

Johnson City's Origin Linked with Science Hill Debating Society

Johnson City Chronicle, May 22, 1936

Personal recollections of men who took part in the formation of Johnson City as an incorporated place are found in some letters and diaries belonging to the collection of Mrs. W. J. Barton, Sr., and throw some interesting lights on the history of the town.

From the diaries which refer to the Science Hill Debating Society of 1869, it is learned that the building was then brand new, and the first record term of school at the old academy was in 1868,

A. H. Yeager, writing from Cleburne, Texas, in 1923, said: "Those boys (of the Debating Society) started the growth of the town after the Civil War. They organized churches and schools; moved and carried the new brick schoolhouse, and were the strongest influence in every good work. As a small boy, I used to play hide and seek in a cedar thicket where Henry Johnson built the house that started the town. A barefoot boy, I watched the masons make the brick and build the house. My father had the contract for grading that part of the railroad. I carried dinner to the hands who worked on the grade while the house was being built."

B. W. Akard, now living in Weatherford, Texas, and 93 years of age, says, in a note written in 1924: "I am indeed proud that I was a charter member of the old Brush Creek Church, and that I was one of the boys from the Science Hill Debating Society. I was appointed to select the lot, measure it off, cut the brush and briars; and then cut and haul cord wood and telephone poles in July and August to get money to pay W. H. Young for building the first little brick building on the lot where your magnificent school building now stands. That was the building and dedication of Science Hill Academy, the lot for which was given by Mrs. Tipton Jobe.

Dr. J. C. King, another member of the Society tells in his diary of coming to Johnson City from North Carolina and going to school at Science Hill in 1868 and 1869. He had learned the tinner's trade making canteens in North Carolina during the Civil War, and set up his tinshop here in 1868, but later turned it over to D. P. Rowe. Dr. King lived for a while with Rev. F. A. Farley, Methodist minister, in his house on Market Street; and later boarded at the home of Henry Johnson. He studied law, received license to practice, and again opened his tinshop in 1871 to make a living, running it for three years. He then studied dentistry, graduating in Baltimore in 1878.

“The town of Johnson City was incorporated about 1870,” he says. (The charter was dated December 1, 1869, according to legislative acts.) “It was surveyed by **P. P. C. Nelson**. It was surveyed in a circle with the center where the public fountain is on the public triangle, one mile (the legislative charter says one-half mile) from the center in every direction.”

Adam B. Bowman is authority for the statement that Dr. King was the person who influenced the naming of the city “Johnson City” in the early 1870s after it had for a time received its mail as the “Brush Creek Flats” from Blue Plum post office, on Sinking Creek, three miles from here; and had been called Haynesville for a time during the Civil War. King is also credited with successfully protesting against a movement during the railroad boom days of the 1890s to **change the town’s name to Carnegie**.

Members of the Debating Society were: J. M. Johnson, George H. Berry, G. W. Wright, D. Y. Cash, B. W. Akard, A. F. Hoss, A. B. Bowman, F. A. Farley, Will Robertson, J. C. King, T. H. Felts, Henry H. Carr, S. B. Debusk, W. P. Rankin, A. H. Yeager, and E. F. Akard.

As of 1936, B. W. Akard is the only member of the Debating Society known to be now living. He is also the oldest living alumnus of Science Hill Academy located on the site of the present high school building.

2006 Note: The location of the original Science Hill Academy is directly behind the Munsey Methodist Church Christian Life Center. Several members of the Debating Society including Carr, Hoss, and Johnson are buried in Oak Hill Cemetery.



Science Hill Debating Society – 1869
Henry H. Carr on far left