

TWO INFLUENTIAL PIONEERS OF WEAKLEY COUNTY, TENNESSEE: WILLIAM AND GEORGE MARTIN

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It is often hard to assess the impact of individuals upon a community or region; but William Martin and his son George are exceptions. For over fifty years these two men in turn made their influence felt in Weakley County, Tennessee. Industrious, William was responsible for the introduction of a major cash crop and its marketing. Equally industrious, George established businesses, supported railroads, and founded a town. Each of their efforts were lucrative, not only for them but for others as well. Active in state politics, George worked for the betterment not only of Weakley County but the whole state. In doing these things, both father and son had an influence far beyond what might normally be expected.

The beginning of all these efforts lay with William Martin, who was born in Halifax County, Virginia, on January 30, 1806. William's ancestors, some of whom had been in Virginia since 1620, had been tobacco farmers and knew the cultivation of the plant very well.¹ A man of drive and ambition, William sought opportunities to get ahead, and tobacco was to provide one of those opportunities.

William married Sarah Glass in 1828 and was working on his father's farm when he heard of new lands to the west that might provide just the chance he needed. Sarah's parents had emigrated to the new lands in what was called the Jackson Purchase. There they settled on the Middle Fork of the Obion River in a county called Weakley, and in 1832 William decided to try his luck there as well.²

William Martin left Virginia with "two four horse teams (and wagons), five or six slaves and about two thousand dollars."³ He also had a precious pouch of tobacco seed, which was to be the foundation of his future success.⁴ After a journey of approximately six weeks, he and his party reached Weakley County. The county in 1832 was just a few years removed from its formation and very unsettled. The population was still less than 5,000, and the land for the most part was covered with thick forests. Its rich, well-watered soil was alive with promise.⁵

Soon the Martins settled about six miles northeast of Dresden, the only town and county seat. William acquired some land and began to raise tobacco, the first man to do so in the confines of that county.⁶

Tobacco farming is labor intensive and having to clear land to plant made it even more so. However, with the land cleared, a plant bed had to be prepared and burned off and the seed planted. When the seedlings were up, they had to be transplanted to the fields. After that, a constant round of topping the plants and suckering (pulling off the secondary leaves) had to be done. In addition to all that, pests such as large green tobacco worms had to be plucked off the plants by hand. When the crop was mature, then came the picking and curing process. On and on the list of jobs went. Lest anyone forget, there were also unexpected vagrancies of weather to be watched for as well.⁷ All in all, it was hard, but William persisted and grew more and more tobacco each year.

Other people began to follow his lead, and soon tobacco was the leading crop. In 1840, Weakley County produced 462,986 lbs. of tobacco, in 1850, 2,228,990 lbs. were produced and in 1860, the figure was higher still.⁸ It overshadowed cotton and any other crop, and William had earned a place in the history books of the area.

Becoming the largest producer of leaf, William naturally had an interest in other aspects of tobacco, such as marketing. To be feasible, tobacco had to be profitable,

and there was also the difficulty in getting it to market. Tobacco was either twisted or packed into barrels called hogsheads. The average hogshead of this period weighed 1400 lbs. and was not easily transported.⁹ The closest market, Mills Point (Hickman), Kentucky, was approximately 50 miles away over a difficult dirt road.¹⁰ In wet weather it was even worse, as deep mud made it almost impassible. Joined to the problem of transport was that of marketing. For, if you did get your crop to Mills Point, you had to either sell it there or ship it down the Mississippi to New Orleans. With the price of tobacco ranging from a low of 1-3 cents per pound in 1846, to highs of 10 cents, every little bit you could save in the process was important.¹¹ Even though Weakley County produced a superior quality of tobacco used as wrapper leaf, prices were not overly high.¹²

Therefore, led by William Martin, the tobacco producers of Weakley County decided to cut out the middlemen altogether and sell at New Orleans directly. They built flatboats on the middle fork of the Obion River using the abundant timber along its banks. Then they floated their cargoes down to the Mississippi and on to New Orleans.¹³ River transport was not new, but it kept expenses down. Even the flatboats turned a profit as the lumber was sold. With business completed, the men rode a steamboat to Mills Point and went home. It was a workable system that helped keep tobacco profitable in the lean years. William made many trips down the Mississippi and sold not only his own tobacco but bought and sold the crops of others as well. While in the process, he became the wealthiest man in the county is true, but countless others made money also.¹⁴

Not one to rest, William became interested in railroads as early as 1852. He worked tirelessly to obtain a connection of the Hickman and Obion Line for Weakley County. Many people were opposed to railroads, so he donated \$5,000 and offered to let it come through his property. By this time he owned 2,500 acres in the western part of the county and saw a great potential for a rail line there. Unfortunately, the railroad was hampered by petty legal problems, and the line wasn't completed until 1861, after William's death.¹⁵ William died January 17, 1859, a thoroughly respected man, leaving an estate valued at \$250,000. He had cast a long shadow.¹⁶

The death of William Martin did not, however, end the family's involvement in the development of Weakley County. Though development was put on hold during the Civil War, after the war, the Martin family, led by William's son George, was once again at the forefront of development. They began immediately by pushing for another railroad. The original rail line had been taken over by the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis line.¹⁷ Its tracks ran through the hamlet of Greenbriar Glade in the middle of the Martin holdings. Unfortunately, many people were still opposed to railroads, but George Martin was a consistent supporter.¹⁸

In 1872, an opportunity for a second railroad presented itself when the Illinois Central Railroad prepared to complete a line through Weakley County. A north-south line, it would enormously increase marketing potential. George was determined to get this line to intersect the Nashville Northwestern line on his land. The Illinois Central had already planned to go through the small town of Gardner, a few miles to the west, but would have to buy the right-of-way. George went to the railroad with an offer of a free right-of-way through his family's land. The railroad quickly agreed and changed the route.¹⁹

Having secured another railroad, the small village of Greenbriar Glade eventually changed its name to Martin in honor of George's father William. Not content to rest on his laurels, George soon erected a sawmill, gristmill, steam cotton gin and a large hotel. Following his lead, George's brothers and other merchants established themselves where the tracks met and the town of Martin was really born. All this took place in May of 1873, and by 1876, Martin had a population of 500 and a variety of businesses. By 1883, the population was 1,500 and in another ten years it was 2,000.

This growth in population and businesses was eventually to make Martin the largest town and commercial center in the county.²⁰

While all of this was going on, George Martin did not neglect politics as an important factor in development. He was familiar with politics, as his uncle Presley Glass had served in the state legislature and the United States Congress.²¹ A democrat, George was elected to the State Legislature for 1873-74. Having advocated public schools in Weakley County, he pushed for them statewide. He helped to pass the first law ever in Tennessee allowing counties to tax for public schools. In 1873, he also introduced the first state bill for regulation of railroads. Being for railroads did not mean being for unrestricted railroads. These efforts were to be important for the whole state for years to come.²²

George was elected to the state senate for 1877-78 and at that time worked hard for the repayment of the state debt dollar for dollar with interest. Many people stood to lose greatly if the debt wasn't settled fully. This was eventually done at 3% interest, as George had wanted, greatly improving the state's financial standing.²³ George was to serve two more terms, one each in the state House of Representatives and State Senate. Each time he worked hard for progressive measures that benefited not only Weakley County but the whole state. Especially interested in public education, as stated above, he even supported a public school in Martin at his own expense. To the end of his life, he supported worthy causes and encouraged others to do the same, and his political influence was always powerful.²⁴

While the Martins, father and son, were not the only ones to have an impact on Weakley County, we can see that over two generations William and George were very influential in its development. During these crucial early years, they worked for not only their own good but that of others as well. Open handed, their legacy is found today in the businesses, public schools and not the least in the town of Martin itself. This is not a bad legacy for anyone.

SOURCES

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⁴Speer, William S. *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans*. Nashville: Albert B. Tavel, 1888, p.134.

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⁷Eaton, Clement. *A History of the Old South: The Emergence of a Reluctant Nation*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 3rd edition, 1975, p.215.

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¹³Speer, William S. *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans*. Nashville: Albert B. Tavel, 1888, p. 134.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Thomas, Ronald C. "The Founding of a Happy Town: Martin, Tennessee." In *The Martin Centennial*. pub. Martin Centennial Committee: Martin, Tennessee, 1973, p.17.

¹⁶Speer, William S. *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans*. Nashville: Albert B. Tavel, 1888, p. 134.

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¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Speer, William S. *Sketches of Prominent Tennesseans*. Nashville: Albert B. Tavel, 1888, p.135.

²¹Ibid., pp.135-136.

²²Ibid., p.135.

²³Ibid.

²⁴*History of Tennessee*. Nashville: The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1887, pp.1008-1009.

