

Notes and Documents

"THE TALLAPOOSA MIGHT TRULY BE CALLED
THE RIVER OF BLOOD":

MAJOR ALEXANDER McCULLOCH
AND THE BATTLE OF HORSESHOE BEND,
MARCH 27, 1813

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Alexander McCulloch was born in Lanesburg County, Virginia, on April 16, 1777, but was raised primarily in North Carolina and educated at Yale College. A neighbor characterized McCulloch as "not only high-minded, but a high-tempered, impetuous, stern man, whose heart was never assailed with the passion of fear."¹ In Nashville, Tennessee, in 1799 Alexander married Frances F. LeNoir, the daughter of a prominent Virginia planter. "She was a domestic woman," according to those who knew her, "and during her husband's absence in the wars she managed the plantation to great advantage."² Typical of the westering American, Alexander McCulloch moved his family from Virginia to Tennessee "about the same time as Sam Houston," 1807, and according to family legend, owned the land on which the log schoolhouse in which Sam Houston taught was built. At least two of their sons were said to have been students under Sam Houston between May and November of 1812.

In the summer of 1813 a large portion of the Creek Nation in Alabama and Florida attacked Fort Mims in Alabama, killing more than 500 of its inhabitants. The Southwest struck back. When word of the massacre reached Tennessee, Major General Andrew Jackson summoned 25,000 volunteers. "In the vigor of his age" Alexander McCulloch "took up arms in his country's cause and

¹ Nashville *Christian Advocate*, August 12, 1846.

² Unidentified newspaper clipping in McCulloch family scrapbook, McCulloch Papers, University of Texas Barker Texas History Center, Austin, Texas.

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marched to the tented field with Gen. Jackson, as one of the officers of his staff, sharing with that great man the toils and perils of war."³ Striking south through Alabama, Jackson defeated the Creeks at Tallushatchee and Talladega, costing the Creeks at least 20 percent of their warriors. In a second campaign in 1814, Jackson and his volunteers once more invaded Creek territory in a campaign culminating in the battle of Horseshoe Bend. Alexander McCulloch served as a volunteer aide to Brigadier General John Coffee through the war. On April 1, 1813, five days after the battle, he wrote to his wife from Fort Williams, Jackson's supply depot at Three Islands on the Coosa River.⁴

In the letter McCulloch refers to the Indians as "Red Sticks," a term with an interesting history. During 1811 the Shawnee chief Tecumseh traveled through much of the territory of the Creeks in present-day Alabama preaching defiance of the white settlers. "Brush from your eyelids the sleep of slavery," he exhorted them, "and strike for vengeance and your country." His bold words, together with the occurrence of earthquakes and meteors that he had predicted, convinced many of the Creeks to join him in a massive uprising against the whites. In order to assure that attacks by scattered war parties were synchronized for maximum effect, Tecumseh employed a traditional Shawnee technique for marking the passage of time, distributing to his followers bundles of sticks painted red. From British astronomers in Canada Tecumseh had learned that a comet would soon pass over the region, and he told his allies to throw away one stick when they saw the comet and another each day until all were gone. On that day they were to strike. These sticks, and perhaps the red war clubs

³ Nashville *Christian Advocate*, August 12, 1846.

⁴ Alexander McCulloch to Frances L. McCulloch, April 1, 1813, McCulloch Papers.

that many of them carried, gave rise to the term "Red Sticks" by which they were known.

Fort Strother, mentioned in the letter, was built following the battle of Tallushatchee on November 3, 1813 (in this battle General John Coffee decisively defeated a large party of Red Sticks). Jackson constructed Fort Strother near Ten Islands on the Coosa River. Using the fort as a base of operations, he proceeded to Talladega, some thirty miles to the south, where on November 7 he again overcame the Creeks in a pitched battle.

McCulloch also describes the death of Lemuel Purnell Montgomery, who was a close friend of Andrew Jackson.⁵ Montgomery was born in Virginia but commissioned as a major in the Thirty-ninth United States Infantry from Tennessee on July 29, 1813. Alabama's Montgomery County, established in 1816, bears the name of this hero of Horseshoe Bend.

When McCulloch wrote his wife on April 1, 1813, he not only expressed his affection for home but also provided a vivid account of the bloody battle that took place on the Horseshoe Bend of the Tallapoosa River:

¶

On Sunday last, the 27th of March, the Red Sticks paid severely for their folly in waging war against the whites by a loss of at least 800 of their warriors which lay dead on the field of Battle. The whole army under the command of Genl. Jackson set out from this post on the Coosa River 60 miles below Fort Strother on the 23rd to march against the enemy's fort in the bend of the Tallapoosa River distance 55½ miles and when having gotten within 6 miles

⁵ Also among those wounded in storming the Cherokee breastworks was Sam Houston, a neighbor of the McCulloch family. At the battle of San Jacinto in April 1836, Houston was to grant Alexander McCulloch's son, Ben, a battlefield commission to first lieutenant and would remain the young McCulloch's mentor until the two men disagreed over the question of Texas's secession from the Union in 1860.

of the fort Genl. Coffee[']s Brigade was detached across the Tallapoosa crossing $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles below in order to prevent their making their escape by swimming the River or by canoes of which they had at least 100. The Indians, Cherokees and friendly Creeks accompanied us and immediately swam across the river and brought over their canoes and carried over their warriors and commenced a fire on them under their breast work in the rear which very soon put a part of them to flight who were killed by our men in swimming the River. The Tallapoosa might truly be called the River of blood for the water was so stained that at 10 O'clock at night it was very perceptibly bloody so much so that it could not be used. The battle commenced at 10 O'clock AM and continued with a tremendous fire for five hours and did not end 'till at least 10 O'clock at night and then leaving a balance of 16 wounded that had taken refuge under the banks who were killed the next morning. A number of very good judges say that there was 1000 warriors and if so there were more killed than I have stated for there was not more than 30 that did escape and that was by secreting themselves under the banks amongst brush and swimming the River in the night most all of which a prisoner which we took says was wounded. I enclose you a plan of the bend of the River together with the fortifications and situations of both the Infantry & Cavalry.⁶ There was only 25 of the whites killed on the ground and 106 wounded a number of which has since died but in all not more than 40 among them but two of your acquaintance which was Shipley and Maj. Lemuel Montgomery who nobly died at the enemy's fortifications waving his hat and huzzaing when he received a ball in the head which instantly killed him. My dear it is not in my power to say when I will be able to reach home but rest assured that nothing [illegible] one moment. Take

⁶ Unfortunately, this map of the battlefield cannot now be located.

care of yourself and the children and when opportunity offers in a few days write me. Otherwise you may let it alone as we will be obliged to return on account of our horses which are nearly exhausted by famine.

I am Dr Franscy
yr aff^r & loving
ALEXANDER McCULLOCH



With the opening of Alabama to white settlement following the Creek War, Alexander McCulloch began a private survey of the territory and speculation in former Indian lands. Through the summer of 1817 he platted the area west of Big Warrior Creek and the following summer explored the banks of the Tennessee River for "such a place as will please me" as a new home site for the McCulloch family. After no little difficulty he located a place to his liking near Florence, where he relocated his family in 1819.

In common with many other families on the American frontier, that of Alexander McCulloch was ever ready to move west, and by 1830 the family was back in Tennessee, this time within three miles of the village of Dyersburg in the frontier county of Dyer. The McCullochs' new home was located ten miles from the Mississippi River and only thirty from one of their nearest neighbors, David Crockett. Alexander McCulloch died at home on August 4, 1846, "after an illness of three weeks, during which period his sufferings were extreme."⁷ Surviving him were his sons, Ben and Henry Eustace McCulloch. Both were to achieve fame as Indian fighters, Texas Rangers, United States marshals, and generals in the army of the Confederate States of America.

⁷ Nashville *Christian Advocate*, August 12, 1846.