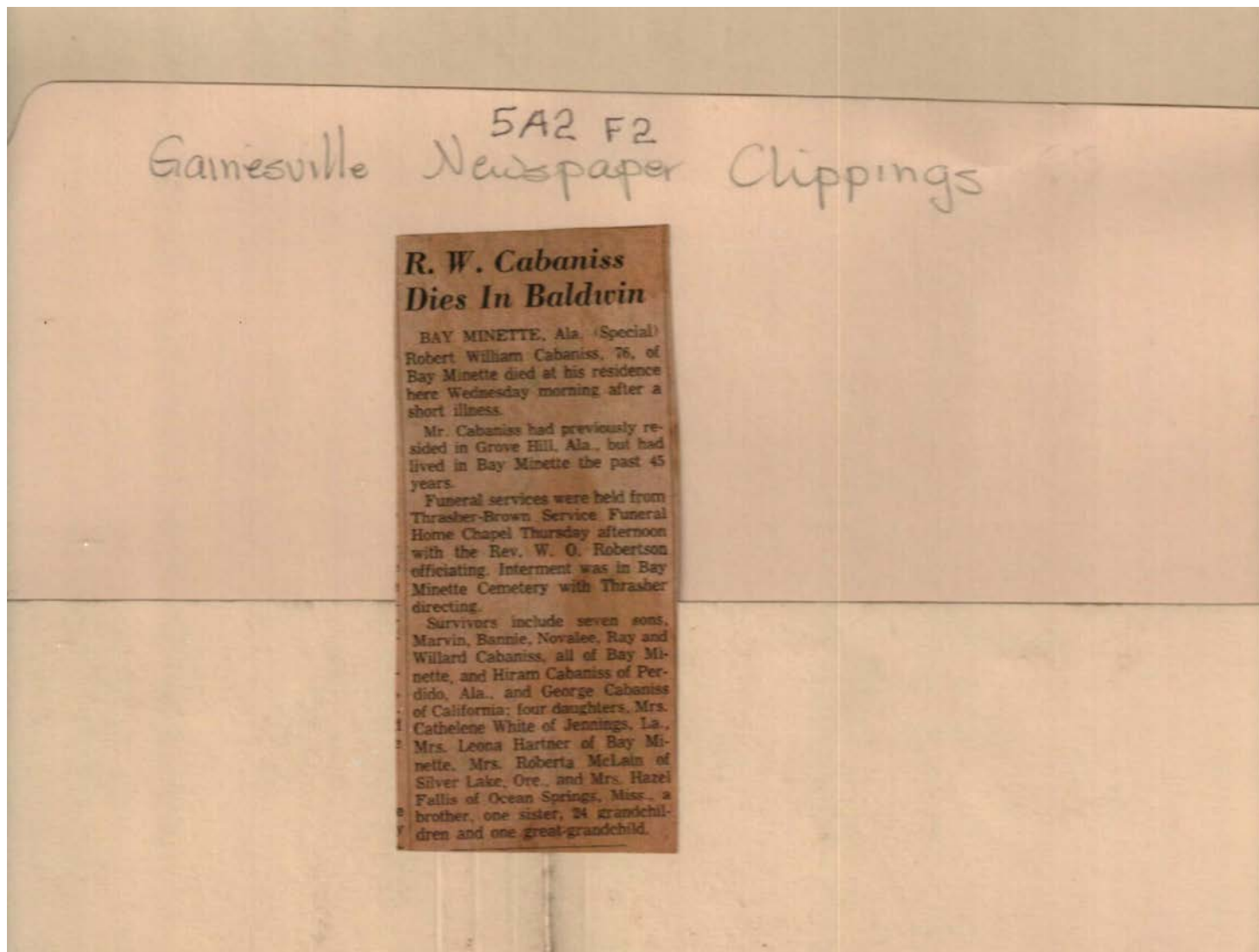


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Gainesville Newspaper Clippings, 1977

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Names:

Cabaniss, Bannie
Cabaniss, George
Cabaniss, Hiram
Cabaniss, Marvin
Cabaniss, Novalee

Cabaniss, Ray
Cabaniss, Robert
William
Cabaniss, Willard
Fallis, Hazel, Mrs.

Hartner, Leona, Mrs.
McLain, Roberta,
Mrs.
Robertson, W. O.,
Rev.

White, Cathelene,
Mrs.

Places:

Bay Minette, AL

Types:

obituary

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Gainesville Newspaper Clippings

SUMTER COUNTY

History thrives in Gainesville — the town that was almost Chicago




ABOVE: Kitty Harrison stands in the First Methodist Church in Gainesville. BELOW: An old cemetery in Gainesville. Staff photo/Tommy Stevenson

Sumter County town resides on the west bank of what used to be the Tombigbee River.

By TOMMY STEVENSON
Associate Editor

GAINESVILLE — This sleepy Sumter County hamlet of about 400, perched high on a bluff on the west bank of what used to be the Tombigbee River, is a place where dogs feel quite comfortable sleeping in the middle of the street on sunny November afternoons.

It is a town of pecan groves, stately tall pines and ancient, gnarly cedars, of a smattering of crumbling ante-bellum homes and quite a few shotgun shacks. At the four main churches, membership has dwindled to the point where they alternate Sunday interdenominational services so there's a congregation large enough to preach to.

Ah, but there was a time.

"Did you know that Gainesville was once the third-largest town in Alabama?" Kitty Harrison says in the parlor of the home in which she was born 77 years ago.

"It's true — back before the fire and the war. It was a major steamboat landing up river from Mobile and had several thousand people living in it," she says. "Now we're just barely hanging on."

The fire would be the blaze of 1839, which swept up the bluff from the west, engulfing all of downtown all the way to the river.

The War, of course, would be the Civil War, which left the South's economy ruined and, with it, destroyed most of what remained of Gainesville.

Both the fire and the war seem like yesterday as Harrison recounts them in her home on Yankee Street, a house built in 1830, at Gainesville's inception.

"The town's never been the same," sighs Harrison, a retired Tuscaloosa city schoolteacher, incumbent Gainesville town councilwoman and sprightly woman-about-town.

But before Harrison takes a visitor on a surprisingly interesting tour — considering the town's best days are nearly 150 years behind it — there is something that needs clearing up.

What's the story about Gainesville almost being Chicago?

"That's true, too," Harrison says. "The story was, Swift and Co. was trying to decide where to establish its first meat-packing plant in the United States back before the war, and they couldn't decide between Gainesville, which was on the river and near railroads, and the area where Chicago is now.

"Well, they flipped a coin," she adds. "And Gainesville lost and Chicago won, and Chicago is now Chicago and we're not touch of anything."

The Gainesville area, which encompasses what is now Sumter County on the west side of the Tombigbee and Greene County on the east, was originally inhabited by the Choctaw Indians, Harrison says.

"An Indian squaw, who was married to a half-breed named Coleman, originally owned what is now Gainesville," she explains. "This was before the Trail of Tears in the early 1830s, and she knew they were going to move her out, so she sold the 642 acres that is now Gainesville so she could have some

Please see TOWN Page 4A

Names:

Harrison, Kitty

Stevenson, Tommy

Places:

Gainesville, AL

Types:

newspaper

photo

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TOWN

Continued from Page 1A

money to take with her."

The land was sold to a man named Moses Lewis, who was from New Hampshire and whose house still stands across Yankee Street from Harrison's.

Lewis, an evidently modest man, named his new community after Strother Gaines, another of the original white settlers who traded with the Choctaw.

"After the Indians were moved out, people from Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Virginia, North and South Carolina began moving in," Harrison says. "Yankees, they said, lived on this street, which is where it got its name."

Gainesville was "a thriving little town that was settled in a hurry," she says. "We had a railroad, the river was navigable by steamboat when the river was up, and at one time right before the war, there was the largest inland dock for shipping cotton in the United States," she says.

"We had a flourishing town square, three newspapers, doctors, lawyers, a bank, hotels, millenary store, department stores, taverns - everything," Harrison says. "But in 1855, we had the fire. And in 1962, 63, 64 and 65 were the war years, and after that we had no way to recover."

"It's been that way ever since, and it's really sad."

Today there are only two stores in town, although the antebellum Methodist, Presbyterian and Episcopal churches remain points of civic pride.

Harrison, raised a Methodist, says she is now a "Methobabterian" because she and most of the rest of protestants attend each of the four churches. Church membership ranges from one to about 15, so combining congregations just makes sense.

"First Sunday is Methodist, second Sunday is Presbyterian, the third Sunday is Episcopalian and the fourth Sunday Baptist, so I go



Staff/Tommy Stevenson

Kring's Coffin Shop still stands on Alabama Highway 39 in the middle of town. The oldest of Gainesville's houses of worship, the Presbyterian Church, began in this building.

to all of them," she says.

The oldest of the houses of worship is the Presbyterian Church, begun in Kring's Coffin Shop, which still stands on Alabama Highway 39 in the middle of town. The church's present wooden sanctuary was constructed in 1837.

"Mr. Kring was a carpenter who also made coffins, and he lent his building for the first Presbyterian services," Harrison says.

Out past the Episcopal Church lies Gainesville's most somber link with its past, the Old Cemetery, where 250 simple white marble slabs, engraved with "Unknown Confederate Soldier," mark the mass graves of both the Confederate and Union dead.

"Both during and after the war, we had a hospital here," Harrison explains at the secluded cemetery. "They brought boys from Shiloh and everywhere here, both Southern and Northern, and when they died, they buried them here."

A Confederate monument stands in the cemetery, as does a huge iron cannon, cast in Selma, that once stood on the bluff over the Tombigbee to guard against Union attack.

Although there was never an actual Civil War battle in Gainesville, it is the site where the last organized Confederate army east of the Mississippi laid down its arms following Lee's surrender.

"Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest had his 2,900 men quartered down in the valley on the river when the war ended," Harrison says. "It was here that they were paroled (discharged) and the war ended for them."

Another monument, on the bluff, stands to mark that spot also. "But that was a long time ago," Harrison says wistfully. "That was back when there was something left of a real town here."

"Now there's no industry here anymore, no steamboats any more, no railroad anymore, and we're just sitting here on the banks of the river doing nothing."

And now, with the construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway and its nearby lock and dam, "we don't even have a river anymore," she adds.

"They cut a channel and made what used to be the Tombigbee on the other side of the bluff Lake Gainesville. It doesn't even go anywhere anymore."

Names:

Forrest, Nathan
Bedford, General

Gaines, Strother
Harrison, Kitty

Kring,
Lewis, Moses

Types:

newspaper



Names:

Amerson, Augusta
Bell, Elma

Rogers, Suddie, Miss
Travis,

Birmingham News

Places:

Birmingham, AL

Types:

newspaper

Dates:

Sep 11, 1977

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Frances Cabaniss Roberts Collection

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Collection Scope and Content: The Collection of 114 Linear ft. includes a total of 156 Archival Boxes. The Frances Cabaniss Roberts collection covers the historical records of the Cabaniss Roberts family. This collection contains extensive correspondence records of the Cabaniss Roberts family circa 1830 to 1930.

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