

(Editor's Note: The Cockrell (Cockrill) Family of Breathitt County was among our most prominent during pioneer times. However, today, the name has all but disappeared from our county. Still, the story of that family is one of much interest to local citizens. This account, which has never before been published, was written in 1939 by Margaret F. Bishop, a writer working on our centennial history, In The Land Of Breathitt. As we have often stated Miss Bishop collected much that was not used in that book. Luckily for us, many of her stories and notes were sent to the State Archives in Frankfort, from which this account comes.)

Early Settlers of Breathitt County: The Cockrells

By M.F. Bishop -1939

(in the Breathitt County Journal)

The Cockrell family have been and are considered one of the most prominent ever living in Breathitt County. In the early part of the nineteenth century, nine brothers, from a family often brothers, came to Kentucky from Virginia. Joseph, Alexander, Morgan and James moved to Missouri. Joseph was the father of the Hon. F.M. Cockrell, United States Senator from Missouri, for thirty years. Daniel was killed in the War of 1812. John, William, Simon and Jerry (Jeremiah) settled in what is now Breathitt County. "Jerry Cockrell lived and died on Quicksand. (This means a part of the country along the Quicksand Creek. MFB.). A stream, Cockrell's Fork rising in Perry County, flows through a part of Breathitt emptying into Lost Creek at Ned, (a new school house is situated here. MFB.) some five miles from the confluence of Lost Creek with Troublesome Creek. This Cockrell's Fork is some 15 miles south of Jackson.

"Jeremiah Cockrell had two sons, Simon and Thomas, they migrated to Arkansas in 1839. John Cockrell lived on the south side of the river (North Fork of the Kentucky River, MFB) at the War Shoal, four miles below the present site of Jackson. He was a great hunter, a second Daniel Boone, and spent much of his time on the Western frontier among the Indians by whom he was finally killed in 1828., He left a widow, known as Aunt Millie, one son, John and three daughters. John Jr. Married at the age of 41. He moved to Arkansas in 1839. One daughter married Jerry South ; another daughter married Dick South, a cousin of Jeremiah. He served as 1st Sergeant in Company B, Fifth Regular Infantry, Consolidated with Kentucky volunteers, September 7, 1862, commanded by his cousin, William T. Berry South, Confederate Army, during the Civil War; a third daughter married Adrian Hays.

Aunt Milly Cockrell, wife of John Sr., was considered a very remarkable woman. She was about five feet ten inches in height, very unusual in the Cockrell and South families. (The Cockrell men of the last two generations are large and tall, but they take after the Jetts. MFB.) Intellectually she was considered very bright, comparing favorable with any lady in Kentucky at the time. She was very religious and was the first member to join what was then called the Campbellite Church (Christian Church of Disciples of current date. MFB.). The only organized church of any denomination within a stretch of 125 miles, in the valley of the North of the Kentucky River and its tributaries, was a small Baptist Church at the mouth of the Quicksand River about three miles south of Jackson.

The nearest church, of which Aunt Milly (Mrs. John Cockrell, MFB) was a member, was at Hazel Green (Wolfe County, MFB), a distance of twenty-one miles. She attended three or four annual meetings held

there by the Rev. John Smith, (known as "Raccoon" Smith) among the first pioneer preachers of the Christian Church in Kentucky. Aunt Milly thought very highly of him. She attended the Hazel Green Church during the summer months, for several years during the 1830s. She travelled alone on horseback through the wilderness where but few people lived. She always stopped at the home of Green Trimble, father of "Green Trimble" usually going there on Fridays and returning to her home on Mondays. (She was the great grandmother of South Trimble. MFB).

The third brother, William Cockrell, was a farmer, a surveyor, a school teacher and a preacher. He removed to Missouri about 1834, but returned to Breathitt in a few years. Green Trimble attended his school about sixty days when seven years old.

William Cockrell had six sons and four daughters. All of the children, except one daughter, Elizabeth, moved to Missouri. She married William Davis, the school master who lived in Breathitt County.

An unrecorded option, County Court Clerk's office, was given to William Cockrell, 26th September, 1829, from John McKinley, for 10 acres at \$5.00 per acre--and a deed from John Speed North to William Cockrell, October 20, 1829. This option was on land lying in a Patent to "Ephraim Thompson dated 17th May, 1784, and the T. D. Roberts Patent dated 13th of May, 1785, estimated to contain 1,000 to 1,500 acres, more or less.

"Simon Cockrell married Miss Polly Smith. They had eleven sons and two daughters. All, except one son married and had families. Vardaman and Miles emigrated to Missouri about 1835. Miles was killed in a fight at Independence, Missouri, leaving a widow and two sons who returned to Kentucky in 1843. James was killed by a tree falling on him, Harrison and Smith, Jr. both died in Estill County from the effects of pistol wounds. McKinley was a minister of the Christian Church. He died at the early age of 37. Frank and Henry were both insane for many years preceding their death."

Simon Cockrell, Sr. lived in that part of Breathitt which was taken from Estill County formed in 1808. He had lived in Estill County for 31 years. When Breathitt County was formed, (April 4, 1939, act approved). Simon Cockrell Sr. made a gift often acres, for the site of the county seat. This was named Breathitt Town, later changed to Jackson, in honor of Andrew Jackson. This site included the square in which the Court House and Jail are erected.

Simon Cockrell and his wife, Mary (Smith) Cockrell, at their decease were buried on their home property, custom among the Mountain people, especially during the early days. This property, the burial ground excepted, passed into the George Sewell family, but it always bears the name of the "Si Bend." for its former owner. (John Jones is the present owner. MBF). These two graves are covered with the rock tombstones cut in the shape of the casket shape of the 1890's. These are set on top of the graves, resting on small corner stones sunken in the earth.

A stream in the Frozen Creek Valley was named for Simon Cockrell. Cockrell's Fork has its confluence with Cope's Fork itself a tributary of Frozen Creek, close to the small bridge on Cope's Fork, but generally known as "the Cockrell Fork Bridge of Frozen. During the recent flood disaster, this bridge was washed off the abutments, down the creek some distance, and together with uprooted trees and other debris washed up on the shore of the creek.

A farm about one half mile farther beyond the bridge, toward Lexington, formerly belonging to U.S. Commissioner Samuel J. Cockrell and his wife, but recently sold to Mr. and Mrs. Earl Howard, was devastated, all crops swept away, dwelling house and all out buildings swept off and utterly destroyed.

Mrs. Howard and two children were drowned, bodies recovered and identified. Mr. Howard's body has not been recovered to date. Mrs. Howard was a niece of Mrs. Samuel J. Cockrell, a brother's daughter. Simon Cockrell Sr. father of James Cockrell, James Cockrell father of

Clifton Cockrell, Clifton Cockrell father of U. C. Commissioner Samuel J. Cockrell and Tom Cockrell, Samuel Cockrell married Miss Roberta Blanton, daughter of County Judge William H. Blanton; they have one son, Ollie James Cockrell, attorney- at-law practicing in the Jackson Course. He married a Miss Susan Bach of the Quicksand Bachs.

Samuel J. Cockrell was elected and served as sheriff of Breathitt County, 1926-29; was elected and served as Jailer of Breathitt County, 1930- 1933; and was appointed United States Commissioner, Eastern Kentucky District April 1936.

Simon Cockrell Sr. was regarded as being the wealthiest man in either Estill or Breathitt Counties, owning many slaves and large bodies of timber and coal lands. At that time the latter was regarded as of little value. While a citizen of Estill County he lived nearly 50 miles from his county seat, and it required three days to make the trip.

Following the organization of Breathitt County, Simon Cockrell paid taxes on the following property, "in the year 1840:....500 acres of land on the North Fork of the Kentucky River (the site of Jackson, 10 acres was in this piece of land. MFB), value \$1,600; 1,000 acres on War Creek, value \$800; 33,000 acres on Frozen Creek (it is told that he owned from the head to the mouth of the Frozen Creek, MFB), value \$1,300; 10 slaves, value \$3,000; 9 horses, 100 head of cattle; three children between 7 and 17 years of age. The full valuation of this property was \$15,560."

Simon Cockrell Sr. was a money lender at 10 percent interest, never charging any more nor taking any less. He handled a good many cattle which he raised at little expense. He had no grass, but depended on the peavine for summer, and the hundreds of acres he owned, covered with cane and other winter forage, was amply sufficient to take his stock through the winter without additional feed.

The only market for all the cattle raised in the Mountain part of Eastern Kentucky was in Virginia, principally Loudon and adjoining counties in the Shenandoah Valley, where the blue grass for grazing purposes was said to be equal to Kentucky. Every year up till the beginning of the Civil War, many thousand head of cattle were driven from this state to Virginia; there being no stock scales in the county, they were sold by head, averaging \$10.00 per head for three year old steers. Since the close of the War, Mt. Sterling has been the great cattle market for all this part of the country. Mr. Cockrell sold his cattle to a Mr. Vanmeter of Winchester, only. His confidence in the honesty of Mr. Vanmeter was unbounded, having sent him as many as fifty and seventy-five head of cattle at a time, requesting him to pay whatever he thought the cattle were worth.

Mr. Cockrell was a clever and an honest man, and had many redeeming traits. He was never known to refuse to extend the helping hand to the poor; and was devoted to his friends. But to his enemies or to those who had incurred his displeasure he would not speak to or having anything to do with; and for any wrong or insult given there was no forgiveness on his part. He was never known to attend church or participate in any religious devotions, or to lend his presence to any religious gatherings, except a certain baptizing at Jackson on one occasion.

There was a protracted meeting (spoken of in cities as "religious revivals" MFB), held at Jackson by Rev. Joseph Nickell, who represented a denomination that preached the doctrine of baptism by immersion for

the remission of sins, and that the remission occurred in the act of baptizing. Fourteen persons joined the church during the meeting, and at the close they all went down to the river to be baptized.

Among the converts was a man who had formerly been a tenant of Mr. Cockrell's and with whom he had had some difficulty. Mr. Cockrell happened to be in town that day and he followed along with the large crowd of over 150 persons to see the baptizing. As his former tenant was being immersed. Cockrell called to the parson in his loud stentorian voice that could be distinctly heard a quarter of a mile, and said, "Souse him again, Joe, for he is a dam't dirty dog, and it will take two dips to wash away his sins!"

Simon Bohanan, a prominent citizen of Woodford County, purchased the tract of land on the north side of the river opposite the mouth of Cane Creek when it was a part of Estill County, and improved it very handsomely as a home for himself and two sons, Lewis and Henry, who were gentlemen of education and refinement and also as a summer home for his wife and two lovely daughters, who would come up from Woodford County via Hazel Green on horseback and spend the summer months. (This house contained eight rooms, two stories, and the lumber in it had all been hand hewed. The house was torn down a few years since by the present owner, Mr. and Mrs. Green Bach, of Jackson, Kentucky, and the good timbers used in the construction of a more modern seven room house. This farm is on a part of the Panbowl section of the county. MFB). "Henry married Miss Pauline Cockrell, daughter of Simon Cockrell Sr. and Louis married a daughter of William Haddix, two of the wealthiest ladies in the county. Both sons, with their families and slaves, migrated to Texas a few years before the Civil War.

Green Trimble, the writer who wrote Recollections Of Breathitt which concerns the 1830's and 1840's in this county, was more intimately acquainted with Miss Ann Allen than any young lady in the county. He boarded with her sister, Mrs. Nick Hays, for several months while she was a member of the family. She was regarded as being the brightest and one of the handsomest young ladies in the county and intellectually she had no superior. She afterwards married James Cockrell (son of Simon Cockrell Jr. -- MFB), and was the grandmother of City Marshall Jim Cockrell, who was assassinated on the streets of Jackson several years ago, 1902, during the Hargis-Cockrell feud (It is said that he died in the performance of his duty. He was a brother of U. S. Commissioner Samuel J. Cockrell and a son of Clifford Cockrell. Clifford Cockrell died while his children were small, I have not learned the cause of his death. Another son, Tom Cockrell, got into an argument with Ben Hargis, a brother of former Senator A. H. Hargis, of Hargis Bank. Ben shot him twice and he shot Ben who died within a few days from the wounds. Tom Cockrell was arrested and the case transferred to Powell County. He was in the Circuit Court of Powell County and acquitted on "Self Defense". (It was a short time before this that Doctor Cox was shot and killed. Doctor Cox had been appointed guardian of the Clifton Cockrell children. He had been to Lexington to employ defense counsel for Tom Cockrell and a few nights later when Doctor Cox was a few yards from his home, going down the hill from his office, a voice called to him from across the street. Doctor Cox stopped, turned and replied-then three load of buckshot were poured into his body, killing him instantly. Twenty-eight buckshot were removed from his body after being removed to his home. (Jim and Tom were older than Samuel J. Cockrell, U.S. Com. --MFB).