Henry Weston was born in 1823 in Skowhegan Island, Maine. Growing up, he became familiar with every phase of the lumbering business as an employee of his father. (Hickman 1962) At the age of 18, he and his brother Levi migrated to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where Henry got a job floating logs on the Eau Claire River. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) In only a few years, working in the harsh climate broke his health, and Henry decided to move south, arriving in New Orleans in 1846. (Hickman 1962)

In New Orleans, Weston saw a schooner hauling lumber from Gainesville, and was convinced by the ship’s captain the lumber business in Mississippi had a bright future. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) Weston was hired as a deck hand on the ship in return for passage to Gainesville and, as Weston would later recall, he left New Orleans with “everything he possessed in the world tied up in a red bandana handkerchief.” (ibid.) On arrival in Gainesville, Weston got a job with the Poitevent and Favre Lumber Company, at a salary of $45 dollars per month. (Napier 1985) His talent was quickly recognized, and he was promoted to sawyer, the most important job in the mill. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) Soon afterward, he was offered a job managing the Wingate sawmill in Logtown. (Hill 2000)

During an 1849 cholera epidemic, Weston went back to Wisconsin with no intention of returning. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) However, his health quickly deteriorated, and he returned to Mississippi the following year, where his replacement was fired and he was given his old job back at the Wingate mill.

In 1854, Wingate formed a partnership in the mill including John Russ, W. W. Carré and Henry Carré, and Henry Weston. (Hickman 1962) Only two years later, the Carrés and Weston bought Wingate’s and Russ’s shares in the mill. Profits were substantial in these days, as the demand for timber was very great
and operating costs were relatively low. Weston later remembered of this period that he “made money like smoke.” (ibid.) Most mill workers were slaves, though it is interesting to note that, in a letter to his brother, Weston states that the slaves were as well off as northern laborers, the principal difference between them being that a northern man who does not work must go without bread, but a slave who does not work will be beaten. (Napier 1985)

In 1859, Weston married Lois Angela Mead, at Gainesville, and purchased the Wingate home. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) He and his wife raised nine children.

During the Civil War, lumbering operations in south Mississippi were suspended. Weston was appointed Captain of the Patrol from Logtown and Pearlington, an organization formed to protect citizens from the bands of criminals known as “jayhawkers” which had formed as law enforcement in the region all but vanished. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) One such band camped near Logtown, intending to kill Henry Weston, Henry Carré, and other prominent citizens and to rob their widows of valuables. (Napier 1985) The threatened individuals formed a posse and attacked the jayhawker camp, killing several and capturing one, who was quickly hanged.

By the 1870s, the mills on the Pearl were flourishing again. In 1874, Weston bought out the Carré brothers’ interest in the mill, reportedly for the highest price ever paid for a sawmill in that area. (Lafayette Genealogical Society) Then, in 1877, the mills in the region were shut down by federal agents, who claimed that the lumber was being taken illegally from government land. (Napier 1985) The case dragged on in court for two years, with a compromise finally reached in 1879 and the mills reopening.

In 1888, the company was incorporated as the H. Weston Lumber Company, and it was under this name that it became one of the largest lumber concerns in the country. (Lafayette Genealogical Society)

According to the Lafayette Genealogical Society, Weston remained a simple, practical man even after his business made him a millionaire. “He would wear a hat until it was in shambles. ‘The family being ashamed of the hat would hide it or burn it to get him to buy another.’… He kept a milk cow and milked her himself long after he became a millionaire, in fact, until just before he died in 1912. He wore common inexpensive clothes and would ridicule his sons for putting on airs and wearing fine clothes. … After a big storm one of his sons came and told him much timber had been blown down and would ruin. ‘Ruin, heck,’ he said, ‘get out of that car, put on work clothes, get a crew and go to laying a road to it and haul it out.’” (Lafayette Genealogical Society, see also Hill 2000) He also had a concern for the welfare of his workers which was unusual for the time. (Hickman 1962)

Weston’s company was also unusual in its concern for environmental responsibility and pioneering of forestry in the region. In 1901, the company started using new steam skidders in the harvesting of timber, a very efficient method but very damaging to unharvested trees, and quickly abandoned the practice. (Mississippi Department of Marine Resources 2005) One of Henry’s Weston’s sons, J. R. Weston, was the first known professional forester from the state. (Fickle 2001)
References/Further Reading


