

John Patton Erwin

By Carter G. Baker

John Patton Erwin, twice Mayor of Nashville,¹ was born in Wilkes County, North Carolina January 8, 1795. He was the son of Andrew Erwin and Jane Patton who later settled in Bedford County, Tennessee. Andrew had been a representative in the North Carolina House of Commons and was the first postmaster of Asheville. In Tennessee, he was a land speculator and owned the Old Stone Fort near Manchester, among many other properties.²

In addition to JPE, I will mention two of Andrew and Jane's other children because their lives and marriages had a large effect on JPE's later life and his enmity with Andrew Jackson:

- James – his first wife was Ann Brown Clay, the daughter of Henry Clay.³ JPE corresponded with Henry Clay and several of his newsy and gossip-filled letters are included in the Clay Papers.⁴
- Jane – she first married the young widower Thomas Yeatman, a well-known banker and merchant in Nashville. Thomas' first wife left an infant son, William Theodore, who later married JPE's daughter Amelia. After Thomas died in 1833, Jane married John Bell, Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives, U. S. Senator, and candidate for President in 1860. This Jane is easily confused with her cousin, Jane Erwin, who was married first to Charles Dickinson, killed in the duel with Andrew Jackson.⁵

In 1815, JPE married Frances (Fannie) Lanier Williams, the daughter of Joseph Williams and Rebecca Lanier of Panther Creek, North Carolina. Fannie was a year younger than JPE and she, too, had brothers who were well-connected and became political enemies of Jackson:⁶

- John – U. S. Senator from Tennessee and as Colonel commanding the 39th U. S. Infantry Regiment led these Tennessee volunteers to the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814, insuring Jackson's victory over the Creek Indians. Although they were friends in earlier years, Jackson became an enemy of Williams' and insured his defeat for re-election as Senator in 1823. John's wife, Melinda White, was the daughter of James White, founder of Knoxville, and the sister-in-law of John Overton, Jackson's long-time business partner and *consigliere*.⁷

¹ (Mayors of Nashville)

² (Unknown)

³ (Genealogies of Kentucky Families; From the Filson Club History Quarterly, 1981), pp. 438-431

⁴ (Hopkins, The Papers of Henry Clay)

⁵ (Kelley, West Nashville...its people and environs, 1987), p. 19

⁶ (Williams, 1997), p. 139

⁷ (Williams, 1997), p. 60-64

- Lewis – fourteen-term Congressman from North Carolina and close political ally of Henry Clay.⁸
- Thomas Lanier – twin brother of Lewis, attorney, Tennessee Supreme Court Justice and Chancellor of Tennessee. He died in Nashville while visiting JPE and Fannie and is buried in the Erwin lot at the City Cemetery. He is the namesake of Thomas Lanier Williams III, a descendant of his brother John, and better known as Tennessee Williams, the playwright.⁹

By 1817, Erwin had been elected an alderman of Nashville and in 1821 he became Mayor for the first of two terms. During this period he practiced law and went bankrupt for reasons that I have never determined. Given the times, land speculation probably had something to do with it. Fannie’s father, Joseph Williams, took rapid action from his lair in North Carolina by sending her brother, attorney Thomas Lanier Williams, to Nashville from Knoxville to sort out matters. Court records show that all Fannie’s assets were separated from her husband’s control and were to be left eventually to their children. Thomas conducted a sale of the household assets and they were apparently bought by friends and returned to Fannie.¹⁰

Although this event chagrined Erwin, he continued his law practice and became the Principal Clerk of the Tennessee House of Representatives. In 1825 he became editor of the *Nashville Whig* and perhaps its secret owner. In a letter to Henry Clay, he mentions the need for a silent partner because “my own poverty and embarrassment” would not allow him to actually own it.¹¹ His newspaper supported Henry Clay and was anti-Jackson.

In 1826 he resigned as both editor of the paper and Clerk of the House¹² in order to be appointed Postmaster at Nashville by President John Quincy Adams. Sam Houston, then Congressman from Tennessee, wrote a letter to President Adams strongly condemning Erwin by mentioning his bankruptcy, his refusal to pay debts, and a supposed penchant for night-time eavesdropping on his enemies.¹³ President Adams appointed him anyway, but Erwin didn’t forgive the attacks and challenged Houston to a duel.

The duel never took place however, because Houston would not accept the challenge delivered by Erwin’s second, a notorious Texas character named John Smith T. All the give and take led Houston to eventually duel a General William White at the dueling grounds in Kentucky. Instructed by that old pro Andrew Jackson, Houston escaped unscathed and severely, but not fatally, wounded the General.¹⁴

⁸ (Williams, 1997), p.122-125

⁹ (Williams, 1997), p. 125

¹⁰ (Williams-Stringfield Family Records held by Emily K. Baker)

¹¹ (Hopkins, The Papers of Henry Clay, Volume 4: Secretary of State 1825)

¹² (McLean, Papers Concerning Robertson's Colony in Texas, Vol. III), p. 81

¹³ (Writings of Sam Houston, 1821-1832), p. 6

¹⁴ (Steward, 2000), pp. 172-174

Perhaps Houston's dislike for John Patton was transference of Houston's enmity with John Williams, JPE's brother-in-law. In an 1816 letter to William H. Crawford, Secretary of War, Houston writes to correct an error in his promotion saying "my reasons for not referring you to my former Col. Williams, are that he has ever been inimical to me..."¹⁵

Erwin was Postmaster for the four years of the Adams administration. He built a lobby for the post office and introduced glazed boxes so that patrons could see whether they had mail.¹⁶ After this period, he became cashier of the Yeatman, Woods Bank.¹⁷ As mentioned above, Thomas Yeatman's second wife was JPE's sister Jane, and Yeatman's eldest son later married one of the Erwins' daughters.

He was also Secretary of the Texas Association which was responsible for much of the settlement of that state while it was still a part of Mexico.¹⁸ The Robertson family was deeply involved in the Texas venture and while Mayor in 1821, Erwin had sorted out a number of deeds to downtown lots for the family, thus insuring their income from them.¹⁹ In 1834 he was elected for a second one-year term as Mayor. He was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1830 and then again for a six-year term beginning in 1835. With the 1840 election of William Henry Harrison, the last Whig elected President, Erwin apparently expected to be appointed as Postmaster again, but this did not happen.²⁰

In 1831, the Erwins purchased "Buena Vista", which would be their home for the rest of John's life. The large white frame house located on a high hill had been built in 1812 by John Everett Beck, Jr. and his wife Lavinia Robertson, the youngest daughter of James and Charlotte Robertson, founders of Nashville.²¹ In 1860, the Widow Erwin sold the house to trustees for the Dominican Sisters²² and "Buena Vista Hill" is now the site of the St. Cecelia motherhouse.

In addition to the six daughters who lived to maturity and were known for their brains, beauty, and ability to marry well, there were four other children who came to sadder ends. John Patton, Jr. (1817-September 3, 1843) apparently suffered from consumption for many years and for most of his adult years he searched for a climate where he might regain his health.²³ A letter written in 1842 by his sister Rebecca, mentions him being in Texas.²⁴ Little Joseph (1824-June 2, 1832) was drowned when he fell from a canoe capsized by the wake of a steamboat in the Cumberland River. His body was recovered several days later.²⁵ Robert W. died at age one year on August

¹⁵ (Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1817), p. 6

¹⁶ (City of Nashville Illustrated), pp. 42 and 62

¹⁷ (To the Citizens of Nashville, 1829). p. unk

¹⁸ (McLean, Papers Concerning Robertson's Colony in Texas, Vol. XII), p.608

¹⁹ (McLean), p. 62

²⁰ (Erwin, 1841)

²¹ (Kelley, 1973), p. unk.

²² (Davidson County, TN Deed Book 31, p. 25)

²³ (Nashville Whig, 1843), p. unk

²⁴ (Erwin, 1841)

²⁵ (National Banner & Nashville Daily Advertiser, 1832), p. unk

19, 1826.²⁶ A daughter, Emma (1833-August 24, 1834) died very young.²⁷ Although there are no records available, I assume that these four children are buried in the Erwin plot at the old City Cemetery along with their father and uncle, Thomas Lanier Williams.

According to his obituaries, Erwin had been paralyzed for some years from the waist down. He also had lost his speech. This apparent stroke did not affect his mind, but his death on August 27, 1857 must not have been unexpected because by September 4 we find his widow and some of her family in Knoxville on the way to visit her brother, Dr. Alexander Williams, in Greeneville, Tennessee.²⁸

In his chatty book chronicling the later lives of the “smart set” of the old Confederacy, Thomas Cooper De Leon tells of the six “brilliant” Erwin girls²⁹ who were:

- Frances Laura (1817-1877) who married William J. Ledyard, a merchant of Mobile.
- Rebecca Jane (1820-1885) who married Major Andrew Franklin Goff, a Nashville attorney. They owned “Glencliffe” off the Murfreesboro Pike.
- Amelia Patton (1821-1888) who married William Theodore Yeatman, eldest son of the banker Thomas Yeatman. William, among other interests, was the long-time captain and owner of the “Tennessee”, a well-known steamboat in the New Orleans trade. In later years they owned the hotel at Kingston Springs, Tennessee.
- Eleanor (Ellen) (1828-1917) who married George Albigence Hayward, St. Louis investor and colonel in the Confederate army.
- Mary Louise (1829-1898) who married Charles E. Hillman of the Nashville iron and hardware family.
- Caroline (1832-1898) who married first, John Scott, of whom I know nothing, and secondly, Willis Gaylord Clark, a Mobile author and educator.

With the exception of Rebecca, all the daughters had children and there are living descendants of all the others except Mary Hillman. Rebecca, Amelia, Mary, and Caroline along with their mother (who died in 1872) and some of their children are buried in Mount Olivet Cemetery in Nashville.³⁰

The old names are not forgotten.

²⁶ (The Whig, 1826), p. unk

²⁷ (Nashville Whig, 1834), P. unk

²⁸ (Gower, 1959), pp. 429-30.

²⁹ (De Leon, 1907), pp. 190-92.

³⁰ Section 6, Lot 114

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