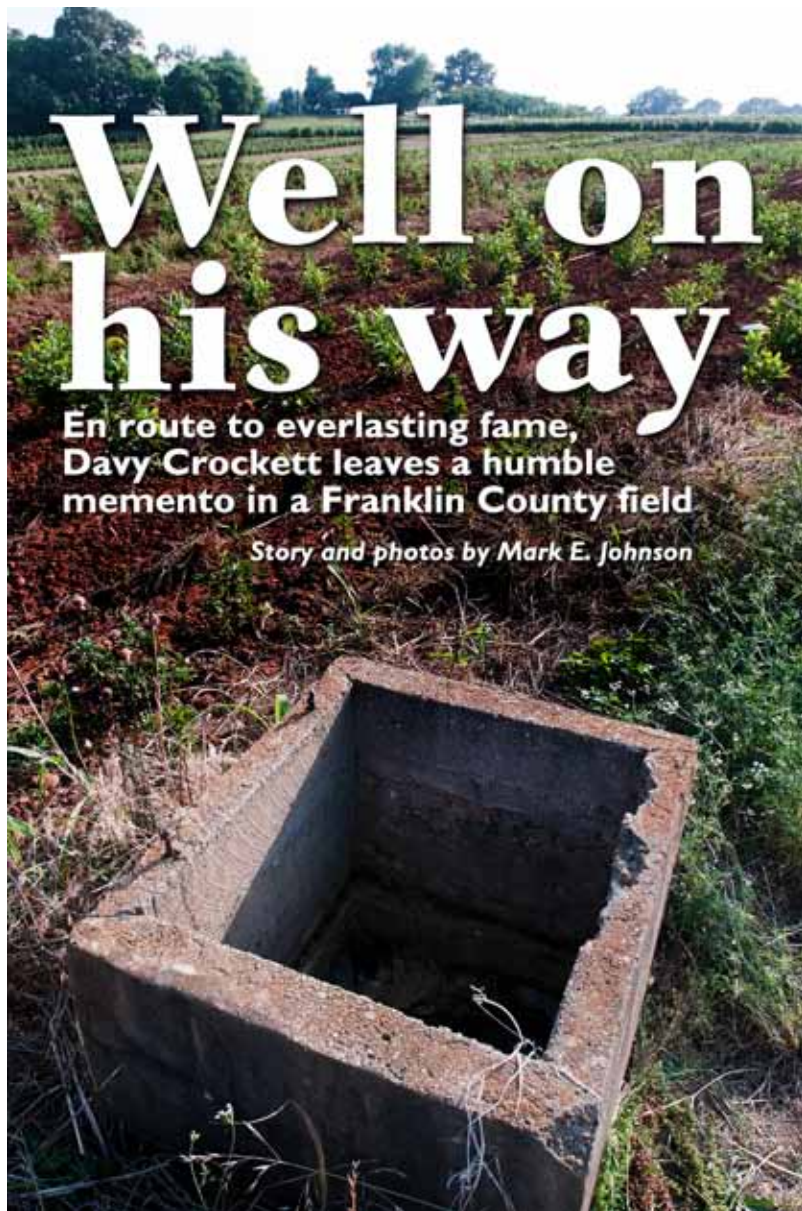


Tennessee's Hidden History : Davy Crockett Well



Well on his way

En route to everlasting fame, Davy Crockett leaves a humble memento in a Franklin County field

Story and photos by Mark E. Johnson

Situated on a commercial nursery farm in southern Franklin County near Belvidere, this well is said to have been dug in 1812 by Tennessee frontiersman Davy Crockett.

A stone-lined well — approximately 3-by-3-feet-square — sits in a field of nursery stock in southern Franklin County. Overgrown weeds and Johnson grass nearly obscure a weathered concrete frame that surrounds the ragged hole. Water is visible at the bottom, some 15 feet down, and reflects the sunlight of a blazing June day.

There is not a single indication that the structure has more or less significance than any other man-made hole in the ground. No park ranger is standing by to answer questions. No visitor's center. No free brochures.

Maybe there should be.

Back in the late 1940s, the little well was just another from which 10-year-old Jimmy Hargrove was expected to draw

water on sweltering summer days.

"It was near where I grew up, and there used to be a windlass connected to the frame," says the 72-year-old Belvidere resident and Franklin Farmers Cooperative customer. "I often had to carry water to some of the farmhands working in those fields, and that was one of the wells I cranked water out of. I never gave it a second thought. But around seventh grade, the agriculture teacher at our school told us who dug it."

It was Davy Crockett, a name only familiar to Tennessee history buffs in those days.

"I'd never heard of Davy Crockett until that old ag teacher told us about the well," says Jim, now recognized as a local historian and Crockett expert. "It was around the time we learned



This 1889 portrait by William Henry Huddle depicts how a young Crockett perhaps would have looked during his years in Franklin County.

a little about him in our history lessons."

The school children learned that David Crockett ("Davy" was coined after his death) was a frontiersman born in the Limestone community of what is now Greene County in 1786. He rose to prominence first as a prolific hunter and then as a colorful, yarn-spinning U.S. congressman before cementing his place in American history by dying in 1836 while defending the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas.

"By 1950, David was largely forgotten," says Jim. "He was just another long-ago name in Tennessee history."

All that changed, though, Dec. 15, 1954, when entertainment mogul Walt Disney debuted a new, episodic TV series called "Davy Crockett" and starring an unknown actor named Fess Parker. The three-part series, a surprising smash hit, was quickly repackaged as a feature movie and released in theaters only five months later. By summer 1955, both the movie and the television show were wildly popular, and nearly every schoolboy in America was wearing a coonskin cap and killing imaginary "bars" in their backyards.

Davy Crockett was a new American hero — again.

In 1813, however, David was an anonymous, backwoods hunter with an adventurous spirit and a quick wit. At 27, he was the

father of two small children — John Wesley, 6, and William Finlay, 4 — and husband of seven years to Polly Finlay Crockett of Hamblen County. In search of more plentiful game and bored with hardscrabble farm life, David had moved the family from their Jefferson County home to the Mulberry Fork area of Lincoln County in 1810. He describes the move in his 1834 autobiography, "A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett."

We got along well enough, and arrived safely in Lincoln County, on the head of the Mulberry Fork and Elk River. I found this very rich country, and so new that game, of different sorts, was very plenty. It was here that I began to distinguish myself as a hunter.

Two years later, the family loaded up again and moved 18 miles south to a rolling valley along Bean's Creek. The area hugs the north side of what is now the Alabama state line near the present-day Maxwell community.

"We believe that David initially dug the well and then built a cabin on a nearby knoll," says Jim, who adds that the concrete wall around the stone structure was added sometime in the early 1900s. "The closest knoll to the well is the one where I live today. I can't prove it, but I believe my house may be located on his old homesite."

Where Jim's property line meets his commercial nursery neighbor — just a few yards from the Hargrove home — several large limestone rocks protrude from the ground.

"Now, there isn't much naturally occurring limestone here in the valley," Jim points out. "Somebody had to transport those rocks from the mountain several miles from here, probably with a mule and sled. I believe those rocks may be part of the foundation of either [David's] cabin or barn."

Records show that the young man named his new homestead — comprising around 20 acres — "Kentuck," possibly as a nod to frontiersman Daniel Boone, who was 52 years old and already famous when David was born. It was during his first year at "Kentuck" that a regional

civil war erupted in present-day southern Alabama involving factions of the Creek (or Muscogee) Indian nation. Referred to as the Creek War, the fighting became the concern of the U.S. government after hundreds of settlers were massacred at Fort Mims, just north of Mobile, Ala., on Aug. 30, 1813. The Tennessee Legislature authorized a 5,000-man militia to be raised and sent to help squelch the uprising, following the example of volunteerism set one year earlier when Tennesseans distinguished themselves at the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. In his autobiography, David reveals the beginning of the personal patriotism and sense of justice that would ultimately lead to his martyrdom 23 years later.

The Creek Indians had commenced their open hostilities by a most bloody butchery at Fort Mims ... For when I heard of the mischief that was done at the fort, I instantly felt like going, and I had none of the dread of dying that I expected to feel.

David's participation in the Creek War led to what Jim Hargrove believes was the most emotionally difficult period of his life. From the fall of 1813 to the summer of 1815, he served two 90-day tours of duty and was elected lieutenant of his militia. David writes that Polly begged him not to leave.

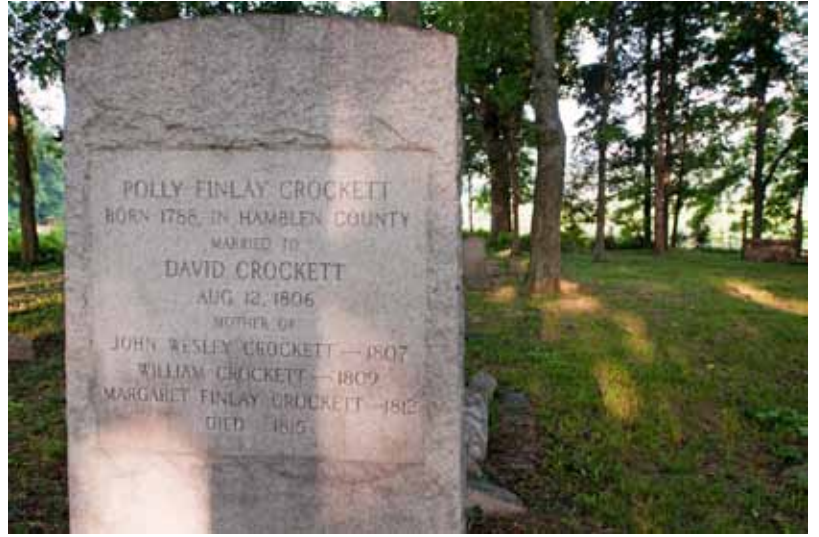
She said she was a stranger in the parts where we lived, had no connections living near her, and that she and our little children would be left in a lonesome and unhappy situation if I went away. I reasoned the case with her as best I could, and told her that if every man would wait till his wife got willing for him to go to war, there would be no fighting done, until we would all be killed in our own houses.

Polly was left to singlehandedly support two small boys and a new baby — Margaret, born in 1812 — in what was largely unsettled wilderness. Jim says that stories were passed down from locals about a Cherokee Indian who lived near the Crocketts and helped the family survive while David was away.

"They say he brought Polly and those three little kids fish he'd caught or game he'd killed — turtles, frogs, rabbits, squir-



LEFT: The concrete frame was added to the stone well sometime in the early- to mid-20th century and originally supported a windlass used to draw up water. **RIGHT:** Roughly two miles from the well is the gravesite of Crockett's first wife, Polly.



rels, whatever," says Jim. "Had it not been for that fellow, they would have probably all starved."

Jim theorizes that this is why, some 15 years later, David — as a U.S. congressman from Tennessee's 9th District — famously opposed President Andrew Jackson's Indian relocation policies. Nevertheless, fate caught up with the Crocketts in the summer of 1815 when Polly became ill and died while David was away either hunting or with the militia.

"The old folks around here used to say she got scurvy, which is a protein deficiency," Jim explains. "I tend to believe that she would give her children the meat that the old Indian brought them, and she most likely just squeaked by on wild onions and dandelions and poke sallet and stuff like that. She probably just withered away, and it's terribly sad to think about. I respect Polly Crockett every bit as much as David, if not more."

Polly was buried on a hilltop two miles away from the homestead. Jim says the fact that David wrote so little of the incident speaks volumes.

"I'm sure he was devastated and probably blamed himself," he says. "I can't even imagine."

David writes: *In this time, I met with the hardest trial which ever falls to the lot of man. Death, that cruel leveler of all distinctions — to whom the prayers and tears of husbands, and of even helpless infancy, are addressed in vain — entered my humble cottage and tore from my children an affectionate good mother, and from me a tender and loving wife.*

As a matter more of conve-

nience than love, Jim guesses, David married Elizabeth Patton, a widow who lived across the valley, only a year later. David had fought alongside Elizabeth's first husband, a militiaman who was killed in the Creek War. Within two years, the Crocketts — now including Elizabeth's two children — moved to Lawrence County where they opened a gristmill and distillery.

In the years leading to his mythical death at the Alamo, David the congressman would continue to butt heads with Andrew Jackson — his old Creek War general and leader of his own political party — on several policy issues. When asked about his opposition to Jackson, David said, "I bark at no man's bid. I will never come and go, and fetch and carry, at the whistle of the great man in the White House — no matter who he is."

Seated on the edge of the concrete wall surrounding the old Crockett well, Jim says he likes to believe that David developed much of his larger-than-life "spunk" and personality during the humble years he lived at "Kentuck."



Local resident and historian Jim Hargrove lives within a stone's throw of the well and used to draw water out of it as a small boy in the 1940s. Hargrove has written several articles on the lives of David and Polly Crockett.

"Those were formidable years for him," Jim says. "He did a lot of hunting, fighting, and parenting, and he dealt with terrible grief. I'm sure it shaped the man he became later in life and probably influenced his decision to raise volunteers and go to Texas."

He adds that he is sometimes "overwhelmed" by a palpable sense of reverence that lingers around the Crockett well and homesite.

"It's amazing to think about all the history that happened right here," he says. "I guess I'm soft-hearted, but when I think of David and Polly and those three kids, it still brings a tear to my eye."