

## **THE ACCIDENTAL GOVERNOR: Thomas Stevenson Drew and the Settlement of Pocahontas** *Carla Barringer Rabinowitz, 2007*

### **The Pioneer Drews**

Thomas Stevenson Drew, the third Governor of Arkansas, was born in 1802 in Wilson County, Tennessee, where his father, Newitt Drew, had settled five years earlier. An educated man and a devout Baptist, Newitt was one of the founders and first deacons of the Big Cedar Lick Baptist Church.<sup>i</sup> His son's middle name was bestowed in honor of the church's pastor, the charismatic preacher Moore Stevenson, who was called to the church in the year of Thomas' birth.

Thomas' mother, Sally Maxwell Hays Drew, was the daughter of a tough Scots-Irish clan that had been pushing west, on the edge of the Appalachian frontier, for two generations. Sally's father, Thomas Maxwell, was killed by Indians when she was an infant. As a young man he had been a friend of the famous frontiersman Kasper Mansker, who later became the first white person to settle permanently in Middle Tennessee. Sally's mother, Rebecca, may have been the sister or daughter of Mansker's fellow Long Hunter Jacob Harman.<sup>ii</sup> The friendship between the Manskers and the Drews was to endure for three generations, and may have played a role in the founding of Pocahontas.

Like many pioneers, Newitt was incurably restless. In 1816 he packed his wife and seven children, their livestock and possessions onto several large rafts and headed out, down the Cumberland, Ohio and Mississippi rivers into Arkansas Territory. They settled for a while in Hempstead County, along with some of their former Tennessee neighbors. Around 1821 the family, now including two or three sons-in-law, moved yet again, this time to Dorcheat Bayou, Louisiana. Several members of the original Big Cedar Lick Church settled there along with them.

Newitt's dominant personality, nurtured in rebellion and religious idealism, appears to have generated rebellions of a different kind among his children. James, the oldest, left home at the age of 18, setting off down the Mississippi River with two friends in dugout canoes, eating nothing for months at a time but bread made of bamboo roots. He settled in Ouachita Parish with a fifteen-year-old French wife, a cabin, and one mule, and by 1860 was one of the richest men in Louisiana.<sup>iii</sup> Around the same time two of the Drew sisters, one fifteen years old and the other sixteen, started out on the long series of marriages that, combined with some dubious land deals, would lead to a spectacular family battle thirty years later.

Given what we know of Thomas' later character, we can imagine him as the conciliator between his strong-willed family members. Perhaps he simply got tired of his domineering father and rambunctious sisters. At any rate, when the Drew clan moved on from Arkansas to Louisiana, Thomas stayed.

## **The Bettis Family and the Settlement of Pocahontas**

Newitt, who knew the power of words and ideas, made sure that his sons received an education. Three of them became lawyers and then judges. Richard Maxwell Drew, the second youngest, was practicing law at age 17 and was elected a judge at 23. Traces of that education can be seen in Thomas' elegant penmanship and his usually clear and cogent writing – valuable resources for a young man whose temperament was even more restless than his father's.

There was still land in Arkansas to be had for the taking, but Thomas wasn't interested. One version of his early life has him working as an itinerant peddler, traveling around the state in the summer and teaching school in the winter. From a letter written much later in his life we know that the school teaching part, at least, is true.

From 1823 to 1827 he served as Clerk of the Clark County Court, where he probably acquired the basics of a legal education. He was appointed postmaster of the county in 1825, and at the same time contracted for several postal routes. By 1827 he had traveled as far as Greenville, Missouri, where he met and married seventeen-year-old Cinderella Bettis, the only child of Ransom Sutherland Bettis and Mary "Polly" Kelley.

The Bettises were a large, adventurous, hot-blooded and close-knit clan, who had been among the earliest settlers in Wayne County, Missouri. Elijah Bettis, the family patriarch, had left his home in the North Carolina back woods only two years after the Louisiana Purchase, with six of his children, their spouses, and thirty slaves. In Wayne County they were joined by the brother and nephew of Kasper Mansker. It may have been the family friendship between the Drews and the Manskers that first led Thomas in the direction of Greenville.

The Bettises, like the Drews, were still dissatisfied. At around the time of Thomas's marriage to Cinderella, Ransom and his brother Overton abandoned Missouri for the corner of Northeast Arkansas that later become Randolph County. A number of their neighbors and relatives had already settled in the area, and others followed: Polly's brothers or cousins Charles, Isaac and Andrew Kelley; Ransom's older brother Elijah; the younger George Mansker and his brother-in-law Casper Schmick; James W. Biggers; and Shadrack Nettles, whose brother was married to a Bettis cousin back in Tennessee.

Ransom established a frontier trading post on a small hill overlooking the Black River. He named his settlement Bettis Bluff; the location of his house is marked by present-day Bettis St., just off Courthouse Square. His wedding present to Thomas and Cinderella was twelve slaves and 800 acres of prime farmland along the river, in the vicinity of present-day Biggers. From a landless young mailman, who had shared a two-room log cabin with six siblings, Thomas suddenly found himself among the richest 5% of Arkansas settlers.

Separated by choice from his own family, Thomas threw himself into the arms of the Bettis clan. For the rest of his life, his closest friends and associates appear to have been Cinderella's cousins.

A description of Cinderella Bettis Drew appears in an odd little book called *First Ladies of Arkansas*, written in 1951 by Peggy Jacoway:

*"Among the 'great ladies'...of vivid, fine physical appearance, having coal black hair and lustrous dark eyes. She was largely proportioned, had a commanding dignity which could have been taken for hauteur. Though in the way she had been obliged to spend her youth, distant from superior educational sources and in a day when formal schooling for girls was negligible,...Mrs. Drew delighted in flowery verbiage; to her taste was the use of superlative, rich words."*

They must have made an interesting couple. William Jarrett, who lived with the family many years later, described her husband as "small in stature, [with] a kindly, friendly smile ... one of the gentlest, most patient men you ever saw."<sup>iv</sup>

But before she became a great lady, Cinderella was a seventeen-year-old wife. By the time she was twenty she had had three babies, and two of them had died within a day of each other, one at birth and one at the age of two. The surviving child, Ranson, evidently a twin of the baby who died at birth, remained for the next eight years his mother's only consolation.

She may have needed that consolation for another reason as well. During her second pregnancy, a few months before the deaths of her two children, Thomas had had another son, this one by his wife's mixed-race first cousin Martha Bettis, one of seven slave daughters of Cinderella's Uncle Elijah Bettis.

Martha was two years older than Cinderella, and the two must have known each other as children and teenagers. She appears to have been a gutsy woman with a talent for survival. In naming her son "Drew Bettis" she was not only boasting of her relationship with Thomas, but asserting a claim on him for future support and protection. Her son's descendants say that he spoke highly of both Thomas and Cinderella, and that Cinderella always treated him well. It would be eight years before Thomas and Cinderella had another child.

Thomas's other consolation was politics. By 1832 he had become a judge of the Lawrence County court. He and Ransom Bettis renamed their settlement "Pocahontas", and, when Randolph County was carved off from Lawrence, successfully maneuvered to have it named as the county seat. The story told in Pocahontas is that when the election was held to decide on the county seat, people could vote anywhere they happened to be. On the day of the election Drew and Bettis gave an enormous barbecue, invited everyone in the area, and got them all drunk, thereby securing their votes. Drew later donated the land for Pocahontas' first courthouse. It seemed as if their days of prosperity were just beginning.

## Politics and Disasters

Political life in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Arkansas had the same edge of violence as on the Tennessee frontier a generation earlier. Politicians, county judges and newspapermen killed one another in duels on numerous occasions, and in one case a defeated politician stabbed his rival to death with a sword cane. Politicians also commonly seized the opportunity to enrich themselves by land speculation and imaginative banking ventures.

In this culture, the mild-mannered Thomas Drew must have been a rare specimen indeed. He was a seeker of consensus, who spent his life trying to reconcile conflicting opinions and to bridge gaps between opposing groups. He was not the type of man to have gained the respect of his colleagues through displays of aggression; his political rise was more probably due to his good legal mind and his talent for seeing all sides of an issue. In 1836 he was chosen as one of the delegates from Lawrence and Randolph Counties to the state constitutional convention, where he is credited with helping to forge a crucial compromise on the issue of the apportionment of representatives.

The Constitution of 1836 provided for the establishment of two state banks, the Real Estate Bank and the State Bank of Arkansas. Drew was named Director of the Batesville branch of the State Bank.

The capital structure of the Real Estate Bank was somewhat unusual. Investors could buy shares in the bank with land, crops, and buildings, as well as with cash. The land and improvements were then used as collateral for bonds that the bank sold to the U.S. Treasury and the North American Banking and Trust Company. With the money raised from these bonds, the bank could make loans, first to its investors and then to the citizens at large.

Although the complex financial dealings of Thomas Drew and Ransom Bettis during the next few years have not yet been untangled, the evidence indicates that they saw an opportunity and jumped on it. In August of 1838 they went on a land-buying spree, which in Ransom's case lasted until his death in 1842. In the tax list for 1839, Thomas appears as the third richest man in Randolph County: his state tax was assessed at \$14.36, ten times higher than that of most of his neighbors. Only Mr. Pitman, the owner of Pitman's Ferry, and T.O. Marr, who was married to Elijah Bettis' legitimate daughter Amy Overton Bettis, were richer.

The tax lists for the next three years show a bewildering series of changes in land ownership, with Drew's possessions dropping from 1278 acres to 383 and then rising to 1140, while Marr's totals moved in the opposite directions. Ransom's acreage fluctuated in a similar manner, and his brother Overton and nephew Elijah were players in the same game. Pending further investigation, my guess is that the newly acquired land was used for the purchase of shares in the Real Estate Bank. It was the first appearance of the incautious enthusiasm that would resurface throughout Drew's career.

The two state banks opened for business in the Fall of 1838. Right from the beginning, things started to go downhill. The staggeringly inept management of the banks, combined with the spreading national depression that followed the Bank Panic of 1837, resulted in both banks defaulting on their bonds within the first three years. By 1843, both of them had collapsed. This collapse may have been the cause of Drew's personal financial disaster, a disaster from which he never entirely recovered.

In spite of his financial problems, he was nominated for Governor in July of 1844. He had not sought the nomination. The Democratic Party had already held not one but two conventions, but the successive candidates nominated at these conventions had both backed out. The party was riven by factional infighting, and Drew, a man with no enemies, was acceptable to all factions. He was elected with 47% of the vote in a three-way election.

During his governorship both the state's finances and his own continued to deteriorate. He ran for a second term unopposed, with the assurance of his political friends that they would raise the Governor's salary before the election. When they failed to carry through on this promise, Drew resigned only few days after the election, saying that his salary was not enough to support his family. Cinderella's excessive spending may have added to his problems. Pocahontas historians remember her slightly as "a petted and spoiled child [who] never knew what it was to want," and who once came home from a shopping expedition with a piece of jewelry worth the Governor's entire annual salary.<sup>v</sup>

Arkansas deeds and tax records trace the decline of their fortunes. Drew borrowed money from his mother-in-law, and repaid the debt with land. He sold and mortgaged his Pocahontas land, mortgaged his slaves, moved from county to county, and finally sold his remaining slaves and all of his farm implements to his rich brother James in 1852. In 1850 Thomas and Cinderella were living in Desha County; Bennett Drew, age 7, had died there in the previous year. By 1852 the family, with six children and a mother-in-law, appears to have moved in with James

In the Pocahontas tax list for 1850, T.O. Marr owns everything: Drew's land, Ransom's land, Overton's land, and Elijah's land. He has also acquired the Black River ferry.

### **Remaking a life**

Thomas Drew's life had not only a second act, but a third, a fourth, and a fifth. In 1853 he used his political connections to get himself appointed Superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory, overseeing the fortunes of the people forcibly relocated in the 1830's over the Trail of Tears. His headquarters were in Van Buren.

Among the scraps of Drew documents found in my attic (now in the archives of the Arkansas History Commission) is a draft of his Superintendent's Report for 1854. It reveals a surprisingly sympathetic appreciation both of the material needs of the various

tribes and of their political sentiments. Drew pays particular attention to the management of the Cherokee schools, drawing a favorable contrast between a system based on instruction by Native teachers and the schools provided by "sectarian denominations, governed and taught by persons from abroad who can have at most but little or no local interests in the country." He argues that the Cherokee system, "which encourages the employment of Native teachers, being founded in wisdom is perhaps producing more real benefits in the general advancement of scholastic improvement than all other combined."

This analysis echoes the vision of Principal Chief John Ross, who hoped to create a cadre of educated young Cherokees to serve as teachers in the nation's schools, and who had recently helped to establish two seminaries to train these teachers.<sup>vi</sup> The correspondence between Drew's language and Ross' vision is close enough to suggest that the two men had spent some time together. Both men of short stature, grand hopes and tragic failures, they probably got along pretty well.

But it is not clear that Drew's investigation of the subject ever went further than Ross' front parlor. At the time of his report the first class of prospective Cherokee teachers had just graduated. Most of them (like Ross himself) were English-speaking mixed-bloods, who's ability to communicate with the Cherokee-speaking children of their full-blood neighbors was only slightly greater than that of the whites. In 1856 the Cherokee seminaries, never popular with the full-blood majority, were forced to close for lack of funds.<sup>vii</sup>

In another part of the draft report, Drew discusses a bill that had just been proposed in Congress by Arkansas Senator Robert M. Johnson. The bill would have merged the governments of the Five Civilized Tribes into three territorial governments, as a first step towards abolishing their sovereignty altogether.

Drew begins by describing the passionate opposition of the tribes to this proposal. He speaks eloquently about the necessity of recognizing the various tribes as separate nations, each with its individual laws and customs, "as ancient as their name, and as sacred as their lives."

But then he changes his mind, crosses it all out, and starts again, deferential and conciliatory this time. Johnson's bill "does not appear to have been received with much favor." Part of the reason for this disfavor is that the Indians don't trust the Senate not to change the bill after they have approved it. If Congress passed a bill that would only go into effect if they approved it, and gave them "some reasonable time to determine for themselves either to accept or reject", perhaps "the intelligent portion of those Nations" would eventually accept it. This was not true, and Drew must have known it.

The draft gives a striking impression of a man torn between his sympathy for his Indian friends and his need to please the powerful politicians to whom he owed his livelihood. Even in its watered-down version, his criticism of Johnson's proposed bill was still strong enough to annoy. His report may have had something to do with his summary removal from the Superintendency only five months later.

Following his dismissal as Superintendent, Thomas and Cinderella moved across the Arkansas River to Fort Smith, on the border between Arkansas and Indian Territory, where Drew set up a law practice. His practice seems to have drawn on the contacts he made as Superintendent: a draft of a brief in a homicide case reveals that at least some of his clients were members of the Cherokee Nation. In the 1860 census for Fort Smith, the Drews appear with five of their children - James, 20; Saidee, 18; Thomas, 16; Emma Cinderella, 14; and Joseph, 10 – and three slaves, one a small boy. Mollie, then age 22, had died of tuberculosis in April of that year. Ranson, the oldest, had left home in 1849 in pursuit of California gold.<sup>viii</sup>

A long letter written on the eve of the Civil War shows Drew arguing, in a reasonable, low-key, lawyerly fashion, against the idea that the Constitution allows any right of secession. . The letter reveals an aspect of the Thomas Drew that we already know: a conciliator, a seeker of compromise, stubbornly rational at the most irrational of historical moments. But a contrasting letter, written from Clarkesville a year later, shows him trying to cajole his way into a colonel's commission in the Confederate Army with an almost touching series of boasts and self-delusions.

The war destroyed whatever financial security the Drews had been able to rebuild. By the war's end they were back in Pocahontas, where once again they had to start from zero. Both daughters had run off with Union officers, although Emma soon divorced hers and returned to Pocahontas to marry her cousin William Marr. In 1866 Drew was working as a bookkeeper in Green Jones' general store, with part of his \$200 monthly salary being credited to his family's account at the same store. When William Jarrett was hired to replace him, it was with the stipulation that Jarrett was to board with the Drew family, and that \$25 of his monthly salary would be credited to the same account.

### **To Seek a Newer World**

Cinderella died in 1872, at the age of 62. Thomas, a 70-year-old widower, could easily have settled down in Pocahontas with his married children to live out a quiet old age. Instead, he and his unmarried son James set off for California.

Perhaps his incurable hopefulness would not let him rest. Perhaps, like many pioneers, he could not bear the restraints and predictability of settled community life. Or perhaps he could not bear being poor in Pocahontas in his old age, after having been the town's founder, benefactor, and leading citizen in his thirties.

A letter to his daughter Emma, written from San Bernardino in 1875, describes his hopes. Emma by this time was a widow with two young sons, embroiled in a series of lawsuits as she attempted to hold on to her father-in-law's ferry. "I do not know if it will avail you anything," Drew wrote, "but I might possibly make a large sale of land in time to come to your relief.... The town of San Bernardino is destined, although far out from the seacoast (80 miles) to become a great Rail Road Center!" Railroads were being constructed right and left. The neighboring mines were immensely rich. Land was

available at unbelievably low prices, and appreciating rapidly in value. “If money is not so plentiful now as desired, it soon will be abundant.”

But it never was. There is a persistent legend that he did in fact make his fortune, but lost it in a stagecoach robbery on the way home from California. Having lost whatever money he had made in California, he tried again in Texas, where his son Joe and his daughter Emma eventually joined him.

He died in Texas in 1879. In 1923 his remains were dug up and returned to Pocahontas, where they were re-buried with great ceremony in the presence of 25,000 people. Although it was not publicized at the time, the only thing found in his grave, and transported to and reburied in Pocahontas, was a single gold tooth.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> *History of Mt. Olivet Baptist Church, 1801 – 1976*, Eltis N. Brown, Pastor, et al., 1977.

<sup>ii</sup> The relationships between Mansker, the Maxwell brothers, and the Harmans can be glimpsed in the court records of Tazewell County, VA; in Pendleton, *History of Tazewell County and Southwest Virginia, 1748-1920*, pp. 271 - 289; and in *Historical Sketches of Southwest Virginia (Bulletin of the Historical Society of Southwest Virginia)* #5, March 1970, pp. 29-61. Rebecca’s youngest son was named Harmon Hays.

<sup>iii</sup> “The Drew Family Moves to Louisiana”, Doris Whitaker Tynes, 1992, unpublished manuscript.

<sup>iv</sup> Lawrence Dalton, *History of Randolph County, Arkansas*, 1947

<sup>v</sup> Letter to Margaret Bennett Barringer from John W. Meeks, 1921.

<sup>vi</sup> William G. McLoughlin, *After the Trail of Tears: The Cherokees’ Struggle for Sovereignty, 1839-1880*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p. 90 - 94

<sup>vii</sup> Gary E. Moulton, ed., *Papers of Chief John Ross, Vol. II*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1985, p. 729

<sup>viii</sup> Obituary of Ranson Drew, Prescott (AZ) Newspaper, April 16, 1913

<sup>ix</sup> Dee Powell, “Arkansas Ex-Governor Lived in Weatherford”, *Trails West*, Parker County Genealogical Society, Vol. 26, No. 1, October 1995.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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My information about Thomas Drew’s political career comes from an essay by Bobby Roberts in T. Donovan and W. Gatewood, eds., *The Governors of Arkansas: Essays in Political Biography*, University of Arkansas Press, 1981. The background information on Arkansas society in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and on the disastrous history of the two state banks, is drawn from S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800 - 1860: Remote and Restless*, University of Arkansas Press, 1998.

This material in this article is part of a book in progress, which will trace the history of the Drew and Bettis families, and the frontier society of which they were a part, from the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup>.