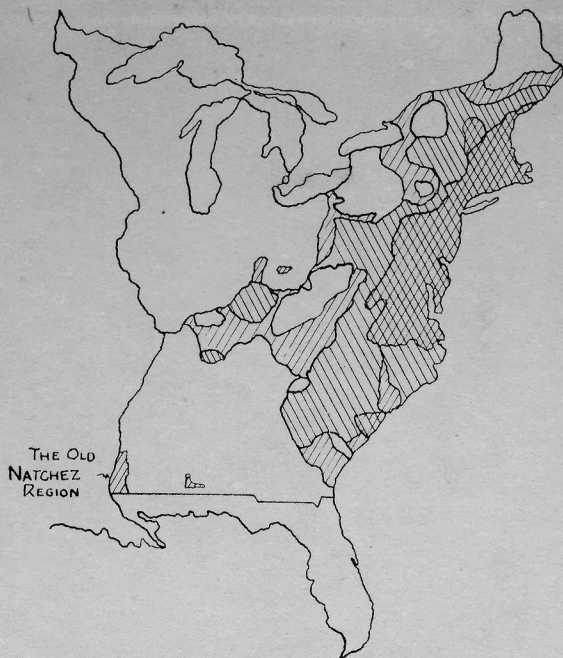
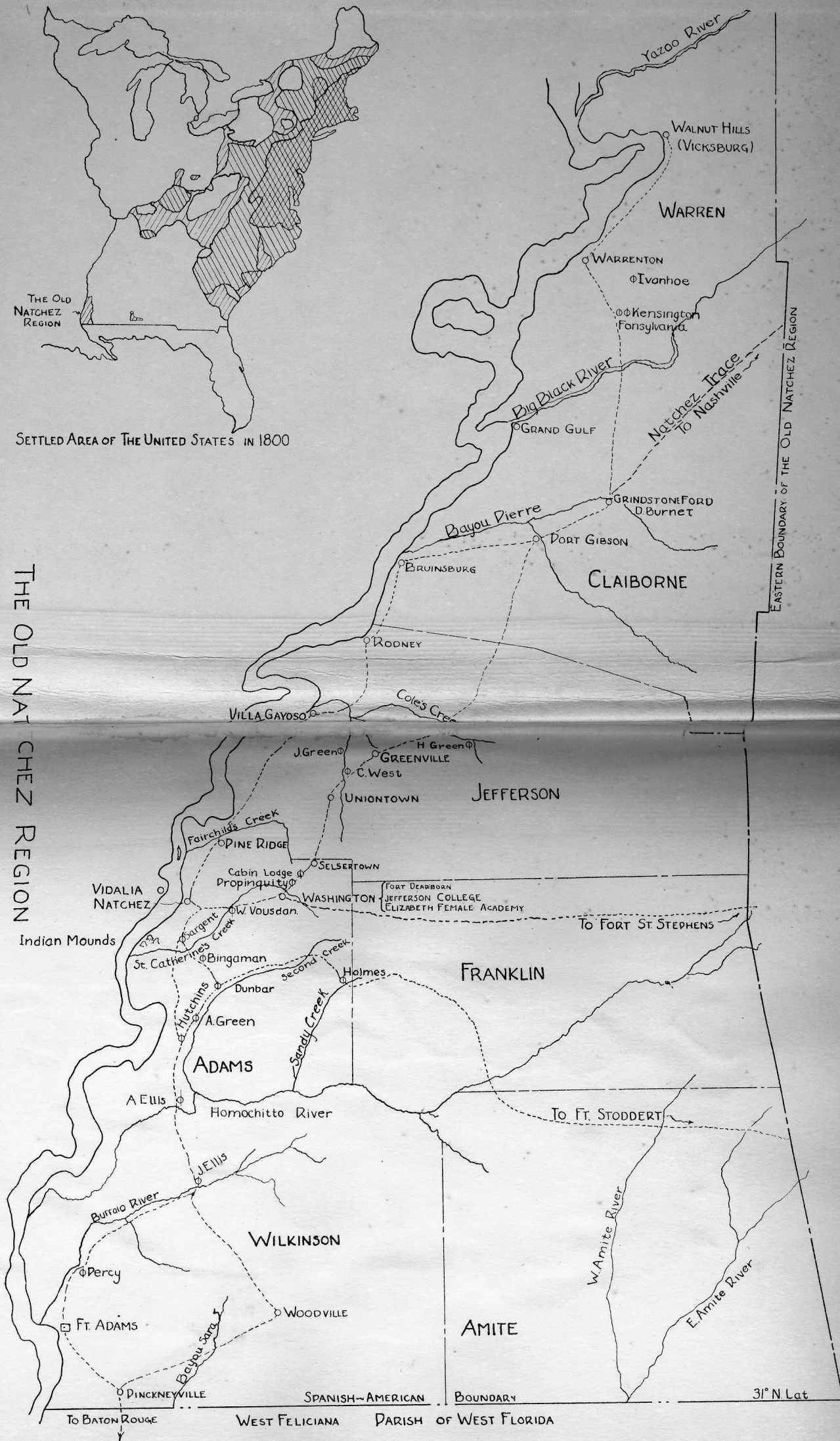




SETTLED AREA OF THE UNITED STATES IN 1800





Benjamin L. C. Wailes after the original drawing by John James Audubon, which is owned by Mrs. Charles G. Brandon, Natchez.

A GENTLEMAN
OF THE OLD NATCHEZ REGION

Benjamin L. C. Wailes

BY

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When Wailes moved from the country into Washington in 1826 or soon after, he bought the house known as "Meadvilla," so called because in territorial days it had been the home of Governor Cowles Mead. It had also served in 1813 as the Washington Hotel, using as its sign the Spread Eagle.⁷⁴

This house was located on slightly elevated ground on the southern edge of the town, with open country behind. From its porch one looked toward the north across the main street, which was a part of the Natchez Trace, to the grounds of Jefferson College. Much nearer and a little to the west was the Methodist Church. "Meadvilla" itself was a square, two-story white frame building of good lines and sturdy construction which Wailes enlarged in 1857 and 1858 by adding wings to each side. These were fashioned from neighboring small houses which he had bought; at least one was moved as a unit from its old site and attached to the house. Venetian blinds were at the windows.⁷⁵

Behind the house were gardens, orchards, pastures, and fields, the establishment almost amounting to a self-sufficient farm clinging to the edge of the town. Cisterns supplied water to the household, and the stock drank from a small stream flowing across the forty-acre tract.⁷⁶ In the pastures grazed saddle, carriage, and work horses, cows, hogs, and sheep. They may have grazed over the adjacent streets as well, for in the late spring of 1858 Wailes sent some of his servants to cut down the dog fennel in his end of the town as well as in his own pastures because it had been spoiling the flavor of the milk.⁷⁷ Although he once received second prize for a litter of pigs exhibited at a local fair,⁷⁸ he was more interested in his sheep, for which he received various prizes, one being for a pen of twenty-nine sheep.⁷⁹ In 1824 he began to give careful attention to his flock,

⁷⁴ *Washington Republican*, May 4, 1813; *Southern Planter*, vol. I, no. 4, p. 14; Wailes papers, Brandon collection.

⁷⁵ *Diary*, 1857-1858, *passim*. The larger wing has since been moved again and reduced to an outhouse. The smaller remains as he left it.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Feb. 12, 1858.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, June 2, 1858.

⁷⁸ *Western Farmer and Gardener*, IV, 98.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, IV, 98; *Southern Planter*, vol. I, no. 4, p. 19.

which had in it a Merino strain from a ram out of the celebrated flock of Chancellor R. R. Livingston of New York.⁸⁰ This ram had been brought to the Mississippi Territory by General Wilkinson about 1811 or 1812. Wailes culled his stock carefully and from time to time added choice ewes from neighboring flocks. In 1831 he added a Saxony pair, ram and ewe, and developed one of the best flocks in that part of the state.⁸¹

While no list was ever written of all the vegetables in his garden, notes scattered through his diary show that the following were planted: sugar beets, red-bordered drumhead lettuce, white lettuce, cauliflower, curled savoy, turnips, white onions, kohl rabi, radishes, rape, parsnips, cabbages, corn, Irish and sweet potatoes, and "asparagress." There was even a patch of Cuban tobacco.⁸²

His favorite fruit was figs, with strawberries a close second. The days of the first and the "last mess of figs" were usually carefully noted; in 1857, these were July 13 and September 22. From year to year he often compared the days his fruits began to ripen, using this as a gauge of the forwardness or backwardness of the season. His fruit trees were improved by pruning and grafting, the work being done by his own slaves.⁸³ At one time he was able to exhibit eighteen varieties of fruits, including grapes, peaches, pears, apples, figs, pomegranates, and quinces. His summer Bon Chrétien and winter russet pears were especially good.⁸⁴

For winter use, Mrs. Wailes stored up jellies, pickles, and preserves as well as dried fruit. The shelves of her pantry were also stocked with home-grown and manufactured mustard, cayenne pepper, catsup, vinegar, and other condiments. She won prizes with her flowers just as her husband did with his pigs

⁸⁰ Among the earliest Merino sheep imported into the United States were two rams and two ewes secured by Livingston while minister to France (*The Historical Magazine*, V, 26-27).

⁸¹ *Southern Planter*, vol. I, nos. 9-12, pp. 18-19.

⁸² Diary, Mar. 29, June 27, Aug. 22, 1857; Feb. 17, 18, Mar. 17-25, Apr. 14, 1858.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Mar. 29, 1857; Feb. 5, Mar. 15, 1858.

⁸⁴ *Southern Planter*, vol. I, nos. 7-8, pp. 21-22.

and sheep.⁸⁵ Even the children were kept busy. Sixteen-year-old Ellen Wailes raised silkworms.⁸⁶

Beauty as well as usefulness was considered, for the yard was ornamented with "Shrubbery & Cedar & Arbor Vitae trees" as well as "roses & other flowers";⁸⁷ and the family graveyard was shaded with live oaks, Napoleon willows, and magnolias, and was sodded with English crimson clover.⁸⁸ Out in the garden the beehives were in a neat white-latticed arbor with an arched entrance and a cement floor.⁸⁹

These were the surroundings in which Benjamin and Rebecca Wailes lived for more than thirty years. Not much is known of their home life, but it must have been happy, for there are glimpses of parties and visits, dances and picnics. Ten children were born to them, but two died at birth and three others before they were four years old. The family custom of bestowing family names on children was continued. Levin, the oldest son, like some of his forbears, chose one of his cousins for his wife.⁹⁰ Another member of the home was Wailes's niece and

⁸⁵ *Western Farmer and Gardener*, IV, 99.

⁸⁶ *Southern Planter*, vol. I, no. 4, p. 19.

⁸⁷ Diary, Mar. 29, 1857; Apr. 29, 1858.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Feb. 16, 18, 25, 1858.

⁸⁹ *Southern Planter*, vol. I, nos. 5-6, p. 10.

⁹⁰ The following list of the children of Benjamin and Rebecca Wailes is from the Brandon collection of the Wailes papers:

1. Levin Wailes, b. Dec. 28, 1821, Adams Co.; d. Oct. 13, 1889, at his plantation "Fonsylvania," Warren Co.; m. (1) his first cousin, Rebecca Covington, daughter of Edmund and Anne Roberts Covington; (2) Anna Elizabeth Harper of Prince Georges Co., Md.

2. Rebecca Covington Wailes, b. May 15, 1823, "Cabin Lodge," Adams Co.; d. Aug. 2, 1841, Washington.

3. Ellen Wailes, b. Aug. 9, 1826, "Propinquity," Adams Co.; d. 1854, "Wilderness," Adams Co.; m. Joseph Winston.

4. Susan Covington Wailes, b. May 9, 1828, Washington; d. Jan. 21, 1831, Washington.

5. Leonard Covington Wailes, b. Feb. 3, 1831, Washington; d. July 16, 1832, Washington.

6. Eliza Lloyd Wailes, b. Nov. 11, 1833, Washington; d. Feb. 15, 1837, Washington.

7. Feliciana Wailes, b. Aug. 7, 1835, Woodville; d. Oct. 23, 1921, "Gayoso," Jefferson Co.; m. James Payne Green.

8. Leonard Alexander Wailes, b. June 1, 1838, Washington; d. Mar. 27, 1926, New Orleans; m. (1) Victoire Kibbee, (2) Mrs. Joe May Drew, née Philcher.

9 and 10. Two infants, unnamed.

ward, Susan C. Covington. The home was brightened by the presence of Benjamin's father, Levin Wailes, until his death on May 24, 1847, in the eightieth year of his good and useful life.⁹¹

In addition to his family, about eighteen slaves were attached to Wailes's establishment at Washington. Even he seems to have been uncertain about the exact number, for when a case of scarlet fever developed he noted that in addition to white persons there were in the family "some ten or more negro children exposed to this disease."⁹² In 1859 eleven of these eighteen slaves were under sixteen years of age, four were fifty years old or older, only two were in their twenties, and one was forty. On the Waileses' plantation, "Fonsylvania," the reverse was true, for there over two-thirds of the slaves were between fourteen and thirty-seven.⁹³ It seems that the youngest and oldest slaves were kept at the home rather than under the control of the plantation overseers.

Some of the young slaves escaped going to the plantation. Bose, for example, was given as a body servant to Leonard when he began to practice medicine on the Tensas in Louisiana. Wailes considered this fourteen-year-old boy, who had been named for a Methodist preacher, intelligent and promising despite the fact that he once had to switch him "for getting into a rucas [*sic*] with some white boys" and striking one of them.⁹⁴

At the head of the small flock of slaves stood Nat, the "principal servant man," who was probably the butler.⁹⁵ The others can be briefly presented by stating the disposition Wailes made of them during the summer of 1860 while he was on a five months' trip in the North. Nat, Amanda the cook,⁹⁶ Elvira, and Laura with six small children were left with Charles Chotard, who had rented Wailes's house for the summer. Dinah, Jim, and Bose were sent to Levin's plantation home, the "Wilderness." Willie, a small boy, was "to stay with Doct. Solomon for his victuals and clothes, he promising to take good

⁹¹ *Woodville Republican*, June 12, 1847.

⁹² Diary, Feb. 14, 1859.

⁹³ Slave Schedules of Eighth Census (1860), Mississippi, I and V.

⁹⁴ Diary, Dec. 25, 1860; July 31, 1861.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, Sept. 20, 1853.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Apr. 29, 1860.

care of him."⁹⁷ Old Sylva was not mentioned. She was superannuated and doubtless remained in her neatly whitewashed cabin.⁹⁸

Three of the men were hired out. Robert was hired at \$15.00 a month to a neighbor, and it might be added that Wailes had much difficulty in collecting the \$75.00 at the close of the summer.⁹⁹ Since 1857 Isaac had been hired out by the year to the Newmans, of Washington, at first for \$15.00 a month and later, after Mr. Newman's death, at the reduced rate of \$12.50 a month.¹⁰⁰

Daniel, the third to be hired, was sent to Wailes's brother in Louisiana and hired at \$35.00 a month.¹⁰¹ Being a skilled carpenter, he was probably the most valuable of Wailes's slaves, since he could be hired out for as much as \$2.00 a day for extended periods of time.¹⁰² On the other hand, he was the most troublesome. For instance, when returning from his work in Louisiana, Daniel hired a cart in which to ride the six miles from Natchez to Washington. Wailes, of course, had to pay for it.¹⁰³ Furthermore, he was often irritated by Daniel's "piddling" or "pottering,"¹⁰⁴ and he once "paddled Daniel well for his skulking laziness," and then went to work himself and "put up ceiling on end of East wing."¹⁰⁵ Daniel, being sometimes guilty of "shamming sick," secretly delighted his master by mistaking a pain in his stomach for a heart attack and loudly shouting for Dr. Brandon. Being soon relieved by "some active remedies," within a few days he "turned out and piddled a little."¹⁰⁶ In the long run he was so troublesome that Wailes meditated selling him "for \$1,800 if he could be suited in a master on a plantation where he would be more settled."¹⁰⁷

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1860.

Willie was evidently just reaching the age of usefulness, for within a few months he was serving as a nurse for the child of Nelson, a neighbor (*ibid.*, Dec. 27, 1860).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Apr. 13, 1860.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, May 14, Nov. 10, 1860; Apr. 29, 1861.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, Nov. 2, 1858; Dec. 31, 1860.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, May 2, Dec. 8, 1860; Mar. 4, 1861.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, June 2, 1859.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, May 29, July 30, 1861.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, Dec. 8, 1860.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, Feb. 12, 1858.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, May 10, June 21, 1858.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, May 2, 1860.