

Speech to Sewanee Trust for Historic Preservation
February 11, 2010

I can say with certainty that we would not be gathered here tonight but for a slave trader from Alexandria, Virginia and a merchant capitalist from New York City.

John Armfield had been the junior partner of Franklin and Armfield which was perhaps, at the height of its success from 1830 – 1836, the leading slave trading firm in the South. Isaac Franklin was from a prosperous Tennessee family. John Armfield was born of Quaker stock in North Carolina. He left home at the age 15 and became a stage coach driver in Virginia. He met Franklin about 1824 and followed him to Sumner County, Tennessee where he became Franklin's assistant and learned the skills of the slave trade, specifically the skills of transporting slaves along the Natchez Trace. In 1828 Franklin and Armfield began operations in Alexandria, Virginia where Armfield was responsible for the purchase of slaves and their transportation to Natchez, Mississippi where they were received by Franklin and sold. In 1831 Armfield married Franklin's niece, Martha Franklin of Sumner County. In 1836 Franklin and Armfield sold their Alexandria establishment. Franklin retired from the business and married Adelia Hayes, who after his death built Belmont Mansion in Nashville. She was then one of the world's richest women. Armfield remained in the slave business until Isaac Franklin's death, after which he retired.

John Armfield first visited Beersheba Springs on the plateau in 1850. It was then a going concern with a hotel owned and operated by Dr. H.R. Robards, a member of the medical college at Memphis, who had purchased the hotel from William (Buck) White and L.D.

Mercer of McMinnville who had acquired it from George R. Smart and his brother in law, Dr. Alfred Paine, both of McMinnville. In 1833 Smart and Paine had built a tavern and several log cabins as a summer resort after the large chalybeate spring had been discovered by Beersheba Cain for whom the place was named.

In December 1854 John Armfield concluded the purchase of 1,000 acres, the original tavern, dining hall, proprietor's room, a row of guest cabins, and Buck White's residence. He then closed the hotel for renovations. It did not reopen until June 1, 1857. In the meantime he also constructed 20 cottages. Armfield's plan was to lease lots on which he would build cottages with his own crew of workmen and materials using the design and specifications of the lessees.

The renovated hotel flourished three seasons under Armfield's ownership. In December 1859 he deeded it for \$44,000 to Beersheba Springs Company, a corporation incorporated by 14 men who had become intoxicated with the prospects of the resort. Some of them had also acquired cottages. Beersheba Springs Company operated the hotel for the 1860 season, after which Civil War halted operations.

Armfield championed further development of the plateau, then called Broad Mountain. He sought out Bishops James H. Otey, Bishop of Tennessee, and Leonidas Polk of Louisiana for the location of an Episcopal university in the South envisioned by them. He gave each of them cottages in Beersheba Springs. In February 1857 Bishop Otey assured Armfield that no site for the university had then been made and that he would oppose any selection until the Beersheba neighborhood could be investigated.

Samuel Franklin Tracy, four other capitalists, J. Bridges, John Daw, Nicholas Fesedder, and William Warne, seized an investment opportunity in coal offered by Nashville attorney and land speculator, William N. Bilbo, in 1852. They formed Sewanee Mining Company, that was capitalized at \$1,500,000 with \$400,000 paid in, and purchased 17,950 acres on the plateau and mineral and timber rights to an additional 3,780 acres. The company engaged an innovative civil engineer, A.E. Barney, who engineered and built a railroad with a grade of 2% or more for 8 miles between Cowan and what is now Sewanee with almost continuous reverse curves so that locomotive equipment could drag the same number of empty coal cars up the mountain as it could safely take loaded cars down the mountain. The line was said to be “in balance”. The road came to be known as the “Mountain Goat”. This spur up the mountain was the steepest in the world and according to Arthur Ben Chitty in his Forward to The Mountain Goat, “the marvel of rail builders everywhere”.

As the railroad was being engineered, the Sewanee Mining Company was developing mines at a place called Coal Bank, believed to be near present day St. Andrews – Midway. The railroad was completed to the mines by 1856 and the first shipments made. However, neither the quantity nor the quality of the coal at Coal Bank was satisfactory and the company extended the Mountain Goat Line to the site of the original discovery of coal at what became Tracy City. On November 8, 1858 the first shipment of coal was made from the Tracy City mine and the genesis for the industrialized “New South” laid. Civil War intervened but following the intervention the company was recapitalized and reorganized as Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company by Arthur St. Clair Colyar. He played a major role in the raising of Tracy City like a phoenix from the ashes of the Civil

War to an industrial giant of the late 19th century. Born June 23, 1818, in Washington County, he migrated to Middle Tennessee where he developed a law practice in Winchester that expanded to Nashville. He emerged as a political leader, opposing Tennessee's secession from the Union in 1861, but becoming a member of the Confederate Congress, serving until 1865. He was editor and publisher of Nashville American through which, following the Civil War, he advocated aggressive policies to attract population to Tennessee, particularly the Cumberland Plateau. In 1871 he organized Tennessee Immigration, Real Estate and Labor Association to promote immigration and settlement in the state. In this effort he was associated with John Moffat, the founder of Moffat (now Monteagle).

Under the leadership of Arthur St. Clair Colyar Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company learned how to convert the bituminous Sewanee seam coal to coke with sufficient heat intensity to smelt iron ore into steel. A blast furnace was developed at Cowan and in 1904 the company's operations moved to Birmingham, Alabama where it became the Tennessee (or southern) Division of United States Steel Corporation.

In June 1857, a party including Bishop Otey, Bishop Polk, John M. Bass, who owned a cottage at Beersheba Springs, and Vernon K. Stevenson, President of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad road on horseback from Beersheba Springs to the vicinity of Coal Bank. Samuel F. Tracy and the Sewanee Mining Company recognizing that Coal Bank was not satisfactory for the mining of coal was offering 5,000 acres of the land to provide a domain for the proposed Episcopal university. A group of Franklin County citizens were offering an additional 5,000 acres contiguous to the mining company land. In

addition, Samuel Tracy, on behalf of the mining company pledged over a ten year period 1,000,000 board feet of lumber, free transportation for building materials, and 20,000 tons of coal. John Armfield added his endorsement of the site by pledging \$25,000 a year during his life to the proposed university. The trustees of the university in organization selected what is now Sewanee for its site; thus, providing commune for us tonight.

The history of the plateau, its coves and valleys is interrelated with connecting pathways. The Grundy County Historical Society has purchased and is restoring the historic First National Bank of Tracy City building and related facilities and developing it as a Heritage Center to inspire all of the people and communities of the South Cumberland Plateau to understand who they are and how they are connected in history.

The facility will include a library and research center for family, cultural and historical research. This part of the facility will have sources and, proper equipment to access sources, for such research. It will have the capacity to access data bases of the Grundy County Register of Deeds and the Tennessee State Library and Archives. The Library and Research Center is nearing completion and will become open to the public around March 1.

The Heritage Center will also include an Exhibit Hall that will be organized with galleys that will be formed on the perimeter of a spacious central area. The galleys will be devoted to areas of history that grow out of the region that have affected national or international history. These include:

(1) the Chickamauga separation from the Cherokees and extension of the western theatre of the Revolutionary War by the Chickamauga to the pioneer settlements in Middle

Tennessee utilizing ancient trails across the plateau to reach their adversaries and the aftermath leading to and including the Trail of Tears;

(2) the origin of the “New South” industrialization mentioned before;

(3) the social experiment of the Republic of Switzerland to relieve itself from chronic economic depression by establishing colonies in the United States for willing citizens to immigrate. The Swiss Colony at Gruetli was such a colony. The banner on display depicts the story and is one of the ways we intend to develop historical stories at the Heritage Center;

(4) the extension of the Chautauqua Sunday School movement of the latter part of the 19th century to the South, at Monteagle, known as “The Chautauqua of the South”, and

(5) the labor and civil rights training activities at Highlander Folk School at Summerfield, acclaimed to be one of the seven most important sites in the civil rights movement.

Several University professors were involved with the school. Dr. Scott Bates remains a trustee of the school’s successor at New Market, Tennessee.

The Exhibit Hall is anticipated to become open to the public in June or July 2010.

The Heritage Center will further have an Assembly Hall. The Assembly Hall will be located in the former lobby of the original bank building, built in 1904. It is in the process of being restored to its original state with two alcove entrances, 14 foot high tin ceiling and large windows. The Assembly Hall will be equipped with audio video equipment and serve as meeting room for activities of the Heritage Center and its partners and also for the community. It is anticipated that this part of the Heritage Center will be open to the public in 2011.

Part of the mission of the Grundy County Historical Society is to give all of the organizations in the region whose primary interest is history and culture the opportunity to participate in the Heritage Center. We call these groups "Partner Organizations". Beersheba Springs Historical Society, Swiss Historical Society of Grundy County, Monteagle Sunday School Assembly and Chikamaka Cultural Organization are current partner organizations. We invite Sewanee Trust for Historic Preservation to participate with us in the Heritage Center project. We ask the partner organizations for modest contribution to the expense of operation of the Heritage Center and in turn will provide space for the partner's displays and or other services we have the capacity to provide.