

FROM GREENE COUNTY, TENNESSEE, TO ILLINOIS:  
A PERILOUS TRIP

*Edited by* NANCY MOORE BRITTON

The letter quoted below was written by Andrew Jackson Bruner after a journey down the Tennessee River in 1853. His grandfather, Jacob Bruner, a Revolutionary War veteran of Frederickstown, Maryland, had followed the traditional path of migration into eastern Tennessee, although his journey was interrupted by residence for several years in Woodstock, Virginia, in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley. He eventually arrived in Greene County, Tennessee, in 1804. Twelve children were born to Jacob Bruner and his wife, Margaret Cline, and unusual for that day and time, all reached adulthood. One son, John, however, died in the War of 1812. The fifth son, Joseph, remained on the home place, while several of his brothers and sisters went into Indiana and Illinois.

Joseph married Elizabeth Stonecifer, who bore him four sons and five daughters. Only two of the sons reached manhood—John Hamilton Bruner, who later became a Methodist minister and president of Hiwassee College,<sup>1</sup> and Andrew Jackson Bruner.<sup>2</sup>

In the late fall of 1852, this A. J. Bruner decided to take his family and follow some other friends and relatives of Greene County into the West. An aunt and uncle had settled in Hancock County, Illinois, and had interested him with their letters about the new country. Taking his wife, Selina Haworth Bruner, her widowed mother, Anna Oliphant Haworth, and his two small daughters (Anna and Paralee), A. J. Bruner equipped a flatboat with supplies and started down the Tennessee River.

It was to be a difficult and tragic journey. A. J. Bruner described it in a letter to his parents written the following spring.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Robert S. Hilten, *The Hiwassee Story* (Madisonville, Tenn., 1970), 54-102.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew J. Bruner is listed in the original returns (microfilm), U. S. Census, 1850, Greene County, Tennessee, as a farmer, age 28, born in Tennessee, owning land valued at \$300, with a wife named Saline [*sic*], and a two-year-old daughter, Anna. Obviously, Paralee (mentioned later) was born after 1850.

<sup>3</sup> This letter is in the possession of the editor. A Xerox copy is in Special Collections, Hoskins Library, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

State of Illinois [Pulaski]<sup>4</sup> Adams County April 17, 1853

Dear Father and Mother Brother and Sisters I take this present opportunity of writeing you a few lines after so long a time. We are all well at this time and do hope that these few lines will find you all in good health. We have had our health very well considering the exposeure we went through in the three months and a half traveling, though we left our little dear Paralee and Mother many hundred miles behind without any expectation of ever seeing the place where we left them. I can not give you a full account of our journey to the west at this time as it would take sheets of paper to contain it.

We left Henshaws on the 8th of November and that knight [night] we lay at old Dick Scruces.<sup>5</sup> Next morning we set sale [sail] and by three oclock we hung fast enough on the bar of rocks at Hill Shoals.<sup>6</sup> We got out and waded and prised and worked untill knight and next day and by unloading she floated off in the afternoon. She run about a mile and hung again. We prised her off and by dragging the bottom, pulling over rocks and shoals, we still moved on though some times rideing the waves and sometimes sailing on the smooth surface, some times bloone up by storm and [sometimes pulled by] cable at the bank. Our journey was slow. We did not make much on our flower [flour] and nothing on the cider. We sold at about four dollars and twenty five cents per barel. We could have done a little better if we had took it below the Mussel [Muscle] Shoals but we was afraid of meeting the Ohio flower [flour] and then we could not sell at all.

The shoals are three miles wid[e] and lookes like a sea of Islands.<sup>7</sup> They are almost full of logs, trees, stumps, drift, and almost avry [every] thing loged [lodged] on the rocks. They are very sallow [shallow], and I could see the blue rocks though the Boat going like it was almost flying.

Shortly after we passed through the shoals Mother was taken sick with the diseas caled diarear [diarrhea]. She still grew worse and we began to think it was time something should be given her for relief. In a few days from the time she was taken, we reached a little town and the doctor gave her a bottle of medison to take and also a vial of vermifuge for Paralee. In hopes of them geting better we started but they still grew worse. We did not no [know] what to do at this time; so we concluded to make all speed to the next little town

<sup>4</sup> At the top of the first page is the following: "the name of the post office I can not spell to any certainty though it will be on the back of the envelopment[:] Pelaski Pulaski Pulashkee[.]" Hereafter paragraphing, punctuation, and capitalization have been corrected for clarity, but not the spelling (except by use of brackets).

<sup>5</sup> Among the Henshaws listed in the 1850 census of Greene County were Levi and Philip. A Richard Scruugs is listed not only in the census of 1850 but also in Pollyanna Creekmore (comp.), "Early Tennessee Taxpayers, XI, Greene County, 1805," East Tennessee Historical Society's *Publications* No. 33 (1961), 97-105.

<sup>6</sup> Hill Shoals, one of the many obstructions in the river, has not been identified.

<sup>7</sup> This description of the Muscle Shoals resembles one made by a navigator in 1834 in the Florence, Ala., *Gazette*: "The River at this point was 3 miles wide and presented a mass of waves and rapid currents." Quoted in [J. Haden Alldredge], *A History of Navigation on the Tennessee River System*, 75 Cong. 1 Sess., *House Document* No. 254 (Washington, 1934), 62. According to the reports of the U. S. Army Chief of Engineers, however, the width of the river at the Shoals ranged from 1,000 to 9,600 feet. *Ibid.*, 7.

and reach it that night if possible. The night was clear and cool and the moon shined; so we thought we could get there before the moon went down. We sailed until about twelve o'clock and the moon now setting [setting], we began to look for some place to land and after pulling from one side to the other, we finally landed in the brush against a rugged cliff. I went on search of some house but finally finding none, I made my way back to the boat. Next morning early we landed at Clifton.<sup>8</sup> I went out to doctor Woolfs. He came and gave them<sup>9</sup> medicine. I believe he was a good Doctor though he could not give them relief. He visited them several times. On the next morning, before day, she [mother] died. In a few minutes after mother died, Paralee was taken with severe fits or spasms, some ten or twelve, I believe. They lasted some while. Next day we saw her breath[e] her last. They were both buried in a grave yard on a high hill at Clifton, side by side, about two hundred yards from the river. I think it was about one hundred and fifty miles below the Mussel Shoals and about two hundred and fifty miles above the mouth of the Tennessee River. Mother died on the 19th of December and Paralee on the 20th . . .

The Tennessee had been rising for twelve or fifteen days before we came out of it and the Ohio was still higher. They told us at Cairo that it was 25 feet above common water. So we rode on a high tide, though it was higher than I wanted, for in a great many places we had hard work to keep in the river without being drawn by slews into the timber. The surface of the river was almost covered with logs, trees, drift, barrels, wagon beds and almost every thing floating on the water. We sold our boat at Cairo after laying their [there] one week for twenty dollars. We moved to the wharf [wharf] boat the same evening that Bayless<sup>10</sup> did, though he started down the Mississippi before four we got there. At 8 o'clock the old Whirl Wind landed and by twelve we were going up the Mississippi. She took in freight all the way up and in two days and nights she landed us in St. Louis. Next morning we took passage on the old Shenandoah for Quincy, though the ice was very thick. She ran slow, and within twenty miles she came to where the river was choked with ice, and there she turned back and landed us at Hannibal [Hannibal] in Missouri. We stored away our plunder and next morning started and crossed the river and started for Quincy afoot. The ground was frozen very hard and it was very cold. We got about eleven miles and Sis gave out and I was tired of carrying [carrying] little Ann. So I left them and went on and hired horses and come after them and took them to Quincy . . . I now stay about thirty-five miles N.E. of Quincy in the N.E. corner of Adams County . . .<sup>11</sup>

Also tell Daniel Bruner to send me the name of my uncle and the name of the county he lives in in this state. Tell all my friends

<sup>8</sup> Clifton, Tennessee, in Wayne County.

<sup>9</sup> As mentioned a little later, Paralee also became ill.

<sup>10</sup> D. D. Bayless was married to A. J. Bruner's sister, Sarah. They turned south at Cairo, Illinois, and settled in Arkansas.

<sup>11</sup> Most of the remainder of the letter is about the farm in Illinois.

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A. J. Bruner

A. J. Bruner, and later little Ann, wrote several other vivid and descriptive letters back home to Greene County over the years. There was to be another tragedy, however. In 1865, Selina Haworth Bruner died, leaving four young sons and an infant daughter, as well as daughter Ann, now married and living back in Tennessee. When A. J. Bruner remarried some six years later, Ann went to Illinois, packed up all her small sister's belongings in a little trunk, and took her back to Tennessee to raise as her own child.