

From The Daily Times, Chattanooga, TN, October 13, 1923

CHARLES W. VINSON DIES AT AGE OF 93

One of the Oldest Residents of Hamilton County

Voted for Gen. Winfield Scott for President
in 1852 - Circuit Court Clerk for Years

Charles Washington Vinson, 93, one of the oldest residents of Hamilton County, died last night at 9:50, at his home, 507 Vine Street. Mr. Vinson was born Jan. 31, 1830, and would have been 94 his last birthday. His mind was clear up until yesterday morning and he had only been sick since last Saturday.

Although blind as the result of a limb broken some years ago, Mr. Vinson had one of his grandchildren read the daily papers to him and he kept up with current events. He was a baseball fan and kept up with the sport news.

He is survived by a son, F. A. Vinson, a daughter, Mrs. Jessie V. Durand, and grandchildren, H. T., C. E. and W. B. Vinson, and Mrs. Fred Peay, Mrs. A. R. McNabb and Mrs. H. W. Durand.

Mr. Vinson, born on Pond creek, near old Philadelphia, Tenn., came with his father to Dallas in 1835, and from that date his story of his life experience begins. Dallas, fifteen miles up the Tennessee River from Chattanooga, was the first county seat of Hamilton, at a period when the word "Chattanooga" was unknown to all but the red men who roamed the trackless forests in this section. Mr. Vinson often witnessed gatherings of Indian clans at Dallas. One peculiarity about the Indians, especially noted by him was the fact that when the Indian women, who often visited Dallas and just as often became intoxicated from overuse of firewater, would parade up and down the streets of the village, one squaw would remain sober, and it devolved upon her to look after her dusky sisters while on a rampage. Mr. Vinson was fond of telling that the squaws would become hilarious and "rip and snort" to the amusement of

the populace. They always possessed plenty of money, and thoroughly enjoyed these visits to the paleface village. He recalled a dance given at the Dallas hotel, which was attended by Indian princesses, the daughters of the famous chieftain, John Ross. They were brought to Dallas from Chattanooga (then Ross' Landing) in the chief's boat, and danced until the wee small hours before voyaging to their down-river home. Mr. Vinson was in Dallas when the Indians were removed to the nation west of the Mississippi.

Later, Mr. Vinson moved to Harrison, Tenn., or rather, where Harrison later was built, for, as he laughingly remarked to a Times reporter, who interviewed him in 1916, he was there before the town arrived. When the county seat was moved to Harrison there was no courthouse, and the first circuit court was held in a log stable. Chancery court was organized at Harrison, Chancellor Williams presiding, and William Standifer being elected clerk and master. Mr. Vinson visited Chattanooga when the town was known as Ross' Landing, coming in from Harrison over the county road, which was located about where Sixth Street now is. He says all that territory north of Sixth Street and west of Walnut was a dense forest of blackjacks, and that he had often hitched his horse in this timber. At this time Harrison was the best town in the county, and its population was greater than that of the then embryo Chattanooga. At that early date the city was a cotton-shipping center, the fleecy staple being brought here from Georgia and shipped away on steamboats. Mr. Vinson witnessed the grading of the Western & Atlantic railroad, and was here before the Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis railway was built. Among the substantial business firms were Hooke & McClure and Moore & Marsh. Mr. Hooke being City Engineer Robert Hooke's uncle and Mr. McCallie, the father of the late Rev. T. H. McCallie.

Mr. Vinson was justly proud of his record as clerk of Hamilton County's circuit court. His reputation as an efficient and painstaking official has come down to this day and generation, and in past years he was often called into service by the late Henry C. Beck, lamented president of the Title Guaranty and Trust company. It is related as an

example of his ability that during reconstruction days that he unraveled the tangled skein of accounts of a careless army quartermaster in a manner to call for the economies of the bluff old chief quartermaster, Col. Porter. It is told that the late Judge Summerfield Key took occasion, in open court, to pay Mr. Vinson a 'striking compliment, saying that the latter was the best record clerk he ever saw, and that he (Judge Key) had rather trust Vinson than himself. Altogether, Mr. Vinson served thirty years in the circuit clerk's office as deputy and chief, his incumbency beginning in 1853 and ending 1883. He was a deputy under Richard Henderson, father of the late Daniel C. Henderson, during the term beginning in 1846, and in 1860 was elected clerk, succeeding George Arnett. His deputy was J. P. McMillan, who had likewise been a deputy under Arnett and Clerk James Clift, the father of the late Col. Joe Clift. At no time during his incumbency did Mr. Vinson receive more than \$100 a month, and his comparison of the amount of work done by him and the cost of conducting the office then and now was not the least complimentary to the present system. He did all the work of the office alone --- kept all records and made all entries. Mr. Vinson, in criticizing present methods, some years ago, said it was past his understanding how cost bills piled up, as the same fees were allowed since the organization of the court as now. He related an incidence of John Ervin's incumbency of the circuit court clerk's office (Ervin was a negro) as an example of latter-day proneness to large fee bills. Visiting the office on one occasion, he noticed a bill of cost in a case amounting to \$15, and out of curiosity ran over the different items to see how the total was obtained. He found among other things costs for subpoenas and depositions which had never been served or taken, and when he called attention of the deputy of the office to the matter, the latter acknowledged that the cost bill had been somewhat overdrawn and reduced the whole bill to \$2. Mr. Vinson said he asked the clerk if he didn't draw on his imagination for costs. Mr. Vinson said he did more work alone than all the force now in the circuit court clerk's office could do.

Mr. Vinson always became animated when relating what befell in the day of battle, when Chattanooga was the particular prize sought,

captured and held by opposing forces. His tenure of office was only interrupted for a few days while he was a prisoner in the old armory building. His sympathies being with the Union cause, the Confederates, fearing he would transmit valuable information to the enemy, kept him locked up for fifteen days. At the time the Confederates were preparing for a raid in Kentucky. He was released three days after Bragg had crossed the Tennessee river and went to his home at Harrison. Many other suspected Union sympathizers were in the guardhouse at the same time. Mr. Vincent laughed heartily while relating the abuse he received at the hands of a Confederate deserter while he was in the guardhouse, saying that "one could smell brimstone," the way the "rebel" cursed.

Mr. Vinson's two brothers were in the Union army, one of them a trooper in Stokes' cavalry. After the battle of Missionary ridge one of his brothers was mustered out, and, coming to Chattanooga, was employed by Charles W. Vinson in a store he was then interested in on Market street. One day a couple of negroes came into the store and stole \$10 or \$20 from the cash drawer. Vinson's brother followed the robbers, and discovering one of them lying on the counter in Crutchfield, King & Co.'s wholesale house, evidently attempting another robbery, shot and killed the negro. At the time Chattanooga was in the control of negro troops, under Col. Gau and Vinson was arrested and put in jail. About the same time the safe of Capt. Remington, who had his quarters on Walnut street, was robbed of \$22,500 and a man named Smith, suspected of the theft, was arrested and placed in jail with Vinson. Smith confessed to Vinson and divulged the hiding place of the stolen currency, in a government warehouse hidden under coal. Charles Vinson recovered this money, and, on returning same to Capt. Remington, was given \$1000 as a reward.

Meantime, Mr. Vinson's brother was in jail, charged with killing the negro, and, while offers to storm the jail and forcibly release him been made by friends, Charles Vinson busied himself in a diplomatic way to secure the prisoner's release. He made several trips to Knoxville to interest "Parson" Brownlow in the case, the latter telegraphing to President Johnson to interfere. While being tried by court-martial, orders

came from Gen. Thomas, who was then at Nashville, having just defeated Gen. Hood at Franklin's bloody field, indefinitely postponing the trial of Vinson. Later Charles Vincent bribed a negro guard to allow his brother to escape. Charles Vinson was haled before the provost marshal, and when informed the cause of his arrest, replied: "You have caught the right man. I did all I could to assist my brother. I bribed your negro guard, and if I had not succeeded in this way, would have tried other methods. The officer exonerated Mr. Vincent and his captivity only lasted about ten minutes, when he was paroled. The negro guard was cashiered.