

A History of the Ambler Family The Search

"I wish we knew more about Ambler's history," stated the principal. That is all it took to get me interested. Ambler school has been in our community since the late 1800's (I thought), yet we know little about its history or its founder. If someone does not intervene, our history could be lost.

An important aspect of history is to make connections. Students need to know their past and to see the value of knowledge gained from their elders, thereby creating a bond between the older and younger members of the community. I planned to do the research about the school and the Ambler family myself. Students would scan pictures and collect oral histories from their acquaintances.

Any history begins with a search of known sources. I started by studying local newspaper clippings, history books about the area, state genealogical records, and court records. These are listed in detail under "Sources." Some discrepancies in the information were noted which is not surprising considering the fact that an extensive biography of James Ambler or the school has never been attempted. Some of the information recorded in the books could be hearsay.

The search itself has been interesting. Not having grown up in this area or attended Pickens County schools myself, all of the information I've located has been new to me. This detachment sometimes worked to my advantage and sometimes worked against it. I think I have been more objective, but information that seemed to be common knowledge was new to me. The search has become, in fact, more of an obsession.

In the summer of 2003 I began searching in the South Carolina history room in the Easley Library. My search was uninformed and unfocused. Not knowing anything about the Amblers, I didn't know where to look for information about them. I found the book about the Pickens County schools, James Ambler's will, and the information about a court case. There was a picture of Ambler school from the *Pickens Sentinel* in their "Schools" file. It accompanied an article about the writing of the book about Pickens County schools. I wrote down the names of the people who worked on the book, most notably, Anne Sherriff.

I tried contacting her by email, but didn't connect. Then I wrote her a letter. Finally, this fall I received a reply by email and she invited me to come talk with her. We met at the Faith Clayton Research Room in the library at Southern Wesleyan University. At our meeting she shared her notebooks with me. (She has written school histories for other schools in Pickens County.) She briefly showed me some of the resources located there. I told her that I wondered if James Ambler had been a slaveholder. She showed me the slave census books and we looked him up. She also showed me what company he served in during the Civil War.

It just so happened that my son, Michael, was taking trumpet lessons from a professor at the college, so in the following weeks I spent my "waiting time" searching the shelves of the Faith Clayton Research Room. This is what really

got me going! Some days I found nothing—or maybe one or two facts. Other days I copied many records. I didn't take the time to understand them; I just collected them. Later at home, I reviewed the records to see what they meant.

While there, I found a book of old articles from the *Pickens Sentinel*. Since the Amblers were prominent citizens, I found their names in many articles. It took me three visits to retype all of them.



One item that continued to elude me was a picture of James H. Ambler. I found it by chance in an obscure book, which contained a collection of newsletters published by the Old Pendleton District Genealogical Society. It seems to have come from a newspaper article, but did not contain the date or name of the paper. It was not a good quality photo, but I was thrilled to find it! As far as I can determine, it is the only known picture of him.

My research raised several questions. I wanted to know what he did in the Civil War and how he rose to the rank of Major. (He was known as Major Ambler.) I wondered if the Ambler houses were still standing. I knew he was buried in the Hagood cemetery, so I wanted to find it as well. One of his sons was listed as Marcellus August in some records and as Angus Marcellus in others. I wanted to know which was correct. I found directions to the Hagood cemetery on the Internet.

One day when Michael's lesson was cancelled, we decided to search for the cemetery and the house. The directions to the cemetery were vague at best. We found a cemetery near Cold Springs Baptist Church, but it didn't seem to have any Amblers and few Hagoods. We decided to search for the house.

My husband's aunt told me she believed the house was in the Midway community, so we drove slowly up Midway road looking for a large, old house that could have served as a guest house since several sources stated that it was used for that purpose. As we passed Midway Baptist Church we saw a large, old white house on top of the hill.



We boldly drove up to it and saw a man working around the foundation. I decided to talk to him.

I told him about our project and that I was trying to find the old Ambler house. I asked him if he knew when this house was built. He said they weren't sure, but there was a rock in the yard with the year "1878" carved into it. I asked if he knew who built the house. His reply is etched in my memory. He said, "Amblers."



His name was Russell Rigdon. His wife, Barbara, lived in the house as a girl. They were visiting her father, Haskell Cox, and Russell was repairing some damage to the house. We continued to talk and I asked for permission to take pictures. He gave us all the information I have on the house and I think we also told him some things he didn't know. He also told us that the other Ambler house was across from Fred Findley's house in a stand of pines. Most importantly, he told me where the Findley house was located. He wasn't sure whether or not the Ambler house was still standing, but said you used to be able to see it from the road. We rode that direction, but didn't see the other house.

The next Saturday I stopped by the Midway grocery to ask directions to the elusive Hagood graveyard. The girl working didn't know, but called her grandmother on the phone. Grandma remembered and gave me another set of directions. To make a long story short, I drove that first two or three miles of Midway Road at least 30 times on four different days and never found the graveyard. Six different people gave me directions. It's not that I can't follow directions or that people can't give good directions. It's just not a place that's easy to find!

Finally, I asked an acquaintance whose son had maintained the graveyard one summer to give me directions. He hadn't been there in awhile, so was not real sure of the directions. (I didn't find it then either!) BUT, he knew where it was, so he visited it again the next Sunday and finally gave my husband directions I could follow. Michael and I went the following Monday. We found it!



The funny thing is, everyone's directions had been pretty good! I'd been up every road and driveway in the area except the correct one! Later my other two sons, Patrick and Richard, accompanied me back to the graveyard to copy the inscriptions.



One more search to go! After school one afternoon, Michael and I parked in front of Fred Findley's house and climbed the fence across the road. We found the old house quickly and fought our way through briars to reach it.



When we got there, we found that if we'd just come in from the other direction the path was clear. You can see the old house from the road if you know where to look for it. There are still daffodils growing in the yard.



After we took pictures of the old Ambler house, we went to photograph the slave graveyard that Mr. Lewis Brown told me about when he came in to give me an interview. His property is behind Haskell Cox's and was probably part of the old Ambler property. The graves, marked only by stones, were right where he said they'd be.



Some of my questions about the Ambler family are still unanswered. Did James Ambler (father of James Hagood Ambler) come here from Virginia? Did he come from Scotland originally? He married Susan Hagood when he was around 50 years old. Was he a wild, young man with many adventures before he settled down? Why did he move his family to the Pickens area? Did he receive a land grant when the Cherokee were removed? His children "married well" and he seems to have had money. Was he also a farmer like his son? Was he an educated man? Did he educate his children or have a subscription school in his home?

Another exciting thing about the project has been finding people to share their stories. The articles Barbara Clark put in the newspaper yielded a few results. Lewis Brown and John Stone emailed me and both came in for interviews. After hearing Mr. Stone talk about his principal, Mr. Hamilton, I got a call from the man himself. He came for an interview the next week. In the meantime, Mrs. Ross called to say that she wanted to be sure we knew about

her teacher. (I didn't.) Since she is now homebound, I visited her in her home. She attended in 1928 and recognized many of the McJunkins in the earliest picture we have of the school. Unfortunately, she was not in any of the pictures.

Those pictures are another story! I did not know where to find pictures of the old school. We had one picture in the conference room at school, but it was different from the one I had seen in the old newspaper article. Where had they found that picture? I tried calling the paper, but did not get in touch with them. Evonne Elrod had given the Pickens County School History Committee some information, but no one I talked to knew her.

One week in my fifth grade Quest class, Taylor Wise came in with some pictures that his grandmother had sent for us to scan. They were pictures of the old schools! Taylor said that she might have more, too. I asked for her name and phone number so I could contact her. Her name was Evonne Elrod! When I called her she promised to keep looking for more pictures and negatives. Now I'm on the trail of some old photo albums that were once kept at Ambler. Who knows where, or if, I'll find them?

When I took a research course at Furman a couple of years ago, I apparently caught "research fever." One question I had for my professor then was, "How do I stop?" Now my question is, "How can I stop?" The Ambler History Project is just beginning. We have only scratched the surface of the information that is "out there" about our school, and many other stories need to be told.