Long search leads to discovery of revolutionary cemetery

By Barbara Buettner
Special to The Cullman Times

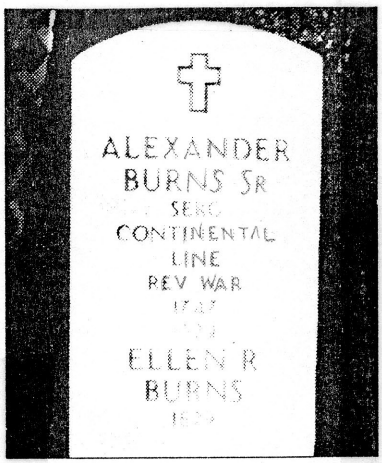
Editor's Note: *A memorial service will be held Sunday, May 30, at 2 p.m. in the Burns and Rivers Cemetery located within the boundaries of Rickwood State Park in Blount County. At that time a Revolutionary grave marker will be unveiled for Alexander Burns I and wife Ellen Roach. The couple's great-great-great-great-granddaughter Barbara T. Buettner of Cullman recounts here her long search for the cemetery and the interesting information she uncovered.*

"Our grandfather and grandmother Burns had lived...in their little home on the mountainside, contented with their lot, were warm-hearted, religious old people, until the fall of 1829 when they were about 80 years old, they were both stricken down with pleurisy or pneumonia, and our grandfather died about November and our grandmother about Christmas. They were both buried near their little home, which is now a beautiful cedar grove. At the same graveyard, our Uncle Alex, Aunt Crecy, their daughter Eliza, and no doubt others of the family of Uncle Alex. Peace to their memory." — Calvin Alex Burns, 1894.

After many readings of Calvin Alex Burns' "History of the Burns Family-1894," I became convinced that the author's and my Revolutionary Patriot, Alexander Burns I and family were buried somewhere in the western part of Blount County. Never had I or my living Burns kin known the exact final resting place or searched for it. From "The History" I knew that in that unknown cemetery would also be the above listed remains. The search was therefore defined as at least five or six graves in one area.

Three points of reference of the Burns' Cove Farm were in Calvin Alex' history. First was their school listed at T16 Section 13 R3W, being two miles north of the farm. The second point was the Cove Farm being near Reed's Gap on the L&N Railroad of the 1894 era. My Uncle Fred Boren had informed me earlier where Reed's Gap was located. The third reference was the farm being located on the Turnpike or Stagecoach Road two miles west of the Reed's Gap Depot. The graveyard was to be found near the elder Burns' home on the mountainside which was, in 1870 or 1894, surrounded by a cedar grove. Richard Buettner, my husband, plotted the three reference points of the then over 100 year old history. They indicated Rickwood State Park. To this concept we both said, "Nah! Can't be!"

Another Burns history had been published in 1974 by Cranford H. Burns. His "Henry and Lexer Grant Burns Family with Ancestors, Descendants and Related Families" was a great sourcebook explaining the relationships of different lineages of our Burns kin. My mother, Gracie Boren Tompkins, had been so excited that the lineages were explained. I was disinterested then, but twenty years later one of her statements came to mind, "We're kin to Country Boy Eddie Burns." That remark was to come in good stead to me later. In mother's correspondence with Cousin A.F. 'Ferd' Burns Sr. of Orange, Texas, I found a small reference to Rickwood Caverns. Visiting the state park a bit later, we were in fact shown the remnants and path of the old Stagecoach Road within the park. "Can't be!" became "Maybe!"



This Revolutionary grave marker will be placed in the Burns and Rivers Cemetery within the boundaries of Rickwood Caverns State Park in honor of Alexander Burns I and wife, Ellen Roach during a special ceremony on May 30.

Mr. Basel Mauldin had given a cemetery reading on Nov. 18, 1980 to Ms. Ann Gregath by telephone saying the "Burns and Rivers Cemetery" was located east of the parking lot of Rickwood Caverns. In the "Cullman County Cemetery Book," Mr. Mauldin stated there were six or more badly vandalized graves in that graveyard and some belonged to Country Boy Eddie Burns' family. Several months later Mr. Mauldin was visited in his home on Arkadelphia Mountain. He had played in the Rickwood area as a youngster and was aware of the cemetery then. It had stayed in his memory well because some of his family had married into the Rivers family. His health prevented him from traveling to the area to point out the exact location.

Many questions were asked of the Burns of the area and other folk. The repeated answer was, "I've heard of the cemetery, but I don't know where it is." I turned to my closer Burns kin whose ancestors had migrated north across the Mulberry River in 1833. Many of the kin however had "GTT" (Gone to Texas) during Reconstruction. There were barriers to the knowledge of our ancestors' gravesites of the boundary of the Mulberry River, moving to Texas, and a time lapse of over 100 years. A native of the Rickwood area who lived on Burns Mountain, Mr. Charles Burns, said he had played and hunted in the area earlier. He, my husband and I combed the woods there on a hot October day, but we couldn't locate the cemetery. My Aunt Ethelene Boren Normand told of hearing of a graveyard that was displaced in the construction of Interstate 65; the remains had been removed to nearby Sulphur Springs Cemetery.

Next stop: Alabama Department of Transportation Office in Birmingham. There, being treated with utmost courtesy, was an employee who had worked on the Interstate 65 project and remembered the relocation of some remains to the above cemetery. A short time later, the department mailed a packet to me containing the family surnames of the deceased and the exact location of the cemetery, being west of Interstate 65 at the Hayden-Corner exit in Blount County. This was definitely not the "Burns-Rivers Cemetery." Back to Rickwood State Park with more questions!

Mr. James W. Russell, park manager, to whom I had spoken earlier, gave me the name of Ms. Linda Hallmark of Smokerise who was researching old schoolhouses and graveyards of western Blount County. She said the unmarked cemetery was assuredly within the boundaries of Rickwood State Park and that area at one time had the postmark of Willow, Ala., but she didn't know its exact location.

Still asking questions of everyone I met, I asked fellow genealogists, Alvis and Mary Hancock. I knew they lived in western Blount County. Mary replied, "My maiden name was Rivers and I'll ask my dad about it." A week later Mary said her dad, Mr. Bennie Rivers, did in fact know about the cemetery as his Rivers ancestors were the first to homestead that area. Alvis was acquainted with Mr. Mike Rickles who was a son of a former owner of Rickwood Caverns. The reading, researching, inquiring, and treks were now becoming more positive!

Ms. Norma Burns, who was researching her husband's family, and I met at Wallace State College in Hanceville one day. She gave me the name and address of Mr. Perry W. Reid of Ashville, Ala., who was researching the Burns family for his wife Loretta Burns. Mr. Reid became a compatriot in searching for the forgotten, badly vandalized Burns and Rivers Cemetery. Making the quest more informative was the addition and acquaintance of these folks.

An appointment was made with Mr. Russell for our group to search east of the parking lot at the park. When we arrived, Ranger Conrad Dean was introduced to us. Mr. Dean asked us to follow him. He stopped, pointed downward to five depressions and one giant hole in the ground. The depressions and hole were parallel to one another, being east to west. Mr. Reid said these were Christian burials since they were placed in that manner. Then we found one stone marker under years of pine straw and logging debris. The stone was deliberately placed there, noted Mr. Russell. If it had been in a natural position it would have been horizontal, not vertical as it was.

We were all wondering about the obviously vandalized grave so deeply dug. Mr. Hancock suggested we go to Mr. Rickles' place of business and ask him about that hole. He remembered professionals coming to search the grave for Native American artifacts, but only vaguely as he was a child at the time. Calling his mother on a phone with a loud speaker, he asked her about the hole. She said the professionals dug to a more shallow depth knowing that artifacts would have been within that depth. No artifacts were found. Their guess was that some helpers on the day of the dig had come back under the cover of darkness and dug deeper.

What joy, humbleness and awe the Burns and Rivers descendants felt! To be able to have the cemetery recognized as such in a state park, permission was required by the Alabama State Parks Board. A letter to that effect was posted immediately and a positive reply was received by return mail. Filling out a form requesting a Revolutionary Grave Marker was done at the Cullman County Veterans' Office. We had been advised that its shipping might not be for a year and what a surprise when it arrived in three months! My aunt, uncle and I went in his truck to transport it away from the park for its safe keeping. While there, my aunt commented that the group of cedars along the walking path were definitely cultivated and were those described in the "Burns Family History of 1894" as being the site of the mountainside home of Alexander Abner Burns and his wife Ellen Roach. The Rivers family had lived in that little cabin upon their arrival later in the area. The chimney and pilings rocks still lie a very short distance from the old cedar grove.

On our most recent visit to the site, Mr. Reid brought his father-in-law, Mr. Aaron Burns and his brother, Mr. Robert Burns with him. The latter was a building contractor who had built a brick house in the Rickwood Park area in the 1950s. He was amazed then to find rock pilings of another cabin fairly nearby the one of the cedar grove and he could appraise the small size of it, by today's standards, due to the pilings. The Burns brothers' father, Alexander Burns III, told them at the time that their Uncle Minter Burns once lived in that cabin. One might suppose that Alexander II and Lecretia Burns had built and first occupied it.

The helpful efforts of the above persons, past and present, will culminate in a Memorial Service for family and friends on May 30 at Rickwood State Park, Blount County. The public is invited.

Quotation marks enclose passages from "The Burns Family History-1894" by Calvin Alex Burns (1826-1896). He was the first and foremost help in locating our ancestors' gravesites. "Peace to their memories."