, Georgia. Married 10 Sep 1828 in Elbert County, Georgia. Both buried Henton Family Cemetery, Whitfield County, Georgia
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**Henton Grandparents**
SANFORD MARION HENTON born 24 Dec 1831, Elberton, Elbert County, Georgia; died between 1862-1864, Kosciusko, Mississippi.
MARY ANN JOHNSTON, born 15 Jul 1835, Elbert County, Georgia; died 06 Jan 1907, Newton County. Married 01 Dec 1849, Elberton, Elbert County, Georgia. Daughter of THOMAS JOHNSTON and MILDRED ROEBUCK.

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**Thornton Great Great-grandparents**
RICHARD THORNTON married LAVINIA JENNINGS. No further information.
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**Thornton Great-grandparents**
CULLEN THORNTON, born 1797, Oglethorpe County, Georgia; died 22 April 1853, Monroe County, Georgia.
MARY BANKS, born in Georgia, died 10 Oct 1863, Monroe County, Georgia. Married 05 Oct 1817, Jasper County, Georgia.
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**Thornton Grandparents**
RICHARD COLUMBUS THORNTON born 25 July 1819, Jasper County, Georgia; died 01 Feb 1882, Newton County.
SARAH ELIZABETH BALL, born 19 Oct 1831 in Georgia; died 03 Dec 1896. Married 02 Oct 1845, Monroe, Georgia. (Census showed moved to Mississippi between 1850 and 1860)
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**Parents**
HENRY BASCOM THORNTON, born 07 Feb 1854, Monroe County, Georgia; died 01 Nov 1921, Crossroads, Newton County. 2 marriages
EDDIE CAROLINE (CARRIE) HENTON, 24 Jan 1878, Newton County. She was born 07 Jul 1859, Newton County; died 25 Feb 1879, Newton County; (2) Georgia Ann Cross, 17 Nov 1887 in Newton County (daughter of Allen Cross and Sarah Weaver). She was born 18 Feb 1866 and died 19 Oct 1946 in Newton County.

# Virgie Thornton Mabry

After finishing school, Clifton returned to Newton County where he took a job in a post office and met Virgie Thornton, who was teaching at Macedonia School. She was boarding at the home of her father, Henry Bascom Thornton — the only time except when she was a newborn that she lived with him. Virgie's mother, Eddie Caroline (Carrie) Henton, had died of childbed fever; her father, realizing that a 24-year-old single father could not care for a baby while working a farm, gave legal custody to Virgie's grandmother, Mary Ann Johnston Henton, who raised her. We have a photo of Virgie with her father, taken when she was about 5, and it shows a subdued little girl.

**Virgie and her father Henry Bascom Thornton**

Virgie came from a family of Newton County pioneers. All her grandparents were from Georgia and moved to east Mississippi in the 1850s; her parents were both born in Newton County in the late 1850s. Her family genealogy has been traced back through the generations to a great-great-grandfather who served in the Revolutionary War. He was Peter Henton, born between 1760 and 1765 in Petersburg, Virginia, and died about 1840 in Elbert County, Georgia. He and his wife Martha had seven sons, one of whom was John Lawson Henton, born June 29, 1806, in Elbert County. He married Elizabeth Hulme, another Georgia native, on September 10, 1828, in Elbert County, and they had 11 children, the second being Sanford Marion Henton, who was to be Virgie's grandfather.

Sanford Marion Henton was born in Georgia about 1831. He and Mary Ann Johnston, also born in Georgia about 1833, married on Dec. 1, 1849, while still living in Elbert County. Within months after the death of his father on Nov. 20, 1857, Sanford Marion moved his wife and their two sons to Newton County, while some of his siblings moved to Arkansas and others stayed in Georgia. Sanford Marion and Mary Ann settled west of Decatur. A year later, on July 7, 1859, their daughter Eddie was born.

When the Civil War broke out, Sanford Marion Henton, a school teacher, joined the Confederate army. We have no war records, but the family history says he died in a measles outbreak. One version was that he was sick, got caught in the rain and died; he was identified by his name sewn into the collar of his coat. Date of death is not known.

Virgie's other grandfather, Richard Columbus Thornton, was thought to have died in the Civil War, too — also a victim of illness which the family's oral histories repeatedly linked to the siege of Vicksburg. However, no Civil War records of his service have been found, and the 1870 and 1880 census listed him still alive with his family living at the Crossroads Community northwest of Decatur. His date of death is given as Feb. 1, 1882.

Richard Columbus Thornton was born July 25, 1819, in Jasper County, Georgia, southeast of Atlanta. When he was 26, he married 14-year-old Sarah Elizabeth Ball, on Oct. 2, 1845, in nearby Monroe County. She was also a Georgia native, born Oct. 19, 1831. They had five children before

moving to Newton County. Henry Bascom, the fifth child, was born Feb. 7, 1854, the link to Virgie. Three younger brothers were born in Newton County.

Family history that was included in the Newton Record on Virgie's 90th birthday recounted that the Civil War left both families impoverished with young children to rear. The article, written in the family-owned newspaper by Virgie's daughter Lorene Mabry Prince, told the oft-repeated story of General Sherman's march through Decatur on his "scorched earth" campaign from Vicksburg to Meridian. According to family history, Yankee officers found and dug up the Henton meat and other belongings that were hidden in a thicket near the farm. Troops also took the widow's best roan saddle horse, with one officer riding it away.

**Carrie Henton**
**Virgie's mother**

Virgie's father was too young to go to war — not yet a teen-ager when the fighting ended but old enough to help his father with farm work. Like others in Newton County after the war, the family was destitute, and Henry stayed home and grew into manhood as they tried to recover. He was almost 26 when he married Carrie, a 19-year-old Newton County beauty, on Jan. 24, 1878. A year later they had a daughter Virgie, born Feb. 6, 1879. In only 19 days, Carrie died on Feb. 25. Some of the country neighbors never forgave the child, who grew up marked as "the one what killed her mother."

In a short time, as the family history described it, the grieving father legally gave Virgie to her maternal grandmother, Mary Ann Henton, who had remarried and was now listed in the 1880 census as the widow Mary Ann Saunders. Henry stayed on with his family. We have no history of that year, but the census describes Mary Ann as running the farm with her other children. Her second husband, J.V. Saunders, is not there. We have few details about him, other than he was a native of Alabama who was 12 years older than she. He had also served in the Civil War, a member of the Mississippi state calvary. The family story, according to Virgie's daughters, was that Mary Ann's three sons (John, 25, in 1880; Thomas, 22; and Bartow, 18) did not get along with the new husband, so she sent him off to Texas. Since divorce was unheard of in that day, at her death the name Henton was placed on her tombstone in Decatur.

The three sons listed on that 1880 census were living with their mother and working on the family farm. Also in the household that year was the 1-year-old granddaughter Virgie Thornton. Sanford Bartow, who later went to the University of Mississippi and became a doctor, was a teenager at the time and was assigned to help take care of Virgie. In telling about growing up, Virgie attributed much to Uncle Bartow.

Virgie's father Henry lived on with his mother and father, working the family farm in the Lilidale Community west of Decatur. We could speculate that his father Richard Columbus was ill, since he died on Feb. 1, 1882, at the age of 64, leaving Henry as the senior male to run the farm. It wasn't until nine years after Carrie's death that Henry, 33, re-married, Nov. 17, 1887. His new wife was Georgia Ann Cross, a native of adjacent Jasper County. They had six children, giving Virgie four half-brothers and two half-sisters who remained close to her all their lives. Georgia Ann — Virgie called her "Aunt Georgia" — died in 1946.

We know little about Virgie's early years with her grandmother. Bartow moved his mother and niece to Suqualena where he started practicing medicine. When Virgie was 8, Bartow took her to

Atlanta to the World's Fair. Particularly memorable to her was riding on the train along with some fashionable women. But she didn't have much to say about the fair. She did say she remembered The Atlanta Constitution and what a good newspaper it was.

It was said that Virgie was the spitting image of her mother. The family compared a photo of Carrie at 18 to a tintype of Virgie at the same age and found the two interchangeable — chin, cheeks, mouth, nose, ears, "only a widow's peak on Virgie and slightly sad eyes on Eddie make the difference."

Suqualena didn't offer much opportunity for education, but there was a "tuition school" in Decatur. Bartow moved the family, Virgie and her grandmother, so she could enroll there. Her father paid her tuition, four months of regular terms and some summer work, until she was 16. The feature in the Newton Record, written in 1969, went on to describe those early years:

> *"She had some piano and voice lessons. She took county teachers' examination, secured second class license and taught for several years in four-month, two-teacher schools at $16 a month. On second try she secured first class license. Today she can outspell and do 'mental arithmetic' better than some of her descendants who had much better educational opportunities.*
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> *"At the age of 14 she had typhoid fever during a Decatur summer epidemic that was related to polluted water from an old tanning yard with vats. Thereafter, Mrs. Mabry was frail, suffering chronic illnesses, but outliving most of her contemporaries."*

We can guess, furthermore, that she grew up in a strict Victorian environment that carried on into her own household. A regular churchgoer and member of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, her strait-laced ways as a mother reflected that rigid, stern morality. One incident from around 1950 is illustrative: She was sitting in her living room, sewing a fine seam as was her wont. The smart-mouthed grandson over for a visit, used a phrase he had picked up somewhere: "Well, by George…." She interrupted with a quick rebuke. "Let's leave the 'bys' off."

Another example comes from a childhood friend of Lorene, Virgie's oldest daughter. As Cecil Wall told it, she and Lorene were walking home from school in Decatur when they passed an amorous bull that some boys had belled in a pasture. They got tickled and were seen, giggling. Word quickly reached the Mabry house, propelling Virgie into near hysterics. "You've wronged me," she wailed, crying and crying. "Girls, you've wronged me." The outcry grew so intense that Clifton had to be fetched from the courthouse. He himself was a strict and unbending enforcer of codes of morality and propriety, but in this case he calmed Virgie down by telling her he'd take over. He separated her from the girls. Privately he read them a poem about how girls now are not like their grandmothers. That ended it. No further rebukes.

"Everybody thought they were too strict," Cecil said. Strict. Proper. So afraid they wouldn't do the right thing. When Cecil fell in love at 16, they wanted Lorene to stop seeing her because of it.

One unexpected exception, in a house where bad words weren't even thought, much less uttered: After Virgie's death, her youngest daughter Annie Rose was asked about family history. In recounting Virgie's stories about the people she knew in Suqualena — many remained her friends for life — Annie Rose off-handedly said, "One story I remember was that a prominent

**Clifton and Virgie Mabry wedding picture**

businessman had his black mistress and children living in the back premises, while his white wife and children lived in the family home." Virgie's grandchildren were agog; they could not imagine her talking about that.

Annie Rose said that when Virgie was teaching, before she married, she paid board and lived with her father's second family. She walked to work, two miles each way on school days, unless it was raining, in which case her father took her and another teacher in a buggy. Clifton, living at the farm north of Chunky, went a-courting on horseback to Decatur. It was an overnight trip, and he stayed at the Hunter Hotel. When they married Oct. 19, 1902,[9] they had a buggy for the trip from Decatur to Chunky. He was 25, she 23. It was unseasonably warm, she recalled years later, describing to her daughters her unbearably hot wool wedding dress.

Both she and Clifton taught at Suqualena, near Meridian, until he found a job closer to home as principal at Stratton and then Union. A son Wilmer was born in Stratton in 1903; Lorene was born in Union in 1906. Then they moved to Decatur where Clifton went into politics. Willa was born there in 1909 and Annie Rose in 1913.

While Clifton worked at the court house, Virgie took care of things at home. None of the family stories mention her accompanying him on campaign rounds — Wilmer drove the buggy for his hand-shaking tours — and there is no indication she participated in the politicking. She did not go along on trips, either. Once, long after Clifton's death, she commented in passing about never going with him, adding somewhat wistfully that if you don't go at first, you'll stop getting invited.

The children went to school at Decatur, and after Clifton successfully helped launch the agricultural high school there, the oldest continued their education in upper grades with courses like history, botany, algebra, Latin, literature and grammar. (Their class records, complete with generally good grades, are preserved in the archives at East Central.) The instruction gave them the credentials to go on to college to prepare for careers in teaching: Wilmer to Millsaps; Lorene to Whitworth, a Bookhaven women's college, and then Millsaps; and Willa, first to Clarke College in Newton, and then to Southern Mississippi. Annie Rose, the youngest who moved with the family to Newton in 1924, commuted across town to Clarke College where she took business courses.

Clifton bought a house in Decatur in 1908 shortly after he was elected superintendent of education. The house, on a rise at the edge of what became the East Central Community College campus, sat on a lot that Virgie's Uncle Bartow Henton sold in April 1908 to E.J. Leslie, who sold it in October to the Mabrys. Why the flip? Was this Uncle Bartow helping the Mabry family move into town? The place was ample, with six fireplaces. Willa and Annie Rose were born there, and it was the family home until 1920, when Clifton was elected sheriff and had a new place built. The new house, with a dog-trot hallway down the middle, had three bedrooms to the right and the

[9] The 1982 Decatur Post Office is built on the site of the old Henton home where Virgie and Clifton were married by a Methodist preacher named Williams.

kitchen, dining and living rooms on the left.[10] There was no electricity or plumbing when it was built, but a bathroom was added in the back. It had front and back porches, a garage and a barn down in the pasture. They lived there four years, until Clifton left the sheriff's office. He sold it to his life-time friend J.M.Thames and moved out of town.

We don't have much about family life in Decatur. Lorene told about crawling behind the bed to hide from chores so she could read every book she could get. One of Wilmer's classmates was Cerelle Crawford, who came from Mathiston to live with relatives and attend school in Decatur; Cerelle and Wilmer both went to college in Jackson and married in 1928. Willa was frequently in trouble; she said she was the one who got the whippings. When she started dating Cleon (Non) McClenahan, a good-looking athlete from Lake who had a Hupmobile racer that an uncle won gambling, the Mabrys didn't approve. She and Non enrolled at Clarke where she was elected most beautiful and Non most handsome. In a final futile attempt to separate them, the family shipped her off to Mississippi State Teachers College, now the University of Southern Mississippi, in Hattiesburg. Non followed her down there, and with a football scholarship and a little money that Willa secretly slipped him out of her allowance, he enrolled at Southern too. That was that. She was 20 when they married.

Clifton may have been strict, but he was loving and generous. Lorene recalled that he was the one who kept close contact when she was at college, writing her letters and sending her cookies or cakes. He liked her intellectual pursuits. Literature was her thing. She said she was never interested in athletics and dodged physical education by playing piano for the exercise class. Her engagement was almost out of a romance novel. She was sitting on a porch at the Neshoba County Fair, wearing another man's ring, when Winner Prince showed up. A good-looking patrolman who checked truck weights for the highway department, he was an irresistible match for a sophisticated English teacher. They were married in 1931.

After his political jobs ended, Clifton moved the family to Newton — household goods were shipped by railroad boxcar — and bought a house at 415 South Main Street. For two years he peddled Reliance Life Insurance, but the sudden death of C.E. Cunningham, owner of the Newton Record newspaper, opened a new opportunity. Cunningham's widow was overwhelmed with the burdens of publication, and Clifton bought the paper in December 1926 although he had no experience newspapering. It was a good investment, and it bailed out Widow Cunningham who was desperate.

Despite his financial success with the paper, Clifton was drawn back into politics. He ran for the state Senate in 1931, but after one legislative session, he resigned. Capitalizing on his long-time political prominence as a Democrat, he secured appointment from FDR as postmaster in Newton, a job he held for 12 years until his health failed. He retired in January 1944, suffering what was diagnosed as involuntary palsy, so bad he couldn't work at the post office or the newspaper. As the condition worsened — he felt too bad to eat — Virgie was unable to care for him. Against his will, they moved him to Pine Forest, a nursing home run by the Seventh-Day Adventist Church near Chunky. It was comfortable enough, but vegetarian, and the family resorted to taking him meat on Sunday. At one point he was subjected to shock-treatment in Jackson, but he didn't improve. He died in 1950. Lorene recalled that his last moments in Newton Hospital were

[10] Details of the houses, including photos, are in a publication of the Newton County Genealogical and Historical Society, "History of Old Houses in Decatur" which can be accessed on the internet at https://www.nchgs.org/GRS_Documents_History_of_Old_Houses_in_Decatur.pdf.

extraordinarily clear as he awakened from a kind of coma, looked at the family gathered around, called them all by name and thanked them for coming.

Virgie was a homemaker. Always frail, she had household help to deal with cleaning and cooking, and keeping her dresses crisply starched. For years, it was Frieda McDonald, silently suffering the old wood-burning stove and managing the war rations and shortages. The Newton house sat atop the highest hill in town, a couple of blocks from the hospital. A block farther, past the depot, spread the main business intersection where the newspaper operated. The house, with a big parlor and dining room in the middle, had two bed rooms on either side and the kitchen in back. Like Decatur, there were front and back porches, a garage, and a fenced off chicken yard and garden. Upgrades over the years brought in a modern kitchen, gas heat, and an end to the garden.

Virgie, like Clifton, was active in the Methodist Church. He was Sunday School superintendent and held family prayer meetings in the front room of the Decatur house on Sunday nights when there was no service. (The children knelt by their chairs.) Virgie belonged to women's groups and helped organize the first Women's Missionary Society at the Decatur church in 1910. On her 95th birthday, a profile in the Newton church bulletin hailed her continued support although she was no longer able to attend services. She tuned in to Sunday sermons on the radio.

Virgie was a supremely skilled seamstress, spending long hours sewing. And reading. Newspapers migrated to her sitting room after they served their purpose at the office — Memphis, New Orleans, Jackson, Meridian. But quilts were her calling, a craft she learned from her grandmother. She required each of the girls to produce one, which they did, dutifully, if reluctantly. (Lorene made hers with her son's baby clothes.) Virgie possessed a great eye for color and collected boxes of complementary scraps. One quilt was crafted from Clifton's old striped shirts, others from worn-out dresses or blouses, some from new collected fabric. Heavy winter quilts. Lightweight summer quilts. Primarily she used classic designs — Butterflies, the Little Dutch Girl, Log Cabin, Grandmother's Flower Garden, Pin Wheels, Stars in Stars, Flower Pot, Friendship Ring, and all manner of Baskets, Fans, Octagons and Hexagons — but she also created crazy quilts. Her passion was shape and color. She made the blocks and organized them into the tops, then hired out the hand-quilting for the backing and batting. Always she slipped in a deliberate mistake, holding to the quilters' tradition that to try to be perfect mocks God — a sudden block in the wrong color, a geometric pattern disrupted on purpose. When she died, she left about four dozen in the house, with boxes of pieces cut and ready for more. How her quilts were left out of the Newton County quilt book will always be a mystery.

Her eyes gave out before she was ready to quit, and she underwent cataract surgery to remove the cloudy lenses. This was before modern technology found a way to implant a new lens, and the surgery left her wearing thick heavy glasses, uncharitably called Coke bottles because they were as thick as the bottom of a soft-drink bottle. The surgery was dangerous, and recovery required her to lie on her back for days on end, her head held between two bricks to keep her from moving.

Annie Rose, who ran the front office at the newspaper, never married and lived at the house with Virgie. It was as if Annie Rose had been designated care-taker so the others could carry on their separate lives. Her affliction of Charcot-Marie-Tooth, which restricted her ability to walk, made the pairing seem appropriate. Although she wore lower-leg braces, she could get around without a cane, even with cats underfoot. Her gripping with her hands for balance left her with unusual arm strength.

Lorene and her family bought the house next door, just a short walk across the back yard, under the 100-year-old pecan and ancient white oak, door to door. Every Tuesday, when Lorene's husband Winner Prince was at Rotary, she joined her mother and sister for lunch.

The proximity had its advantages, since it put a man in shouting distance if Virgie and Annie Rose needed him. One near-disastrous night a mentally handicapped handy-man broke open a kitchen window and crawled into the Mabry house, apparently thinking the two defenseless women would be easy prey. Little did he imagine the strength in Annie Rose's arms. Holding him at arm's length, she grabbed a shoe and battered him into retreat out the window he came through. She called for Winner, who was there in an instant with his shotgun, furious and dangerous. The state highway patrolman next door heard the gunshot and came rushing out. The intruder was gone before Winner got there, but he fired into the air to make his point. A few days later the guy was arrested in New Orleans, hauled back to Newton to face charges. He made a deal to leave town forever and was never seen again. That's when they installed burglar bars on the windows at 415.

Virgie remained the matriarch until the end of her life, the magnet that brought the family together for holidays at the Newton house. On Christmas Eve, family gatherings in the front room clustered around the piano. On Thanksgiving there was always too much food. The daughters divided up the menu and everybody brought dishes — sometimes forgetting or ignoring the plan and duplicating what somebody else prepared.

**Virgie Mabry 1974**

One memorable Thanksgiving, when Virgie was old enough to be visibly fragile, she fell in her bedroom just as the dinner bell chimed. Rushing in, the family discovered her flat on her back under the Singer sewing machine, her head propped awkwardly on the treadle. Amid the ensuing scramble, two grandsons gingerly lifted her off the floor and settled into a straight-backed chair. She stared out from behind those thick glasses and pronounced matter of factly that it hurt. Off to the hospital! They picked up the chair and headed out past the loaded table of steaming food, waggishly singing something about Barging Cleopatra Down the Nile. (It seemed like a good way to distract her.) Out the back door, the last wing of the family drove up on the instant from Gulfport. Finding themselves face-to-face with this unexpected spectacle, grandson No. 3 took hold of an empty chair rung and the three marched down the street to the hospital, bearing their delicate burden. X-rays showed nothing broken. Back at the house, despite the vacant chair at the head of the table, they carved the turkey and served the feast. It was noon, and in Newton you always eat at noon.

# A Few of Virgie's Quilts