

THE ELDRIDGE FAMILY

From the book Hamilton County Pioneers by John Wilson

The Eldridges once had fine riverbottom farms on both sides of the Tennessee River in North Hamilton County. But now much of their former estate lies beneath the waters of Lake Chickamauga.

Jefferson Eldridge was a pioneer of the Long Savannah section in the 1830s, and he was joined by his younger brother, Simeon M. Eldridge. They descended from Thomas Eldridge, a Quaker who was among the Penn settlers in Pennsylvania. Thomas Eldridge was in Virginia near the Pennsylvania line in the late 1750s, then he moved to Guilford County, N.C. The family could hear the gunshots of the Revolutionary War battle of Guilford Courthouse.

Thomas Eldridge pushed on to the frontier of the future Tennessee, settling at Campbell's Station. Later, he moved to a farm near Lenoir City. Thomas Eldridge was married to Catherine Taylor, a relative of President Zachary Taylor. Her father was Simeon Taylor. The Taylors also moved to Guilford County, N.C.

The sons of Thomas Eldridge included Simeon Eldridge and Jesse Eldridge. This Simeon Eldridge was born while the family was still near the Pennsylvania-Virginia line. The family moved to Guilford County when he was a child, and on to Washington County, N.C. (later Tennessee) when he was 17. He enlisted there to

fight in the Revolution. Simeon Eldridge later lived at Roane County and then McMinn County. Jesse Eldridge, younger brother of Simeon, was one of the first settlers west of Knoxville. In 1796, Jesse Eldridge was bondsman at Knox County for the marriage of William Gardenhire and Easter Nail in October and for the marriage of John Eldridge and Sarah Gilliland in December. About 1798, he purchased land on the Tennessee River near the future town of Loudon. A 32-foot Indian pirogue that was found on the Jesse Eldridge property was used by the family as a feeding and watering trough for farm animals. It is now in the McClung Museum in Knoxville. Jesse Eldridge fought in the battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812. He married Elizabeth Gardenhire, a daughter of Jacob Gardenhire of Roane County. Jesse Eldridge lived until near the end of the Civil War when he was 102 years old. He was buried at the New Providence Cemetery in Roane County. He had acquired many slaves and much property. His brother, Taylor Eldridge, married Ailsey Pathkiller, granddaughter of Chief Pathkiller. Jefferson Eldridge, a son of Jesse Eldridge, was born in 1805. He married Rachel Blair in 1823 in Roane County. Her grandfather, John Blair, was a Revolutionary War soldier who fought at King's Mountain. John Blair was born in 1749 in Lancaster County, Pa., and he was living in Washington County, Tenn., when he died in 1819. His first wife was Jean Gamble, who

lived from 1749 to 1793. His second wife was Hannah Caruthers. The parents of Rachel Blair Eldridge were William and Sarah Simmons Blair. Rachel was the eldest of their 10 children. William Blair was born in 1775 and he lived until 1843. The Blair family came to Knox County about 1790, settling at Blair's Landing. This later was known as Blair's Ferry. Jefferson and Rachel Eldridge moved on to Hamilton County near a Gardenhire settlement in an area that later became James County. However, Jefferson Eldridge died in his mid-30s, leaving Rachel with a large family to tend. She continued to manage her Hamilton County farm that was valued at over \$7,000 just before the Civil War. Two of the sons of Jefferson Eldridge married daughters of George W. Gardenhire. Jesse Eldridge married Isabella Gardenhire after her first husband, George W. Luttrell Jr., died in 1850. John Blair Eldridge married Elizabeth Gardenhire. Another son, William Blair Eldridge, married Caldonia Shull. The youngest son of Jefferson Eldridge was Vincent Blair Eldridge who married Mary Jane Luttrell. Other sons were Simeon and James. The daughters of Jefferson Eldridge included Sarah who married Francis H. Norman, Dollie who married French Watkins, and Elizabeth who married Elisha Cooley. Jesse C. Eldridge, a son of Simeon and Nancy Eldridge, joined Union forces when he was 18. He enlisted with Co. H of the Fourth Tennessee

Cavalry on Aug. 1, 1863, at McMinnville. He rose to the rank of corporal. Jesse Eldridge was accidentally shot in the left arm, with the shot going through his elbow, near the end of the war. The arm had to be amputated at a hospital at Memphis. John W. Eldridge, who was also from Hamilton County, also joined Co. H of the Fourth Tennessee Cavalry. He was mustered in at Tullahoma on Feb. 17, 1864. Records show he "carelessly lost" a Remington pistol and was charged \$20 by the government. John W. Eldridge was captured by the Confederates near the Chattahoochee River on July 31, 1864. Vincent Blair Eldridge moved to Spring Place, Ga. William Blair Eldridge died in 1869 and Jesse Eldridge in 1871. Caldonia Shull Eldridge, widow of William B. Eldridge, lived until 1910 when she died at the home of her daughter, Mrs. John W. Wilson, at Ooltewah. A son, Jesse Eldridge, and daughter, Rachel Eldridge Henry, were living at Soddy. Jesse married Margaret Roark. Caldonia's brother, F.T. Shull, was then living at Rhea Springs. Isabella Gardenhire Luttrell Eldridge, widow of Jesse Eldridge, was living at Rhea County with the Gardenhires when she died in 1898. She was called "one of the best known and most highly esteemed women of Rhea County."

Rachel Eldridge was living after the war with her grandson, Jefferson Watkins, and many of her sons and daughters were nearby. Simeon M.

Eldridge, her brother-in-law, was in the same Blue Springs neighborhood with a riverbottom farm. He had been in Hamilton County since 1833. He and his wife, Nancy, were parents of the Union veteran Jesse C., Isabel, Catherine, Alfred, Martha, Elizabeth, Nancy, James and Molly. Isabel married Caswell Teenor, and Catherine married Samuel M. Scott. Alfred Eldridge served at one time as a deputy sheriff. When Simeon M. Eldridge died in 1897, it was noted he had lived at Blue Springs for 62 years. He owned much property and was "one of the wealthiest residents of James County." Alfred and four of his other children were then living. Jesse Eldridge studied at Savannah Seminary and at Riceville. He became a physician after attending lectures at Vanderbilt and practicing under Dr. T.H. Roddy. He married Mary E. McGill in 1875. Their children included James W., Simeon A., David N., Mary C., Elizabeth G. and Isaac C.

Some of the Eldridges and their neighbors were buried on a knoll known as the Jackfield. It was so named because the family donkey, Jack, grazed there. This Norman-Eldridge Cemetery was one of the small parcels of the Eldridge lands that was not inundated by Lake Chickamauga.

One of the most renowned of the family was Ernest "Big Boy" Eldridge. He was a grandson of William and Caldonia Eldridge and the son of

Jesse and Martha Roark Eldridge. Ernest Eldridge was such a successful basketball coach at Soddy-Daisy High School that he became a legend. He first turned little Soddy High into a basketball powerhouse, then when the school was merged with Daisy he continued to rack up victories, including 45 wins (against only two losses) and the state championship in 1947. In a 44-year coaching career, his teams had 840 wins against only 256 losses. His daughter, Ernestine Eldridge, was also a basketball coach. She still resides at Daisy. The other brothers and sisters of Big Boy Eldridge were also teachers. The children first attended Rutherford Academy at Birchwood prior to the family moving to Soddy. William, Burleigh, Nannie and Dollie all taught. Nannie married C. Douglas McRee from the pioneer McRee family of Soddy. Burleigh married C.A. Downey, a peach grower at Sale Creek. Almeda Frazier, daughter of Douglas and Nannie Eldridge McRee, had a long career at TVA. Her husband, Earl Lee Frazier, owned an insurance agency.

Dave Eldridge served on the Hamilton County Council and was county trustee. He was also president of Broadway Feed Company on South Broad Street. Born in Chattanooga in 1915, he was the son of David McGill Eldridge and Eugenia Coulter.

Bill Eldridge was a longtime county school principal, including 14 years at Sale Creek

School and 12 years at Red Bank High. He later was on the Hamilton County School Board. His brother is Roy Eldridge, a former postal carrier who is now a court officer in the criminal courts. They are great-grandsons of John and Elizabeth Gardenhire Eldridge. They are sons of James Davis Eldridge and grandsons of James Franklin "Dyke" Eldridge. Davis Eldridge served a number of years on the County School Board. Dyke Eldridge was "a character" who was a justice of the peace and farmer. At the time of the Chickamauga Dam project, he sold one of the largest tracts acquired by TVA. This was on the south side of the river, while Jesse Eldridge sold a sizable farm across the river.

Another early Eldridge family was that of William A. and Martha M. Haney Eldridge, who were married in 1866 and lived in James County. Their children included Riley, Tennessee, Jefferson, James, Ellen and Eliza C. Jasper M. Eldridge and his wife, Sarah, also lived at James County.

Polly Watkins Donnelly of Cleveland, Tenn., has written a book on Jefferson Eldridge and his descendants. She is a granddaughter of Jefferson Eldridge.