

CLINTON

Rev. Jesse Laney Boyd at the  
time this was written (1960)  
was Executive Secretary of the  
Mississippi Baptist Historical  
Association

## HISTORY OF CLINTON

by J. L. Boyd

Clinton is one of many in this country. Practically every state of the Union has a Clinton. We in Clinton, Mississippi, often wonder if they all are derived from the same source. Our Clinton was named for Ex-Governor DeWitt Clinton of New York who had served his state as chief executive several terms of two years each and had led the movement in the building of the Erie Canal from the Great Lakes to the Hudson River. For this latter feat he was "lauded to the skies" as it were, <sup>became</sup> and/a popular idol of the nation similar to Franklin D. Roosevelt in the past generation. He had run for president in 1812 on the Republican Party (equivalent to the Democratic party of today), but was defeated by John Adams of the Federalist party by a narrow margin. Clinton was being groomed for the nomination for the presidency in 1828 when the Mt. Salus' folk were ambitious to become Mississippi's Capital. (However, he died before the nomination convention convened.) Besides, DeWitt Clinton was a "States Righter" of the first Order. All of which turned the minds of the people of Mt. Salus to choose Clinton as the name of their anticipated Capital City. (Other national leaders were honored in the selection of the names of our streets - Jefferson Street, Monroe Street, and Madison Street.)

This community in its beginning is erroneously (?) said to have been called Mt. Dexter, where the 1805 Choctaw Treaty was signed with the Indians (There is a small community called Dexter in Lawrence County located on a picturesque elevation that might be the traditional site for the signing of that Treaty.) The Natchez Trace (1802) passed near the hills of our present Clinton from beneath which some six salubrious springs of crystal waters flowed. No doubt travellers along this Trace camped here

overnight and filled their canteens with the waters as they departed. And it is safe to say that traders concentrated upon this spot to exchange wares with the Choctaw Indians, and maybe some of the whites dared to settle temporarily as "Squatters", which was strictly against the laws of the land till the 1820 Treaty with the Choctaws was negotiated.

The first person to purchase land in this immediate area after the Treaty of 1820 was Charles M. Lawson, an "attache of the Surveyor's Department in the Land Office in Jackson", in March 1823. This plot of land embraced the hills and springs. In November of 1823 at a public sale at the Land Office in Jackson, Gov. Walter Leake was the first to make a purchase of land which extended west and south of the Lawson tract. He proceeded to have a home built for himself and family near the large southernmost spring, after the order of an English manor, and called it Mt. Salus (Mountain of Health). While it was a-building he continued residence at Plain Springs, Claiborne County, until March, 1825, when he and his family moved into Mt. Salus. He was then a sick man. He administered the affairs of state from his sick bed through his subordinates till his death on Nov. 17, 1825.

The village came to be called Mt. Salus, from the Governor's mansion (?). On January 26, 1825, Mt. Salus was given a post office, it being the fifty-first (51st) in the state; Jackson having received hers on October 21, 1822. (The first in the state was that of Natchez, July 1, 1800) Mt. Salus and surrounding community enjoyed a period of rapid growth in population from the first. The people were for the most part of the middle class industrious, and frugal in business, and out in the rural sections, prosperous landowners with many slaves. Fine homes dotted the countryside, cotton being the principal crop, making Mt. Salus (Clinton) noted as a cotton shipping center. The village became a noted health resort with hotels and inns crowded with

Wealthy guests from far and near enjoying the health-giving properties of the waters of the free-flowing springs. State officials in considerable numbers resided here and commuted to Jackson to carry on the State's business. The Circuit Judge chose this as his home and radiated from here to county seat towns for court duty. Lawyers bunched here for their families to participate in the advantages of a health resort.

The people in the early days were anxious for their sons and daughters to have school advantages nearby. Hence, an Academy was established with a charter by legislative enactment on January 24, 1826, to be known as Hampstead Academy. The first citizen, Charles Lawson, donated five acres of land, embracing the western section of the present Mississippi College campus. A building was constructed and the school opened for enrollment of students on January 1, 1827. Both boys and girls were enrolled which indicated an advanced attitude toward females' ability to cope with males in academic instruction. Some thirty students were enrolled in 1828, increasing from year to year. In December, 1830, the legislature amended the charter, changing the name to Mississippi College and authorizing the Board of Trustees to confer degrees in the arts, languages and sciences "as are usually conferred in the most respectable colleges in the United States." In December, 1831, the first ~~graduation exercises were held~~ commencement was held when two young ladies were graduated, given gold medals with suitable inscriptions and diplomas. (This is the first time a four-year co-educational institution in this country sent out a female graduate so far as we have record.) The College was owned and operated by the town of Clinton. In many respects the town was forging ahead.

Gideon Fitz of Mt. Salus was the first Register of Public lands from the time the Land Office was located in Jackson on May 10, 1822. He was instrumental in having it moved to Mt. Salus on June 6, 1827. The following is taken from the report of an eye-witness of Mt. Salus at that time:

"Hundreds assembled at the Land Office for days at a time, men and women. They came prepared to camp out, many bringing rations with them . . . This was generally a time of great excitement. Ill-feeling, angry words, and often blows - - - aye sometimes more fatal consequences resulted from the competition for certain tracts of land. Neighbors would supplant each other and sharp, shrewd speculators would take advantage of those who had hoped by virtue of their right of "preemption" to secure their homestead and some valuable tract adjoining, and by some maneuvering of which such men are always capable, these sharpsters managed often to disappoint and almost ruin honest, industrious, unsuspecting people." And he told how he and other young people sold home-made ginger cookies to the land hunters. The people dwelt in tents until they could erect log cabins with earth and puncheon floors.

In 1828 Mt. Salus bid for the honor of being designated as the county seat; but Raymond got it. She then aspired to be chosen as the state's capital. Jackson had gotten off to a good start in 1821, but the unhealthy, mosquito-infested marshes to the east inhibited a rapid growth. The legislature was considering the matter of a change of location. Mt. Salus groomed herself for favorable consideration. As inducements her citizens and those of outlying communities offered to donate to the state a suitable square for public buildings, including a State Capitol, a fire-proof office building for the Secretary of State, treasurer, and auditor. They also proposed to remodel the academic edifice of Mississippi Academy for the use of the law-making body for some years till proper facilities could be provided. The College proposed to have its vacations during the meetings of the General Assembly. In anticipation the town was surveyed into lots, streets, etc. with the public square to be on the hill where the present fire station and picture show are now located. The State Capitol building was to face east through the center of town down Main street, bisecting Capitol Street, Jefferson Street, Monroe Street and East St. Madison would parallel College Street, Leake Street, Lawson Street.

And, as a climax for lending greater dignity to the rapidly growing town of Mt. Salus, the name should be changed to Clinton, as heretofore reiterated.

Several towns in the state were seeking the same distinction and honor, including Monticello. The deliberations of the legislative committee on the change of location dragged on many months, in heated and bitter debates. There were eliminations down to Clinton and Jackson. At the final session the vote resulted in a tie; and Clinton lost by the presiding officer, John R. Peyton of Raymond, casting his vote for the Capitol to remain in Jackson. As Clinton had only recently lost to Raymond in her bid for the county seat, feeling ran high in and around Clinton against Major Peyton. As a consequence, Judge Isaac Caldwell of Clinton challenged Peyton to a pistol duel. They met on the Raymond Road about a mile from Clinton on November 28, 1829. Two shots were exchanged. Neither was seriously hurt. This settled the issue, and each retired from the scene with his honor unblemished.

These two defeats of Clinton in her aspiration for civil or political distinction blotted out her hopes for the possibility of her becoming a "Big Town". She doubtless settled back and pondered over what was left for her to do that might be noteworthy. She had Mississippi College which was moving rapidly forward to a great and glorious future. Perhaps it was providential that she should be defeated in these aspirations that the College may be favored with the distinctive advantages of a small town environment. In this she has become famous. Clinton, Mississippi, has come to be known far and wide as a center of culture and refinement through her educational institutions. Sometime in the 1830's some distinguished gentleman framed this toast: "Here's to Jackson the seat of Government; to Raymond the seat of Justice; to Amsterdam the port of Entry; and to Clinton, the seat of Learning." Another has designated Clinton as

Up to 1830 the population of Clinton reached "in all about two hundred inhabitants" (Brough, in Historic Clinton). According to the U. S. Census, Clinton's population has fluctuated as follows: (whites only) - 1837, 613; 1840, 400; 1880, 569; 1900, 354; 1910, 767; 1920, 669; 1930, 912; 1940, 916. By 1950 Clinton's population increased to over 2,000, and on April 1, 1960 the population was 3410.

The early 1830's leading up to the "panic of 1837" was a period of "Flush Times" when land values and commodity prices soared to frenzy heights, an orgy of speculation. Interest on loans rose to enormous rates, reportedly 7% per month in some sections. The crash came in 1837. One of the two banks closed its doors in Clinton, and its president retired to his magnificent home in the country to avoid being pressured by the depositors who had lost their life's savings. A small group, it is said, went together to his place to appeal for redress and found him in the field plowing. He listened only briefly to their plea, and continued plowing with the remark that they see the cashier; he was not busy with his mind on spiritual things. The papers were filled with bankruptcy proceedings, sheriff's sales, tax collector's sales. Paper currency was discounted to as low as 20% of its face value. Salves valued at \$1200 were offered for one-fourth as much, and their further importation into the state was forbidden. Clinton suffered with all the rest. Her population at the beginning of the panic of 1837 was 613 and was reduced to 400 in 1840. Her one industry, the college, was stricken to its knees, as it were. Enrollment in the male department dropped to 25 students. An accumulated debt for maintenance and back pay for the three teachers and president who were serving for a pittance, loomed as a storm cloud overhead threatening to destroy the institution. At a called conference with the trustees, the president and two of the teachers resigned with the assurance of a token payment of back pay be forwarded

when in hand. This left the male department in care of Prof. Daniel Comfort. (The female department fared som better.)

The recovery from the set-back was slow and arduous. In 1842 the Presbyterian denomination assumed responsibility of operating the college to 1850. Then the Baptists were given the privilege of operating it, under the guantantee that the school would be operated successfully in Clinton, or return it to the owners, the Town of Clinton. In the 1860's and 1870's conditions arose that the College might revert back to Clinton. The Civil War had left it nearly bankrupt, and its recovery almost failed. Then in the early 1890's Clinton came near losing her college, some say because of neglect. The Baptists of the state were not supporting the institution as they should have. And the Town of Clinton had drifted into a state of apparent neglect. The streets were neglected with hog wallows all about and hogs and cattle having a free run of the place. Jefferson Street leading from the front of the college campus to the center of town had grown up with weeds, grass and briars so dense that a citizen of the town petitioned the Board of Trustees of the College to allow him the privilege of fencing it off as a cow pasture. The board or plank side-walks of the town were so neglected that it was a risk for people to use them for fear of stepping through a hole, falling and breaking a limb. There was evidence of a general let-down spirit. According to one who passed by and observed these deplorable conditions, it appeared that a town of people possessed of culture had lost their personal pride and "run down at the heel".

There was a campus with several buildings formerly occupied by a girls' school at Meridian than unused. A quiet movement was started to move Mississippi College to this location and Meridian would get back of it with moral and financial support. At the 1892 session of the Mississippi Baptist Convention at Meridian the removal spirit asserted itself in a majority vote to move Mississippi College to Meridian.

This caused great excitement throughout Mississippi. It was an awakening blow to the Town of Clinton. They aroused from their lethargy and put their finger on the spot of the contract of 1850 where the Baptists agreed to operate Mississippi College "in Clinton." That killed the removal movement; but it was a rallying point for the Town of Clinton and Mississippi Baptists to join hands and hearts behind Mississippi College to make a greater success of it in Clinton.

Soon thereafter Dr. W. T. Lowrey who favored "removal" at the Meridian Convention in 1892 was elected president of Mississippi College. He accepted and brought Dr. J. W. Provine along with him to head the Science Department. Provine immediately assembled a crew of laborers and began to "clean up the town" - cut the weeds, mend the sidewalks, fill the hog wallows, get the cattle off the streets and a few years later put in water works. The water was piped from the Mt. Salus Spring south of town and soon the outside privies were eliminated, assuring better health conditions. President Lowrey marshalled his forces for smooth sailing on the campus, at the same time cultivating the towns people with a view to better co-ordination between the town and college. Within a few years he canvassed the citizens of Clinton with a petition asking that they agree to transfer the title of ownership of Mississippi College from the Town of Clinton to the Mississippi Baptist Convention. This they finally agreed to do with the proviso that the Mississippi Baptists pledge to invest \$10,000 as soon as possible on improvements of the facilities on the campus. It was all consummated and carried out as agreed to. A Change was effected in the charter by legislative action, giving it the necessary legal status. The B aptists of Mississippi thus in 1900 became owner and possessor of Mississippi College.

In 1850 when the Baptists began operating the College it was valued at \$11,000. Today (1960) it is valued at in the neighborhood of \$8,000,000. The Town of Clinton has rendered a great service to the



world in initiating and perpetuating such an institution, though most of the time through the efforts and activities of other agencies.

---

A D D E N D A

During the Civil War when everything was upset economically, "hard times" were experienced in Clinton. All able-bodied men were in the armed forces, the slaves were restive and doubtless in many cases caused trouble for their masters, some fleeing through "the underground" to the North; and the armies of the North were pilfering on every hand. The citizens of Clinton made application for assistance from the Federal Government as the following affidavit indicates:

"Clinton, Miss., July 23, 1863 - 'We, citizens of Clinton, Mississippi, having received from the United States 15,000 rations for subsistence for destitute people in Clinton and vicinity, pledge our honor that the same shall be quitably distributed, and that none of the stores (i. e. rations) shall be convertible for the use of the so-called Confederate States."

THE CLINTON RIOT

After the Civil War when everything was upset politically "hard times" were experienced in Clinton and Mississippi. All ex-service men from the armed forces were disfranchised who failed to pledge allegiance to the U. S. A. The carpet-baggers, scalawags and Freedmen were in the saddle representing the Republican party; Democrats did not have much of a chance. Race riots occurred in many places in the South. The one at Clinton was the last and the bloodiest of all. A county-wide political rally was planned about two months before the general election on September 4, 1875. During the morning hours the leading freemen paraded on the streets of the town led by their most turbulent group on horses caparisoned with tinkling bells, etc. drumming up the crowd. It happened

in a spacious oak grove in sight of Clinton, north of town. More than a thousand people were present, the vast majority of them Negroes. Speakers of both parties (Democrat and Republican) were to speak. Bottled whiskey was there in abundance in the pockets of men armed with pistols. A young white man from Raymond lifted a bottle to take a drink. A negro tried to take it from him. A scuffle followed, and the negro was getting the best of the fight. A young white man also of Raymond drew his pistol and shot the negro. The riot began. Armed negroes closed in and the young man that shot the negro tried to make his escape on a horse but was overtaken and his brains were beaten out. A friend of his trying to assist him suffered the same fate. Larger numbers of both races entered the fray. The battle raged furiously till the ammunition of the whites gave out. They fled toward town and were met by armed men who had heard the shots and anticipated trouble.

A telegram was sent to Vicksburg for assistance, and by a chartered train a company of armed young men was on the ground in a short time. They opened fire on the remaining negroes on the field and soon cleared it of them. It is not known the number killed and wounded, but it is thought the casualties amounted to near one hundred. Most of the turbulent leaders escaped into the woods in the country. Sentries were placed in all road intersections of the county to round them up. When they realized what they had done and the possible consequences they dared not return to their homes. Some showed up in Washington, posing as martyrs to the Republican cause. A committee of the Republican Congress, then in session, came to Clinton to investigate, but there is no record that they found sufficient evidence to fix the blame on the Democrats.

The race riot at Clinton sparked a movement which resulted in the success of the Democratic candidates for office in the general election in November, thus putting an end to Carpetbag Government (Republican) in Mississippi.