

## **Amis House: A Treasured Hawkins County Landmark**

by Rodney Ferrell

On a snowy December morning in 2008 as I drove down Burem road I saw smoke coming from the chimney of the familiar landmark and it was as if the old house had come alive again. For over 200 years the Amis House has watched history come and go. High on a hill above Big Creek it has overlooked the Amis Community since the 1700's. As a matter of fact it is one of the oldest stone structures in Hawkins County and certainly one of the most interesting. First time visitors to the Amis house may not unlock all its secrets but they are sure to be swept up in its spell.

Many years ago Thomas Amis (pronounced "Aim ee") and his wife Alice Gale made their sojourn west and into land that would later become Hawkins County. A legend in his own time, Amis was a captain in the American Revolution, a member of the Society of the Cincinnati, a prosperous businessman and later he became a member of the North Carolina Legislator. He was known to be a man of quick temper and was accustomed to getting his own way. But despite his flaws he was a very respected and accomplished military leader.

On land that was granted to him for his service in the Continental Army, Amis built his home on Big Creek about a mile and a half from the Holston River near the sinking spring. The original house was built of native stone and constructed by renowned Pennsylvania stone mason Thomas Harlan. The early structure was designed as a fortress and the entire complex was surrounded by a log palisade to protect it against Indian raids. The stone walls of the house are 18 inches thick and the oak doors are of double thickness. There were also three enclosed staircases and gun slots in the walls. Years later Miss Anne Amis would claim that there were Indians buried in the field near the house, fallen warriors from an early raid. She also said Thomas Amis had intended for his slaves to dig an escape tunnel to use during the sporadic Indian raids but she didn't know if those plans ever materialized.



*The Thomas Amis house in 1919.*

The Amis complex included an Inn, cattle barns, hay barns, a smokehouse, a blacksmith shop, a distillery, a grist mill, slave quarters, and a trading post. The house also served as a tavern and a way station for early travelers and the Amis family entertained many notables of the day including Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury during his 1790 frontier tour. The bishop called Amis a "poor sinner" because he made whiskey and kept slaves. Amis complained that the bishop prayed too loud at night and that it disturbed the other guests. He came very close to making him sleep in the barn.

Other visiting dignitaries of the day included the Captain's good friend John Sevier, Dr. Thomas Walker, the French Botanist Andre Michaux, Daniel Boone, Andrew Jackson and the top military leaders of the day.

Amis and his first wife Alice had eleven children after her death he remarried Lucy Haynes and that union produced four more children. One of his daughters Mary would eventually elope with a clerk in the Amis store, a young Irishman by the name of Joseph Rogers. The very idea of his daughter marrying the "hired man" infuriated the Captain. Family tradition states that during the early days of the marriage, Amis sent word for Joseph to come to the Amis plantation right away. When the young man didn't show up the Captain saddled his horse and rode down to the Rogers Tavern. When Joseph came out Captain Amis struck him across the face with a riding crop and told him "When I send for you again you had better come" The relationship between the two was strained for many years to say the least.

Thomas Amis died in 1798 and was buried near the Amis house. In the 1800's the structure was remolded and a story and a half was added. The kitchen and dining room were connected to the main house and a saddle room was added. Today the Amis house remains essentially as it was after these additions.

Miss Anne Amis was one of the last direct descendants of Thomas Amis to occupy the home. She loved to regale visitors with stories of the Amis family, Indians, the Revolution, and the Civil War.



*Miss Anne Amis one of the last direct descendants to live in Amis house.*

During Miss Anne's time the house contained many of the original family heirlooms and antiques. After her death the house was occupied by relatives from time to time but for the most part it stood empty and vulnerable to robbers and adventure seekers. Although there were often caretakers the house pretty much took care of itself. Preservationists wondered if the Amis house would follow the path of many of Tennessee's lost landmarks. But thankfully the house was destined to stay in the Amis family.

In 2008 Jacob and Wendy Jacobs purchased the property and they have long term plans to take the house back to 1783, when it was an Inn. Wendy is the fifth great grandchild of Thomas and Alice Gayle Amis and it is her intention to open the house for tours so a new generation can enjoy it. I think old Captain Amis would be proud.