An Interview With

PENELOPE JOHNSON ALLEN

By

John Wilson

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INTRODUCTION

This interview with Penelope Johnson Allen was conducted at her home in St. Elmo, 4301 Alabama Avenue, in July 1977.

The interviewer, John Wilson, donated a copy of the interview to the Chattanooga - Hamilton County Public Library in 1978.

Wilson: Just [give me] a general description of John McDonald.

Allen: 036 You should have warned me on that so I would refresh my memory a little. I've been reading about things later than he. Of course the first thing is he was a typical Scotchman, I think. He had all of the good characteristics of the Scotch; he was thrifty and very intelligent, and he represented the British during the Revolutionary War. He was [the] British agent in this area. The Cherokees, the Overhills, as they called them, Cherokees --

Wilson: Where did he live here? Where was his place here?

Allen: He lived at Rossville Gap at Poplar Springs, he called it, because there are letters in the American State Papers and in the archives in Washington that state that he writes from Poplar Springs. So that was his home; the big spring there was a fine location. Of course he moved down here from the Fort Loudoun area, and he was sent up there from Charleston or Augusta. He was the representative in America, came over here under the pa- 051 tronage of and worked for Panton-Leslie and Company, which was an English company that did business with the colonies, the Southern colonies. And he came as their agent.

Wilson: How do you spell that?

Allen: Panton, P-A-N-T-O-N and then hyphen L-E-S-L-I-E, that's I guess two men, Englishmen, that had this mercantile-trading business in America. They sent him from London over here for some reason, I don't know why, I've never seen it. He went from Scotland to London and represented them; they sent him over here. But the account of John McDonald's that I think is the most authentic is the one in the North American Indians, the -- it was published in the 1850s; it was written by John Ross and there is in Nashville [Tennessee State Library and Archives] John Ross' retained copy of a letter that he wrote to the publishers saying that he had read the proof of it, and it was in all points correct. So if you want any information about the McDonalds or the Rosses, that is the best source that I know be- 065 cause it was approved by John Ross. There is in existence material that proves that.

Wilson: John Ross, would you just --

Allen: He was his grandson.

Wilson: What kind of a person was he? Would you describe him.

Allen: Oh, I think he was a magnificent person; he was a born leader, and from the things that I've read about him, he must have been

(Allen): a quiet person but very forceful. He was very Scotch; he, from the pictures I think, looked more like a Scotchman than an Indian, though he had the brow of an Indian, the deep-set eyes. I have read that he never talked to the Cherokees except that he used an interpreter; he spoke Cherokee, but when he had any official business before the Council, he always had an interpreter with him so that he was sure of the Indian language. He was a very kind man, and of course, I think, a wonderful father to his children. The schools that he had -- he patronized, he was careful in the teachers that he brought [in]. But he had had good training; his father had done that before him. Daniel Ross was also a Scotchman. He had brought tutors into the Cherokee nation to teach his children; I think [he] was probably the first individual that did that. I think Ross was actuated by patriotic motives, I don't think there's any doubt about that. The historians in the East, people with whom he corresponded, all recognized his stature as a leader among his people.

Wilson: What attitude did he take toward [the Indian] removal?

Allen: Well, of course, he opposed it all the way through. He never wavered in his loyalty to his tribe and to his love of the country that they had always owned. There was no wavering; he was determined to use every means possible for the Cherokees to remain. They had developed a very high state of civilization and were spreading it. He advocated -- patronized schools; and while he, himself, was a Methodist, he was liberal toward all religious forms and encouraged the development -- religious development -- among the Cherokee people.

Wilson: You were telling me that the people in Washington didn't understand the Indian situation.

Allen: I don't think they did. I think it's very hard, even now, for people in Washington to understand the situation in Korea; we have that today, just today actually. I don't think that the people in Washington, with the insufficient communication that they had, understood the [situation]. In the first place, they didn't understand the Cherokee as an individual, the Indian himself. And they were a very interesting people, and in many ways, I guess, different from other tribes that we read about. They were unique in a great many ways, and they were forceful. If they were your friend, they would -- were completely loyal, and their idea of retribution -- I don't think there's any -- I've never seen a record where the Indians attacked a white man first, it was always in return for some ill that the -- or evil that the white man had brought to them. I have a very high regard [for them]. After you read about the Cherokees, their life in the wild -- I mean the people before they were civilized or culturalized by the white people -- they were simple but very direct.

(Allen): They revered the Great Spirit, and they were, in many ways, a unique people. I think the history of them is very interesting. It was the good fortune of the Cherokees to have many white people who came among them with a high type of trader, and they brought with them an appreciation of education that developed
123 and led to a development in the -- both here and then after the removal it was continued in Oklahoma. I think you'll see that if you've known any of them, you know the fine people they are.

Wilson: Comment on the tragedy of the removal, would you call that a tragedy?

Allen: Oh yes, I think it's the most tragic thing that ever -- one of the most tragic things that ever happened to the United States was the forced removal of the Indians from their homeland. It was their home from time immemorial; they had the love of the land, and [to think] that they should be forced by the greed of the white man to leave it, seek a new home. But when Mr. Robert Ross visited me in the 1930s here, we took him on a trip to the different places where his family had lived in the Cherokee nation.
136 When he looked at all these, he said, "Well, after looking it over here, I don't think that we did so bad in what we got in Oklahoma for it's a beautiful land where they live out there." I think he really was interested to see what they had left, but he was perfectly satisfied with where they lived out there. It's a beautiful country.

It was a tragic thing when they -- the removal of the -- the forced removal and some of the -- many of the incidents. You read case after case in the claims of the Cherokees; they tell of the indignities that they suffered at the hands of the people who removed them. Now later the white people -- everybody wants to be a part of the removal, and say, "My grandfather assisted in the removal," and when you read about what happened, you're not so sure that you want them for grandfathers. (laughter) In the claims of the Cherokees, which are now in Nashville, there are incidents over and over where they'd tell of what they suffered; what they left; and how they were picked up and forced to leave their pots and pans in their kitchens; their gardens that they'd planted; their stock on the land; and their chickens. Some of the more affluent ones even had peacocks that they had to leave. They had gardens very much the same that we have, they'd put in -- planted so many peach trees, so many apple trees, so many plum trees, and so many acres of po-
159 tatoes or corn. They had good gardens, and there's just claim after claim; it isn't just one, but there are sixteen thousand that were taken out in the final removal. And since you were here, I reviewed my notes on General Nathaniel Smith who was agent for removal, before the final removal; that's in 1835 and 1836 when they were trying to get them to remove. I had a letter where he describes the first contingent that he sent off,

(Allen): which composed a thousand people that left the wharf at Ross' Landing by boat. He said he had almost a thousand more that were ready to go in the next few days, and then another group. Then he had one group that did go overland; he says so in this letter which is signed by him. I had always -- in my mind I had always thought that the Trail of Tears, as it's known, that all of the people that went West crossed the Kincannon's Ferry up into Meigs County, crossed to Rhea, and across the mountain up above into McMinnville, over that way, Nashville, and on to Golconda, Illinois and west. But he did send out one contingent overland that did go down across Suck Creek Road -- he doesn't mention Suck Creek Road as such, but you can tell in following it that they left Ross' Landing, went over the mountain, and they wouldn't have gone back up North to do that, went by land. And I was glad to get that straightened out in my mind, because I had never seen it before. [I] had heard people claim that there were Indians that went that way, but I had never seen it in print. When I saw it in this letter, I was really pleased to have that point cleared up in my mind, because that was one thing I've always questioned; I didn't know one way or the other, but I had questioned it. But they did; he sent one [group]. And then the removal became so odious that he resigned and left, and later went to Texas to live.

And Ben [Benjamin F.] Currey was the agent then for removal, and he was very unsatisfactory to the Cherokees, just very oppressive in the means that he used to get them to remove. He died, fortunately for them, but the people that succeeded him weren't much better. When General [John Ellis] Wool came, he was sympathetic with them and tried to do what he could for them, and it became very odious to him, and he asked to be removed. Then General [Winfield] Scott was sent to replace him, but final removal was turned over to John Ross, and the Cherokees did it themselves. They organized themselves into groups of a thousand each, and I think they sent out about ten companies. That's all described in Dr. [Emmet] Starr's history of the Cherokees -- the means by which they removed themselves.

Wilson: This letter from Smith, is that in some book?

Allen: No, I've got the original letter. No, it's not in a book, it's never been printed.

Wilson: Oh, you've got the original letter. Does it give any details about the landing?

Allen: No, I don't think it gives much. I think that the -- I'm trying to think where's the best place that you could get some description of the landing. I saw something in one of these clippings -- I think it was Colonel Tom Fort.

End Tape 1, Side 1
Begin Tape 1, Side 2

Wilson: 033 I was going to ask you about Ross' Landing, describe Ross' Landing in the late 1830s, Ross' Landing, when the Indians were here; when they took the Indians out.

Allen: When they took the Indians out. Well, of course Ross still had a warehouse there which he had sold to his niece's husband, the [Nicholas Dalton] Scales, in the early 1830s because he left here in 1828 and went to Georgia. But he sold that warehouse and the buildings that went with it; I think there were several buildings that were there up on -- later after the immigrants from above came on down.

Then, of course, Daniel Henderson lived there, and his house [was] up above [the landing]; he was there as early as 1835 when he took the Cherokee census. There were -- I think the Kings, Colonel [William] King of Abingdon, Virginia, who had a salt warehouse, a station [where they] sold salt and traded in pelts and things with the Indians and with the natives, [who] had lived on the north side of the river. It was quite a little community there around the landing. My impression is that it extended up the river as far as Citico, because the camp that Colonel [William] Lindsey had, the concentration camp for the Indians, was above [the] town up there out in the flat part out there near Citico, the mouth of Citico Creek where the 054 old Citico mound was.

Wilson: You were telling me that Ross' Landing was kind of an afterthought.

Allen: Oh yes, it was. John Ross and Timothy Meigs founded [the] store there. It was a short cut that he opened up as a short way to the McDonald home at Rossville -- at Poplar Springs. Daniel Ross' warehouse was always at the mouth of Chattanooga Creek, and I've noticed [in] one or two references lately [that] they confuse Daniel Ross with John Ross. Daniel Ross had nothing to do, I think, with the Ross' Landing. It was a cutoff that John Ross opened up because it was a shorter and higher road to the McDonald farm out Rossville Boulevard. They kept to the high ground when they left the landing down there. They really didn't go up Market Street. They kept to the left going south along that high ground until it got out there to beyond Rossville, I mean to Ross' -- Well from Main Street now, it went on south of Main.

Wilson: 067 Daniel Ross' double log cabin, I believe I was reading in the Ross article that you said it was still here in the early 1900s.

Allen: It was, I think. It was there that a Mr. Pinion lived over there in that house, and Colonel [Lafayette W.] Bates, Squire Bates, Creed Bates' father owned that property, and he [Colonel

(Allen): Bates] told me that when they tore it down, he remembered all
072 of that -- of their tearing it down and of the man who, I guess, was probably a tenant of Squire Bates.

Wilson: Too bad that they tore that down.

Allen: It was too bad, but that house site is there, and I was quite surprised to see that in one of these brochures that was brought [to] me later, it said that the school that was at John McDonald's home was the earliest school in North Georgia. But that school was at Daniel Ross' house; it wasn't at John McDonald's house. When Daniel Ross came back here around 1800, he settled on that knoll down there that's just beyond where that Chevrolet [Ed Wright] [3605 Broad Street] -- they have a used car lot there in front. He had quite a development; he had a warehouse at the mouth of the creek which is mentioned in any number of contemporary letters. I've seen a letter, dated around 1801, which stated that some men, who represented the government, came here to go down to the mouth of the Elk River; I think there was a proposed cantonment the government was going to put down there, and they met there at the mouth of the Chattanooga Creek at Daniel Ross' warehouse, [and] went on down from there.

It's well established back in contemporary documents that his home was there in that place, and then he had his tannery about where the Scholze's Tannery is now [3100 St. Elmo Avenue].
092 He had all that developed from where he lived there as far as the river. Then he took a reservation of six hundred and forty acres which was allotted to him in right of his wife there at that place. That's where [Gideon] Blackburn established a school for him, sent a teacher down there from Maryville to teach his children and other Indian children of the neighborhood. He had a big development there at the mouth of the Chattanooga Creek. He had a warehouse and then the warpath came around the mountain there; it was all right together, it's very constricted there. If you go down there in that locality you'll see what a close place it is. There's every reason why he would have done that. That was the earliest development; there was a crossing of the river from time immemorial just above there, on account of the paths coming around the mountain.

But Ross' Landing up there where John Ross established that warehouse, if you'll look at the map you'll see that it was simply a short cut to his place out at Rossville at the McDonald home than if they came down to the mouth of the creek and then went up across to it. This [was a] time saver and I guess in time of high water it was quite advantageous.

111 Most of their trade had developed to the East at that time; they went to Baltimore and Philadelphia for their supplies and

(Allen): then brought them down, either down the river or the road that came down that way. Washington, [Tennessee], at that time, had developed into quite a town. It was the county seat of Rhea County and the biggest place in this vicinity in Tennessee. They
117 had a good deal of business that came down from there. The Indian agency was there until they moved it to Charleston, Tennessee. You see [Return Jonathan] Meigs was there at the Hiwassee agency, Hiwassee garrison, until about 1817, and then he moved over to the old agency in Meigs County, and then two years later moved to Calhoun. So there was every reason to move up North commercially. [interruption]

Wilson: I was looking at those [Albert Sobieski] Lenoir Papers * you
129 were telling me about, and he refers to Chattanooga I notice in April of 1834, but I've always heard about this meeting at the schoolhouse to name Chattanooga in the late summer --

Allen: Yes in 1838.

Wilson: I mean in 1838. How accurate is that account, do you think, where they all got together in that schoolhouse?

Allen: I think that's about -- I would say I think that he was a very well educated man, and I think that his memory on that would be as good as anybody's.

Wilson: I mean Lenoir, I notice in his writings he's calling it Chattanooga as early as April and [Gilbert E.] Govan and [James W.] Livinggood have this account about this town meeting, you know, at the little schoolhouse in the late summer.

Allen: I think they took that from Miss [Zella] Armstrong. Have you checked her book? [<u>History of Hamilton County and Chattanooga, Tennessee</u>]

Wilson: I notice she's got it too.

Allen: How did she have it? I think they took theirs from her; I don't know now, never had to ask her.

Wilson: Do you know how reliable that -- do you think they really did
140 have a town meeting like that, and that's how it got named?

Allen: I wouldn't be surprised. I don't question that. Anything that -- any tradition that people have unless I know some -- have some

* The Lenoir Papers are part of the Local History Department's manuscript collection.

(Allen): documentary evidence to show that it's wrong, I accept it until you can prove it.

Wilson: But in Lenoir's papers, he's talking about Chattanooga in April, 145 and that would be earlier than this meeting.

Allen: Well, if he calls it Chattanooga in April, they were calling it that then, and maybe a certain group wanted to name it that and they --

Wilson: Maybe they wanted to officially name it that.

Allen: Uh-huh, and he probably had -- there was the Chattanooga area and the Chattanooga Creek had that name for a long, long time. The Chattanooga Mountain, they referred to [it on] this old map as Chattanooga Mountain. So he may have just been referring to the area down in the Chattanooga country, as it were. But I think that Mr. Lenoir -- my regard for him is very high, and any statement he'd make, I would think, would be --

Wilson: Yes, I wasn't questioning that.

Allen: Uh-huh. Well, I know I think anything that he -- if he called 155 it that that early, there was a group that were calling it that that early.

Wilson: Did you say that there were some letters that he had written in there? I haven't looked at all of it, but all I saw was just his books, his ration books and everything.

Allen: Well now, that's all I've ever seen. There were the books that he used when he accompanied -- I think he accompanied one of the groups of Cherokees that went West; now which one it was, I don't know. I've never gone into it because those papers turned up after I was interested in getting the material together that I did. The people who accompanied them West -- after the removal was turned over by General Scott to John Ross and to the Cherokees, they organized it into ten different units, and they went out at different times. The Cherokees, themselves, undertook it. I was reading a report of General Scott here just within the last two days and he said he didn't think it was necessary to send troops along with them because they were all very well-
171 behaved, and he didn't anticipate any violence or any disorder on the part of the Cherokees at all in the removal. And they turned it completely over to John Ross, and he really had charge of the removal.

Wilson: Was it 1836 when they first started gathering the Indians in Chattanooga?

Allen: Well, I think they started -- yes, in 1836 because they didn't
176 start until after the treaty was made December 29, wasn't it; twenty-eighth or twenty-ninth I think in 1835. They didn't start to gather the Indians until after the treaty was signed. They had surveyed it though before that, you know south of the river. They anticipated the treaty going through, and the urgency of the government to force the Cherokees into signing it had gone on for two or three years; from 1834, 1835, and 1836 there was just constant pressure. Hamilton County, north of the river, had already been organized, and they sent surveyors over here and all of this was surveyed in 1836. They made a census in 1836 and another one in 1837; there are two censuses of the area south of the river that was ceded by the Cherokees by that treaty.

Wilson: When did the first party of Indians go out?

Allen: Well, of course, see the first party of Indians went out from --
192 in 1805 or 1806, along in there, they had been going west of the Mississippi since Jefferson was president.

Wilson: I mean from Chattanooga, after 1830.

Allen: Well now, the first ones you know went by water, and they expected to remove them by water under General Nathaniel Smith from McMinn County, the agent at that time. Then he sent out several different groups by water; they all went by water. I don't think any of them really -- there may have been a few that removed themselves over land, and those that did prior to the general removal -- I don't think that the government sent any except by water until Ben Currey became the agent after Nathaniel Smith was -- I guess he resigned, he went to Texas finally. But then Ben Currey followed him, and he was the one
208 that was so hated by the Indians. He was so cruel.

End Tape 1, Side 2
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