

Capture of John A. Murrell
Natchez Trace Outlaw
— 1834 —

John A. Murrell, known as the "Great Western Land Pirate," was captured near this site in the winter of 1834. He was said to have killed over 400 people, including many kidnapped slaves. His arrest was brought about through the clever maneuvering of Tom Brannon, a local African-American slave. An attempt had been made by the outlaw to recruit Brannon as a contact man for his far-reaching empire of crime. Brannon was awarded \$100 for his bravery and his name was publicized across the country.

Erected by: Florence Historical Board Florence Alabama.
Location: Co. rd 14 (Waterloo Rd) & Cypress Bend Place-Florence, AL

The marker dedicated to the capture of John Murrell leaves many questions unanswered. Most people in Florence do not know who Murrell was, or why he was named the Natchez Trace Outlaw. We have asked numerous people who have lived in Florence their whole lives and they have never heard of the Great Western Land Pirate or the Florence slave, Tom Brannon. Upon doing some research into the subject, we discovered many folktales and stories written about the outlaw by local historians of the Tennessee towns he lived in and by local historians from Florence. Individually, these sources tend to only focus on parts of the story and rarely give a complete account of Murrell's life and his crimes. However, taken together these sources reveal a much more complete story of Murrell's life, his capture and his death, dramatically expanding the story told on the historical marker.

John A. Murrell was born in Columbia, Tennessee in 1804.¹ To say that he came from a disordered family would be an understatement. His father, Jeffery Murrell, was a Methodist circuit minister who was rarely at home. As such, Murrell was left to the care of his mother, along with and his brothers, William and James, and sisters, Louisa, Judith, and Leanna. Zilphia

¹ William McDonald, "Uncle Tom Brannon and the Capture of John A. Murrell" (Florence, AL: 1968), 2.

Murrell's bad influence can be found at the root of his evil behavior later in life. . While her husband was away, Murrell's mother turned their family inn into a brothel. Florence Historian William McDonald stated that "Mom Murrell taught her boy to steal from her customers by the time he learned to walk."² This was validated by Murrell's description of his mother's impact on his childhood: "my mother was of pure grit: she learnt me and all her children to steal as soon as we could walk, and would hide for use whenever she could. At ten years old I was not a bad hand."³ Murrell then put into action the skills he learned from his mother. In 1821, he stole the family treasury and ran away from home. It was not long until Murrell became a familiar face to law enforcement in Tennessee.

On October 25, 1822a sixteen year old Murrell appeared before the court of law, along with his two brothers.⁴ In *The Great Western Land Pirate*, James Penick stated that "according to the grand jury indictment, he and his brothers William and James 'unlawfully, riotously, routously and tumultuously' entered the house of a certain Thomas Merritt, and 'by threatening words and gestures' made a 'riot' to the 'great alarm' of the occupants."⁵The court found the bothers guilty of rioting. . After appealing the court case and having the sentence lowered to only paying a fine, Murrell walked out the court doors a free man.

On May 25, 1826, Murrell was charged for stealing a black mare belonging to William Shumate, who was a Williamson County resident.⁶ The case was moved to Davidson County, where he was ordered to "receive on his bare back at the public whipping post...thirty lashes...to

² William McDonald, "Uncle Tom Brannon and the Capture of John A. Murrell," (Florence: 1968), 2.

³ "John A. Murrell's Own Story," in *A Treasury of Southern Folklore: The Stories, Legends, Tall Tales, Traditions, Ballads and Songs of the People of the South*, ed. by B. A. Botkin, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 221.

⁴ James Penick Jr, *The Great Western Land Pirate: John A. Murrell in Legend and History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

be branded on the left thumb with the letters HT” and to be “imprisoned twelve months.”⁷ C.W.

Nance, a boy at the time of Murrell’s court punishment, gave an eye witness account of the event.

He stated that:

“Being anxious to see all that was going on, I climbed up the railing close to Murrell. Mr. Horton, the sheriff, took from the little stove the branding iron, a long instrument, which looked very much like the soldering irons now used by tanners. He looked at the iron which was red hot and then put it on Murrell’s hand. The skin fried like meat. Mr. Horton held it there until the smoke rose probably two feet when he removed the iron. Mr. Horton then untied Murrell’s hand. Murrell, who had up to this time never moved, produced a white handkerchief and wiped his hand several times. It was all over, and the sheriff took Murrell back to jail where he was yet to suffer punishment by being whipped and placed in the pillory.”⁸

After being released from prison John A. Murrell wreaked havoc along the Natchez Trail as a thief and counterfeiter. His major crimes, horse and slave stealing, were based around forgery and deceit. For example, Murrell often pretended to be a Methodist preacher. As he preached, his followers would steal the worshipers’ horses. Robert Coates mentioned that “he used the same disguise in selling his stolen slaves: he found people less inclined to inquire into antecedents or to haggle over prices with dealing with a sanctimonious preacher who could say an Amen over the sale.”⁹ When stealing slaves, Murrell would approach the slaves and present them with a proposal: he would steal them from their current masters, sell them three to four times, and then release them to their ultimate freedom in the North. This promise of freedom was irresistible for most slaves, but there is no evidence that the outlaw ever set any slaves free alive. Instead, it was rumored that “when the slave became too well known, that is, after he had been

⁷ Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*, 19.

⁸ Emma Williams, *Historic Madison: The Story of Jackson and Madison County Tennessee. From the Prehistoric Moundbuilders to 1917* (Jackson, TN: Madison County Historical Society, 1946), 258.

⁹ Robert Coates, *The Outlaw Years: The History of the Land Pirates of the Natchez Trace* (New York: The Macaulay Company, 1930), 226.

restolen and resold several times and too many advertisements appeared in the newspapers for him” the slave would never be heard of again.¹⁰

The outlaw did not commit these crimes alone. He “realize[d] more than ever the value of friends in his business of horse stealing and slave stealing.”¹¹ These friends and followers were known as the Mystic Clan. It has been estimated that there could have been over a thousand members. The best description of the Clan was given by Mark Twain in his work, *Life on the Mississippi*. Twain compared Murrell to the outlaw Jesse James, claiming “Murell was his equal in boldness, in pluck, in rapacity; in cruelty, brutality, heartlessness, treachery, and in general and comprehensive vileness and shamelessness; and very much his superior in some larger aspects.”¹² Twain described Murrell’s gang as robbers, counterfeiters, horse-thieves, and negro-stealers, all doing business along the Mississippi River.¹³ Twain continues with an in-depth description of the Mystic Clan, which consisted of two classes. The upper class, called the Heads or Councils, planned the crimes. There were about four hundred people within this class. The lower class was called ‘strikers’. Approximately six hundred and fifty members acted as strikers. They often performed dangerous acts, but were poorly compensated. The strikers were also responsible for recruiting slaves for the business. The Councils had the power to kill any striker whom they deemed unworthy to live.¹⁴

The process Murrell and his clan used when killing a human and disposing of evidence was gruesome. According to “John Murrell’s Own Story,” Murell “ripped open [the victim’s]

¹⁰ Ibid., 239.

¹¹ Ibid., 238.

¹² Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Harper, 1950), 243.

¹³ Ibid., 243.

¹⁴ Ibid., 245.

belly and took out the entrails, and sunk him in the creek.”¹⁵ The outlaw claimed that the reason he did this was because “he will never give evidence against me; and there is but one safe plan in the business, and that is to kill.”¹⁶ It is estimated that 400 slaves suffered this type of “freedom from slavery” by the hands or orders of Murrell. Unfortunately for Murrell, one slave in Florence, Alabama did not fall into his trap.

John A. Murrell often traveled to the town of Florence, Alabama. While Murrell’s specialty was stealing horses and slaves, there is no record that Murrell succeeded in stealing slaves while in Florence. That is not to say he did not try. During his travels to Florence, John Murrell struck a keen interest in one slave in particular, Tom Brannon, or better known to some as “Uncle Tom.”

Tom Brannon was born near Nashville, Tennessee and was a slave of Kinner Brannon. Tom was later sold to Abraham Ricks of Colbert County, Alabama.¹⁷ Ricks was a Northwest Alabama cotton tycoon who owned Oaks Plantation, a plantation spread across the fields below LaGrange Mountain.¹⁸ A few years later, Tom Brannon was sold once again to James Irvine, an attorney-at-law in Florence. Tom worked as a gardener and house slave under Irvine. It was during his time at the Irvine’s house, that Tom first met James A. Murrell.

In the summer of 1831 Murrell came across Tom as he was trimming some bushes at the entrance of the Irvine home (located where the present day Dabney Home sits on Pine Street).¹⁹ According to a later interview with Tom Brannon, Murrell approached Tom and offered him a drink of brandy. They shared several drinks. Murrell wanted Brannon to join his empire of crime

¹⁵ “John A. Murrell’s Own Story,” in *A Treasury of Southern Folklore*, 226.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁷ William McDonald, “Capture of Murderer Led by Area Slave,” *Times Daily* (Florence, AL), Jun. 4, 1998.

¹⁸ Terry Pace, “Slave Called ‘Uncle Tom’ Helped Capture Outlaw,” *The Tuscaloosa News* (Tuscaloosa, AL), Mar. 11, 1992.

¹⁹ McDonald, “Uncle Tom Brannon and the Capture of John A. Murrell,” 2.

and lead a “negro strike” in Florence. Tom speculated that this was just a means to draw all the slaves out and away from their masters so Murrell could easily steal the slaves as they rebelled. Murrell informed Tom that he was staying at the Pope’s Tavern and expected Tom to visit him within the next day so they could work out the plans for the strike. Tom failed to meet with Murrell the next day.²⁰ One might expect that would be the end of their brief relationship, but Tom would come across Murrell’s path two more times in the future.

A couple years after their first encounter, Tom ran into Murrell who was on his way to Nashville from Florence, traveling along the Jackson Military Road. Tom had been sent to fetch a wagon of wood, when he ran across Murrell and a number of his gang members playing a game of cards.²¹ Murrell was said to have never forgotten a slave’s face and he certainly had not forgotten Tom Brannon’s face. Murrell recognized Tom and cursed at him, but did not physically harm Tom.²² Tom was hoping he had seen the last of ol’ John Murrell. Sadly, he had not.

Shortly after his second encounter with Tom Murrell, began to gain a reputation around the South as a major force to be reckoned with. One of Murrell’s more elaborate schemes was known as the Christmas Day Plan. According to Murrell’s plan, slaves all across the South were to rebel on Christmas Day in 1835.²³ The *Nashville Banner* stated the Christmas Day Plan was to involve slaves from places as distant as Madison County, Tennessee to New Orleans, Louisiana. Murrell planned to murder, plunder, and burn every town along the way. However, due to Murrell being arrested in early 1834, the Christmas Day Plan of 1835 was moved up to July 4th, 1835.. During his trial, the infamous Christmas Day Plan came to public light and was heavily publicized. Murrell was sentenced to prison, but he escaped a short time afterwards thanks to the

²⁰ Jill K. Garret, *A History of Florence, Alabama* (Florence: n.d.), 17.

²¹ McDonald, “Uncle Tom Brannon and the Capture of John A. Murrell,” 4.

²² Garrett, *A History of Florence, Alabama*, 17.

²³ McDonald, “Uncle Tom Brannon and the Capture of John A. Murrell,” 3.

help of his wife, Elizabeth Mangham, who slipped a saw into his cell. Murrell escaped from prison, and he and his gang were chased to the swamps of Arkansas. Shortly after, Murrell decided to make another trip to Florence in the back of a grain-filled wagon.²⁴ Little did he know, but it would be his last trip to Florence, Alabama.

In the winter of 1834, when the “grass quit growing, the flowers were dead, and the gardening was awaiting the warm sunshine of spring,” Tom Brannon would be hired out by James Irvine to work at the local brickyard, owned by James Sample. Sample’s brickyard was located near the present day location of the University of North Alabama.²⁵ Tom worked alongside his good friend, Randall Campbell, and also one of Murrell’s brothers, who were working at the brickyard incognito. It was through Randall that Murrell would arrange his final meeting with Tom Brannon.

The day before Tom and Murrell’s last encounter, Randall got into a fight with Murrell’s undercover brother. Randall went back to his master, but he ordered Randall to return to the brickyard. Reluctantly, Randall obeyed his master’s orders but not without having a drink at a tavern at the west end of the Waterloo Road Bridge.²⁶ Ironically, Murrell and his brother also had a similar idea and were at the tavern when Randall arrived. While buying his drink, Randall was approached by James A. Murrell and his brother. Murrell discovered that Randall personally knew Tom Brannon.²⁷ Murrell gave Randall seven dollars and instructed him to go buy a loaf of bread and to bring his friend Tom Brannon back to the tavern.²⁸ Randall, having never seen so much money in his life, returned to the brickyard and told Brannon that Murrell wanted to meet

²⁴ Pace, “Slave called ‘Uncle Tom’ Helped Capture Outlaw.”

²⁵ McDonald, “Capture of Murderer Led by Area Slave.”

²⁶ McDonald, “Uncle Tom Brannon and the Capture of John A. Murrell,” 4.

²⁷ Pace, “Slave Called ‘Uncle Tom’ Helped Capture Outlaw.”

²⁸ McDonald, “Capture of Murderer Led by Area Slave.”

with him. To Randall's dismay, Tom refused to meet with Murrell until he had first notified the authorities.²⁹ Tom hurried to the First Methodist Church, in downtown Florence, where a revival was being held. Tom knew that Lauderdale County Circuit Court Clerk William Garret would be there worshipping. Tom slipped down the aisles as the preacher was just beginning his lesson, and whispered into Garret's ear. Once outside the church, they planned to capture the greatest outlaw of the Old South.³⁰

The plan was for Randall to return to Murrell with a loaf of bread at the bridge and tell Murrell and his company that Tom was on his way. In the meantime, Tom and Garret gathered a militia to capture the outlaws. Not everything went according to plan. Fearing Murrell's wrath and also hoping to escape with Murrell, Randall returned to Murrell and his company with the bread but warned them to get out of town as soon as possible.³¹ Quickly, Garret and Tom hurried the soldiers to the bridge where they encountered Murrell and his band of outlaws. Two of Murrell's companions managed to escape, but John A. Murrell, the greatest outlaw of his time, were overpowered in his grain wagon about halfway up the hill on Waterloo Road.³² Murrell was taken to the Lauderdale County jail, where he was held until a sheriff from Jackson, Tennessee arrived and transported him away to be tried for his crimes. Tom Brannon was awarded \$100 for his bravery and his name was widely publicized across the country.³³ Randall Campbell, on the other hand, received a "good whipping," according to an interview with Brannon. In the Sesquicentennial edition of the *Florence Times*, June 9th, 1968, Florence historian William

²⁹ Pace, "Slave Called 'Uncle Tom' Helped Capture Outlaw."

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Garret, *A History of Florence, Alabama*, 18

³² McDonald, "Capture of Murderer Led by Area Slave."

³³ McDonald, "Capture of Murderer Led by Area Slave."

Lindsey McDonald wrote: “until recent years, the big tree that stood alongside Waterloo Road was pointed to by old timers as the place where Murrell was caught.”³⁴

John A. Murrell was tried in Jackson, Tennessee where he was convicted of “negro stealing” but not of murder.³⁵ The Madison County Court record of July 29, 1834 reads:

"After due trial, the court passed the sentence according to the verdict of the jury and the law of the land-that the said defendant John A. Murrell convicted as aforesaid do undergo confinement at hard labor in the Penitentiary house of the state for a term of ten years. The Sheriff was ordered by the court to take the defendant to jail and to the Penitentiary as soon as possible. He was received August 17, 1834. In April 1837, his case was appealed to the Supreme Court and Murrell was brought to Jackson for trial on appeal by J. S. Lyon, the Sheriff of Madison County. William Yerger and J. W. Chambers defended him but the conviction was affirmed and he was returned to the penitentiary where he remained until he was discharged from the Nashville Penitentiary April 3, 1844."

The whereabouts and death of Murrell have been theorized and speculated upon. Some claim that the outlaw spent the next ten years in prison where he suffered of tuberculosis and, some say, where he went mad and insane. Murrell was released but was never heard from again.³⁶ Penick claimed that when he was released from jail he moved to Pikeville, TN. Penick also stated that Murrell’s head was severed from his body and displayed at carnivals around the Natchez Trace for “ten cents a peep.”³⁷

The story of John A. Murrell’s life and capture is an interesting tale and also quite ironic. An outlaw, famous for stealing and murdering many slaves, was betrayed by a slave he was trying to “recruit” and the days of his “empire of crime” were drawn to a close. One can find a significant amount of information on the life of John A. Murrell. One source that gave an abundance of information of John Murrell was the historical work of Virgil Stewart, who published his pamphlet under the name of Augustus Walton. Stewart was an ex-Clan member

³⁴ Garret, *A History of Florence, Alabama*, 18.

³⁵ Williams, *Historic Madison*, 237-244.

³⁶ McDonald, “Capture of Murderer Led by Area Slave.”

³⁷ Penick, *The Great Western Land Pirate*, 31.

that wanted to see Murrell go to prison. Stewart's pamphlet about Murrell, published in 1836, was cited as a source in almost every work that we came across during our research. Modern historians consider this pamphlet inaccurate and believe it exaggerates some aspects of Murrell's crimes. On the other hand, one will find little-to-no information on the life of Tom Brannon unless one is familiar with the capture of Murrell in Florence, AL. Every source agreed that John A. Murrell was captured in Florence, but they made no reference to how he was captured or by whom. Local historians, such as William Lindsey McDonald, and local historical texts are amongst the only sources one will find the story of Tom Brannon and his role in the capture of the "Great Western Land Pirate." No historical marker can ever capture the true depth of the history it tells in just a few words but we would like to see a more in-depth examination of Murrell's life and the involvement of Tom Brannon's involvement with the capture of John Murrell on the marker.

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