

The Kirksey Family of Talladega County

A Brief History

THE SURNAME *Kirksey* is extremely rare. Historically, it first appeared in Lancashire County, England, as *Kyrkshagh*, a place name meaning “church-wood.” The earliest records of the name include: Matthew de Kyrkshagh of Lancashire in 1281 and Geoffrey del Kyrkeshagh of Rochdale Parish, Lancashire, in 1390. Lancashire County lies on England’s northwestern coast. In time, the spelling of *Kyrkshagh* became *Kirkshaw*, with *Kirks* one of its variations.

New Year’s Day 1878 brought the English and Kirksey families together in celebration of the marriage of 34-year-old James S.C. English and 22-year-old Maude Hunter Kirksey.

John Kirks II (1605 to 1686) was the first of the family to migrate to North America. He is thought to have departed Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire, when he was in his twenties. In the English colonies, *Kirks* became *Kirksey*. Any effort to trace the first several generations of John Kirksey’s descendants in colonial America yields only sketchy and conflicting information until the family settled in colonial Carolina. Founded in 1663, the colony was divided North and South in 1710. The Kirkseys made their home in central North Carolina, in the area that would become Orange and Chatham Counties.

Gideon Kirksey II (1770 to 1816)

Mary Ann Carmichael (1775 to 1820)

Their Children:

Alexander Kirksey (1791 to unknown)

John C. Kirksey (1792 to 1860)

William Henry Kirksey (1794 to 1840)

James Isaac Kirksey (1797 to 1865)

Gideon Kirksey III (1800-46)

Abraham Kirksey (1805-50)

Jesse B. Kirksey (1807-50)

Elijah J. Kirksey (1810-84)

Gideon Kirksey II is said to have been born about 1770, in Somerset, Pennsylvania. He later migrated to Chatham County, North Carolina, where he married Mary Ann Carmichael about 1790. They were the parents of eight children, all of whom were boys. Although they farmed, the family trade was blacksmithing—one of the most essential and highly valued professions in colonial America. About 1810, the family migrated from Chatham County to middle Tennessee, near the town of Nashville (population 1,100) to take advantage of the distribution of former Cherokee Indian land.

Farther south, the first settlers in what would become the Alabama Territory had begun arriving around 1805, and a federal office for selling Alabama land opened at Nashville in 1807. Four years later, the office was moved into the territory to a settlement on the Tennessee River 110 miles below Nashville, where the streets had been laid out for a town to be called Twickenham. But when the settlement was incorporated in 1811, it was named Huntsville, becoming the first certified town in the Alabama Territory. Before Gideon's death in Hickman County, Tennessee, (southwest of Nashville) in 1816, three of his older sons—John, Henry and Isaac—had moved to Huntsville. In 1820, his widow Mary appeared in the census of Maury County, Tennessee, (south of Nashville) as the head of a household of eight, three of whom were identified as “manufacturers,” presumably metal workers.

James Isaac Kirksey (1797 to 1865)

Mary Bradford (Nancy) Connolly (1802 to 1839)

Their Children:

Albert Oscar Kirksey (1822 to 1909)

Dr. Walter Sidney A. Kirksey (1823-71)

Eliza Jane Kirksey Rather (1824 to 1913)

Diana Rebecca Kirksey Rakestraw (1832-90)

John G. Kirksey (1834 to 1910)

Dr. James Isaac Kirksey II (1836 to 1917)

In 1814, 17-year-old Isaac Kirksey purchased land in Huntsville and opened a blacksmith shop there. Four years later, when Huntsville became the seat of newly formed Madison County, Isaac began increasing his real estate holdings. On December 14, 1819, Alabama became the 22nd state with Huntsville serving as its interim capital until a more central site would be selected. Isaac married Mary Bradford Connolly on July 22, 1821. Born in Chapel Hill, Orange Co., North Carolina, and known as Nancy, she was the daughter of John W. Connolly and Obedience King. (Her sister, Angelico Connolly, had married Isaac's older brother, Henry, in 1814.)

Isaac was the most ambitious of the Kirksey brothers. He continued to acquire land in Madison County in 1829 and 1830; by then Nancy had given birth to the first four of the Kirksey children, six of whom would live to adulthood. According to the 1830 census for Madison County, Isaac owned eleven Negro slaves. From 1830 to 1833, he served as a Justice of the Peace in Madison County, his name appearing on numerous marriage and probate records.

As the United States expanded its borders to the south and west, Isaac took advantage of every opportunity to purchase frontier land. In 1833, he began selling off his Madison County property in order to buy land in eastern Alabama, the former Muscogee Creek Nation. By 1835 the family had moved to the northwestern corner of Talladega County, where the 560 acres he purchased became the basis of his Locust Grove Plantation. In 1835, he also purchased 4,000 acres, sight-unseen, in the Mexican state of Texas. In October 1839, Nancy Kirksey died after a lingering illness. Five months later, Isaac married 28-year-old Sarah Young Edwards of nearby St. Clair County. With her, he fathered an additional five children. (It has been said that his wives gave birth to a total of thirteen Kirksey children.)

By 1840, his household numbered 47, which included 36 Negro slaves. Fifteen of the total were employed in agriculture with one classified as a “professional learned engineer,” most likely Isaac, who never gave up the blacksmith trade. In time, the Kirksey plantation was devoted not only to farming but also to manufacturing, with a merchant mill, a wagon factory, a tannery and workshops for making leather goods like harness and shoes.



Isaac Kirksey

Isaac continued to buy and sell land in upper Talladega County and the adjacent Benton (Calhoun) County to the north. By 1846, he and his neighbor J.S. Montgomery owned most of the desirable property in the area. As a result, his Locust Grove Plantation was a scattered patchwork rather than one contiguous stretch of land. In 1848, after Texas was annexed as the 28th state, he subscribed to the *Galveston Weekly News* and proceeded to purchase additional land in East Texas, where the fertile soil was ideal for cultivating cotton. The 8,500 acres in Texas and his older children reaching adulthood fed his dynastic ambitions, and he persuaded two of his married sons and his two married daughters to relocate their families to Texas and manage his properties there. Among them were Eliza Jane Kirksey and her husband Dr. Daniel Rather¹ who settled in Shelby County, Texas, about 1850. According to the Rather family lore (unverified and, no doubt, exaggerated): “With a caravan of twelve wagons and a hundred slaves, the young family moved to Texas where they acquired large land holdings. They built a 20-room house on their cotton plantation. A hand-operated gin was across the road from the homestead. The Rather cemetery was donated by Dr. Rather. The first grave was one of their slaves.”

Of the Kirksey children, only two sons, the firstborn Albert Oscar Kirksey and his much younger brother John G. Kirksey, remained in Talladega County. After Albert’s marriage, Isaac gave him a farm about twenty miles north of the Locust Grove plantation in the vicinity of Morrisville, Benton County. With it came the requisite number of Negro slaves for farming.

By 1860, 62-year-old Isaac Kirksey’s household included his wife Sarah, 48; his and Sarah’s five children; and John G., 23, the youngest son from his first marriage. He estimated his wealth at \$30,000 in real estate and \$40,000 in personal property. Like most plantations, Locust Grove was a self-sustaining village, and the Civil War apparently had little affect on the family and their dependants. One of his sons in Texas enlisted in the army there, while Isaac apparently used his influence to shield Albert and John from being drafted into service. But in the end, the war defeated Isaac and his aspirations for the family. He died, age 68, on May 14, 1865, only five weeks after the Union declared victory, and was buried beside Nancy at the Kirksey Cemetery at the “old home.” His memorial, a tall marble shaft carved by W.T. Jenkins of Talladega, features a Masonic symbol and the inscription: “An honest man. A faithful member of the Methodist Church for many years.”

Not having written a will, Isaac left \$5,420 in gold coin and thousands of acres of land in two states for his heirs to divide. His widow Sarah and their children remained at Locust Fork, and by 1870 the household was headed by their 25-year-old physician son, William H. Kirksey.² Residing with them were seven Negroes, ages six months to 75 years. Nearby lived 36-year-old John G. Kirksey, yet to marry and residing with an older Black woman and her five young

1. They were the great great grandparents of Dan Rather, the distinguished, Texas-born broadcast journalist.

2. Within ten years, Sarah had died and Dr. Kirksey and his family had relocated to Freestone County, Texas.

children, as well as three families of freed slaves who had taken the Kirksey surname. (Later censuses indicate that John Kirksey eventually farmed whatever acreage he had inherited, living alone and unmarried until his death in 1910.)

Isaac Kirksey has been described as a “public-spirited gentleman of large wealth.” Soon after arriving in the county, he had become a trustee of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Talladega town. He also served as a justice of the peace and is credited with founding Eastaboga, a town northwest of his plantation that began appearing on maps of the state in 1858, the year he helped establish the Eastaboga Academy there. But Isaac would be remembered not for his wealth or accomplishments, but for the landmark *Kirksey v. Kirksey* legal decision of 1845, which revealed the less favorable side of his nature. The following is a character study published in light of his lasting notoriety.

One of the first white men to own land in Talladega County, Isaac Kirksey was a working-class man who, during a lifetime of constant wheeling and dealing, managed to amass a sizeable fortune. Nevertheless, when he died, he was still described as “a laboring man, a Blacksmith by trade.” Isaac was said to be tall, very fair and fine looking. He was Scots-Irish and reputedly spoke in a Scotch brogue. Isaac was born in North Carolina and, as a boy, migrated across Tennessee to Madison County, Alabama, with his family. In 1821, he married Mary Bradford Connolly. He owned a “smith’s shop” there, but kept an eye out for any opportunity to make money. As a young man, he profited from buying and selling land in Madison County. He eventually bought land from his brother Henry and his wife’s parents.

In 1830, Isaac was well established in Madison County. He was thirty-three, and Mary (whom everyone called Nancy) was twenty-eight. That year, he and four other men bought two acres for the use of the Methodist Church. He was appointed Justice of the Peace in 1832 and served in that capacity for the rest of his life. But Isaac and Nancy did not remain in Madison County. Much of central Alabama had belonged to the Creek Indian tribes, until 1832 when they ceded the last of their land to the federal government. Part of this cession became Talladega County. About that time, the first cotton gin in Alabama was built, and cotton quickly became the state’s most important crop. Seeing the enormous agricultural potential of the new county, Isaac sold his property in Madison County in 1834 and moved his family to the northern part of Talladega County. He called the cotton plantation he established Locust Grove.

In addition to growing cotton, Isaac had numerous other commercial interests. In 1835 he bought 4,000 acres of land in the Mexican state of Texas. He “was a man of means, was very economical; and was in the habit of loaning money.” There are indications that within his family he was very generous. He apparently was “an indulgent father,” and he believed in the value of education. In addition to serving on the board of directors of the Eastaboga Academy, Isaac insisted that all of his sons and daughters go to school. He sent one of his sons to an eastern university. It must be said, however, that the 1865 inventory of Isaac’s estate lists only “1 Lot Books” valued at ten dollars.

At the same time, there is evidence of a darker side to Isaac’s character. He was a “very economical” man, and outside the family his constant striving for wealth may have taken him down immoral paths. There is some evidence of his “habit of lending money” at exorbitant interest rates. Isaac was also well known to the Alabama judiciary. He appeared as a plaintiff as early as 1828 and never seems to have slaked his thirst for litigation. From 1845 to 1856, the Alabama Supreme Court published eight opinions in cases involving Isaac.

Isaac Kirksey embraced slavery and made a fortune from it. Even if the general moral problem of slavery is set to one side, there is evidence that Isaac was more abusive than other slaveholders. In the

early 1830s, a woman that he claimed to own sued him for her and her children's freedom. Edy Hinton alleged that she was in fact a "free woman of color and daughter of a free mulatto woman." She and her eight children were kidnapped in Tennessee and sold as slaves to Isaac in Alabama. If these claims were true, Isaac should have released her and her family, but a "very economical" man like Isaac Kirksey might have been unwilling to lose the value of his bargain. Isaac's "economical" ways apparently influenced the way he treated his slaves. In 1861 his oldest son, Albert O. Kirksey, offered to buy one of Isaac's slaves "who was then a runaway." Isaac responded that "he would not sell the negro, as the balance of his negroes would run away if he did, just to be sold." In Isaac's eyes, his slaves would have preferred to be owned and controlled by someone other than himself.³

In 1845, a seemingly insignificant family conflict came before the Alabama Supreme Court that would leave an enduring mark on American jurisprudence and result in one of the fundamental decisions in U.S. contract law. It began in October 1840 when Isaac learned of the death of his brother Henry Kirksey in Madison County and wrote to Angelico, his widow and also the sister of his deceased first wife Nancy, to offer her and her children a home on his land in Talladega County:

Dear sister Angelico—

Much to my mortification, I heard, that brother Henry was dead, and one of his children. I know that your situation is one of grief, and difficulty. You had a bad chance before, but a great deal worse now. I should like to come and see you, but cannot with convenience at present. ... I do not know whether you have a preference on the place you live on, or not. If you had, I would advise you to obtain your preference⁴, and sell the land and quit the country, as I understand it is very unhealthy, and I know society is very bad. If you will come down and see me, I will let you have a place to raise your family, and I have more open land than I can tend; and on the account of your situation, and that of your family, I feel like I want you and the children to do well.

Angelico, having been left with considerable debt, welcomed Isaac's proposal, and the house he provided was described as "comfortable." Sometime in 1842, Isaac's eldest son, 20-year-old Albert Oscar Kirksey, moved in with his Aunt Angelico (and as many as five of her children), and the two "occupied it jointly." A year later, about the time Albert turned 21, Isaac asked her to leave. He offered her, in the words of Alabama Supreme Court documents, another "house, not comfortable, in the woods," one that lacked outhouses and was "a half mile or mile off" from the land she had been farming. Angelico refused to go until Isaac gave notice that he would sue to evict her. Researchers speculate that a portion of the land Angelico had farmed was federal "open land" that Isaac intended to add to his already large holdings. Removing Angelico from the property was apparently an essential move in Isaac's scheme: He used Angelico to farm this public land until Congress granted another preference that would enable him to purchase it. His son Albert Oscar, having resided on the property and come of age, would then become eligible for the valuable preemption. Isaac believed that transferring Angelico to a cabin in the woods was in keeping with his original promise. Needless to say, she disagreed and hired an attorney to plead her case.

The question before the court was: Did Isaac's promising Angelico a place to live constitute a binding contract or was it a nonbinding promise? The lower court ruled that it was indeed a contract and awarded Angelico \$200. But

3. From "Dear Sister Antillico...: The Story of Kirksey v. Kirksey" by William R. Casto and Val D. Ricks, published in the *Georgetown Law Journal*, Volume 94, 2004 to 2005. History books often refer to Angelico as *Antillico*, owing to a misreading of the spelling of her name in original hand-written documents.

4. In the sales of public land, a preference was awarded to a prospective buyer who had met certain requirements, earning them an advantage over others in the right to purchase a piece of land. Having inhabited a piece of land for a certain amount of time and made improvements to it were the simplest means to that end.

that decision was soon reversed by the Alabama Supreme Court in Isaac's favor.

Albert Oscar Kirksey (1822 to 1909)

Margaret Clara Goodwin (1833-79)

Their Children:

Idora A. Kirksey Best (1849-80)

Georgia Ella Kirksey Richey (1850-80)

Oscar Kirksey II (1852 to before 1870)

Mary Eliza Kirksey Gladden (1854 to 1907)

Maud Hunter Kirksey English (1856-86)

Lula Olivia Kirksey Richey (1859-89)

Carrie Kirksey (1864 to after 1880)

Lena Kirksey Huey (1867 to 1903)

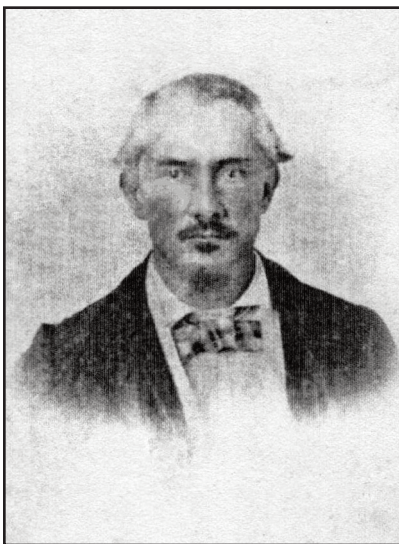
Walter Alva Kirksey (1869 to 1932)

James Isaac Kirksey (1871 to unknown)

Identified in most documents as A.O. Kirksey, Albert was born in Madison County, Alabama, on Feb. 22, 1822. As the firstborn and eldest son of Isaac, he was reared and groomed with the expectation that he would someday inherit much of his father's considerable estate and further glorify the Kirksey lineage.

He was a boy when the family moved from Huntsville to upper Talladega County. On Oct. 21, 1847, he married Margaret C. Goodwin, who was also from a well-to-do plantation family. Her parents, Thomas Goodwin (1789 to 1843) and Eliza Mitchell (1812-63) had married in St. Clair County, Alabama, in 1827, and relocated to upper Talladega County around 1833. When Thomas died, age 54, he owned hundreds of acres of farmland and 73 slaves. His estate was divided among his widow, five children and grandchildren. Margaret inherited eight of the slaves, and Albert Kirksey was appointed legal guardian of three of her minor brothers and sisters, as well as the slaves they inherited.

The census of 1850 lists Albert, age 27, Margaret, 17, and their one-year-old daughter Idora living north of his father's plantation, in the area of Benton County known as Morrisville. The estimated value of his real estate was \$1,700, and he owned 14 slaves. In 1860, they remained in Calhoun County (as Benton County had been renamed), and the family included six children: Idora, Ella, Oscar, Eliza, Maud and Lula. He owned 740 acres, of which 300 were improved, valued at \$4,500; \$1,300 in livestock; and personal property, which included a considerable number of slaves, estimated at \$27,000. His farm was the most productive of any in that area of Calhoun County, that year producing 2,000 bushels of Indian corn, 50 bushels of beans and peas, 50 bushels of sweet potatoes, 90 bushels of wheat, 38 bales of cotton and 700 pounds of butter.



Albert Oscar Kirksey

A year later, war broke out between North and South. At age 39, Albert became eligible to serve the Confederacy, but there is no record of his having volunteered or having been conscripted, perhaps taking advantage of his status as a planter. The South's defeat and the emancipation of its enslaved population erased Albert's every expectation for the future. He would never again farm on the grand scale of those earlier times or afford his family the comforts they had known.

Federal troops occupying the county ordered the freed slaves to stay put for the time being. A large number of the Kirksey slaves, for want of anywhere else to go, remained on the plantations and continued to work without compensation. In December 1865, they appealed to the U.S. Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands for help. The bureau summoned Albert to court to “answer and show cause for refusing to pay or settle with said Freedmen.” Kirksey’s overseer testified that “the freedmen had labored well but not as well as in former years, yet better than the average throughout that section [of the county]. Also that they had raised a crop better than the general average of crops, that the freedmen did not run off to town and back as others had done, that they were generally honest and did good, fair work, that he estimated the corn crop at 3,000 bushels.” Kirksey was ordered to distribute around \$1,300 to the family’s former enslaved men, women and children before the year ended or face imprisonment. Albert’s plantation was worthless without a labor force to keep its fields productive, and if farming was to continue, he would have to employ laborers.

Apparently not blessed with his father’s strength and determination, Albert was less adaptable to the reconstructed post-war society than the Kirksey men in Texas. Although they had established plantations there, they also had non-agricultural professions. The two Kirksey sons were medical doctors, while the two sons-in-law were a medical doctor and a teacher. As a result, they adjusted more easily to change than their two brothers in Talladega County.

By then, Albert and Margaret were the parents of six daughters and one son, ages one to sixteen. (She would give birth to three sons, but only one would survive to adulthood.) Coming of age during Reconstruction, few of their children carried memories of the family’s entitled way of life, while Albert and Margaret were, no doubt, haunted by memories of their once comfortable life and thoughts of what might have been.

The eldest of their children, Idora, married Thomas Alexander Best, a first cousin of Jim English, in 1866, and Eliza married Joseph Kelly Gladden in 1874. The Kirksey and English families lived far apart and had little in common, the Methodist Kirkseys had been wealthy, well-to-do planters, while the Englishes were Presbyterian farmers of more modest means. But Thomas Best’s marriage had brought the families together, and Jim English wed Maud Hunter Kirksey in 1878. She was 21 years old, he was 34.

In December 1879, Margaret died, at age 45, in Calhoun County, her death attributed to consumption.⁵ Without his wife, Albert was set adrift. According to the census of 1880, he was farming 240 acres of cotton and corn in Maddox, Calhoun County, employing twenty white and twenty black workers, whose labors earned him \$600 that year. His household included his daughters Lula, Carrie and Lena, sons Walter and James, as well as his daughter Ella and son-in-law James Richey⁶. The census noted that Ella was sick with consumption; she died only a few months later, and Richey married her younger sister, Lula the following year. Another sad blow to the Kirksey family followed in 1886: Maud Hunter died, leaving Jim English with three young children.

Albert retired from farming in the early 1890s. By then, his younger son James had apparently died, and it was clear that Walter had no interest in farming. Without the means to support himself, Albert began living temporarily with his scattered kin. In October 1896, he joined Walter in New Orleans, where they lived on North Rampart Street, and the elderly Kirksey, then in his mid-seventies, initially took delight in that cosmopolitan city. But two months later, he wrote to the Englishes: “Times are hard here, and not much doing. Trade is sorry. I think the first good opportunity, we will leave this place.” He returned to Alabama to live with one of his daughters in Birmingham. When his welcome was worn out, he returned to Louisiana. In June 1899, in a letter addressed to his son-in-law

5. Later known as tuberculosis, consumption was a leading cause of death in 19th-century America.

6. Richey, one of Jim English’s fellow soldiers from the 42nd Alabama Infantry, Company G, had married Ella earlier that year.

James English, Oscar wrote to his granddaughters Maggie and Etta from New Orleans, where he was again living with their Uncle Walter:

I write you a few lines this morning but hardly able to write, have been sick ever since I left Alabama. I went from B'ham to Plaquamines, La., stayed there over two months, nearly the worst place on earth and very sickly. Neither of us was satisfied. Now I been in New Orleans one month and am worse dissatisfied than ever was in my life, sick all the time and no way to get away from here. I have no money. Walter has none. ... Children, if I don't get help soon, I think I will be buried here right in the mud. I have no desire to live, plumb out of heart. I wish someone would send me to come back to the old country.

The pathos-drenched letter was a plea for help directed to his son-in-law through his tenderhearted granddaughters. When a census taker visited Jim English's family in Munford one year later, Albert was residing with them.

After his son Walter married and settled in Lincoln, Calhoun County, Albert Oscar Kirksey lived his last years with Walter's family before his death on February 4, 1909. He was buried in an unmarked grave at the Kirksey family cemetery behind the original Kirksey plantation home in upper Talladega County.

Maude Hunter Kirksey (1856 to 1886)

James Samuel Crawford (Jim) English (1844 to 1931)

Their Children:

Margaret Emma (Maggie) English (1878 to 1965)

Georgia Etta English (1880 to 1956)

Albert Clarence (Bud) English (1882 to 1960)

Maude Hunter Kirksey—apparently known as Hunter, the name carved on her gravestone—married Jim English in January 1878, when she was 21 years old and he was 34. Their families were loosely connected through the marriage of Hunter's oldest sister, Idora, to Jim's cousin, Thomas Best, twelve years earlier. They wasted no time in starting a family, with Margaret Emma English, born December 22, 1878, named for both her grandmothers and called Maggie. Next came Georgia Etta English, known as Etta, on October 1, 1880. She was named for Hunter's older sister, Georgia Ella, who had died two months before. Finally, Albert Clarence English was born March 5, 1882, named for his Kirksey grandfather, but known as Clarence and called Bud. They were ages eight, six and four when their mother died in 1886, at age 29 or 30, cause unknown.

The family of Jim and Hunter English is covered more extensively in *The Englishes: A Family Portrait*.

WALTER KIRKSEY (1869 to 1932)

Hunter's younger brother Walter Kirksey was born on his father's 740-acre farm Calhoun County four years after the Civil War ended and grew up during the difficult years of Reconstruction. Tales of the family's glory days before the war, of his father's two-dozen enslaved field hands and house servants, may have magnified his determination to make something of himself. But for the devastation of that war, Walter would have inherited a considerable portion of the Kirksey family's wealth. But he had no interest in farming, believing chances for success awaited him outside of Alabama.

He was one of the three known sons of Albert and Margaret Kirksey; his brothers, Oscar and James, apparently died

in infancy or childhood. His sister Hunter, a dozen years older, undoubtedly played a significant role in his care and upbringing before and after his mother's death when he was ten years old. There was apparently a close and loving relationship. But the Kirksey women tended to die young, and he was seventeen years old when Hunter died in 1886. She was survived by her husband Jim English and their three young children, and Walter transferred the affection he felt for his sister to them. Jim English was old enough to be Walter's father, and Walter held him in highest regard, always addressing this brother-in-law as Mr. English.

Excerpts from his letters to Jim English reveal the nature of their relationship:

[In] the last letter you wrote me you were speaking of brother T.B.'s [Walter's other widowed brother-in-law Thomas Best's] anticipated marriage, and said something about if you should ever marry, what kind of woman you wanted. I have been afraid ever since because of my quitting at that time to write, that you would suspect that you had intimated your marriage, or that I had looked at what you said in that light (so I did) and had quit, being bitterly opposed to it. Now I write hoping to correct such false impressions if they exist. The fact is I would be glad to hear of you getting married if you were to get a good woman and that I know your good judgment would do. Because I believe there would be more pleasure and less cares, which I know needs be lessened. No, I would urge your happiness. (1889)

I will tell you why I am always so glad to hear from you. Well, in the first place because of your faithfulness to my dearly beloved sister, believing that you made her one of the best and noblest of husbands. And for this no doubt her sweet spirit ever pleads for you at the throne of the Most High, and may He ever bless you. Secondly, it is because of my great admiration for you as a man, not as a kinsman or a benefactor, my high admiration for your soundness of judgment and stability of character. And in the years to come, when you shall have passed from this stage of action probably, taking a normal view of it, for you are a much older man than myself, I shall look at those you cherish and love so tenderly, picture their little house under the hill. For there is no better place in this green earth for the formation of character than a country house in the fair Old Southland. It affords time for reflection and the drawing of conclusions so essential to fundamental principles of character. Reveling among the vicissitudes of Nature is nothing more than the development of character. To repeat, I say to take a normal view of it, I shall someday look at them, picture their little house, think of their parentage and say there are none better. But oh! May that day be far distant, for may you live long to watch over and cherish them. And in the third place, you are the only one of my kinsmen whom I hear from, who writes an intelligent letter. Your letters are always written in that clear and concise manner which characterizes you. (1893)

You have always shown good judgment in whatever thing, and if you will allow me to say so, I have always thought you were fitted for a better place than between the plow handles, although I don't mean to reflect at all on the humble but honest calling of the farmer, and I suppose if you are happy and succeed in making those dependent upon you happy, at the same time providing for their mental nourishment, you have done well—fought a good fight. (1894)

Intelligent and ambitious, Walter set out to become a pharmacist. In 1888, nineteen-year-old he wrote to his ten-year-old niece:

Let me tell you, Maggie, an education is one of the grandest accomplishments you can have. If I had my choice tonight of an education or a legacy of 10,000 dollars, I would unhesitatingly take the education. I am studying chemistry now, read 10 to 15 pages every night. It's extremely interesting. I like the drug business better, the better I become acquainted with it. If my health remains good, I'll make it a lifetime business.

A year earlier, he had left home for Hillsboro, Texas, south of Dallas, an area where numerous Kirksey uncles and

aunts resided and were well established. Among them was his father's younger brother, James I. Kirksey II. The only one of the brothers to have fought in the Civil War, he had practiced medicine before making a career of pharmacy. Apparently inspired by his uncle, Walter worked as a drugstore clerk and then as a "traveling view artist," which he described in a letter to Jim English: "I go from town to town, take photos of stores, residences and sell pictures from them." He went on to say, "I am in search of an honest independence which I hope to have attained ere I am thirty." In 1889, he moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where he remained only a short time before returning to Alabama. To Jim English, he expressed his misgivings:

I left Texas about a month ago, came to St. Louis, Mo., expecting to either go to a school of pharmacy or get in business. But decided after arriving in St. Louis not to go to school for many reasons which I will tell you when I see you. I managed to secure a position in a drug store at a meager salary, thinking something more profitable would perhaps present itself. But as it did not, I decided to come home for a while, if not for the next year. Pa is getting old, and I consider it my duty to be with him if possible. I had a paying business [as a photographer] in Texas, but there was too much rascality necessary for me. . . . I don't think I'll ever hire [myself out] any more. I find I can do better to depend on my own exertions. Besides, it's not always pleasant to be bossed. (Dec. 1889)

After spending some months at home with his widowed father, he moved to Atlanta, where he worked at Jacobs' Pharmacy and then for a photographer. He considered starting what he described as an "installment furniture business." Unable to locate investors, he resumed his career as a small-town druggist in Madison, Georgia, east of Atlanta. There he went in partnership to open Kirksey & Stone Druggists in 1892. It was a troubled arrangement that ended in 1893 when Walter relocated to Mexico City.

To the three English children, Walter Kirksey was Uncle Walt. The Englishes probably represented to him the stability and promise that his own family had lost. Throughout his travels, he corresponded regularly with them, often reminding the children that he was their "only uncle," although they did have several uncles by marriage. He took a strong, sometimes overbearing, interest in the welfare and education of his motherless nieces and nephew, and particularly in Maggie, who was the most faithful correspondent in the family. Walter was nine years older than she, but his letters are surprisingly personal and often paternal. Between 1888 and 1898, he and Maggie exchanged dozens of affectionate letters that portray him as a caring and thoughtful young man. Excerpts from his letters:

I would love to be there for a while to eat pears, peaches, watermelons and other fruits with you, and to enjoy the quiet of the country for a while, but find it impossible this summer. (1892)

Children, I suppose you are going to school? Tell me how you are doing at school. You must learn to write better than your uncle. But how do you? Oh! How do you spend those precious moments? Is it in the, however innocent, yet idle, prattle of childhood? Or in the careful perusal of good books in search of knowledge, my chief source and, I believe, the true source of happiness. . . . I can only say it's not as pleasant with me as I would like. I long for the quiet of a good country house and a life of reflection. But as this cannot be, as it is yet denied me, I'll make the best of what's allotted me. I have a very nice drug business [in Madison, Georgia], but a dishonest partner which makes the drug business still more confining to me. (1893)

Wherever you are, whatever you are doing—all the way down the stream of time, remember your mother, follow in her footsteps. Remember that she intercedes at the throne of God for her little ones. Maggie, I hope that you may sometime be a bright light, a blessing to your house and kinsmen. (undated)

How I would love to be with you and have power to direct your futures, to direct your faith to the blessed strongholds of that of your mother, who in my opinion made the best of life by her view of death—happy

through life in the view of that sad time—sad to us—when she should change mortality for immortality and be forever blest... You had one of the best mothers that ever lived. You should cherish her memory and follow in her footsteps to happiness. (1893)

Living and working in Mexico City was an eye-opening experience for the 24-year-old. To his nieces and nephew, he wrote: “I expect to be a gentleman of a great deal more leisure someday, when I have learned to speak the Spanish more fluently... I only get very modest pay—one hundred dollars a month. When I have learned the Spanish perfectly, I will either travel for some American house [drug manufacturer] or go in some business for myself.” But to their father, he wrote:

It is hard to be situated as I have been situated. In the first place, the choice of a very hard life or profession, then from my earliest hours I have seen my fondest hopes decayed. I wanted an education, and I believe if I could have gotten it, I could have done something in the world—such mental torture, and, after all, mental torture is the worst of any. Had I never seen any of the great possibilities of life, when armed with a good education and a little money, I might at least have been spared such mental death. Of course I still have hope, this is a blessing, and I really believe from a base of hard reason, that there are great possibilities in the various lines of the Drug Business in Mexico.

Even so, he took advantage of the experience:

Well, I have returned from the bullfight, suppered, went for a walk in the Alameda again, returned to my room, read two chapters of a novel in Spanish and now, find myself trying to finish my letter. The bulls fought bravely. I only stayed to see four killed as it was getting late and I was anxious to get back to my novel. As it happened, no one was killed, but during the fight as the bull horned the horse and knocked him to the earth, his rider fell under him and came in ace of being caught by the bull. The second bull killed four horses and severely wounded three or four others. It is an exciting and barbarous pastime, but the Mexicans go wild with delight over it. These animals are of the fiercest breed, raised in the wilds of Mexico and never allowed to see human faces until they are brought into the ring. (1894)

I am becoming very Mexicanized, take my pulque regularly for dinner and usually my siesta after dinner. Pulque is the national beverage. Am progressing fairly well toward a knowledge of the language. Can answer most calls at the store and converse a little. I have come to the conclusion about the hardest thing in the world to learn is a language. I am with a general house and am also learning some German. I study usually about two hours a day and on Sunday usually go to some suburban town to try to catch on to a little Spanish and learn something of their manners and customs, not that I approve of such on Sundays. The dominant religion here is Catholic, and we have a great many feast days or holidays. I don't object. But usually before going out on Sunday, I write to my [girl-friend]. We write to each other regularly every Sabbath at 9 o'clock. (undated)

By 1896, with the “great possibilities” apparently unrealized in Mexico, he took a job with a drugstore in Poplarville, Mississippi. It proved to be a disappointing move, and he soon relocated to New Orleans. There he represented German chemical manufacturers to druggists. His father, having retired from farming early in the decade joined Walter in Louisiana in October. They lived on North Rampart Street, and the elderly Kirksey at first took delight in cosmopolitan New Orleans. But in December, he wrote: “Times are hard here, and not much doing. Trade is sorry. I think the first good opportunity, we will leave this place.” He returned to Alabama to live with one of his daughters in Birmingham. Walter was reluctant to leave the wide world where he still aspired to build a successful career. He continued to write to his nieces:

I sent each of you [Maggie and Etta] a book last week—"Lady of the Lake" and "Bill-bye and Boomerang." Hope you'll enjoy them. There are many beautiful passages in the "Lady of the Lake," well worth remembering, memorizing. The music of this little poem is diverse and the story is a pretty one. Then you know Scott's thought and phraseology deserves to be not only read but studied. (1896)

I got after Grandpa in my last letter to go up to Eastaboga and go to see you all. He says you care nothing for him and have forgotten him, that you never even write. Surprise him once, girls. His no. is 2222 Ave. F, B'ham, Ala. Give him a good one. (1897)

I have two little nieces that I really feel proud of and I would not swap them for anybody's nieces. ... And say there, don't you think you are getting a little familiar on short acquaintance calling me Old Bachelor? If you keep at me after that fashion I'll get married at once. ... Oh! I bought me a mandolin and am learning to play. It's a nice little instrument. (1897)

That spring, Walter took a job as druggist in the commissary of Salmen Brick & Lumber in Slidell, just across Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans. In June, he wrote to Maggie: "Tomorrow I am 28 years of age. Join me in a little orison [wish] that ere one other birthday rolls round I will have found you a loving little auntie."

More than a year would pass without word from Uncle Walter. In September 1898, he was in Alabama long enough to get engaged to 23-year-old Agnes Weed (1876 to 1944), who lived with her family in Blue Eye, just west of Lincoln, near the Kirksey farm. They hastily made plans for an early October wedding at her parents' home. The Weed family, like the Kirkseys, were one of the earliest to settle in that northernmost corner of Talladega County. Breaking his silence, Walter wrote to Jim English three weeks before the wedding: "I have always thought, Mr. English, that if ever I married ... that I would like to have an honest man for best man, if best man he may be called in this instance, for it's going to be a very quiet affair. But such a one would be a comfort in my last hours of single wretchedness, and I hope that you can see your way clear to be with me."

In a letter to Maggie, who was only one year younger than Agnes, Walter described his bride-to-be: "She's not a beauty...nor has she a 'finished' education, but she possesses to a marked degree those rare traits of character found in a good wife and loving companion and that are the real source of comfort and relief from the many cares and vexations of life... What is life without love? A barren and fruitless waste not worth the living. I have seen many phases of life and I hope that my experience will profit me in this step. Can you not join me in that hope? ...I fear that you feel too much like a stranger toward me." It is unclear why he anticipated Maggie's disapproval, but it proved correct. He went on to ask a favor of his nieces: "And Dear Girls, if you could allow grandpa to stay with you for a few days, twould be a great relief to me. He will live at Lincoln as soon as it can be arranged."

Walter was astounded by Jim English's response: "I hardly know what to say at your refusal to be with me at my marriage at Lincoln Oct. the 4th—don't suppose that any comment is in order except to say that it seems that all my kin have deserted me. I have absolutely no one to accompany me to home of Miss Agnes, and it is now too late to get anyone. Your ideas were very exalted concerning Best Man. If I mistake not, it has always been the custom for someone to accompany the groom to the home of his affianced, and it will seem to me very awkward to go alone. But as there is now no alternative, I suppose I shall have to do this. There will be not one of my folks present."

There is no record of why Jim English refused to take part, or if he changed his mind.

Immediately after the wedding, Walter and his bride took a train to New Orleans. She stayed a short time, with the understanding that he would return to Lincoln after a few months. In December, he wrote to Maggie and Etta from

New Orleans to let them know Agnes intended to visit them at Christmas: "I have been trying to get her to visit you to get acquainted with her. For when we get settled down in our little home, wherever it may be, I want you successively according to age to visit us. And I will promise to find you each a worthy fellow." Before closing, he added: "I think you really should have gone to see her first." After the letter was read, its three pages were folded and ripped in half. This was the last of Maggie's letters from Uncle Walt. Christmas came and went without the intended visit. In January, Agnes very graciously wrote to the nieces she still had not met to say that Walter had recently returned for a short stay and regretted not having seen them.

In March 1899, Walter was in Plaquemine, Louisiana, eighty miles west of New Orleans, when his father moved in with him. By then, Grandpa Kirksey had become a pathetic figure, without a penny to his name nor a home in which to live out his last years. When Plaquemine proved to be, as he put it, "nearly the worst place on earth," he and Walter moved to New Orleans. There, A.O. wrote to Maggie and Etta, addressing them as "me dearest granddaughters" and describing his dire situation:

"[I] am worse dissatisfied than ever was in my life, sick all the time and no way to get away from here. I have no money; Walter has none. He has traveled out and paid house rents and eat up all his funds. He is now working at \$50 dollars per month. He is trying to locate himself permanent. If he makes the arrangement, he will stay in the city several years. Children, if I don't get help soon I think I will be buried here among the offscourings [outcasts] of this globe right in the mud and matter where all of them are buried. I have no heart to write, no desire to live, plumb out of heart.... I wish someone would send me to come back to the old country before I have to go to the unknown world. I wish Pa could see you all once more."

As a postscript, he asked them to intercede on his behalf with their father to make arrangements for his return. It is possible that Jim English did so. When the 1900 federal census was taken the following June, Grandpa Kirksey was listed as residing with the English family in Munford. How long he shared their home is unknown. That same census tells us that Walter and Agnes were reunited and living in Blue Eye with her parents. He was working locally as a druggist.

In 1909, Uncle Walt wrote to his niece Etta: "It is only too true that my Dear Old Father has passed to the 'Great Beyond.' Defeated this life Thursday, February 4th at 9:45 a.m. Was buried Friday the 5th at noon at the old home. This leaves only the 13th.⁸ Pray for me and for his soul." Albert Oscar Kirksey was born and raised in plantation comfort and prosperity, and died, 87 years later, with nothing to his name but the plot where he was finally laid to rest. In 1910, Walter registered a patent for what he called a "Coin and Letter Holder for Rural Mail-Boxes."

Walter and Agnes were the parents of six children: Ethel May (1902), Paul (1903), James Isaac (1904), Thomas A. (1907), Grace (1911) and Walter Sidney (1914). During this time they moved to a small farm on Crawford Street in Lincoln, while Walter ran his own dry goods business. In 1930, Walter, age 60, identified himself to the census taker as a farmer. He had yearned for what he called "a life of reflection" and aimed to have "done something in the world," only to return to the place where he was born and till its soil. He, no doubt, entertained his children with tales of bullfights and urged them to read and become "bright lights." One son, 29-year-old James Kirksey, was elected mayor of Lincoln in 1933 and is credited with the construction of the city's first municipal water supply system through the Roosevelt administration's WPA. This would have pleased Albert, had he lived to see it. He died in 1932, at age 62, and was buried at the city cemetery in Lincoln.

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8. This implies incorrectly that Albert had outlived all but one of his siblings and half siblings.