

## Thomas Thompson, Grundy County Frontiersman

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Thomas Thompson was an early resident of Warren County and later Grundy County who is particularly remembered as a hunter. One can still hear stories repeated about his exploits. In the stories that have been passed down he is always referred to as Tommy Thompson. Very likely he called himself Tommy although in government records his name is almost always recorded as Thomas. In this history I will do the same – refer to him as Thomas when speaking of government records, but use Tommy otherwise. He was my third great-grandfather.

Tracing his family proved difficult. For some time I knew nothing at all about his ancestry. Eventually I got a very important clue from Glenn Bonner,



who was a grandson of Mary Thompson McCarver and a great-grandson of Tommy. Glenn recalled his grandmother telling him that Jefferson Davis Fults, a well-known lawyer in Tracy City, was her first cousin. Several years later I heard essentially the same story from Jack Thompson, also a great-grandson of Tommy, who told me that his father and Jeff Fults were second cousins.

Knowing that my family was closely related to the family of a prominent person was very helpful as there were good sources of information on the ancestry of

Jeff Fults. From a pair of published biographies I learned that Jeff Fults was the grandson of Daniel Fults and Philadelphia Thompson. There was a problem in using this information. As Tommy's wife was Elizabeth Fults I didn't know if the close relationship was through the Thompson family or the Fults family. Eventually though it became clear that the close relationship was through the Thompson family and that Philadelphia was Tommy's sister. This then meant that Jeff Fults and Jack's father, Fitzhugh Lee Thompson, were second cousins as Jack had claimed.

Tommy's sister Philadelphia was listed as living with an older Philadelphia, apparently her mother, in the 1860 census. Using this information I was soon able to determine that the parents of Tommy were Thomas Thompson and Philadelphia Wilson who were married in Rutherford County, North Carolina, in 1789. Jack had been able to tell me that

Tommy was born in 1808 as it had been noted in his family that when his father was born in 1908 it had been a hundred years since Tommy's birth. This is consistent with the census records.

Where Thomas was born was more of a puzzle. In the 1850 census he says he was born in Louisiana, in 1860 he says North Carolina, and in 1870 he says Tennessee. In the 1880 and later censuses when his children were asked to report where he was born one sees an even greater variety. There is good evidence that he was born in Rutherford County, North Carolina, as there are many records of the older Thomas through the years in the county records. The older Thomas last bought land there in 1807 and proved a deed from Nicholas Tesner to Thomas Nunley at the July term of the court in 1808. The last record of Thomas in the Rutherford County records is when he is mentioned in a court judgment in the January term of 1809 and he is not listed there in the 1810 census.

Why he would claim to have been born in Louisiana remained a puzzle until I obtained a transcript of a letter written by the older Thomas in 1809. It is the oldest family letter in my possession. The letter begins – "Louisiana St. Louis District May 26, 1809 – Dr friend this is to Inform you that I arrived in this country six weeks from the day that I left or started from that country landing in St. Louis and live ten miles above that town and I also live one mile from Richard Chitwood ..." So when the younger Thomas had said he was born in Louisiana he was claiming to have been born in the Louisiana Territory, not the state of Louisiana. However, it seems that he was actually a baby at the time of the move to the Louisiana Territory. This old letter was found in a trunk that had belonged to Thomas Wilson, a nephew to Philadelphia. Richard Chitwood had been a neighbor back in Rutherford County. Interestingly, Ellender Thompson, who I identified as a sister of the younger Thomas through DNA research, reports in one census that she was born in Louisiana in 1811 and in other censuses she reports her place of birth as Missouri.

It isn't known when the family moved to Tennessee, but judging from the years of birth of the first child of Tommy's oldest sisters, the stay in the Louisiana Territory must have been a short one. His sister Philadelphia who married Daniel Fults of Warren County had a daughter, Feriba, before 1820. His sister Catherine, who married Emanuel Nunley of Warren County, had a daughter, Philadelphia, about 1820. And his sister Mary, who married Moses Thompson, had a daughter Lydia in 1815. Moses was listed in the Warren County tax list of 1812.

Thomas was listed as a chain carrier in a survey for James Walker in Warren County 3 March 1828, and again for Lewis Williams, likely his mother's second husband, 20 July 1829. The pension papers of Martha Knight, who applied for a pension as a widow of a soldier in the War of 1812, contain an affidavit from Thomas. He states that he was present at the wedding of Martha Savage and William Knight on the headwaters of Collins River. That wedding took place 6 March 1828.

There are a few records of Thomas in the 1830s. He was listed in the 7<sup>th</sup> district of a tax list for Warren County in 1836. Also in 1836, he was an ensign in Adrian Northcutt's Company that was raised for the Second Seminole War. This unit was not sent to Florida and was soon disbanded. In 1838 he had 15 acres surveyed in Nunley's Cove. This land was granted to Thomas in 1839. He is listed as a buyer in the estate of William Sullivan in 1835, the estate of David Woodlee in 1836, and the estate of Ephraim Fults in 1837. Finally, Jack reports that Tommy worked as a powder monkey at Muscles Shoals, Alabama, in the building of a canal to improve traffic on the Tennessee River. This work began in 1831 and was completed in 1836. The canal, however, was abandoned in 1838.

Tommy married Elizabeth Fults, the daughter of Adam Fults and Jane Nunley, about 1841. Eleven children are known to have been born to the couple.

Through the years Thomas does not appear in many government records. He is listed in the 1850, 1860, and 1870 censuses. He also appears in the Grundy County tax lists beginning in 1860. Through the tax lists we can place his move from Nunley's Cove to the valley below Stone Door Point to about 1860. He is sometimes listed in the county court minutes as having produced a wildcat scalp in court (the state paid a bounty on them). In 1855 the court notes that the route of the Hill Turnpike is to be altered in the manner set out in his report. Sometime in the 1870s he was serving as a director of the 24<sup>th</sup> School District in the county. This would be the Savage Gulf School. There are no extant deeds where he buys or sells land until 1884 (and more about that later).

He does appear in the federal agricultural censuses. His holdings were very modest and less than most of his neighbors. For example, in the 1870 census he reports that 10 acres of his holdings are clear. He owns one horse, one milk cow, one other head of cattle, and 20 sheep. He reports having grown 50 bushels of Indian corn for the year and 15 bushels of Irish potatoes. Although not mentioned in the 1870 census, some of the deed records mention an apple orchard. Although their holdings were modest, this might be an appropriate place to note that the Thompson Spring (to locals today usually called the McCarver Spring) where the family got their water is probably the finest spring in Savage Gulf Park.

Although Tommy rarely appears in government records, there are a number of stories about his life that have been preserved. Most of the ones that I know were passed on to me by Banks Thompson or Jack Thompson. Banks heard these stories from his grandfather's sister, Mary Thompson McCarver, a daughter of Tommy. Jack's grandfather, Albert Thompson, and his wife Rachel lived the last few years of their lives with Jack's family. Although Jack was young when his grandparents passed away, stories that they told were relayed to Jack by his older brothers who remembered them better.

Both Banks and Jack paint the picture of a man who liked to be out in the woods. He might be away from home for weeks at a time. It is said that he might come to a house, ask for some cornbread, and soon be gone again.

He is best known as a hunter. Jack says that at times he sold meat, and sometimes to the hotel at Beersheba Springs. He reports that at one time he had 16 deer hanging. One place that he would stay on these hunting expeditions is what is today known as the Tommy (Thompson) Rockhouse that is under the bluff above Savage Creek. The overlook in the park that is to the northeast of where Coppinger Creek flows into Savage Creek is nowadays known as Tommy Point. Ralph Thompson, a great-great grandson of Tommy, said that he had a hunting cabin between Tommy Point and the present day Hobbs Cabin.

Hooty Knight told one story about Tommy's hunting expeditions. He said that he would be gone for weeks at a time. Then he would come up to the Flag Rock. Flag Rock is a large overlook north of Bouldin (now Schoolhouse) Creek where the top of the mountain turns to the northwest to follow the Collins River. From this point today one can see several houses in the valley below and no doubt the same was true in the 1800s. Hooty said that Tommy would go to the Flag Rock, wave a large white flag, and holler down to the valley, "Meat a plenty." Then people would bring their horses up probably along an old trail that climbs the mountain from the old Roger's place to haul the meat down.

Banks and Jack told different stories of Tommy killing a bear in a cave. Probably he killed more than one bear in a cave! In the version that Banks told, Tommy lit a pine knot and with that as his light went in the cave and killed the bear with a knife. In Jack's story, he went in the cave with a torch and a muzzleloader. Of course he got only one shot with the muzzleloader. And anyway, when he fired the gun the force of the explosion put out his torch. He had to make sure that his one shot was a good one! I think that one of the caves where he killed a bear is the cave close to Savage Creek that is now known as Bear Cave.

Banks told another story about bear hunting. He said that Tommy chased a bear up through the Stone Door. On this occasion there were other men hunting with him. These were up on top so when the bear tried to ascend the mountain through the Stone Door they had an easy shot. And Ralph Thompson said that Tommy killed the last bear in the area of the Coppinger Springs (the present day site of the Hobbs Cabin). It does seem that he was the man to go to when a bear was discovered. Jack says that if people discovered bear tracks then they would go tell Tommy.

Banks told the story of an unusual happening in the woods. He said that Tommy was one time sitting with his back against a tree. He heard a voice call, "Uncle Tommy." He got up and looked around. Not seeing anyone he sat down. Then he heard the voice again, "Uncle Tommy." He got up again and looked around. Then the tree fell down.

Margaret Coppinger told me that she had it from her mother that the short story, "The Star in the Valley," which is one of the stories contained in

*In the Tennessee Mountains* by Mary Noailles Murfree, was inspired by her view of the light from the Thompson cabin in the valley below Stone Door Point. When the leaves were off the trees likely one could have seen any light from the cabin as the Thompson place was directly below the Point.

Back in the 1990s Hooty and Horace Knight told me that years ago one could find beech trees in the gulf where Tommy had carved his initials. They said that there might be some still. Ever since whenever I have noticed a particularly large or old beech I have tried to get to it to check it out for the TT. I have probably looked a bit strange scrambling on mountainsides in order to walk around beech trees. As one of my friends remarked, "He ain't right." But about three years ago I found one! What a thrill! It is located near the base of the mountain close to the Stagecoach Road.

There is conflicting information as to when Thomas died. The affidavit he made in support of Martha Savage Knight's pension application was made 15 August 1878 so he was living then. But in the 1880 Census his wife, Elizabeth, identifies herself as a widow. There are also no tax records for Thomas after this date. But then 15 October 1884 Thomas and family sold their property to his son-in-law, Elias McCarver. And the record states that he personally appeared. In another deed earlier in the year it is said that Elizabeth and other family members are residents of Grundy County but Thomas is now a resident of Sequatchie County. Finally, Jack recalls that it was said that when Tommy was 80 he would clean his feet when going to bed by rubbing the bottom of his feet together. It was thought remarkable that a man of his age was so flexible. Tommy wouldn't have been 80 until about 1888.

So the picture that emerges of Tommy Thompson is one of an accomplished mountain man. Financially he was very limited. But he is remembered today from the stories that are still told of his adventures in the early years of Grundy County and the places that are named for him.