

New Facts about an Old Pioneer Family

by Jim Morriss

If anyone were to ever give an award for the person, or persons, who had the greatest effect on our area of south Denton County, I think that Elisha and Mary Chinn should definitely be on the short list of possible recipients. But few people who live here have heard of them and even those who are aware of the Chinn's know little about them. That really is a shame because all of us who live here, and especially our kids who are being raised here, should know a lot more about the early settlers who made our communities possible. Fortunately, several old documents have recently been found that provide some new information about this family of pioneer Texans.

Prior to the Texas Revolution (1836) this area, called the "Cross Timbers," really was a vacuum; pretty much devoid of people. Various Native American groups may have camped and hunted here from time to time, but there were no villages or permanent camp sites here. The citizens of Houston, Austin and East Texas wanted armed settlers to live here and stop, or at least slow down, the raids that were being made by dangerous tribes such as the Comanche. The early Texas government gave away thousands of square miles of land to individuals who agreed to recruit farmers to settle in north central Texas. These real estate developers were called "empresarios," and one of them was named William S. Peters. All of what is now Denton County was once a small part of Peters' Colony. Despite the advertising blitz and other inducements offered by Mr. Peters and his backers, few settlers moved into South Denton County prior to 1850.

Elisha Chinn was born in 1802 to a family that had been living in America for at least 150 years. Mary Stowe was born in North Carolina in 1808. Elisha and Mary met sometime around or before 1830. They married and the two began raising a family in western North Carolina. Newly found census records show that Mary Chinn had given birth to at least eight children by her fortieth birthday. In 1850, when the Peters Colony was seeking potential settlers to live in Denton County, the Chinn family was well established in Surry County, North Carolina. There were four girls and four boys in the family: Elizabeth (b:1832) Rachel (b:1834) Nancy (b:1836) Jesse (b:1844) John (b:1845) James

(b:1846) Mary (b:1848) and William (b:1848.) It is possible, and even likely, that more children were born and died prior to 1850 because this was a time when infant mortality was common.

There is no way to know all the reasons the Chinn's decided to move to Texas but the fact that they did migrate here can not be questioned. We know that they came here in 1853 but new evidence shows that Elisha moved his family to Collin County first. The magnet of free land was quite strong and by the mid-1850's, colonizers were beginning to show up in Denton County. However, settlers were not coming here nearly fast enough to satisfy the grandiose promises that had been made by the Peters' Colony. Apparently Elisha Chinn was not content to apply for a free land grant and accept whatever property he was given. He came and spent time looking for the kind of land that would make a good farmstead. He located a spot between Denton Creek and Hickory Creek that had been a meeting site for the few people who lived in and knew this area. This was a place where trees were abundant and clearing enough land to plant a crop would be a lot of work. Just a few miles to the west there was abundant acreage, available for free, but Chinn wanted a good reliable water source. It seems that Mr. Chinn had a much better understanding of Texas than you might expect of a new arrival from "back east." What we now know is that on July 14, 1854, Elisha Chinn paid \$320 cash for a 320 acre parcel of land. Chinn bought the land from a man named R.H. Barksdale who had been one of the principle administrators of the Peters Colony. This was land that had been held back by Barksdale and his associates. Title to this half square mile had been granted to Barksdale specifically by the Governor of the State of Texas.

When the Chinn family moved onto their newly acquired land, it must have attracted a lot of attention in the area. There were several reasons for the settlers of south Denton County to take note of this family:

1. Any new family was considered a possible source of information from the civilized world.
2. The fact that Chinn could pay hard currency for prized land meant that he was a man of some affluence.

3. This family was staking a claim to one of the best watering holes for miles around.
4. In the Chinn family were three young, healthy, single girls of marriageable age. Many of the new arrivals to Texas were single young men who would have taken notice of this family.

Elisha and Mary were probably considered a bit old to start a new life by many of their new neighbors. Elisha would have been 51 and Mary 45 when they made the journey to Texas. They both knew that they would never be able to go back. What they were able to bring with them is not known, but it could not have been more than the barest necessities. The youngest family members were only five. The older children would have been able to help on the trip and in building a new home. There were ten in the family and they may have brought along some slaves. Elisha Chinn did own slaves in 1850 when he lived in North Carolina but none were listed with him in the 1860 Texas census.

As soon as they could the Chinn's would have built a suitable shelter and started clearing land for the spring planting. Much of this may have been done by Elisha and some of the older children before the rest of the family moved in from McKinney. This was a time when curious neighbors in the area would have gladly come over to get to know the new family and help if they could. There was also the fact that residents had been getting water from the springs that were on the Chinn's property. They would certainly want to know if the new owner would allow them to continue the practice. Apparently Elisha and Mary not only let others use their water source, they also encouraged their fellow citizens to use their campsite as a meeting place especially for the irregular religious services that had become a local custom.

In those days very strong bonds of friendship would develop among neighbors. This would be especially true in a place as remote from civilization as Denton County. Pioneer ladies quickly established very close and strong links of camaraderie. As visits from circuit riding preachers became more frequent, four of the women, gave birth to a plan to build a meeting house where more normal church services could be held. Elisha and Mary endorsed the idea and enthusiastically donated the site on which a cabin could be built. It has been often said that Mary Chinn asked each family to bring one log with

them every time a church service was held. Sometime in 1858, a special day was set and settlers from the area came to convert the pile of fifty or so logs into a sturdy cabin. Old-timers from the area said that the construction was completed in a day and a half. There was no doubt a big celebration as soon as the work was done. Early Texas families had a hard life, but they knew how to party when it was appropriate.

Over the course of the next 20 years the population of the area and the, congregation of the little church, grew. The general prosperity of south Denton County also improved. The little cabin became more than a church. It was used as a community meeting site and also as a one-room schoolhouse. People started to call the church "Chinn's Chapel." By the mid 1870's a larger building was needed and once again the community came together and built a larger structure but the new church was still called, "Chinn's Chapel." The cabin remained in use as a school. When deaths occurred in the community, grieving families asked Elisha for permission to bury loved ones close to the little church. It is very possible that some burials were made even before the cabin was built, but the first grave (that we know of) was for a two-year old girl named Mary Sublett, who died in 1859.

As the community became more established, Elisha and Mary Chinn remained two of its most respected members. Their hard work and the advancement of the frontier made their lives much easier but their advancing age made it difficult to continue farming. Sometime in the mid 1860's one of the sons, James Chinn died. We can not be sure if he remained in the area or if he might have gone off to fight in the Civil War but he died before 1870. In 1866 William, the youngest son died and was buried close to the chapel. Five years later Elisha's wife, Mary died and was buried next to her son. In 1874 another of the sons, John, died and was also buried beside his mother. Then in the early months of 1876, Elisha died and joined his wife and sons. These are the members of the Chinn family that we know are buried in Chinn's Chapel Cemetery.

The remaining five Chinn children moved from the family home site after the death of their father. Rachel married a doctor named Frank D. Cash and had a son named Janot and a daughter named Mollie. Rachel lived in Denton and died in 1877.

Mary, who preferred to be called Mollie, married Sam J. Taylor, a cotton broker. They lived in Denton and had two children, a son and a daughter. She died sometime around 1880.

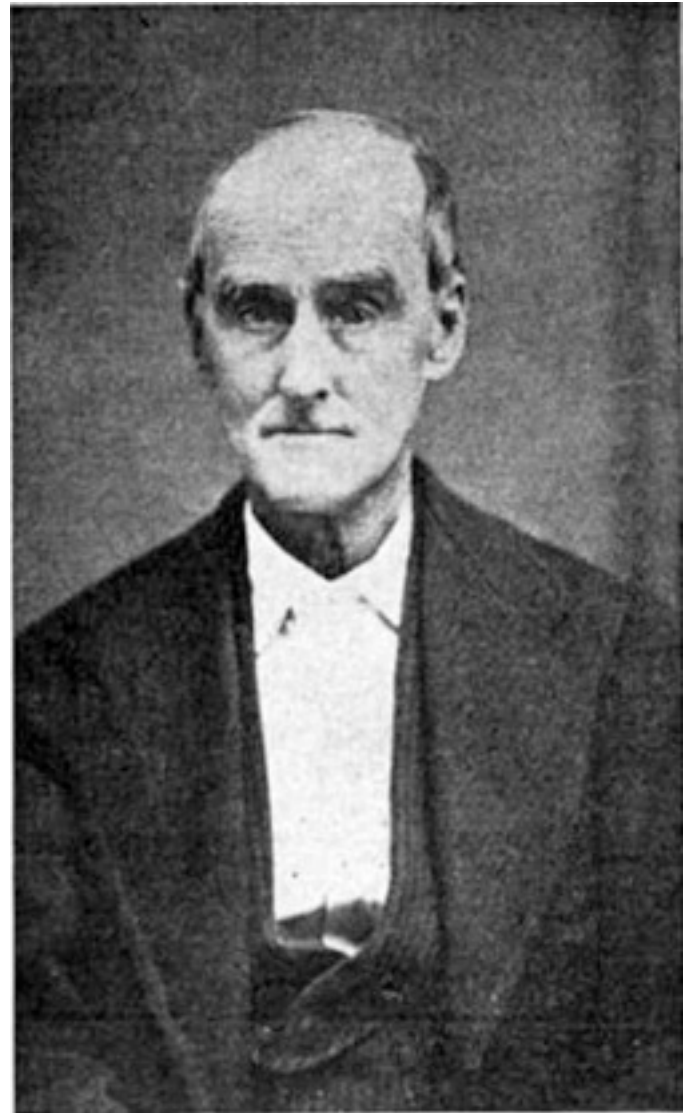
Elizabeth, the oldest daughter, married a farmer named James B. Stiff. They lived in Collin County and had three sons. After the death of her husband, Elizabeth moved to Denton, where one of her sons had a farm. Elizabeth died in 1916 at the age of 84.

As they aged, Jesse Chinn took on much of the responsibilities of running his parent's farm. He married a young girl named Angie Baird in 1869 but Angie died within a few years of their marriage. Jesse married Pattie Clark in 1875. They moved to another farm closer to Denton and the two had two sons and three daughters. Patty died in 1901 and Jesse married Ivey Stegall four years later. Jesse died in 1918 at the age of 74.

Nancy Chinn was always called Nannie. She married Thomas A. Lowery sometime before 1860. Thomas was the Postmaster of McKinney, Texas. They then moved to Dallas where he ran a hotel. Nannie and Thomas had a daughter named Jessie. Thomas died around 1871 and Nannie married Otis G. Welch about three years later. Otis was a lawyer who was instrumental in moving the county seat from Alton to Denton, Texas. He laid out most of the city streets and was often called the "Father of Denton," prior to his death in 1878. In 1879 Nannie married a Polish grocer named Dwara Kowski. The two ran a grocery until Dwara's death in 1886. Nannie lived with her daughter and son-in-law, Charles Ramsdell, who was the Postmaster of Denton. Nannie remained in Denton until her death in 1924 at the age of 88.

The Chinn's are a perfect example of the kind of resilient people who converted our region from a raw wilderness into what it is today. They came here from North Carolina in covered wagons well before the Civil War. They survived brutal summers, savage winters and even Indian raids.

Few of us today can even imagine how difficult it must have been to clear this land and make enough things grow to feed a family. This is one of many families of early Texans who came here and succeeded and we should not forget them.



The only picture I have of Elisha Chinn was taken from a book, "History and Reminiscences of Denton County" which was written in 1918 by Edward F. Bates. Other information for this article came from, "History of Denton, Texas" by C.A. Bridges and from, "June Bugs And Tabernacle Arrows : Remembrances Of Rural Texas," by Edd Painter.