

Census offers glimpse at Walker County history

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The Huntsville Item

In 1870, the population of Walker County was 9,765, according to the United States Census. Of that number, 3,952 were white, 5,052 were black, and 728 were of mixed decent. The male population, which included prisoners, was 5109 and the female population was 4,656.

Almost half were born in Texas, with 1,427 claiming Alabama as their birthplace, and 554 claiming Louisiana. Others were born in Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.

For the most part, it was a young population, with the average age being 21.4 years. However, several stated their age as over 80 and one was 110 years old.

All of this and lots of other in-



Town
Talk

formation can be found in the 1870 United State Census for Walker County, compiled by Anthony Vincent Banes and the late Dennis Michael Lawlis, and published by the Walker County Genealogical Society.

The book will be introduced at a party hosted by the society from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. Tuesday at the Huntsville Public Library. The price of the book is \$21.65 including the state sales tax.

Most of the residents who

lived here in 1870 listed their occupation as farm hand and day laborer. However, the county had 13 doctors, five dentists, and 11 lawyers, including James A. Baker, who later joined the Houston law firm Gray & Botts, which became Baker & Botts. He was the great-grandfather of former Secretary of State James A. Baker.

The book contains a lot of interesting statistics. The population included five full-time preachers, and two who farmed and preached part-time. There were 444 students and 17 school teachers, 22 blacksmiths, 718 farmers, eight full-time retail merchants, and three druggists. There was one publisher, item founder George Robinson, one undertaker, and two stage drivers.

Additionally, there was one

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buggy maker, one coach maker, and one wagon maker. One of the social graces was taught by one dance master and one dancing teacher.

The 1870 census was the first to list the names of blacks, according to Tony Banes, which makes it a valuable resource for those interested in genealogy.

Census takers misspelled some names, including the name of Huntsville's most noted black citizen at that time. Joshua Houston was spelled "Johua." The former slave of Gen. Sam and Margaret Houston, Joshua, who

prospered as a blacksmith, was one of the first blacks to own property in Huntsville. He was also one of the first blacks to hold office in the state. He was appointed a city alderman and later won two terms as a Walker County commissioner. Additionally, he served as a delegate to the 1888 Republican Convention.

Another prominent black was Jefferson Watkins, great-grandfather of Richard Watkins. The Watkins family, along with the Nevil and Hightower families, was included in "From Slave

to Statesman" by Patricia Smith Prather and Jane Clements Monday, a recently published book on Joshua Houston.

Jefferson and Rachel were slaves on the Col. Watkins plantation. He was plantation foreman and manager, according to the book, and Rachel was a house servant. Jefferson was in charge of the plantation when Col. Watkins was away.

The couple had five children. One of them, Joe Kimball Watkins, became one of the county's leading black farmers and eventually owned a 1,000-acre farm. Another son, Walter, started preaching at age 12, and as an adult, preached part of his sermons in Latin. He performed the marriage ceremony of Joshua's son, Samuel Walker Houston, and Hope Harvell on April 28, 1915.