

FRED CULP AND PERPETUATION OF THE CROCKETT TRADITION

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Prominent among Gibson Countians maintaining the David "Davy" Crockett tradition has been Fred Culp of Route 1, Trenton, Tennessee. His two publishing vehicles for presenting information about Crockett have been **Gibson County, Past and Present** and a series of five articles in the Trenton **Herald-Register** during 1967. The first article covers general biographical material about Crockett and his family. In a second article Culp concerns himself with the travels of Smith Rudd of Bronson, Michigan, to learn personally as much about Crockett as possible during the 1880s.¹

The third and fourth articles cover a distasteful debt controversy between Crockett and the Reverend David Gordon that surfaced in an area newspaper during Davy's successful bid for the U.S. Congress in 1829. During late September, 1829, the **Jackson Gazette** published the Congressman's account of differences between the two men. As Culp informs his readers, Gordon helped form the Old Gibson Primitive Baptist Church in 1825, and the Eldad Missionary Baptist Church in 1828, an interesting activity considering doctrinal differences between those Baptist churches. Davy accused the parson of having been partisanly active during the 1829 campaign and having set aside his religious beliefs in order to "take a set at me."

The Congressman was especially distressed at the Reverend's actions because Crockett had befriended the minister several times. The first occasion happened during the autumn of 1824, when Gordon, whom Davy described as "the old man," met with Crockett about locating 235 acres for Gordon to settle on. An uncompensated Crockett marked out a plot onto which Gordon moved, and Davy was proud to have the Gordons as neighbors. However, when the parson's wife—a very fine woman in Davy's opinion—died, inexplicably the widower became hostile to Davy. Crockett did not know what the clergyman's problem was—derangement, dotage, or otherwise—but something caused him "to fall out with and traduce the reputation of his best friend,"—Crockett.²

Davy continued recounting his kindnesses toward the Gordons. During the household move to the new neighborhood in 1824, the Gordon family members overworked themselves so greatly that most of them were sick. In fact, the father was in such bad health for weeks that neighbors thought he would not live. Davy supplied the unfortunate family with water daily until a well could be dug. Additionally, in the crisis stage of the illness, Davy twice rode about forty miles to Huntingdon for a doctor to examine Gordon and his daughter. Thus, Davy concluded, "I was pleased and gratified I had it in my power to accommodate him and render what I conceived to be very essential service to himself and his family."

At this point Davy introduced other persons involved in the debt difficulty. David C. Phillips, a county resident who called himself a millwright, for an

extended time had owed Gordon approximately twenty-five dollars, for which Nathan Fike held the note in security.³ Davy had hardly mentioned their names before he wrote disparagingly of their characters. His opinion was that "neither said Phillips (n)or Fike is worth one groat, nor were they at the time of the conversation, between Mr. Gordon, Phillips and myself." Prior to that meeting Phillips agreed to construct a "horsemill" and Crockett promised to "pay him in trade" once the work was done satisfactorily. Actually Davy, anticipating that the wright would do quality work, advanced him fifty dollars.

The conversation Crockett alluded to above occurred at Crockett's house during September, 1828. Gordon had come to see Phillips in order to collect the twenty-five dollars Phillips owed him. Davy became involved in the discussion of the debt only when Phillips told Gordon that Crockett, his employer, would settle the account upon Phillips' completion of the mill. Apparently in the millwright worker's presence, Davy explained to the parson the terms of the original contract that Crockett had made with Phillips for both Phillips' reimbursement for constructing the mill for Crockett and for Crockett's paying the twenty-five dollars the millwright owed Preacher Gordon.

Crockett could not readily fulfill his obligation to the minister. First, Davy had not been able to get the millwright to do the work before the Congressman had to leave to fulfill his governmental responsibilities as United States Representative, even though, Davy had promised to send the money from Washington, D.C. In fact, it was by mail that Crockett learned that the mill had been completed, finally, but was poorly built. Thus, he withheld final payment to both millwright and minister, his stance being that the clergyman should not be paid until the mill was finished nor "could Mr. Gordon have reasonably expected" the money otherwise.

Davy sought to strengthen his position further. He had several people, including two millwrights, inspect the work. Their collective opinion was that "it most unquestionably is, the most abominable horsemill that ever was put up by the hands of man." Crockett also attached to his letter sworn statements of two trustworthy and disinterested men who had heard the Gordon-Crockett contract talk originally and whose recollections substantiated Davy's contentions. Again Crockett could not resist another swipe at the credibility and character of Phillips and noteholder Fike. The latter was so lowdown that he had cut and stabbed two horses belonging to two other men. Even though Davy claimed that Fike was jailed in Jackson, Culp shows in his newspaper column that the criminal was detained in the Dyer County jail because Gibson County did not yet have such facilities in 1824. Despite his feeling sorry that a set of circumstances had necessitated public criticism of the parson, Davy considered that his action may have done the Rev. Gordon's Baptist congregation a favor by exposing a hypocrite.⁴

Continuing this matter in his next weekly column, Culp thinks it appropriate to print the reverend's response to Crockett's letter of 1829. Perhaps

the preacher and the Congressman argued for two years, but, at any rate Gordon did not answer in a newspaper until the 1831 Congressional campaign. That year in Weakley County, Crockett and William Fitzgerald of Dresden waged a bitter canvas with the challenger topping the incumbent Congressman by 586 votes. Some consolation to the loser was the fact that Gibson County, usually regarded as Crockett's home, gave the Congressman the nod by thirty-four votes.

In the spring of 1831, Gordon sent his letter to the **Southern Statesmen** of Jackson. Even against a natural reluctance, Gordon felt that he had to reply to Crockett. The minister felt that his own character was higher than the Congressman's because Crockett was striving for rewards and honors in this world while the parson was seeking God's glory and the redemption of souls. Besides, the parson did not wish that his family should have to endure any disgrace for which he was supposedly responsible. Additionally, Gordon believed that old age and death would shortly overtake him. Ironically though, as Culp relates, Gordon and Crockett died the same year, 1836. However, in order not to seem callous and ungrateful, the minister expressed gratitude for Crockett's early kindnesses toward him and his family.

Gordon's account of his prolonged feud with Crockett differed somewhat from that of Davy himself. Certainly Phillips had been indebted to the minister for twenty-five dollars over an indefinite time. During the autumn of 1826, Phillips indicated that he had enough cattle to clear the obligation. Indeed, initially, the Rev. Gordon planned to accept the cattle as payment in full to retire the debt, then planning to sell the livestock because he "was needy and would be more so shortly." Later, Gordon met with Phillips at Crockett's homeplace, where Davy and a neighbor, John Ryen, were present; Gordon remembered no one else's being present. By now, however, Gordon's previous bad luck with livestock evidently had caused him to decline the earlier offer. Likewise, he would not now accept payment in cotton.

At this point, after Phillips and Crockett had spoken privately together, Phillips offered Preacher Gordon the alternative of property then or cash later. Gordon, also under some pressure from his creditors, preferred money, so Phillips assured him that Crockett would pay the minister by Christmas if a delay was acceptable. The minister was wary, personally "knowing that Col. Crockett was a man whose word was not [to] be depended on." To protect himself, Gordon insisted Davy "give his word and honor both" to pay, and if the job was not finished before Congress convened, to send the money from Washington to a mutual friend in Gibson County. Davy agreed to those terms.

Several times the parson was to attempt to collect the money. For instance, by his own count, he had personally checked three times to learn whether or not the Gibson County friend he and Crockett shared had received the twenty-five dollars from the Congressman. Supposedly Davy did not answer this intermediary's written inquiries. Consequently, Gordon de-

cided that he would have to wait until the Congressman returned home. Even after Crockett was back in his home community, the Reverend Gordon discovered that Davy had gone to Nashville without leaving the twenty-five dollars for Gordon with any of the two men's neighbors. While Gordon was checking different places for his money, strangely enough the millwright claimed that Crockett had paid eighty-six dollars for millwork, a point which became a major discrepancy between Crockett's and Gordon's versions.

Finally Gordon met Crockett at the April Gibson County Court Session. When the parson asked for payment, Davy said that he was not then accountable. Although the astonished minister reminded Crockett of his swearing upon his word and honor, Davy was unmoved. Preacher Gordon threatened to get a court order, but Davy told him that he doubted he would have to pay. When the clergyman inquired why Davy refused to pay the debt, Crockett responded that millwright Phillips had not yet fulfilled the contract. In the face of further questioning by Gordon, Crockett twice denied any payment to Phillips since the agreement had been made with the minister for Crockett's assuming the millwright's twenty-five dollar indebtedness to the Rev. Gordon.

Persisting though, Gordon contended that he could legally force compliance. Still Crockett insisted that a court would not compel him to pay and maintained that a lawyer would substantiate his position. Coincidentally, lawyer Adam Huntsman, a political opponent who successfully defeated Davy for Congress in 1835, was at the Courthouse. The disputants explained their differences to Huntsman, who delivered the opinion that, indeed, the two men had an unwritten understanding which was not legally binding. Consequently, Gordon confronted the Congressman a final time on his word and honor and was again rebuffed. The news of the refusal spread rapidly that day among the parson's friends at the court session and beyond Trenton for many days. The Rev. Gordon reported that many people along the Obion River were greatly upset with lawmaker Crockett.

The reverend's letter had sworn statements attesting to his account and character. He sought likewise to discredit Crockett's witnesses. Surely Crockett knew that John Ryen had fled Madison County to avoid prosecution for stealing bacon. Another witness, William Edmondson, had mistreated a Trenton merchant and left town to escape imprisonment.

Preacher Gordon tried to refute the allegation that he had improperly engaged in politics, intending "to ruin his [Crockett's] election." The parson's opinion was "that no man can electioneer to any purpose except it is a man who puts on a cloak of religion for every profession of people, first the Methodist, then speak well of the Baptist, then join the Presbyterians," Culp injects that this statement was one of the limited number of allusions to the famous man's religion. Thus, the minister believed Crockett hypocritically adapted his manner and speech to fit the prejudices of whomever he met. If Crockett could point out to the Baptists that their minister was a black

sheep among them, then Gordon could inform Crockett's fellow Presbyterians that "a wolf in sheep's clothing" was a threat among them.

Culp writes that this exchange of accusations was the end of the Gordon-Crockett dispute, at least in the newspapers. To Culp the intriguing question in the 1830s as in the 1960s was : "Who was right, the Congressman or the Parson?"⁵

It is quite evident from those incidents about Davy Crockett that Gibson County historian Fred Culp has been quite active in researching area newspapers for Crockett materials. His findings show some of the reasons that it is not always easy to know about and understand the activities of Crockett and his relatives. While Culp does not assign fault in the Crockett-Phillips-Gordon mill case, he is willing to present information which is at least potentially damaging to Gibson County's leading hero. In that manner Culp has helped to perpetuate the Crockett tradition in West Tennessee.

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1. For an elaboration on points included in this paragraph, see Marvin Downing, "*Fred Culp and the Crockett Tradition*," **Journal of the Jackson Purchase Historical Society**, XI, June 1983, 9-14.
 2. Trenton **Herald-Register**, August 23, 1967.
 3. Neither Crockett nor Culp informed the reader of the original reason for the debt, a fact which evidently was immaterial in the overall dispute or a cause of which Culp was unaware. Author's note.
 4. **Herald-Register**, August 30, 1967.
 5. **Ibid.**, September 6, 1967.