

# THE FIRST NATIONAL BANK OF SMYRNA, TENNESSEE AND

*John Norman Barnett*

by CHARLES A. DEAN

**S**MYRNA, Tennessee is located along U.S. Highway 41 (Dixie Highway) about 20 miles south of Nashville and about 12 miles north of Murfreesboro. Smyrna was established in 1851 as a way station on the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad that was being built through the area. The railroad named the way station after the Smyrna Presbyterian Church that had been located in the area for about 40 years. The church, in turn, had derived its name from one of the seven churches of Asia mentioned in the Apocalypse of St. John.

When the first train to Murfreesboro came through Smyrna on July 4, 1851, most of the residents from the surrounding area came out to marvel at the new mode of transportation. The Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad owned the land around the way station. The railroad divided the area into 64 lots and sold them to the public around 1859.

At the beginning of 1861 most of the residents of Smyrna were against secession, but after the events of April most people sided with their home state when, in June, Tennessee became the last state to secede from the Union. After Nashville fell to Federal forces under General Don Carlos Buell on February 25, 1862 the area just south of Nashville, including Smyrna, was subjected to several Union foraging expeditions. In late December 1862 Smyrna area residents witnessed Union General William S. Rosecrans' Army of the Cumberland advance from Nashville through the area on its way to Murfreesboro to engage Confederate General Braxton Bragg's Army of Tennessee at the Battle of Stones River, December 31, 1862-January 2, 1863. After Bragg's withdrawal to the south from Murfreesboro, the railroad bridges north and south of Smyrna were guarded by Federal troops.

Smyrna's most famous citizen was Sam Davis. Davis was captured by Union forces near Pulaski, Tennessee with secret military information hidden in his boot. After refusing to betray his friends by revealing where he obtained the papers, he was branded a spy and hung on November 27, 1863. Sam Davis has been known ever since as the "Boy hero of the Confederacy."

Confederate forces entered the area again in early December 1864, when General John Bell Hood invaded Tennessee and sent General Nathan Bedford Forrest toward Murfreesboro. After three days of operations around Murfreesboro, Forrest

withdrew and the area never again saw a large Confederate force.

When the war ended in the Spring of 1865 the area around Smyrna, like most of the South, was in physical and economic ruin. Residents struggled for several years to return to normalcy.

Smyrna was incorporated by the Tennessee legislature on December 10, 1869, but later, because of a technicality, the incorporation was repealed on February 28, 1881. The town was not incorporated again until May 5, 1915.

Banking for Smyrna residents was difficult since the closest banks were located in Nashville and Murfreesboro. Realizing that this was an impediment to progress, some of the leading citizens decided to form their own bank. Thus, the Bank of Smyrna, a state chartered bank, was opened for business in 1904. The bank had a capital of \$25,000 with 20 of the leading citizens of Smyrna serving as directors. John S. Gooch, a former Lieutenant Colonel in the Confederate 20th Tennessee Regiment, served as president. On March 1, 1908 the bank changed its name to the Peoples Bank of Smyrna. In 1910 the bank contracted for a new building in which to conduct its business. The bank applied for a national charter, and in July of 1910 the bank was granted Charter 9807 and changed its name to The First National Bank of Smyrna.

In 1914 John Norman Barnett started working at the bank. Mr. Barnett's name was soon to become synonymous with The First National Bank of Smyrna.

PLEASE BRING THIS NOTICE WITH YOU.

*M. L. W. Davis*

Your note for \$ *500.00* will be due at

**BANK OF SMYRNA,**

SMYRNA, TENN.

*Feb 16* 190*6*, which is the last day of grace.

No. \_\_\_\_\_

Bank of Smyrna promissory note notice of 1906.

John Norman Barnett was born on August 2, 1891 in the Fellowship Community near Smyrna, Tennessee. He was the only son of William Thomas and Mary Jane (Hunter) Barnett. Mr. Barnett went by his middle name of Norman. He attended public school in Rockdale, Tennessee through the 8th grade. Mr. Barnett was a farmer until 1907, when he became a Bible salesman for two years. Then, he was a school teacher from 1909–1913, earning \$1.25 a day.

The elder Barnett had \$5000 on deposit in the First National Bank for Norman to start his own business. In the early spring of 1914 Norman Barnett got on his mule and rode nine miles into Smyrna, intending to withdraw the money and go into business for himself. At that time, the withdrawal of that sum of money from such a small bank would have necessitated its closing. Silas Hudson, the cashier of the First National Bank, offered Mr. Barnett a part time job at the bank, if he would keep the money on deposit. He accepted and started work on April 1, 1914. Mr. Barnett worked every other day with Mr. Hudson working the remaining three days of the week. This arrangement continued for sixteen months. Then one morning Mr. Barnett came to work and found a note from Mr. Hudson laying on his desk. The note said, "It's all yours. I quit." With that, Norman had a full time job. Jack B. Ewing then served as cashier for about six months, followed by Jack G. Batey.

On September 22, 1915 Norman Barnett married Jessie Seaton. They were married in front of the grandstands at the Tennessee State Fair in Nashville.

John Gooch continued to serve as President of the First National Bank until his death in December of 1916. After the death of Mr. Gooch, Will V. Smith served as president of the bank for five years. He was followed by John W. Brittain and still later by Walter C. Hibbett. In 1918 Mr. Barnett became the cashier of the First National Bank.

On February 12, 1923 the First National Bank was burglarized by cutting a hole in the vault door with a flame torch. Everything of value was taken in the burglary.

For the most part, Mr. Barnett ran the bank by himself. Bank examiners referred to the First National Bank of Smyrna as a one man bank.



First National Bank of Smyrna circa 1911. Silas Hudson, Jack Ewing, Jack Batey.

In the period from 1921 to 1931, 8000 state and national banks had gone under. Over 85% of these banks had a capital of less than \$100,000. The First National Bank of Smyrna, with a capital of \$25,000, was thus a prime candidate for failure. On December 31, 1930 deposits at the bank totaled \$152,032. By September 30, 1932 deposits had fallen to \$102,288.

In the early 1930s several large banks in Nashville and Murfreesboro failed. In early 1933 public lack of confidence in banks reached crisis proportions. On March 4, 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated as President of the United States. Two days later, Roosevelt declared a "Bank Holiday" and closed every bank in the country. He then asked Congress to pass the Emergency Banking Act. This Act provided for the examination and licensing of national banks. Licensed banks were allowed to reopen on March 16. Fourteen hundred national banks remained unlicensed. On reopening day the First National Bank had lost only one account of about \$600. By December 30, 1933 deposits had climbed to \$112,386. The crisis was over. Only the financial expertise of Mr. Barnett and the confidence of the citizens of Smyrna in him had saved the First National Bank.

On January 11, 1934 Walter C. Hibbett, president of the bank, died. Otis B. Coleman then became president on February 15, 1934.

In 1935 First National Bank bought out its competitor of 19 years, the Smyrna Bank & Trust Company. The First National Bank was located on the east side of the railroad that divides Smyrna. The Smyrna Bank & Trust was located directly across the tracks on the west side. Mr. Barnett placed the entire assets of the Smyrna Bank & Trust in a satchel, put it under his arm and walked across the railroad to the First National Bank.

In 1937 the bank was the victim of a daylight robbery. Mr. Coleman and Mr. Barnett were locked in the vault. The robber was later apprehended in Maury County, Tennessee.

Prior to 1941 First National Bank simply existed with deposits of only \$175,000 by that time. In 1941 the U.S. Army decided to build an Air Force base on the north side of Smyrna. The government started buying up farmland for the base and deposits at the bank started to climb. In 1942 the base opened and the future of the First National Bank was assured.

In 1950 the First National Bank was remodeled. The brick columns in front of the bank were removed and a new black façade added.

In an advertisement of February 1951 the bank boasted of being the only national bank in Rutherford County. It also advised that it was paying 2% on savings accounts.

On January 13, 1955 a robber entered the bank and fired a pistol shot into the ceiling. Mr. Barnett gave him \$6,374 and was, subsequently, locked in the vault, along with a customer. The robber was apprehended about four hours later, still in Smyrna.

On March 3, 1955 the bank was robbed again. This time the robber made off with \$1,474. He was apprehended about two months later.

The First National Bank continued to grow. By June 30, 1967 deposits had reached \$2,443,000. In 1968 the bank had eight employees to serve its customers.

On March 31, 1969 the First National Bank presented Mr. Barnett with a new Chevrolet automobile. This was in recognition of his 55 years of faithful service.

By 1970 the bank had outgrown the building where it had been conducting business for 60 years. Plans were drawn up for a new bank building to be constructed three blocks south



JOHN NORMAN BARNETT.



\$20 1929 TYPE ONE with the signature of J.N. Barnett, Cashier and W.C. Hibbett, President. In 27 years, this is the only National Bank Note on Smyrna that I have had a chance to buy.

of its old location. First National Bank moved into its modern building on July 7, 1971. A formal dedication and open house was held on Sunday, August 1, 1971.

Norman Barnett had three sons, William Thomas born May 1, 1919, Frank Kelly born May 1, 1921 and John Norman, Jr. born April 11, 1930. Starting in the 1960s his sons served as directors of the First National Bank. In 1973 Mr. Barnett and his sons sold their stock and he retired. Mr. Barnett had been employed by the bank for 59 years, at a job that he was not really looking for when he rode into town in 1914. That many years of service on one job is truly remarkable. Even more remarkable is the fact that Mr. Barnett only took six sick days in that time. Norman Barnett only failed once to open the First National Bank on time and that was because of high water.

Mr. Barnett believed in giving his customers personal service. He personally answered the telephone at the bank 95% of the time. Most of the time, when a customer came into the bank with a question about their account, he could give them an answer without having to look up the account. Mr. Barnett



Money bag from "The Greatest Little Bank in the Central South."

### Population of Smyrna

1910	220
1920	463
1930	531
1940	493
1950	1544
1960	3612
1970	5698
1980	8839
1990	13647

### National Bank Notes Issued

#### Third Charter, Date Back, Blue Seal

5-5-5-5	Serial 1-615
10-10-10-20	Serial 1-494

#### Third Charter, Plain Back, Blue Seal

5-5-5-5	Serial 616-1462
10-10-10-20	Serial 495-1041

#### 1929 Type I

5-5-5-5-5-5	Serial 1-337
10-10-10-10-10-10	Serial 1-193
20-20-20-20-20-20	Serial 1-49

Total amount of circulation issued	\$108,860
Amount outstanding in 1935	\$ 6,250
Amount of large-size notes outstanding in July 1935	\$ 250
Number of large-size notes issued	10,012
Number of small-size notes issued	3,474 *
Total number of notes issued	13,486

\* There were 105 national banks in Tennessee that issued Series of 1929 notes. The First National Bank of Smyrna issued the fourth lowest total number of notes.

even boasted that he knew his customers so well that he knew what they ate for breakfast. He managed the bank very conservatively, only loaning out one-third of the deposits. The rest he kept in bonds and in the process, became a shrewd bond trader.

Since prior to working at the bank Norman Barnett had held several jobs, his mother decided to give him an incentive to stay at the bank. She told him that if he would stay on the job for six months, she would give him a fountain pen. I am sure

**Number of Notes Known****Large-size  
Series of 1902**

None

**Small-Size  
Series of 1929**

	Serial Number	
\$10	E000179A	VG
\$10	F000183A	G
\$10	F000188A	F-VF
\$20	C000033A	VF

that if she knew how long he stayed at the bank, she would be very proud.

Mr. Barnett was the only banker who had his signature affixed to national bank notes, that I personally knew. He always had a smile and was very cheerful. I never saw him when he was not immaculately dressed; and with his gray hair, he was the epitome of a small town Southern gentleman banker.

In 1977 the First National Bank opened a branch office in Murfreesboro. At the same time, it changed its name to the First National Bank of Rutherford County.

After he retired from the bank Mr. Barnett maintained an office in Smyrna from which he conducted his personal business. On April 26, 1984 John Norman Barnett, who for so many years really was the First National Bank of Smyrna, died.

In January of 1985 the First National Bank of Rutherford County was bought out by the Third National Bank in Nashville. The name was then changed to the Third National Bank of Rutherford County. Thus ends the story of a unique small town bank, whose nickname was "The Greatest Little Bank in the Central South."

Anyone wishing to report additional national bank notes from Smyrna, Tennessee is invited to contact me at P.O. Box 140262, Nashville, Tennessee 37214.

**Sources**

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**Acknowledgments**

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**TEXAS** (Continued from page 142)

A.R. Davis died in 1967 at the age of ninety-one. An elementary school in the Garland Independent School District was named in his honor.

**REFERENCE**

Garland Local History and Genealogical Society—Volume Five, Number Two. July 1977.

**DANIEL** (Continued from page 140)

Treas. of the U. S., was donated by Col. White to the State Hist. Soc. The said bill, attached to this paper, was placed on exhibition in the museum. It was stolen out of the case. The loss was first discovered by me in January, 1923. Melvin R. Gilmore, Curator."

That is the only record found of the missing \$1. note. I leafed through what seemed the appropriate file folders of Curator Gilmore's correspondence but found no file copy of any letter acknowledging the receipt of such a \$1 bill. The museum registrar found no record of it in either the acquisitions or missing files. A possible explanation could be that the note was presented personally and no written acknowledgment was considered necessary. Since it is unknown whether the note was a silver certificate or a United States note or what serial number it carried, none of the eight possible notes can be identified as the missing \$1, note if, by chance, it should be in someone's collection.

**ENDNOTE:**

- I. According to the description of Lot 478 in the Currency Auctions of America, Inc., sale, October 27-28, 1995, a \$200 shortage of \$10 silver certificates from the Bureau of Engraving and Printing came to light on December 12, 1896, and United States Treasurer Daniel N. Morgan made up the shortage from his personal funds.

**SUPPLEMENT XX** (Continued from page 150)**UNREPORTED CHARTERS**

TX	14072	Falfurrias
	14126	Groesbeck
VT	7614	Enosburg Falls
	13261	Poultney
VA	7208	Gate City
	11533	Tazewell
	13878	Onancock
WA	3862	Yakima
	8639	Kelso
	9576	Zillah
	10407	Tonasket
	14166	Tonasket
WV	7672	Pineville
	8333	Gary
	9523	Alderson
	10392	Anawalt
	10759	Ravenswood
	11502	Kimball
	13505	Gary
	13783	Marlinton
WI	8632	Rio