

A HISTORY OF RAVENSWOOD

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By Preston Bain*



Thomas Wilson immigrated to America from Ireland in the mid 1700's and followed the migration trail down through Virginia and the Carolinas and finally over into Tennessee where he settled in the late 1700's. His grandson, James Hazard Wilson II, who built Ravenswood was born in 1800 and would be one of several children by James Hazard Wilson, Sr. and Ruth Davidson Wilson. James II grew up in Williamson County and chose to remain here and start a family while his brother, Samuel, moved west to Texas and became one of the first Secretaries of State after it's admission to the Union in 1845.

In March of 1821, James Hazard Wilson II married his cousin Emeline Wilson. Prominent Tennessee and Texas historical figure Sam Houston served as the best man at his wedding. James and Emeline would settle in Brentwood and build their home in 1825. The home was christened Ravenswood in honor of their friend Sam Houston whose Cherokee Indian name was "the Raven", most likely due to the jet black hair of his youth.

Sam Houston ran away from home when he turned 16 and went to live with the Cherokee Indians near the Hiwassee River. The tribal chief became a father figure to Sam and gave him the Cherokee name *Colonneh*, meaning "the Raven". Sam lived with the Cherokee for about 3 years before returning home to Maryville, TN and enlisting to fight in the War of 1812. It would be here where he would gain the attention of a military leader named

Andrew Jackson. Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson became good friends and, following in Jackson's footsteps, he would take an interest in politics, eventually becoming the only person in American history to serve as Governor of two different states – Tennessee and Texas.

It is speculated that the Wilson, Houston, and Crockett families all became familiar with each other and forged friendships during their migration from Ireland to Middle Tennessee. The Crockett Family also laid down roots in Brentwood around the turn of the 19th century with Andrew Crockett building a home in the area in 1786 and Samuel Crockett building Forge Seat in 1808. And, just in case you were wondering, yes, Davy Crockett was a young nephew of Andrew's.

James Hazard Wilson II and his wife purchased hundreds of acres of land around the Ravenswood home to establish their plantation. James II became a very prosperous businessman and landowner. He maintained large plantations in Tennessee, Louisiana, and Mississippi raising primarily cotton. With the opening of lands west of the Mississippi River, James II acquired a steamboat line along the Mississippi River. The steamboat route cut the time it took to get cultivated cotton from the plantations to the markets in New Orleans from months to merely days. By the mid 1800's he was one of the wealthiest individuals in the state.

Things were good at the Ravenswood Plantation but the years did not pass without their scars. James II and Emeline had nine children. Their son Samuel died of a heart attack in 1851 and less than a year later in 1852 his only daughter Emeline would pass away. In 1854 they lost another two sons, Jason and George Washington. In 1856 his son Walter who was deaf and mute from birth died from a gunshot wound when a shotgun that was leaning against a column on the front porch fell over and accidentally discharged. It is said that when family members found Emeline to tell her about the accident that her mother's intuition had already told her something had happened to her 14 year old son, Walter.

Wilson Pike, originally called the Harpeth Turnpike, was a toll road built by the Harpeth Turnpike Company around 1840. James Hazard Wilson II was the majority stakeholder in the Harpeth Turnpike Company. In the early 1850's, James Hazard Wilson and several other prosperous Middle Tennessee landowners raised enough capital to build the railroad that would pass through Brentwood giving the young city life. When the railroad came through, commerce and population growth began to come to Brentwood in the area of the current Town Center. The railroad that runs in front of Ravenswood today was not a part of the railroad at that time. The railroad line that crosses Concord Road near the Interstate and Brentwood Baptist

Church was the original line. The portion of the railroad that crosses in front of Ravenswood today was not constructed until sometime around 1914. When the Civil War broke out, James II spent over \$10,000 equipping a company of men from right here in Brentwood that would become part of the 20th Tennessee Regiment.

James II used a portion of his considerable wealth to build two stately mansions on the Ravenswood Plantation for two of his sons. When his oldest son Samuel married in 1845, James II built Oak Hall, also known as Century Oak. It was named such because it was built in a grove of large White Oak trees just to the North of Ravenswood along Wilson Pike. Originally the home had three stories but the third floor was destroyed by a tornado in 1920 and was not rebuilt. After Samuel died in 1851, his wife Lucy married one of Samuel's brothers, Frank Wilson, in 1853 and they continued to live in the home. The practice of marrying spouses' siblings after they passed away was very common in that day.

One of the most fascinating stories around Oak Hall happened during the Civil War. It was a common occurrence after the fall of Nashville in the spring of 1862 for Union Troops to forage in the area and confiscate livestock. Frank and Lucy had thoroughbred horses that they knew would surely be confiscated by Federal troops if found so on more than one occasion, they blindfolded the horses and led them up one flight of stairs and stored them in the second floor ballroom until the troops had passed. The hoof prints can still be seen on the grand staircase today.

In 1858, James II built another mansion across Wilson Pike to the East for his son James III upon his marriage to Virginia Zollicoffer. Virginia was the daughter of Felix Zollicoffer, A United States Congressman from Tennessee who had the unfortunate distinction of being the first Confederate General killed in the Western Theatre at the Battle of Mill Springs in Kentucky in January of 1862. This mansion was originally named Harpeth due to the spring that feeds the headwaters of the Little Harpeth River. Today, it is known as Inglehame. When Civil War broke out in the spring of 1861, James III left to join the Confederate army. The elder James' wife, Emeline has passed away in 1860 so when the younger James went off to war, Virginia moved over to live in the Ravenswood home. James III survived the war but could not survive the economic hardships brought on by Reconstruction. The elder James passed away in 1869 and in 1873, James III was forced to move to Nashville to find work and provide for his family. Inglehame passed from the Wilson family hands in 1877.

In 1961, Reese and Marcella Vivrette Smith Jr. purchased the historic home and 500 acres surrounding it, recreating a portion of the original plantation.

The home was lovingly restored over the years bringing it back to its former majesty. The history of the house was always in the forefront of any renovations or additions to the property. Mrs. Smith even prominently displayed a portrait of Emeline Wilson in the front parlor. Over the years the Reese family hosted many prominent businessmen and politicians on the state and national level to come enjoy the beauty of Ravenswood and its surroundings. Mr. and Mrs. Reese Smith, Jr. raised three sons at Ravenswood – Reese III, Steve, and Mark. After Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Jr. passed away, the home remained vacant for several years but was still well maintained and cared for by the sons.

In January of 2009, the Smith brothers approached the City of Brentwood to begin discussions about the potential of selling and preserving the property for future generations. For almost two years the City Commission and staff had discussions with the Smith family about the potential for a new park on the southern edge of the city. In November of 2010, the Commission voted to purchase 320 acres of land along with the historic Ravenswood home and out buildings and to establish the Marcella Vivrette Smith, Jr. Park in Mrs. Smith's honor. This would mark the single largest land purchase ever by the City of Brentwood. In addition, the City holds an option to purchase another 80 acres of land adjacent to the current 320 acres over the next three years. James Hazard Wilson II probably never imagined that what started out as a gift to Emeline in 1825 before Brentwood even existed would become a park for its citizens almost 200 years later.