

## **“The Beardens as Builders”**

By Nicholas Gambrell

25 February 2018

I grew up and live in Oakway, SC. Sometimes we joke as to why it was not named “Beardenville.” When I began to research and write this article, I had only a slight idea of the influence that the Bearden family had in construction, not only in Oakway, but in the Upstate of South Carolina. I heard stories growing up of certain buildings that were built by the Bearden Family of Oakway, but as I started to ask questions recently, I realized how much I really did not know!

It is told that one of the first, if not the first, settlers of what is now Oakway, SC was William “Bucky” Bearden (1810 – 1882), a Confederate gunsmith. Legend has it that his large expanse of land in Oakway, or “Nubbin Ridge” as it was also called, was obtained by trading a gun for land. There is one small house still standing that is associated with this Mr. Bearden. One of the oldest structures still in Oakway is this small home with stairs accessed from the porch and rafters that are pegged together.



What remains of the house associated with William "Bucky" Bearden (author's photo)



Front Porch (author's photo)

Bucky Bearden died in 1882 but his wife, known as “Granny Bearden,” lived until she was 103 and died in 1911. On her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, she is known to have lived with one of her sons, James Bearden (1848 – 1915).



The James Bearden Family in front of their home (photo courtesy of Julie Davis)



Granny Bearden (seated in front of door) and her family at her 100th birthday in 1908 (photo courtesy of Martha Bearden)

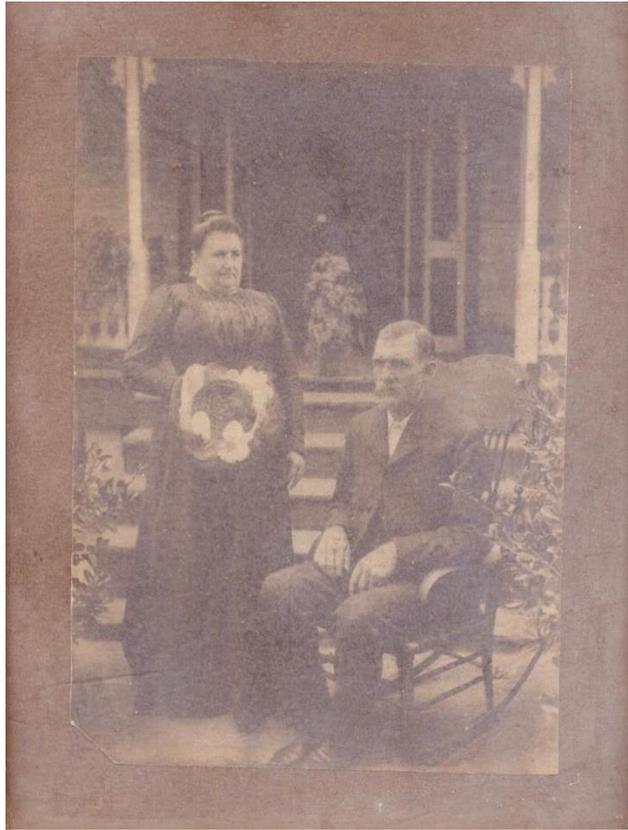


**The James Bearden House c.1970 (photo courtesy of Erick Lowe)**



**The James Bearden House as it appears today (author's photo)**

The James Bearden home, where the author currently resides, is one of two existing “second generation” homes. His brother, Andrew Bearden (1844 – 1920), built a house about a mile down the road. Built in the late 1800s, both the James Bearden and Andrew Bearden houses have many similarities. The floor plans are very similar with a hallway down the middle and three rooms on each side. The front left room in both houses has wainscoting and the chimneys are very similar in style. One main difference though is that the James Bearden house has two rooms upstairs. The Andrew Bearden house (known now as the Bearden-Gambrell House) is the main farmhouse being used for the living-history Foothills Farmstead project in Oakway, SC.



**Andrew Bearden and his 2nd wife, Nannie Hunter Bearden, believed to be in front of their home before the current wrap-around porch was built c.1915 (photo courtesy of Mary Hardy)**



**The Bearden-Gambrell House c.2005 (photo courtesy of Carla Honea)**

The next generation of Beardens produced the most prolific of the builders in the family, William Walker Bearden (1870 – 1962). Known for building houses and “country schools,” Walker’s buildings can still be seen throughout Oconee County and beyond. The following are samples of his work and certainly not inclusive.

Walker Bearden built houses for many people in the area including some of his siblings. One of those siblings was Joseph Sylvester “Vester” Bearden (1877 – 1961). He built this house in 1909. It was later moved in the 1980s and has been restored.

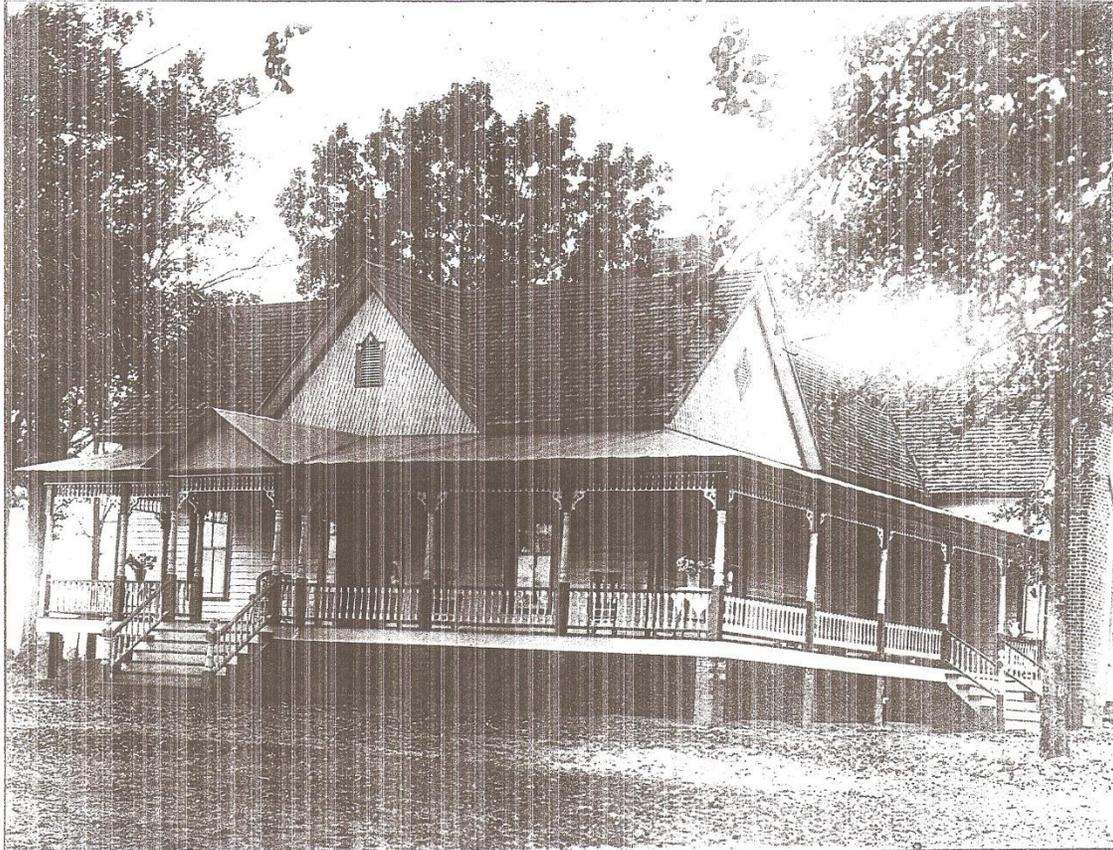


**The Vester Bearden House in transit (photo courtesy of Peggy Bowen Moore)**



**The Vester Bearden House as it appears today (photo courtesy of Peggy Bowen Moore)**

The Eubanks House was built by Walker Bearden for his sister, Amanda Tulula Bearden Eubanks (1866 – 1946), and her husband, John Aaron Eubanks (1863 – 1941). They were married in 1884 but the date of construction of the house is unknown.



**The Eubanks House (photo courtesy of Mahala Bowen Moore)**



**An aerial view of the Eubanks House in the 1950s (Photo courtesy of Mahala Bowen Moore)**

Walker Bearden's own house still sits on the corner in Oakway. It is told that this style/pattern of brickwork was his signature style.

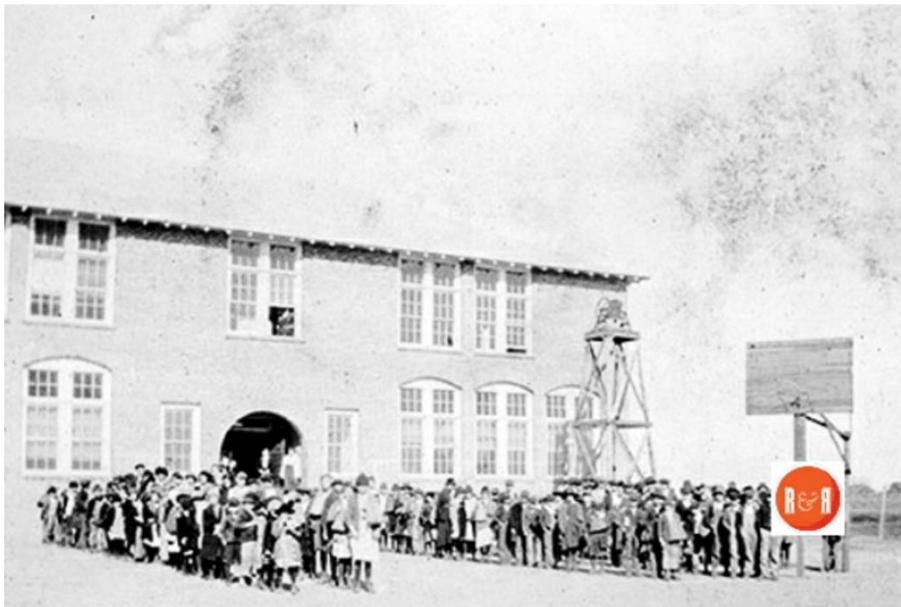


Unidentified man with Walker Bearden House in background (photo courtesy of Payton Ashley-Harper)



The William Walker Bearden House as it appears today (author's photo)

Walker Bearden also built many of the area schools of his time. The old Oakway School, no longer standing, was built by him in 1922 with the auditorium added soon after. He is also attributed with building the Long Creek Academy in 1914 (listed on the National Register) as well as the Retreat Rosenwald School (also listed on the National Register). The Retreat Rosenwald School was completed in 1924 at a cost of \$2,300.



The Oakway School c.1923 (photo courtesy of "Roots and Recall" from Winthrop University Pettus Archive)



The Oakway School and Auditorium (photo courtesy of Tony Adams)



Long Creek Academy (photo from [www.schpr.sc.gov](http://www.schpr.sc.gov))



Retreat Rosenwald School after recently being restored (author's photo)

Other buildings attributed to him are the old Seneca "Town Hall" and several of the "downtown buildings" in Oconee County.



The old Seneca "Town Hall" with Fire Station (photo from Louise Matheson Bell collection)

An article in the newspaper of 1962 mentions yet another generation of Beardens, Buck Asa Bearden (1913 – 1983), helping out with another public building, the Oakway Fire Station. Oakway's Fire Station was the first rural fire department building in Oconee County. The newspaper reads, "Buck Bearden of Oakway is Chairman of the Building Committee for the Oakway project and has donated all the brick that will be used in construction of the building."



**BREAKING GROUND FOR THE OAKWAY FIRE STATION—Left to right—T. J. Shirley, John Field, Raymond Finley, Jack Brown, Buck Bearden and C. C. Moore. Work started last Friday.**

You cannot go far in Oakway and nearby towns without seeing the influence of the Bearden family in the buildings that still stand today, a testament to their prolific skills. Wooden-framed homes, brick homes, wooden-framed schools, brick schools, official buildings and more still dot the landscape. Bearden descendants still live in Oakway and scattered throughout the Southeast. Many of the descendants still live in the old family homes. It is without a doubt, that this family has left their mark on area history and these buildings will continue to help shape "future history" as well.