ROBERTA'S BOYS

FOUR PITTS BROTHERS OF MACON, GA

Ann B Carlson

for

The Pitts Family Trust

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for Ray

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Nat Pitts for entrusting me with completing his father's final project, and for sharing his vast store of documents, photos, and tapes from the "Pitts Family Archive." Nat is the carrier of his father's vision for this history, and has given me extensive encouragement, support and guidance. Nat and his siblings—Frances, Ray Jr., and Kathy—all spent generously of their time with me, recounting family stories and memories, as did their cousin Mitra, nephew (Kathy's son) Kelvin, and Robert's wife Mattalyn. I thoroughly enjoyed getting to know this special family and feel privileged to count them as friends.

I am grateful to Ethleen Brooks and Barbara Dortch, Pitts relatives and avid genealogists, who shared with me their research on the family's more distant relations. I had many enjoyable discussions with other Pitts relatives and friends, as well as with several Macon, Georgia, residents who gave me valuable insights into the era during which the Pitts family made that city their home. The staff of Macon's 1842 Inn, where I stayed during my research trips, also deserve special mention for their warm welcome and helpfulness.

During the too-many-months I spent on this project my partner, Jan, has been patient, supportive, and my most enthusiastic cheerleader. Our cats, Amí and Sophia, were also enthusiastically helpful: habitually lying on the keyboard or sitting directly in front of the screen to enhance my writing experience. They made long hours in front of the keyboard probably less productive, but significantly more entertaining.

Finally and most of all, I feel deep gratitude to the men and women about whom I have written. Their lives are an inspiration to me. I hope what I have written will allow them to continue to inspire future generations.

A Note on Style and Sources

This book contains a considerable amount of material that is quoted directly from family documents, memoirs, letters, and taped interviews. To visually assist the reader in navigating the frequent switches between my writing and direct quotations, I have adopted the convention of indenting and italicizing all but the shortest bits of quoted texts. Where external sources are known and available, even if only in the institutional archives of the men's personal papers, the reference is given in a footnote. If there is no reference, the source is a private document, clipping, or audio file from Ray's extensive family collection.

In attempting to preserve the authentic voices of the Pitts family members and friends, the quotations have not been edited, even to conform with today's standards of terminology, usage or style—except, very occasionally, to correct spelling or add essential punctuation.

 Poems quoted, except on the dedication page, are works of Raymond, Robert, or Willis Pitts, Jr. and have not, to my knowledge or unless indicated, been published elsewhere. The Dunkerley (Oxenham) poem, opposite the table of contents, was a favorite of Ray's and is in the public domain.

The Ways

by William Arthur Dunkerley
(John Oxenham)

To every man there openeth

A Way, and Ways, and a Way,

And the High Soul climbs the High Way,

And the Low Soul gropes the Low,

And in between, on the misty flats,

The rest drift to and fro.

But to every man there openeth

A High Way, and a Low.

And every man decideth

The Way his soul shall go.

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Prologue

On a hot August day in 1988, nearly one hundred Pitts family members and friends met at Browns Grove Cemetery, Browns Crossing, Georgia. They were there to participate in a major family reunion: to enjoy the fellowship of close family, to reacquaint with family seldom seen, to meet new family members, and to jointly dedicate a new headstone to the memory of their common ancestor, David Peter Pitts.

Raymond Jackson (Ray) Pitts, President of the *Pitts Family Association of Central Georgia*, *Inc.*, addressed the crowd. He swept his arm to emphasize the vista of Baldwin County's bountiful woodlands, fields, lakes and streams. Then he indicated the humble, white-clapboard church their ancestor helped to build in the first years after the Civil War:

> *This is Hallowed Land. This is the land of our ancestors, and it is our land. It is Pitts land. This is where they were born. This is where they lived happy lives, and lives with some sorrows. This is where they worked, and where some of them slaved. This is where many of them lie.*

During the program, the youngest members of the clan were addressed by one of David's great-granddaughters—now a grandmother herself—and instructed to...

> *Look at me; and stand up straight and tall. Hold your chest out! Because you are part of me, and I am part of the past.*

It was Ray's dream to leave a tangible legacy of this shared past: in honor of his mother who instilled this family passion, and for the benefit of his own children and grandchildren. He wrote:

> *I have promised to [my children and grandchildren] that I will give to them, and to posterity, a history of the Family from which they came. This is a 'labor of love' for me. I travel everywhere to get the information that is needed for a complete and Authentic history of the People who were my ancestors.*

Most of all he wanted to leave them his own story, and the story of his three

brothers—the lessons learned, the wisdom gained, and the successes they all achieved in those difficult and often forgotten years between the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Era.

They were David Peter Pitts' great-grandsons—through his first son Emanuel and Emanuel's fourth son, Willis Norman. Channeling the strength of their Pitts heritage, and the equal love, support and persistence of their indomitable mother—Roberta Jackson Pitts—these four brothers became prominent national leaders in education and government service: Dr. Willis Norman Pitts Jr. (1907-1988), Robert Bedford Pitts (1909-1982), Dr. Raymond Jackson Pitts (1911-2004), and Dr. Nathan Alvin Pitts (1913-1998).

Before he died, Ray managed to document most of the family's historical background and, in addition to his own, collected the memorabilia and professional papers of his three brothers. With his characteristic confidence, optimism and boundless energy, he expected and planned to live, at minimum, until he reached his one hundredth birthday. He had tasked himself with sufficient retirement projects to fill all of that time. Assuring himself that he would complete them all, he saved this most cherished family history for what he intended to be his last—his ultimate—contribution. Unfortunately for us, time caught up with him early: at age 93.

This book is not the book he would have written; yet, perhaps, the story he wanted to tell of this incredible family will survive in my retelling.

A Brief Pitts Family History

Peyton Taylor Pitts Sr. was a prominent and wealthy landowner in Jones County, Georgia. At various times he served as a member of the legislature, judge of the county's Inferior Court, delegate to the Secession Convention, and captain of the Civil War's Jones County Volunteers. He was fond of sports, guns and dogs, and was said to be a pillar of the Church. According to Carolyn White Williams' *History of Jones County Georgia:*[1]

> *He had a large two story white house with a long veranda across the front. In the rear he had a pigeon house and many pigeons, which he fed early in the mornings from a basket full of grain. His place was a village within itself as he had the slaves' quarters, wagonshops, cotton gin and grain houses and cribs for corn. Every house was painted white and situated in a large oak grove, a typical plantation of that time. ... Peyton Pitts built a nice Methodist church at the Crossroads and it was called "Pitts Chapel." He was the main supporter of this church and he also built the Negroes a church and helped support this.*

After the civil war Pitts lost most of his wealth, sold the plantation, and lived in a small house nearby until his death in 1885. Many of his numerous descendants, both black and white, still live in Jones County, Georgia, or the vicinity. Others—"Roberta's boys" among them—left Georgia at the earliest opportunity, joining the general migration to points north and west.

But the events that concern this history began much earlier, when Jones and Baldwin Counties were in their ascendancy. This central Georgia land had been acquired from the Creek Indians in 1803, distributed to its new owners by land lottery, and immediately turned to the profitable cultivation of cotton. The Pitts family was involved almost from the beginning. The family's progenitor, Walter Pitts (1700–1770), had begun his career as a carpenter in North Carolina, but built his fortune in land and slaves, investing heavily in North Carolina and in Virginia. By the time of his death he was a noted gentleman-farmer with a large family, resident in Halifax County, North Carolina. Sometime before 1808, according to Pitts family records, one of Walter's youngest sons, John Pitts (1767–

1 Carolyn White Williams (1957). *History of Jones County, GA*. J. W. Burke Company, Macon, GA. p. 419.

1818), moved his family and many slaves to Baldwin County, Georgia. He, like his father, recognized the economic potential of the plantation and, taking advantage of the westward expansion of land availability, established himself there as a local planter. The war of 1812 had brought, at first, a large increase to the population of this area. Then the opening of other Indian lands further to the west caused the population to shrink by one third over the next decade, as the flood of would-be settlers continued west. But the John Pitts family remained, to become permanently ingrained in the fabric of central Georgia.

By 1820, thanks to the cotton boom, Baldwin County was prosperous and its city of Milledgeville, the state's capital, was becoming increasingly powerful and refined. Its neighbor, Jones County, was the most populous county in Georgia, with 43.5 people per square mile (9,821 whites; 6,886 slaves).[2] Two of John's sons became plantation owners in Jones County. The 1830 Federal Census shows that the younger son Peyton Pitts, at only eighteen years of age, was already the owner of his own plantation; it was not far from the larger plantation of his elder brother, Captain John (Jack) Pitts. These Pitts plantations were situated only five miles from the county seat of Clinton, and fifteen miles equidistant from the sedate capital of Milledgeville and the upstart village of Macon, in Bibb County.

Peyton was recently married to Ann Marie Moore, the younger sister of his brother Jack's wife, and she was expecting their first child. Head of his own household, he was already well on the way to a high standard of antebellum wealth and prominence. Although still a teenager, he owned fifteen slaves. His brother Jack owned twenty-two. Peyton's slaves, as listed in that 1830 Census, included only one female between the ages of ten and twenty-three. That slave girl was known to the Census as only a number—sex, age, and race—but she is remembered by her descendants as "Hess." She was also destined to soon have a child: Peyton's child.[3]

Peyton's wife Ann Marie gave birth in December 1830 to a little girl, naming her Mary. Perhaps Ann Marie was unable to resume her "wifely duties" quickly enough to please her husband, or perhaps he, along with so many of his compatriots, was already accustomed to taking mistresses from among the family's slaves. Whatever the case, the following November Hess gave birth to David Peter, who was in all likelihood Peyton's firstborn son. The descendants from this child, born "on the other side of the blanket," rival the recognized Pitts heirs both in number and in contributions to their community and their country.

Today the surname name of Pitts is ubiquitous across Georgia's Jones, Bald-

2 William H. Bragg (August 15, 2013) *Jones County*. New Georgia Encyclopedia. www.georgiaencyclopedia.org, (All references in this chapter to the web-based New Georgia Encyclopedia were verified April 24, 2015).

3 There is another tradition, supported by his death certificate, that David was born in 1823 and his father was John (Jack) Pitts. However, census details and most family records do not support this alternative history.

win, and Bibb Counties. The brothers each had several children by their legal wives, and each owned dozens of slaves and likely fathered several more. Nearly all the slaves of the family took the surname of Pitts after emancipation, including those to whom it belonged, whether acknowledged or not, as a genetic birthright. David Peter Pitts was one of these.

Pitts' descendants on both sides of the family tree had large, interconnected families that stayed on the land, or migrated to nearby Macon or Atlanta after the Civil War. David himself had 18–20 children with two successive wives, and through them, almost innumerable descendants. His descendants remain a close family group.[4]

David Peter Pitts

The early details of David Peter Pitts' life are illumined only by family legends or by his occasional mention in legal documents, church records and family archives. His grandson Willis Sr. recorded that he grew up with five brothers and one sister: children of Hess.[5] Some of their given names appear in wills; marriage, death, and tax records; and in census documents of that time period. However, multiple uses of the same name in extended families was common, which complicates the process of using these documents to understand family relationships or the circumstances of their lives. David, additionally, had at least two younger half-brothers—Alexander Pitts and John Wesley Pitts—said to be fathered by Peyton through Carrie, another of his slaves.

Born a slave in a land where cotton was king, David was only too familiar with the hard labor of the fields. To quote another descendant of cotton plantation slaves, "If you talk to elderly blacks today who have worked in the cotton fields, a negative response is always given, such as 'I don't ever want to see another cotton field as long as I live.'"[6] But as an acknowledged son of his master, he may have had a somewhat more privileged position than his fellows. Writing with the characteristic "rose colored" memories of a Southern white woman of her era, Ms. Williams wrote about life on just such a prosperous Macon plantation.[7] She states that it was customary for each son in the owner's family ...

> *to have given to him an older negro boy to go with him everywhere, to protect him from harm or wait upon him, when necessary. The negro boy taught him woodcraft, how to fish, to make and set traps for turkeys and quail, to find bird nests and identify the eggs. Although they were comrades the dif-*

4 And still hold biennial family reunions.

5 According to Willis Sr., they were Emanuel Pitts, Isaac Pitts, Peter Pitts, Balam Pitts, Asburn Pitts, and Rhonda Pitts Cook.

6 Jeanne C. Herring (2000). *Macon, Georgia* (Black America Series). Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, SC.

7 Carolyn White Williams (1957). *History of Jones County*. p. 67-68.

ference in social status was not lost sight of by either. The negro boy enjoyed a standing among his fellows by reason of his position, in which he took great satisfaction. He came into the big house on rainy days and cold days and there he learned many things of the white folks that helped him, their stories, songs and lore.

David might have played some version of this role for a younger son of one of Peyton's legal wives.[8] Clever and ambitious, perhaps he learned far more from this arrangement than "stories, songs, and lore."

David and his half brother John Wesley were, again according to family stories, fairly light-skinned "mulattoes" (half black – half white)[9] and were sent away by Peyton as young men to be educated. They would have been unusually accomplished for slaves of the day.[10] In fact, some of the family believe that David had already been granted his freedom before the Civil War (but no documents supporting his early manumission can be found). Peyton was, however, known to have several skilled black carpenters and artisans working for him who were also hired out in the village as artisans.[11] Such work would go to those with privilege, training, or unusual capability. These skills and an education would have greatly enhanced their social standing after the war. And indeed, David and John Wesley did fare rather better than most freed blacks. They were ultimately able to adopt and maintain the dress and manners of typical, middle-class southern gentlemen.

David married fellow slave Lucretia Woolfolk. Their first son Emanuel was born in 1850.[12] David and Lucretia had at least six additional children[13] before she died, somewhere around 1862—possibly at the birth of her youngest daughter Leah. He was married a second time to Martha Gray Allen, and had an additional 11–13 children with her.[14] There is a family legend that some of David's children by Lucretia had been sold away from the family before the end of the war (John Nelson, in particular, to Alabama), and that after the war David scoured the countryside to bring them all home. Their belief is that he was

8 He was married three times, successively, to Anne Marie Moore, Rebecca Moore, and Mary Buford Hill.

9 Light skin generally conferred a higher status.

10 Although educating slaves was discouraged and often forbidden, literacy was highly desired and sought out by slaves. By 1860, perhaps five percent of slaves had obtained some level of literacy. [Eugene Genovese (1976). *Roll, Jordan, Roll.* Vintage Books, New York.]

11 Carolyn White Williams (1957). *History of Jones County.* p 419.

12 The existence of an elder sister, Mary, is possible. A "Mary" is noted (age 25) in the 1870 Census as a member of the household, but may not have been David's biological child. She could possibly have been Lucretia's or Martha's from an earlier relationship, or could even have been Martha herself, as the accuracy of information in those old census records is notoriously poor.

13 Hester, John Nelson, David Jr., Carrie, Henrietta, Leah.

14 Asbury (Jace), Fannie, Marietta, Osborn (Andrew? Also possibly also called Abraham), Joseph B., Lucrecia (Lucy, Cressie), Samuel, William (may be the same person as Samuel), Florine (Corine), Oliver, Mattie, and Ruben Thomas.