A Name for Faulkner's City

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When William Faulkner introduced his fictional world in *Sartoris* in 1929, he named his county after the Chickasaw Indians and the county seat, ostensibly at least, for President Thomas Jefferson. Yoknapatawpha means "water flowing slow through the flatlands," he explained later, "which to me was a pleasant image."[1] Jefferson was an obvious choice for any early nineteenth century town, though it was probably chosen because of the facts of Mississippi geography, where the names of Washington and Jackson, other presidents popular in the South, had already been recorded as both towns and counties.[2] Twenty years later, however, in what is an obvious afterthought, Faulkner explained that the choice of Jefferson was a very involved matter and that the town was not named for the President after all but for a nondescript mail rider on the Natchez Trace.

It is a queer story, with just the sort of fillip that Faulkner likes to give to the seemingly obvious. In the early 1830's, the town was only an outpost of the Republic, free of governmental surveillance and control, until in the loss of a piece of government property, a 15-pound lock to the United States Mail bag, the settlers were suddenly brought face to face with Federal power. In working their way out of this situation, they named the town.

The lock had been brought by horseback from Carolina by old Alec Holston and donated for use on the government mail bag, which arrived from Nashville every two weeks. When it disappeared, Ratcliffe, the storekeeper, wanted to put it on the books of the

[1] *Faulkner at Nagano*, ed. Robert A. Jelliffee (Tokyo, 1956), p. 82.

[2] The first two counties in Mississippi Territory, Adams and Pickering, were organized in 1799. In 1802, Pickering was changed to Jefferson in honor of the President. In the late nineteenth century, Jefferson also appeared as a "post-hamlet" in Carroll County, nine miles north of Carrollton, the county seat. In 1900 it had a population of 25, and has since disappeared. *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Madison, Wis., 1907), I, 960, 965.

Bureau of Indian Affairs and forget it. But the mail rider, Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew, "frail and childsized, impermeable as diamond and manifest with portent," says, "Uncle Alec hasn't lost any lock. That was Uncle Sam."[3] Then he reminds them of an Act of Congress: for unauthorized removal of government property, 30 days to 20 years in a Federal jail. He hangs about the settlement while the men huddle, and finally Peabody comes up with the solution. Pettigrew is too honest to accept money, but, "childless and bachelor, incorrigibly kinless and tieless," he is still vulnerable. They will name the place for him. He was grooming his horse when Peabody told him. "At first he didn't seem to breathe." Then raising the brush he turned back to the horse, but instead of making the stroke, he laid the hand and the brush against the horse's flank and stood for a second, "his face turned away and his head bent a little."

> "You could call that lock 'axle grease' on that Indian account," he said.
> "Fifty dollars' worth of axle grease?" Peabody said.
> "To grease the wagons for Oklahoma," Pettigrew said.
> "So we could" Peabody said. "Only her name's Jefferson now. We cant ever forget that any more now."[4]

There is a solemnity in Peabody's announcement, as though he is aware of an historic moment, but the naming of the town is generally a shabby business that does honor to no one, least of all Thomas Jefferson. Pettigrew is a menace until they find a way to buy him off. His mother named him for Mr. Jefferson, he says, so that he would have "some of his luck." "Have you had it?" Peabody asks, but apologizes when he notes the irony of his question. The incident, narrated more than 20 years after Faulkner named his town, seems to be a retraction of whatever honor he intended Thomas Jefferson in the first place.

That honor, it might be assumed, was due to Faulkner's devotion to the Jeffersonian ideal of the yeoman society and distrust of the city and the manufacturing class. "Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God," Jefferson said. "The mobs of great cities add just so much to the support of pure government, as sores do to the strength of the human body."[5] The agrarian ideal

[3] William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York, 1951), p. 23.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

[5] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, 1955), pp. 164–165.

inspires the best of Faulkner's work. The Snopeses are the apostates, who have turned from honest labor with the soil to cunning and manipulation. His good people, both aristocrats and poor whites, are close to the earth. Yoknapatawpha County, like the South of Faulkner's time, is primarily a country of small freeholders, who tend their patches of corn and cotton and sorghum cane and mind their own affairs and ask nothing of the outside world. In part four of *Sartoris*, he celebrates the yeoman farmer in old Anse McCallum, who walked back from Virginia after the Civil War, built a log house, raised a family of six sons, four of whom he named for Confederate heroes. The McCallums are the tall men of the frontier, proud and self-reliant and free from the involvements of modern society.

Jefferson's association with the theory of states' rights must also have appealed to Faulkner, though Jefferson's commitment is by no means as clear as his Southern adherents have tried to make it. His Kentucky Resolutions in 1798 were cited as justification for South Carolina's Act of Nullification in 1832, as well as for secession in 1860. In the inaugural address at Montgomery, the Confederate President related the Southern position to that of the 13 colonies in their revolt against Great Britain and declared that the South had merely asserted the rights which Jefferson had defined as "inalienable." Jefferson's theory had borne strange fruit, for at the same time that Davis and the South were eulogizing him, the President of the United States was also claiming him as the defender of freedom and the father of American democracy. Merrill D. Peterson has pointed out in his recent study that Jefferson's fate was to be claimed by everybody and that his apotheosis was reached in 1943 in his bicentennial year with the dedication of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington. He had become in the words of President Roosevelt the "Apostle of Freedom" and, along with Lincoln, a symbol of the American ideal.[6]

The Jefferson image reflects an ambivalence which is not consonant with Faulkner's strictly partisan nature. In temperament, two men could hardly have been more different. Jefferson was the child of revolution; there was little reverence in his nature. The King had turned his back on him at St. James Court, and the

[6] Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), pp. 377–379.

President (who received the British ambassador in dressing gown and yarn stockings) would try in every instance to eradicate British prescriptive influence in American institutions. In his own state, he had led the fight to abolish entails and establish religious freedom by disestablishing the Church of England. He sponsored the break with the British coinage system and tried to extend the decimal system equally to weights and measures. He opposed the use of titles, even "Mister" and "Esquire," and refused to celebrate the president's birthday or to allow an inaugural parade, since it was only a weak imitation of coronation proceedings. The president was to live in a house, not a palace, and if Jefferson had had his way the presidential image would not be impressed on the coinage.

Faulkner was no innovator. His attitude is English rather than French; Burke, not Paine, inspires his thought. Like Walter Scott, he exults in the heroic ideal and is concerned about what he calls the "old verities of the heart" – love, honor, pity, pride, compassion, and sacrifice – and the diminishing part they play in a society committed to the idea of progress. Like Scott, he reveres his ancestors. "Who is the knight with the black plume?" cried General Beauregard in the thick of the fight at First Manassas. The knight was Col. William C. Falkner of the Second Mississippi, the great-grandfather of the novelist, whose career during and after the war reads like a Waverly romance.[7] "Remembering courage never hurt anyone," Faulkner said, and particularly those who are not brave.[8] Among Jefferson's faults of character says James Schouler, was "a knack of shunning danger." Good humor, no less than integrity was a valued quality of mind since it helped to avoid trouble.[9] In a Chesterfieldian letter to his grandson, Jefferson stresses the importance of "never entering into dispute or argument with another. I never saw an instance of one of two disputants convincing the other by argument. I have seen men, on their getting warm, becoming rude, and shooting one another."[10] During the Benedict Arnold invasion of Virginia in 1781, Governor Jefferson was ac-

[7] Alexander L. Bondurant, "William C. Falkner, Novelist," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, III (1900), 117–118.

[8] William Faulkner, *The Town* (New York, 1957), p. 144.

[9] James Schouler, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1919), p. 244.

[10] *Letters and Addresses of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. William B. Parker and Jonas Viles (New York, 1905), pp. 183–187. (Letter dated November 24, 1808.)

cused by his political rivals of pusillanimous conduct when he fled from his capital before a force of less than a thousand men.

The naming of Faulkner's city reflects the great popularity of Jefferson among the map makers of the nineteenth century and to a lesser extent a certain affinity Faulkner always felt for the yeoman ideal. But the Pettigrew incident suggests a mature Faulkner's reservations. The two men were antipathetic by nature, but more significantly Jefferson was being patronized in Washington by an administration that had initiated a vast cultural revolution, of which Faulkner was bitterly critical. In the late Roosevelt years, Faulkner began to express his dissatisfaction with the New Deal, usually in speeches or interviews with the press, but sometimes in his fiction. The curious account of the naming of Jefferson seems to be a part of this reaction. In 1941, he published "The Tall Men," a story about a new generation of the McCallums, whom he had introduced in *Sartoris*. The McCallum boys ignore the draft call because they prefer to fight for their country in their own way and on their own time, like their grandfather in the Civil War. Their father has refused to participate in the acreage control program, and their barn is stocked with cotton they are unable to sell. When the county agent comes out to measure their crops, McCallum tells him, "You're welcome to look at what we are doing. But don't draw it down on your map." Finally they turn to raising whiteface cattle, still spurning government aid. "We're much obliged, but we don't need no help."[11]

Faulkner was concerned about the effect of a paternalistic government on the moral fiber of the country. The "old tough fathers" would have scorned charity, which we "have made respectable and even elevated to a national system." The danger in the world today, he said to an Oxford high school graduating class in 1951, is the forces who are trying to rob man of his individuality by trying to "reduce him to an unthinking mass by fear and bribery – giving him free food which he has not earned, easy and valueless money which he has not worked for."[12] He is "tricked into not realizing the pressures to belong to a mass, a group which wants to do his thinking for him, give him his ideas. The young man must

[11] *Collected Stories of William Faulkner* (New York, 1950), pp. 55–57.

[12] *Essays, Speeches & Public Letters by William Faulkner*, ed. James B. Meriwether (New York, 1965), p. 123.

struggle against the mass."[13] In an interview at Virginia in 1958, he said that if he should ever become a preacher, he would preach against man "relinquishing into groups, any group. I'm against belonging to anything."[14]

Though the naming of his city after Thomas Jefferson seems inevitable in the light of Mississippi geography, the choice reflects no personal bias towards the third president. Faulkner left Mississippi to live at the university "founded by Mr. Jefferson," but the reverence he paid Virginia in the last years of his life was directed to a Virginia more immediately associated with a sectional ideal than Jefferson would allow. Even in "our wilderness," he says, meaning Mississippi and the other states of the western South, "the old Virginia blood still runs and the old Virginia names – Byrd and Lee and Carter – still endure," so that Virginia is a living place to a Southern child "long before he ever heard (or cares) about New York, or, for that matter, America."[15]

In an essay in 1932, A. Wigfall Green suggested that Faulkner's town was named for Jefferson Davis (born during Jefferson's administration and named from him).[16] The subsequent development of the Yoknapatawpha story rules out this suggestion, since Davis was still unknown nationally in the 1830's when the town was founded. However, the idea is intriguing. According to Faulkner's own account, his great-grandfather, Col. Falkner, accompanied Jefferson Davis to the Mexican War, "as a friend."[17] Faulkner always expressed a sentimental attachment to Southern nationalism, of which Davis was the symbol; and this association with the only president of the Confederate States and Mississippi's most distinguished son lends a special aptness to the name of Jefferson. At any rate, Faulkner adopted it in 1929 without stating a reason and

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[13] *Time*, June 3, 1957.

[14] *Faulkner in the University*, eds. Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner (Charlottesville, 1959), p. 269. See also pp. 100–101. For other attacks on paternalism in big government, see "Address to the Delta Council," Cleveland, Mississippi, May 15, 1952, *Essays, Speeches, and Public Letters*, pp. 126–134; and *The Mansion* (New York, 1959), pp. 285, 287, 333–334, 350–351.

[15] *Faulkner in the University*, p. 212.

[16] A. Wigfall Green, "William Faulkner at Home," *Sewanee Review*, XL (July-Sept., 1932), 294.

[17] *Faulkner at West Point*, eds. Joseph L. Fant, III, and Robert Ashley (New York, 1964), p. 108.

probably without much thought concerning it, and his later explanation of how the town was named indicates a development rather than a radical change in his thinking.

His story about Thomas Jefferson Pettigrew is above all a celebration of early American character. It is a tribute to "the Anglo-Saxon, the pioneer, the tall man . . . innocent and gullible, without bowels for avarice or compassion or forethought either," but strong and reliant, asking no favor of any man.[18] The settlers of Jefferson paid for the lost lock, 15 dollars to old Alec Holston, and spurned the idea of charging it to the government, even after Pettigrew, who *was* the United States Government to them, showed how it could be disguised as axle grease on the books, "as though the United States had said, 'Please accept a gift of fifteen dollars.'"[19]

According to Faulkner, man has become the victim of social forces. He has lost his identity and with it his moral responsibility. For a mess of pottage, he has surrendered his independence to the politicians who would reduce him to "one obedient mass for their own aggrandisement and power." The settlers of Jefferson were not so easily managed. They named their town through necessity. not for a president, but for a trivial mail rider on the Natchez Trace, expressing thereby, not a lack of patriotic devotion, but a sublime indifference to any regulatory power that seeks to inhibit the individual. Their relationship to Washington was that of free men to free men, "of respect without servility, allegiance without abasement." They had helped to found a government, which they accepted with pride, but "still as free men, still free to withdraw from it at any moment when the two of them found themselves no longer compatible." As Faulkner's own countrymen were turning more and more to Washington for easy security, he would remind them of the independence and self-reliance of their fathers and of a government which "remembered to let men live free, not under it, but beside it."[20]

[18] *Requiem for a Nun*, p. 102.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 12.