

I Remember Old Tuscaloosa

By Fred Maxwell

IF YOU look on a U.S. Engineers' map or chart of the Black Warrior River at a spot about 10 miles down stream from Tuscaloosa you will notice a legend indicating the "wreck of the Ophelia" which lies below the surface. This river steamboat was owned by Messrs. Richardsons and operated between Mobile and Tuscaloosa. This boat hit a hidden snag in the river, burned to the water's edge and sank about March 28, 1838.

About five years ago two young Tuscaloosa boys—David Cochrane, Jr., and Jimmy Coleman, Jr.—were intrigued by the thought of great riches within the Ophelia's hulk. They outfitted themselves with scuba diving equipment and went on a treasure hunt. They located the wreck and went below only to find that the one and one-quarter century repose on the river bottom had resulted in the hulk being covered with mud, only bare timbers and the like showing.

The sinking of the Ophelia had a very large impact on the personal affairs and fortune of the Maxwell family.

On Oct. 15, 1836, Thomas Maxwell of Cockermonth, England, embarked on the good ship Harriet bound for Mobile from Liverpool. After 70 days en route he arrived in Mobile late on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 1836. Walking along the riverfront or docks he observed a sign "rooms" and went in and registered. To his dismay the "room" was of dormitory type with 28 beds. His roommates were a mixture of sailors of various nationalities. Practically all slept with either a gun or knife under their pillow. Thomas' first opinion of America was that it was a den of iniquity.

He soon got job as a clerk or steward on a river steamboat—the Ophelia—bound for Tuscaloosa, a name he had never heard of.

Arriving in Tuscaloosa late on Saturday night, it was a Sunday morning when he walked up river hill and was greeted by church bells of the Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic and Episcopal Churches, all ringing to summon their congregations to church. So great was the contrast with his first night in America on the river front that he made a vow to settle in Tuscaloosa.

Thomas was soon joined by his brother Robert (my grandfather) and together they worked on the Ophelia. The captain, John Richardson, allowed them to run a sort of store on the boat selling goods bought in Mobile (cigars, fruit, etc.) along the river front and returning with eggs, butter and the like to Mobile.

After about a year of river work they decided to go into business in Tuscaloosa and with a stock of goods purchased in Mobile they set off in the Ophelia to Tuscaloosa. The rest is history. Just about 10 miles from their destination the Ophelia struck a snag, caught fire and sank in about 15 minutes. Thomas, having sold some goods on the way up the river, put their entire money, about \$300, in a leather pouch and threw it on the river bank and then climbed to the forecastle and awaited rescue by a skiff. Next day they recovered the money bag.

The two brothers walked to town and with such limited resources opened for business in the basement of a store located on the corner where Kress now stands, advertising that they "sold goods lower than anyone else in

Later they acquired the property on the opposite corner (formerly Belk-Hudson and now Fred's) and called their operation the "Bee Hive" corner. They imported a great deal of merchandise from England and freight shipped coastwise to Mobile and thence up the river. They served a large area around Tuscaloosa, extending as far north as Huntsville, selling "everything needed from the cradle to the grave."

Two other brothers, John and Richard came from England and joined the business called "TJR and R Maxwell" for the Thomas, John, Robert and Richard. Later their parents moved to Tuscaloosa.

In addition to the loss of their opening stock of goods they lost about one year's wages that were tied up in the Ophelia.

So the "wreck of the Ophelia" means more to our family than just a mark on the present map of the Black Warrior River.
