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## **TUNNEL STORY PERSISTS**

ONE of the most persistent stories in Tuscaloosa "history" is one regarding a tunnel from the Friedman Library to the Warrior River. It is said by those who believe the story that Robert Jemison had the tunnel dug in order that he might "get his slaves out on the river when the Yankees came."

The building that now houses the Friedman Library was built by Robert Jemison in 1862. Jemison was one of the most important men in early Alabama history. Brewer, in his "*Alabama History*," says, "Among the citizens of Tuscaloosa Robert Jemison stood like Saul among the children of Kish—a head and shoulders above his brethren." Garrett, in his "*Reminiscences of Public Men in Alabama*," says, "At no period in the legislative history of Alabama has any man been more intimately connected with the important interests of the State than Mr. Jemison."

Jemison owned six plantations, totaling more than 10,000 acres, had slaves on all of them, and homes on several. He owned a stagecoach line, sawmills, grist mills, and iron ore lands. He was considered to be the wealthiest man at the Secession Convention. He served in the state House of Representatives, the state Senate, as a member of the Secession Convention of 1861 (where he led the opposition to secession), and as a member of the Confederate Senate.

He was chiefly responsible for organizing the state's finances after the failure of the State Bank, promoted railroad building, and was instrumental in locating the Alabama Insane Hospital near Tuscaloosa.

How or when the tunnel story originated I do not know. The evidence is overwhelmingly against there being a tunnel.

The distance from the Friedman Library to the river is about a mile. The cost of digging such a tunnel would have been great, even with slave labor. Jemison kept only a few of his slaves at his home place; most of them of course, would have been on his plantations. It would have been very uneconomical to build a tunnel a mile long to get a few slaves out on the river. And, when they got there, would they have been any better off? Why not just let them walk to the river? And how did Jemison know that the Yankees would come to Tuscaloosa?

The Van de Graaff family lived in the house for many years. Mrs. Van de Graaff was the granddaughter of Robert Jemison. She told Mrs. Torrey Jemison that there was no tunnel. "Bully" (Wm. T.) Van de Graaff, her son, told Miss Barbara Davis, formerly chief librarian at the Friedman Library, that there was no tunnel. We may be sure that, if there were a tunnel, those venturesome Van de Graaff boys would have known about it—and gone through it.

Finally, I have never heard of anyone going from one end of the tunnel to the other.

However, there are some bases for the story. Underneath the house is a deep well which served as Jemison's refrigerator. Butter, eggs, watermelons and other perishable foods were kept cool by lowering them in the well. Also there is in the basement of the house a room which was used for manufacturing the gas with which the house was lighted.

At the other end of the "tunnel" are natural caves and mine shafts extending back from the river. One of these shafts extends under the pool in Queen City Park.

Between the home and the river was yet another link in the "tunnel." In 1866 a torrential rain washed a deep gulley across Broad Street at 21st Avenue. In 1885 the Big Gulley was filled with dirt, but a conduit, large enough for a person to walk through, was placed at

the bottom of the ditch to carry off the water which had formerly flowed through the ditch.

It is my belief that the well under the house, the mine shafts, the conduit and a good imagination are responsible for the tunnel story. In spite of all the evidence against it, the tunnel story persists.