

Whodunit: Did John Whitley kill the famous buck?

Guest Column



W. Wright Mitchell

Buckhead is a name known the world over. Associated with fine dining, shopping and affluence, Buckhead is synonymous with the finer things in life. But how did this sophisticated community get its rather pedestrian name?

I had always heard that Buckhead was named when one of its original settlers, Henry Irby, shot a buck and placed the head over the door to his tavern, which was located near the intersection of present-day Peachtree and Roswell roads. But as I read more about Buckhead history, I realized that there are actually three different stories regarding Buckhead's inception.

As a Buckhead native, the varying stories about my community's birth intrigued me. So armed with a pen and pad of paper, I went to the Atlanta History Center Kenan Archives to see if I could get to the bottom of the murky issue.

Starting with Volume I of Atlanta's historical bible, Atlanta and Environs, written by Franklin Garrett in 1954, I turned to the section on Buckhead. In his book, Garrett wrote that in early 1840, someone, possibly Irby, "shot a large buck at a bold spring just south of Paces Ferry Road and a few hundred feet west of Peachtree Road." Garrett further stated that the head was then mounted on a post at the spring "and the locality, including Irby's Tavern, came to be known, in something of a jocular vein, as Buckhead."

As support for these statements, Garrett cited two different sources. The first was a personal interview Garrett conducted with Henry Irby's granddaughter, Jane Donaldson, in 1930 and the second was an 1861 Georgia Supreme Court case.

I was particularly interested in the transcript of Ms. Donaldson's interview. But sadly, the Keenan archivists informed me that Garrett's papers, which he donated to the At-

lanta History Center after his death in 2000, are not catalogued. Looking for the interview, they told me, would be like "looking for a needle in a haystack."

I then pulled a copy of the Supreme Court case, which involved the manslaughter trial and conviction of Henry Irby's son, George, who killed a man named Norton on Dec. 25, 1856. On this particular Christmas Day, according to the case, "quite a crowd of persons were assembled at a place called Buckhead, in the county of Fulton." Apparently, having already opened their presents, the residents of Buckhead were amusing themselves by "drinking, shooting powder guns,

and shooting at chickens for sport." Norton, who was noted to be "a quarrelsome, violent man when drinking," accused Henry Irby of not paying his money into a communal "raffle." The accusation led to a fist fight, which George Irby, who was 14 at the time, settled decisively by shooting Norton in the head.

Despite the interesting facts of the case, it failed to shed any light on how Buckhead got its name. But it did establish that the area was commonly known as Buckhead as early as 1861. The earliest official reference to Buckhead appears in an Act of the Georgia Legislature dated Dec. 22, 1840, which designated the "house of Henry Irby, at the place known as Buckhead" as an election district. Prior to being called Buckhead, the area was known as Irbyville.

After exhausting Garrett's leads, I asked the archivists to pull the Buckhead Subject File, which consists of several folders of documents pertaining to Buckhead history. Mostly, the subject file contains newspaper clippings, journal articles, unpublished manuscripts and other items of community interest.

The subject file yielded a few newspaper articles that reference the story of Buckhead's creation. The first, an Oct. 19, 1948 Atlanta Journal article, contained an interesting quote from the previously mentioned Ms. Donaldson. In response to what she believed was erroneous information previously reported by the paper, Ms. Donaldson wrote that

her grandfather "did have a tavern but the buck's head was not attached to the tavern. It was nailed on a tree about two blocks down Pace's Ferry Rd. at a big spring."

Another Atlanta Journal article from March 14, 1967 stated "In 1840, a North Carolinian, John Whitley, killed a buck nearby, skinned and dressed and left the head nailed to a tree. It soon crowned the doorway of Irby's Tavern which was then promptly called 'Buck Head.'" This story appeared again in Susan Barnard's 1996 book, Buckhead: A Place for All Time, but the shooter's name was spelled Whitley.

Yet another article from the Northside News claimed that an Indian killed the buck and mounted its head to a tree at a spring. The article cited "old Buckhead residents" as the source of the story.

All three stories shared some significant similarities and differences. Each story agreed that the buck's head was originally posted at the spring and not at Henry Irby's Tavern. But the stories all attributed the killing of the buck to a different person. So a different person. So who was the most likely shooter, I wondered. Was it Henry Irby, an Indian or the mysterious John Whit(e)y?

On Dec. 18, 1838, Henry Irby bought Land Lot No. 99 consisting of 202 1/2 acres from Daniel Johnson for a mere \$650. So Irby would certainly have been living in the area about the time the buck was killed. But the fact that Irby's own granddaughter did not attribute the killing of the buck to him is telling. With regard to the Indian, the Treaty of Indian Springs on Jan. 8, 1821 basically phased out the presence of Indians in Buckhead. Therefore, it seems highly unlikely that an Indian fired the fatal shot. So that leaves us with John Whitley.

The census records for Buckhead in 1830 and 1840 show that a John Whitley lived in Militia District 722, which is the area where Irby's Tavern would have been located. By 1840, however, Whitley disappears from Buckhead and reappears in the Census Records for Wilkes County, N.C. Could this be the North Carolinian, John Whit(e)y referred to in the 1948 Atlanta Journal article and Ms. Barnard's book? We will likely never know for sure unless additional evidence comes to light. But it is certainly an intriguing possibility and the only one supported by primary source documents.

While the mystery of Buckhead's origins will no doubt persist, at least we may be one step closer to unraveling the mystery of how Buckhead earned its distinctive name. And from now on, every time I drive past the "bold spring" off Pace's Ferry Road, which has been choked to a trickle by development, I think of the dense woods that once covered the area and of the solitary buck's head that gave rise to the world famous community that I am proud to call home.

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