

Before Bemis
Bemis Historic District – Madison County, TN
By Joel Jackson

It has been common knowledge that the property where Bemis, Tennessee, is located was at one time a plantation. But there are a lot of unknowns about how, when and who actually possessed the property. This is an attempt to fill in some blank spaces for the inquiring minds.

First some census notes: In 1850 census, Madison County, District 15, Jackson, Tennessee, on August 20, dwelling number 97 has **Alexander Jackson**, a doctor as age 44, owning \$12,700 in real estate; and he is listed as being born in Virginia. Others in the household are **Howell E.**, age 18; **William**, age 15; **Mary**, age 11; and **James F.**, age 6.

In 1870 census, Madison County, District 15, Jackson, Tennessee, on June 3, original page 21 – reviewed page number 313, dwelling number 109 and family number 121 has **A. Jackson**, a doctor as age 60, owning \$20,000 in real estate and \$1,500 in personal property. **E. Jackson** is a female, age 60. **S. Jackson** is a 15-year-old male at school. **R. Jackson** is an 11-year-old male at school. Also, in the household was a **R. Jackson**, age 25, listed as black and a house servant. **T. Jackson**, age 5, was a black male in the household along with **C. Jackson**, a 3-year-old black female.

Dr. Alexander Jackson and wife **Mary Hurt Jackson** had a son born April 8, 1832. They named him **Howell Edmunds Jackson**. They were living in Paris, Tennessee, at the time. They moved from Paris, Tennessee, to Jackson, Tennessee, in 1840. Howell received a classical education, graduating from West Tennessee College in 1848. He then studied at the University of Virginia, returned to Jackson and studied law, entered Lebanon Law School at Lebanon, Tennessee, in 1855 and graduated in 1856.

In 1856 after just graduating from law school, he and his brother **William H. Jackson**, who had just graduated from West Point, met in Nashville to spend a day or two visiting around the city. They visited a friend of their father, **General William G. Harding**. The two brothers later married General Harding's two daughters.

They returned to Jackson where Howell E. started a law practice. He then moved to Memphis in 1858 to form a law partnership. In 1861 when the War of Northern Aggression started, Howell was appointed "Receiver" under the Confederate Sequestration Act of West Tennessee.

Howell E. married **Sophia Melloy** (1857-). They had four children, including **William Hicks** (named after his uncle) and **Howell E. Jr.** (1864-1938). (Note: These two ended up being heirs of their father's farm/plantation which contained the Bemis property.)

Howell Sr.'s wife died in 1873, and he married General Harding's daughter **Mary E. Harding** the next year. He soon moved back to Jackson and entered politics in the Tennessee Legislature. From there he was elected by the Legislature to the U. S. Senate in 1881. From there he was appointed by **President Grover Cleveland** as Circuit Judge of the Sixth Circuit on April 11, 1886, where he served until February 1893 when he was nominated to the Supreme Court by **President Benjamin Harrison**. Howell served on the Court until his death on August 8, 1895, at the age of 64.

It was at this point that Howell Jr. and William Hicks, his brother, inherited the farm/plantation from Howell Sr. and William Jackson. Only eight months later, they sold 1,000 acres to **L. J. Brooks**, a local

land speculator, for \$15,000 (Book 8, Page 31). This 1,000 acres northern boundary was the Forked Deer River and a tract of 11 ¼ of **Alice Tottens**. The eastern boundary was the Illinois Central Railroad. On the west side were the **Thomas Greer** and **A. H. Elington** properties. Along the south, it was bounded by the **Shelton** property. This transfer from the Jackson brothers to (Louis) L. J. Brooks was signed by William H. Jackson and wife **Caroline Dickson Jackson** of Cincinnati, Ohio, along with Howell Edmunds (Jr.) Jackson and wife **Jessie Mabry Jackson** of West Mead in Davidson County, Tennessee, on the 21st day of April 1896 and filed in Book 8, Page 31 on May 26, 1896, at the Madison County Courthouse. This property was in the 8th District of Madison County, Tennessee. It was noted that it has been acquired by will from the estate of Justice Howell E. Jackson.

Bemis Tidbits, written by Joel Jackson, includes 124 tidbits (stories and memories) of the Bemis Historic District in Jackson, Madison County, Tennessee.

Bemis Tidbit #1 – Historic Bemis

Founded in 1900 by **Judson Moss Bemis**, president of Bemis Brothers Bag Company. Bemis was a cotton mill town, planned by Albert Farwell Bemis and renowned architects **Andrew Hepburn** and **Arthur Shurchiff**. A self-contained town, Bemis consisted of a four-story mill, worker housing, church, auditorium/theater, schools, company store, YMCA, public bath house, park, post office, and other commercial facilities.

In the 1940s, Bemis' population was approximately 4,000. In June 1968, the company began selling houses. The City of Jackson annexed Bemis December 29, 1977. Three years later the Bemis Company sold the mill. Bemis ceased being a cotton mill town when the mill closed on August 1, 1991. On December 16, 1991, Bemis was listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

~ Historic marker at the intersection of Highway 45 and Bemis Lane. Unveiling May 16, 2000



Bemis in the 1950s



Historic Bemis

<http://www.bemishistory.org/> – Bemis Historical Society's website

<http://vimeo.com/61582748> – West Tennessee Historical Society interviewed Joel Jackson on March 2, 2013.

<http://vimeo.com/61526125> – West Tennessee Historical Society toured the Bemis Historical District and the Bemis Mill Village Museum on March 2, 2013.

http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WM189Z_Historic_Bemis