

Alexander Murphey (1770 – 1822)
[Alexander¹ Archibald² Alexander³]

Alexander Murphey, the eldest son of Archibald and Jane Debow Murphey, was born in 1770 in Orange [later Caswell] County, North Carolina.

W. H. Hoyt in his 1930 work on Archibald Debow Murphey stated that Alexander “was a tobacco planter, merchant and land speculator, acquiring land in Tennessee. He also inherited 1,100 additional acres in Tennessee. Alexander served as clerk of the Caswell County Superior Court from 1818 to 1822. Like his brother, Archibald Debow Murphey, Alexander invested heavily in western lands and was ruined when the market crashed and the courts found in favor of the settlers and against the land speculators.”

Archibald Murphey’s [Alexander’s father] will made no specific devise of land to his children, other than the land to the children of John Greene Murphey. Consequently, Alexander did not inherit 1,100 acres of land in Tennessee, unless he took the land as his one-seventh share in trust for his children.

Dr. Turner, in The Dreamer, identifies Alexander’s wife as Miss Debow, but records found since its publication have proven this to be untrue. However, in all fairness to Dr. Turner, genealogical records have become more easily accessible in the years since he conducted his research. Dr. Turner further describes Alexander’s life: “Like so many of the farmers of his day in that area, he lived beyond his means and bought property in the land boom that accompanied the discussions on Internal Improvement in the Legislature from 1815 onward. Two months before his death all of his property, except the Tennessee lands, was sold at auction to satisfy his creditors. The next year Archibald Debow Murphey was in Tennessee trying to sell Alexander’s lands there to pay the rest of his debts and to save something for the family.”

Alexander Murphey served in the War of 1812 and achieved the rank of Colonel in the State Militia in 1814. On 16 November 1819, he resigned his commission.

Alexander’s relationship to the Smiths of Granville County is first recorded in Granville County records on 22 May 1789 when John B. Smith of Prince Edward County, Virginia, appointed John Young of Granville County, North Carolina, attorney, to collect that due him. Witnesses were: Alexa. Murphy, Betsy Smith, and Mary Smith. Alexander was only 19 years old.

Eight years later, when he was 27, Alexander Murphey and Jane (Jenny) Smith were married in Granville County, North Carolina, on 28 March 1797. The marriage was witnessed by James Smith, the bride’s brother, and Maurice Smith, also the bride’s brother, acted as bondsman. Jenny, the daughter of Samuel Smith and Mary Webb, was born on 07 October 1768 and died on 17 June 1813 in Caswell County, North Carolina.

Granville and Caswell County deed records identify the children of Alexander and Jenny:

The will of Samuel Smith, Jr., dated 19 September 1800, was proved at the Granville County November Court 1800: “Samuel Smith, Jr. wills to wife, Mary Smith, six negroes for her lifetime and their increase, and she may dispose of them as she wish to my children and grandchildren and if fails to do so in her life, then they are to be divided to the children later; to son Samuel . . . to daughter, Jenny Murphy, three negroes and their increase and at her death, to her children . . . Exrs: my wife, Mary Smith, sons, James Webb Smith, William Smith and Maurice Smith . . . my grandson Smith Murphy is to have a mare colt . . . Wts: [Rev.] Henry and Milley Pattillo.”

Caswell County records the following: "Whereas Samuel Smith late of Granville County bequeathed to his daughter Jane Murphey wife of Alexander Murphey of Caswell County a Negro girl . . . and as Jane has departed this life leaving two children, Smith Murphey and Nancy intermarried with Thomas A. Thompson . . . dated 16 June 1821.

In their sixteen years of marriage, Alexander and Jenny had two surviving children:

- i. Dr. Thomas Smith Murphey *[see page 118]*.
- ii. Nancy A. Murphey *[see page 121]*.

Alexander, with his brother, Archibald Debow Murphey, speculated heavily in land, probably leveraging every asset available to him. On 14 April 1819, Alexander wrote to Archibald Debow:

Dear Brother,

I have just received a lengthy letter from Henry Rutherford, esq. And have enclosed you a Copy thereof Verbatim. I am unacquainted With many of the Holders of land therein named. I am Anxious to go [to] that Country as soon as possible but Would be glad to engage all the business possible before hand.

Should be glad to become a partner in a purchase of any of the lands which Rutherford recommends. Try and find Out whether Newman is living or what has become of his lands with all Others who he has mentioned. Procure for me all the business you can. Exchange the Minder lands *[near the town of Haywood]* and my Haywood Lots if you can for lands in that Country *[possibly near present day Memphis]*.

I am much confined by business in my office therefore have been unable to go to Fayetteville to see Branson. Mr. Bennett will start down immediately after Our Court, yet we are at a great loss for a form of a Bond—whether the bonds are signed in the face or endorsed on the back.

Business in Milton is quite Dull, no Sales of property can now be made. The Committee have Contracted with a Col. Bernard of Connecticut to Build the Bridge at 18,000 Dollars and will commence the Work next fall. It is expected that Bernard will Come on to the Roanoak Cannell this Summer as the Directors of the Navigation Company have made him propositions which it is expected will be Acceded to and he will undertake a considerable portion of that Work.

I am truly Anxious about my moneyed business having no Source from whence I can raise money only from the little which will Accrue from the Office. I know not how I can make the next instalment at Fayette. I have Urged Capt. Haralson to Sell my Haywood lots even at par rather than my Mind should be Harrowed in the Manner in which it is.

If We could form a Company and purchase the 55,000 of Newman or from those to whome it belongs I can git four or five thousand Dollars in advance from two Gentlemen to whome I have made communications in confidence.

Pray do what you can by contract and I Will carry the same into execution. All well and In great Hast. Write to me. Yours affectionately.

Alex Murphey

By the 1820's [and perhaps as early as 1818 when he became 21 years of age], Alexander's son, Smith [*Dr. Thomas Smith Murphey*] began investing in Western lands, which ultimately created a sizeable estate for his heirs. It is my opinion that the money could only have come from his father, perhaps an advance on his inheritance, since he was not named in his father's will. Following Archibald Murphey's death, it is also possible, that as one of the executors of his father's estate, Alexander Murphey made a distribution to his son. Unfortunately, accountings have not survived. This is relevant only in that Alexander Murphey died in bankruptcy, leaving little for three children by his second marriage, but having given his eldest son advantages not available to the others. Smith, Alexander's eldest son, however, encouraged his step-mother and half brothers to live near him in Mississippi, and no doubt helped them as much as possible.

Following the death of his first wife, Alexander Murphey married Jenny's cousin, Mary [Polly] Smith, daughter of William Smith, on 29 August 1815 in Caswell County. Polly was born 17 April 1785 and died on 05 September 1860 in Tallahatchie County, Mississippi. Alexander and Polly were married only seven years before his death.

Alexander and Polly had the following surviving children, as identified in Alexander's will.

- iii. Alexander Greene Murphey [*see page 124*].
- iv. Archibald Debow Murphey [*see page 128*].
- v. William Smith Murphey [*see page 130*].

Alexander Murphey's health began failing in 1821. His brother, Archibald Debow, wrote to Herndon Haralson on 05 August 1821:

. . . My Brother continues very low . . . He is reduced to a Shadow and must die, if his Disease be not soon checked. He is now on his way to the Sweet Springs. I do not believe if he should recover, he can go to Tennessee this fall

His illness continued. Shortly before his death, his brother, John Greene, made a visit to North Carolina, and hearing of Alexander's condition, visited his brother for the last time. Upon his return to Tennessee, on 24 March 1822, John Greene wrote to Herndon Haralson:

. . . Previous to this I had heard of the situation of Bro. Alexander's health, and on the next day went to see him. His features I recognized, but his flesh, complexion, and manners had left him. Instead of a fleshy man, a skeleton appeared. Instead of a rosey cheek, a corpse like face appeared and for a Joyfull and pleasing Temper, the most base and cross one filled their places. It would be impossible for me to describe to you the peavishness he possesses. Not one iota goes in and right _____. With him and eavery thing his friends thinks, for to desert his mind, he takes it to aggravate his passion.

His wife [poor Woman] was on the Verge of being Delivered of an Infant when I left that Country. What will be the consequence after her confinement I cannot say, But am afraid the family will not be as well situated as perhaps it was before her confinement, which I assume was not of the best -- but more of this when I see you

No record has been found to give additional information on the child Polly was carrying at the time of her husband's death. She left a will naming her sons, Alexander, Archibald, and William, as well as the daughter of Archibald, who had predeceased Polly. It is, therefore, assumed that if the child she was carrying at the time of John Greene's letter survived birth, the child did not survive to adulthood.

Alexander Murphey died on 12 April 1822 in Caswell County. His Last Will and Testament provided funds to "educate my three sons" and appoints his wife, his brother, Archibald Debow Murphey, and his son-in-law, Thomas Thompson of Tennessee, as executors.

Last Will and Testament of Alexander Murphey [portions illegible]
State of North Carolina }
County of Caswell }

I, Alexander Murphey, of Caswell County in North Carolina, do make, publish and declare this to be my last Will and Testament.

I devise all the lands, tenements and hereditaments of which I am seized or to which I have title in any way whatsoever, whether situate in North Carolina or in Tennessee, to Thomas A. Thompson and William L. Smith of Tennessee to hold the same to them and the survivors of them and the heirs and assigns forever of the survivors of them, upon the following trusts, that is to say, that they shall in the first place sell and convey so much of the said lands as shall be necessary to pay off the charges and incumbrances thereon, and particularly a debt of four thousand five hundred dollars due to Col. William Polk of Raleigh for and on account of the said lands, and such debts of the late John Rice, Dec'd. as are chargeable upon the said lands.

And upon the further trust that they shall divide the remainder of the said lands among the persons entitled to shares thereof and make thereunto such conveyances as may be necessary for vesting said shares in the persons entitled to the same. Or that they shall sell the remainder of the said lands for the best price that can be got from the same, and divide the money arising from said sales among the persons entitled to the shares aforesaid, in proportion equal to their said shares.

And upon the further trust that they will well and truly execute and carry into effect all the contracts and agreements into which I have entered touching and concerning the lands, of which John Rice ¹⁴ aforesaid late of Tennessee, died seized or possessed and in any entitled to, first coming to an account with the several persons claiming under such contracts and agreements, for the expenses, trouble, income [illegible] heretofore, and to [illegible] by them hereafter in endeavors to secure the said lands and to execute the contracts and agreements aforesaid and crediting my estate for such expenses, charges and fees.

And upon the further trust, that when the [illegible] affairs shall be settled and the share to which I am entitled shall be ascertained in the said lands, that they will sell so much of my said lands as necessary to educate my three sons, Alexander, William and Archibald.

And also pay to each of them the said Thomas A. Thompson and William L. Smith the sum of five hundred dollars.

And then upon the further trust that they will permit my wife, Polly, to occupy during her life the remainder of my said share, and at her death to convey the said [illegible] property to my three sons aforesaid, or to such two or one of them as may be then living.

I direct my debts to be paid out of the monies that are due to me, as out of the proceeds of the sale of certain lands in which I have an interest, conveyed by me to my brother Archibald D. Murphey, from the [illegible] of his hold, to pay debts. If the monies due to

¹⁴ 27 April 1820, Stephen Debow of Madison County, Alabama, sold to Alexander Murphy of Caswell County, North Carolina, all his interest in the estate of John Rice, deceased. On 25 July 1821 William and Martha Clifton of Madison County, Alabama, sold to Alexander Murphy of Caswell County, North Carolina, Martha's interest in the estate of John Rice, deceased. Deed abstracts do not identify where land is situated.

me cannot be collected in time to pay my debts, I direct the said Thomas A. Thompson and William L. Smith to sell part of my Western Lands for this purpose, and to make up the amount out of my personal estate when the monies due to me can be collected.

After my share of the monies arising from the sale of the lands conveyed to Archibald D. Murphey as aforesaid are applied to the payment of my debts, and the remainder of my debts paid out of my personal estate as aforesaid, I give and bequeath all the residue of my personal estate to my Wife Polly during her widowhood. If she marries she shall hold one-fourth part thereof to her own use. The other three fourths shall be equally divided among my three sons aforesaid or such of them as shall then be living. If she does not marry, the said remainder of my personal estate shall after my wife's death be equally divided among my said children or such of them as may be then living. In addition to the above, I give to my Wife [illegible] all my Beds and Furniture, and all my household furniture of any description.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 15th day of March A.D. 1822.

/s/Alex Murphey [seal]

Signed, Sealed, Published and Declared as the
Last Will of Alexander Murphey, before us,
who have attested the same in his presence.

James Graves [jurat]
Barzellai Graves
Aza Graves [jurat]

A Codicil to my Will

I appoint my wife, Polley alias Mary Murphey, Executrix and Archibald D. Murphey, my brother, and Thomas A. Thompson, my son in law, of Tennessee, Executors to this my last Will and Testament.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and affixed my seal this 18th day of March AD 1822. /s/Alex Murphey [seal]

Signed, Sealed & Published
in presence of us:
Jane Murphey
Jeremiah Rudd [jurat]
John M. Daniel

Following Alexander's death, his brother made arrangements to admit Alexander's will to probate.

Mr. Haralson -

Please request James Graves, Azah Graves and Barzillai Graves Jun. [the clergyman] to attend on Thursday of the County Court to prove Will. I got Mr. Lanery to offer the Will for probate. When the same is proved, make the entry on it, as I have above written it, that a minister of it's probate in the same records on your Minute Docket.

If you can see Jer. Rudd, request him to attend on Thursday to prove the Codicil, I will write for John Daniel to come up on that day to prove it also.

Yours,
/s/A.D. Murphey
1st May 1822

during her lifetime and in the event of her death, leaving no children, then the said Negroes to go to the children of my Son William S. Murphey in equal parts, the said children now being, viz: Mary Murphey, Narcissa Murphey, Francis Murphey and Alexander Murphey - the aforesaid negroes, viz: Carolina or Puss and her two children, Louisa and Henry, to be and remain in the possession of my Son Alexander G. Murphey, to be hired or used at his discretion for the benefit of my said Grand Daughter Mary Rebecca Debow Murphey until she shall have reached lawful age and without security being given upon his part.

Item Second: To my son William S. Murphey I give a certain negro woman named Betty and her two children, Lizzie and Minerva for his lifetime and at his death to go to his children but the aforesaid negroes to be and remain in the possession of my Son Alexander G. Murphey to be hired or used at his discretion and without security for the support of the said William S. Murphey and his children.

Item Third: To my son Alexander G. Murphey I give and bequeath all the balance of my property of whatever kind both real and personal and nominate and appoint my Son Alexander G. Murphey Executor of this my last will and testament and that no security of any kind shall be required of him.

Given under my hand and seal this 12th day of October A.D. 1858. /s/Mary Murphey [seal].

Witness: Alex Pattison; G.W. Bellamy

Filed in my office October 10th, 1859. /s/L.P. Smith, Ck.

The State of Mississippi]
Tallahatchie County]

In the Probate Court of said County at the October Term A.D. 1859. Whereof, in the matter of a certain instrument of writing purporting to be the last will and testament of Mary Smith Murphey, Deceased. Be it remembered that at a term of the Probate Court of the County of Tallahatchie in the State aforesaid ---- and held at the Court House in and for said County on the second Monday in October in the Year of our Lord One Thousand Eight hundred and fifty nine [1859] personally appeared in open Court George W. Bellamy, one of the subscribing witnesses to a certain instrument of writing purporting to be the last will and testament of Mary Smith Murphey, deceased, late of said County, who having first been duly sworn, deposed and said that the said Mary Smith Murphey signed, published and declared said instrument as her last will and testament on the 12 day of October A.D. 1858, the date of said instrument, in the presence of this deponent and Alexander Pattison the other subscribing witness to said instrument – that said Testatrix was then of sound and disposing mind and memory and twenty one years and upwards of age and that he said deponent and the said Alexander Pattison subscribed and attested said instrument as witnesses to the signatures and publication at the special instance and request and in the presence of said Testatrix and also in the presence of each other on the day and year aforesaid. /s/G.W. Bellamy.

Sworn to and subscribed in open court October 10, 1859 A.D. /s/L.P. Sutton, Clk.

Witnesses to her will were Alex Pattison, the husband of her stepson's daughter, and George Washington Bellamy, Mary's son-in-law. At the October 1859 Tallahatchie County, Mississippi Court, A. G. Murphey was granted letters testamentary on the estate of Mary Smith Murphey, deceased. Polly Murphey is buried in the family cemetery near Charleston, Mississippi, with her two sons, Alexander and Archibald. The place of her husband, Alexander Murphey's burial is unknown.