

Stanley Nelson column/Natchez bluff
Sentinel

Congress tells Natchez: Preserve bluff 'green' forever A land dispute in the early 1800s divides the city, territory

More than 200 years ago Congress made a covenant with the City of Natchez over the strip of land that serves as a public park along the bluff today.

On Saturday, March 10, 1804, a Congressional committee reported to the U.S. House of Representatives that it "cannot avoid considering" the "prosperity" of the "infant city" of Natchez "as a matter of some national importance." As one symbol of that importance, Congress decided to insure that a portion of the bluff property be forever maintained as a public green, or commons, for citizens and visitors to enjoy.

LAND DISPUTE

It all began as a land dispute.

Congress was caught in the middle, and growing tired of the issue before a resolution was reached. Events leading up to this entanglement began several years earlier.

In the late 1700s, Stephen Minor, an American who spent decades in service to Spain, owned 300 beautiful acres along the bluff. He sold this prime real estate to the Spanish government for \$2,000.

Spanish commander Carlos de Grand-Pre' saw the need to set aside a portion of this bluff acreage for the citizens. Historian Jack Holmes said Grand-Pre' realized that a "large plaza, which seemed out of proportion to the small nucleus (of the tiny settlement)" would "seem more suitable as the town grew in size."

Manuel Gayoso de Lemos served as governor of the Natchez District during the 1790s and, accorded to Holmes, "He (Gayoso) created a public green or park which remained undivided into residential lots." Holmes said Gayoso "drew a line from Front Street, facing the bluffs, and forbade the granting of lots west of it."

The governor saw not only the need for a green, or commons, for Natchez citizens and visitors, but he also wanted a "buffer zone" between the river and the town to prevent the spread of diseases and other illnesses believed to be associated with water in those days, an idea Congress later embraced.

CONGRESS INVOLVED

In 1801, the city was incorporated after the territorial capital of Mississippi was moved from Natchez to the nearby village of

Washington. Congress had previously set aside land for the construction of Jefferson College and some wanted the school to be located along the bluffs. Natchez officials thought the land should be preserved as it had been during the Spanish era as a public park. And William Dunbar, a founder and trustee of the proposed college, submitted documentation that some of the property had been deeded to him by the Spanish when they possessed the Natchez District.

During the early 1800s, the issues involving this bluff property landed in the lap of Congress. Two congressmen reported directly to the House of Representatives on the matter -- Thomas Mann Randolph of Virginia, the son-in-law of President Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Gregg of Pennsylvania. Also involved was William Lattimore, a delegate to Congress from the Mississippi Territory.

During this time frame, Dunbar -- the explorer, scientist, surveyor and planter -- was involved in a regular correspondence with Jefferson over matters involving the future of the country, science and exploration. Jefferson held Dunbar in high esteem, and the Scotsman was the President's eyes and ears in this section of the country. In fact, following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Dunbar, at the request of Jefferson, led an expedition up the Ouachita in 1804-05 to explore the river from present day Jonesville to the hot springs in present day Arkansas. Dunbar also helped plan the Red River Expedition.

Before the Spanish transferred the Natchez District to the Americans in March 1798, Dunbar had been granted 26 acres of the bluff property by Gayoso in payment for surveying services. But there was a question as to whether the transfer was legal since it was made after the Spanish gave up the Natchez District by treaty but before they actually transferred possession of the city to the U.S.

DUNBAR'S STANCE

As one of the early promoters of Jefferson College, Dunbar addressed the property and college issues in a letter to Jefferson dated Sunday, Jan. 8, 1804. The proposed college had already been named in honor of the President.

Dunbar wrote: "I am concerned to observe that a resolution" that would "deprive Jefferson College of 30 acres of land granted by the late Congress and to give the same to the City of Natchez. The Town of Natchez is not in distress, the Corporation has been empowered by this legislature to levy taxes, more than sufficient for their expences, upon all property within the liberties of the town. The College is in absolute poverty: The Trustees, reckoning upon the

thirty acres as an object immediately productive, have passed a resolution, to prepare plans & contract for the erection of the most necessary buildings; if the 30 acres are taken away, the progress of the College must be arrested. Our public treasury has been so poor (& so unreasonable an aversion from paying taxes prevails) that the College has received no aid from the territory: private Contribution has not gone beyond the narrow Circle of a few public Spirited individuals; the Section reserved by Congress will not very Speedily be productive; hence if our newly created town Corporation obtains a victory over the College, the poor Seminary will be absolutely nipped in the bud."

Congress reviewed the matter for three years, from 1803 to 1806, in three successive sessions. Lattimore's committee reported that "when the town of Natchez was laid off by the Spanish government, the land between the front street" of Natchez "and the bluff of the Mississippi river was reserved for the convenience, comfort, and health of the inhabitants; and that two lots, on which a parsonage house is yet standing, were appropriated for the use of the clergy."

Lattimore continued: "It also appears, from an instrument bearing date the 19th (Wednesday) April, 1797, that the aforementioned land in front of the town was granted by the Spanish governor, Gayoso, to...William Dunbar, as compensation for services rendered by the said memorialist...." Further, Lattimore said the governor of Mississippi Territory, based on a Congressional act, claimed the land for use of Jefferson College.

Dunbar presented his case in writing before Congress, snapping that "the legality of your petitioner's (Dunbar) title, has engendered in the mind of the infant corporation of the town of Natchez, a possibility of snatching from your petitioner the well-earned fruits of his labor in the service of the former government..."

JEFFERSON'S SON-IN-LAW

After taking evidence and mulling over the matter, Congress wisely determined that the dispute should be settled locally, but made an important provision, reporting that "said land be neither cultivated nor occupied with buildings, but be planted with trees, and preserved as a common for the use, comfort, and health, of the inhabitants" of Natchez.

But it was the report of Randolph, the son-in-law of Jefferson, that eloquently conveyed the importance of the new city of Natchez to the country. Part of the importance was due to the Mississippi River.

"The Mississippi must soon become the greatest highway on the earth," reported Randolph. "Its long arms extended in every direction throughout the greatest and most valuable portions of the globe..."

Randolph said the "diffusion of American principles and American arts through all the wide space it embraces; the occupancy of this whole fertile surface by American citizens, is now insured beyond all risk. The immense wealth which will be produced by the industry and ingenuity of those citizens, with the aid of soils superior to all, and climates inferior to none on the earth...(will)...be carried for the purpose of exchange along the highway."

Natchez, Randolph reported, "is an inn established upon it (the Mississippi) in a chosen spot. There, the thousands of American citizens, engaged in the transportation, and the superintendence of the transportation...will stop for refreshment and for rest." In time, Congress felt Natchez would be "constantly fringed with boats, and its banks be covered with American citizens..."

This was part of the importance of this "narrow strip of land" which "extends very nearly along the whole front of the city upon the river, and separates the buildings of it by a convenient distance from the water." If the city's request to keep this land open is granted "it may preserve it as an open space, next (to) the water, for the joint accommodation of the citizens, and those strangers when they land." Otherwise, "buildings will quickly extend to the water's edge" and a "dreadful insalubrity must be the certain consequence."

Randolph said science and experience have taught other "great maritime cities" of the U.S. that the "germ of pestilence...always develops first in the dense and stagnant air of those streets and buildings which lie nearest the water." During certain seasons, this "pestilential contagion" could quickly spread throughout the city.

This open space of land on the bluff, said Randolph, would be a buffer to "this tremendous agent of human misery." He said "an occasion offers itself to the Government of the United States to make this important experiment in the city of Natchez at this time...The day cannot be very distant on which, if pestilence arises in Natchez, it may ramify itself with the wide spread arms of the Mississippi, through the vitals of the Union." Thus, a local health problem in Natchez could become a national problem as disease would be spread by those landing and debarking from the shores of the Mississippi at Natchez.

These were the reasons Randolph and his select committee felt it so important that Congress grant this "strip of land to the city of

Natchez, on condition that it shall be preserved forever as a public ground for the health, comfort, and enjoyment of all citizens and strangers indiscriminately; and shall never be built on, or cultivated; but, on the contrary, shall be disposed into public walks and lawns, and planted with trees, at the expense of the corporation, and so maintained by it as long as it exists."

JACKSON IMPRESSED

In the early 1800s, Joseph H. Ingraham noted that Natchez consisted of six streets "at right angles with the river, intersected by seven others of the same length, parallel with the stream. The front, or first parallel street, is laid out about 100 yards back from the verge of the bluff, leaving a noble green esplanade along the front of the city, which not only adds to its beauty, but is highly useful as a promenade and parade ground."

Ingraham said that "shade trees are planted along the border, near the verge of the precipice, beneath which are placed benches, for the comfort of the lounge. From this place the eye commands one of the most extensive prospects to be found on the Mississippi."

It was on these beautiful grounds that a future president once stood. In January of 1813, Gen. Andrew Jackson led 3,000 Tennessee volunteers down the Cumberland, Ohio and Mississippi rivers en route to New Orleans, a city the British were expected to attack. It was a long, cold journey, and the boats cut through ice along part of the voyage.

When Jackson and his weary men reached Natchez in February they looked atop the bluff and saw people everywhere awaiting their arrival. "On our landing at Natchez," Jackson recalled, "the strand was crowded with spectators welcoming the largest army that ever appeared in view of Natchez." He and his men never forgot the greeting.

SETTLEMENT REACHED

Legal entanglements involving Natchez and Jefferson College continued for years. William Dunbar died six years before the matter was settled.

The college, eventually built at nearby Washington, never reached the lofty dreams of its founders by becoming a premiere American university, and that's due primarily to warring political factions. Historian D. Clayton James in his book "Antebellum Natchez," said that initially "the school would be known as a stillborn child with the politicians....serving as muddled midwives." Not until 1816 did the city gain clear title to the bluff property, and that came with a \$6,000 price tag in payment to Jefferson College in settlement.

For a while, Congress's grand prediction that Natchez might become a great national city due to its position on the Mississippi seemed well founded. But the flow of riverboats and the people they deposited at Natchez eventually halted as transportation changed with the advent of the railroads and eventually the automobile. Petty and personal politics doomed the growth of Natchez and the capital of the Mississippi Territory, already relocated to Washington, eventually was removed from Adams County all together in favor of Jackson.

But, my, what a beautiful view the city property along the bluff has provided through the past 200 years for countless local citizens and visitors, who continue to this day to walk along the bluff top and gaze down on the Mississippi and at Concordia across the river.

This ground belongs to the people, Congress said, and this ground shall be "preserved forever."