

## STERLING BREWER I

The early pioneer days in Tennessee must have been difficult. Sterling's two daughter's, Margaret and Eliza, died in 1802. The land was new and uncleared, goods and services were scarce, but soon farms were established and towns were formed. In 1803, Sterling was one of the first justices of the peace of the newly formed Dickson County and was one of the commissioners who laid out the town of Charlotte. His property was along Jones Creek near the Harpeth River and in 1809 he was given town lot number 28 bounded by Dunning Street and Dickson Street and he acquired more land along the River.

As his wealth and influence were growing, so was his family. In 1807 another daughter, Elizabeth, was born followed in 1809 by another daughter, Letitia Harper. A second son, Sterling Junior was born in 1811 and the final child, Louisa A. (or Louisiana) was born in 1813.

Sterling had a tempestuous career in public service beginning with an unsuccessful race for commander of the Dickson County militia. "Sheriff Robert Weakley accused him of having been tried for a criminal offense in North Carolina before he came to Middle Tennessee. Brewer hotly denied the accusation, and sued Weakley for slander. After considerable litigation Brewer was awarded \$200. damages and his name was cleared."

"Over half a decade elapsed before Brewer again ventured into politics. In the meantime he farmed extensively, acquired more slaves, and became more prosperous. In 1810 he announced his candidacy for representative to the state legislature from Dickson County, and was elected. He served for only one term and returned to his Dickson County farm after the legislative session. By 1817 he had accumulated considerable real and personal property, was a prominent churchman, and had been elected to the state senate from a district composed of Dickson, Hickman, and Robertson counties. Two years later he was chosen for a second term, but resigned for reasons undisclosed.

The first United States census available for this part of Tennessee was taken in 1820. Sterling Brewer is the only Brewer recorded in Dickson County. His household was counted as two males under 10, three males between 26 and 45, one over 45; one female under 10; two females between 10 and 16, one female between 26 and 45; and one over 45. Slaves were not listed. In 1820 Sterling was 50 years old, Nissy was 45, James was 28 and unmarried, Elizabeth was 13, Letitia was 10, Sterling, Jr. 9, and Louisa 7. That leaves unexplained three adults and two children under 10. Perhaps there was another family staying with them at the time and this family could have been that of his brother John whose two daughters would certainly have been under ten years of age at that time. John died in Dickson County in 1844, leaving a wife, Susan, and two daughters, Mary Ann and Sarah Elizabeth. Unfortunately in this early census, no names were taken.

" In 1821 he was elected for a third term, and by this time he was a familiar figure among legislators in Knoxville and Murfreesboro where the legislative sessions then were held. He had been a staunch supporter of one of Tennessee's greatest governors, William Carroll, and he became Carroll's choice for speaker of the senate. Of the many important matters which came before the Tennessee legislature of 1821, the numerous petitions for divorce, then granted by the legislature,

attracted the speaker's attention. Even former Governor Joseph McMinn was among those who filed a petition for legal separation. Brewer was a staunch Methodist who took his religion seriously and who believed divorce was wrong. He .....secured the Reverend Valentine Cook, a Methodist minister and president of a Methodist college in Kentucky, to deliver the sermon, and the legislature met in joint session to hear him. 'Never did that singularly powerful preacher appear to greater advantage.....' He convinced the legislators that from a New Testament point of view divorce was wrong. The result was that many petitions for divorce, including McMinn's, were turned down." (History of Dickson County, Corlew)

Following the momentous legislative session of 1821, Sterling "decided to retire from politics and to devote the rest of his life to farming and retirement in Dickson County. These years should have been filled with joy and satisfaction instead of grief and despair. At this point in his life he was visited by a charlatan from an eastern city who represented himself as being a scientist and an expert in mineralogy. The ingratiating stranger told Brewer that he believed that underneath Brewer's farm there converged several salt-water steams which, if tapped, would yield considerable wealth. Salt was scarce at that time, and brought a good price on all markets. Most Nashville merchants advertised daily that they would pay for farm produce in 'either cash or salt'.....Brewer permitted the stranger to make a survey. The latter took from his coat his 'divining rod.' Brewer with apparently more knowledge of law and politics than of science, watched with amazement while the rod, time after time, appeared to quiver and pull downward as the stranger walked over the farm. Brewer, now believing he had a 'gold mine' in salt, agreed to pay the stranger a handsome price to make an extensive survey on his land and to draw maps locating spots where wells should be drilled. The stranger made the survey, took Brewer's money, and disappeared. Drilling was expensive, and Brewer, being a man of caution, decided to employ other 'scientists' before spending money on drilling equipment. A second, and then a third, was called in, and each confirmed the findings of the first. The third to come was Valentine Cook, the same college president and Methodist minister who had addressed the legislature several years before when Brewer was Speaker of the Senate, and whose moving eloquence had won Brewer's utmost respect. He brought from his Kentucky home his 'divining rod' and proceeded with a survey and, amazingly enough, confirmed the findings of the other 'mineralogists' before him. If Brewer had consulted with Bishop Paine about Cook's reliability he no doubt would have received the utmost encouragement, for Paine soon was to write of Cook that he was a man 'distinguished for learning, piety, and usefulness . . . an expert in chemistry, electricity, and kindred subjects . . . ' Convinced beyond a doubt now, the well-to-do Dickson County farmer ordered expensive machinery and hired a crew of workmen to begin drilling at a place recommended by Cook and the others. For three years Brewer let his farm go to ruin while his slaves and others drilled wells on the farm. At one place after drilling several score feet Brewer struck a hard crystalline limestone bed which made operations slow and difficult, but at 300 feet he reached water which had 'a brackish taste.' This encouraged him to drill farther, although by this time he had poured thousands of dollars into the operations. Finally at a depth of one thousand feet the auger broke. With a heavy heart and anguish of spirit Sterling Brewer now was forced to turn aside from his pipe dream. Most of his slaves and personal property had been sold, and much of his real property had been mortgaged. Disappointed, discouraged, and disillusioned, the former legislator, having aged a score of

years during the three year period, wanted to see no more of his Dickson County land. He moved to Nashville where he lived a few more years in very modest circumstances. George Frederick Mellon, a Nashville newspaperman, wrote of him as a 'man who died in poverty,' and Bishop Paine, his close friend who conducted his funeral, stated that he 'buried him from a humble rented house in Nashville.' Census records for 1830 indicate that he did own eight slaves, but he owned no real property, and the number of slaves owned was less than half the number he had owned ten years previously." (History of Dickson County, Corlew)

Sterling Brewer's obituary in the *National Banner and Nashville Daily Advertiser* of Saturday, July 7, 1932, was only two lines: "DIED-- In this town, Mr. Sterling Brewer, a worthy and respectable citizen."

After the death of her husband, Nissy went to live with her oldest son, Dr. James Moody Brewer, in Trenton, Gibson County, Tennessee, where she died in 1849. Of her seven children only the two boys survived her.

James, who had come to Tennessee as a young boy, was educated at Cumberland College, later Nashville University, under the tutelage of Dr. James Priestly. He studied medicine at the Medical University of New York under Dr. Hosack, graduating in 1818. His obituary of 1867 refers to him as "an accomplished scholar and a polished gentleman--an man of no ordinary endowments." In 1824 he returned to Wake County, N.C. and married Ann A. Camp before moving to Trenton, Gibson County, Tennessee, in 1826 where he practiced medicine "with zealous fidelity" for forty-two years.

Two of the daughters married the same man, Thomas Shearon. The Shearons had evidently come to Dickson County from North Carolina shortly after the Brewers. The two families had known each other for at least two generations as there were Shearons in Warren County, N.C., as well as in Wake County, N.C. (N.B., Some anecdotal records say that Thomas Shearon came from England, but the long time presence of Shearons in North Carolina seems to dispute this.) The elder sister, Elizabeth, married Thomas Shearon in Dickson County in December of 1827. They had three children: Thomas Rogers, William, and Elizabeth Brewer. There exist today portraits of Thomas and Elizabeth which have been handed down through the Shearon descendants that show two very aristocratic and prosperous individuals.

After Elizabeth's death in 1830, Thomas married her younger sister, Letitia, in Nashville where she was living with her parents following the salt mine disaster. Their children were Sterling Brewer, Mary, Lewis, and Catherine. Sometime after Letitia died in 1843, Thomas went to California. Gold rush fever? He was killed there in August of 1853 at Coloma, El Dorado County, where he apparently owned property. His son Sterling's Confederate pension application indicates that he had been with his father in California before returning to Nashville.

The youngest child, Louisa A. or Louisiana (Sterling's pulpit Bible records Louisiana, the Marriage Register says Louisa A.) was married to Jesse D. Carr on 27 October 1836 in Nashville. She died sometime in 1840 in Memphis, Tennessee.



Grand mother of Mrs. J. Johnston  
on her right side  
Mrs. Thomas W. Shanon



Grand father of Mrs. J. Johnston on  
his left side  
Thomas W. Shanon