

Monticello, the 1872 Denham Inn, and me

by Dave Tolle

Monticello: First time

The first time we moved to Monticello, Florida, I was four or five months old. It was the fall of 1947, and Dad taught in the junior high school (probably English and social studies). We rented a room in Miss Puleston's house. (Her brother, [William Dilworth Puleston](#), was a well-regarded naval officer and author, who served in both world wars. I don't think I ever met him.)



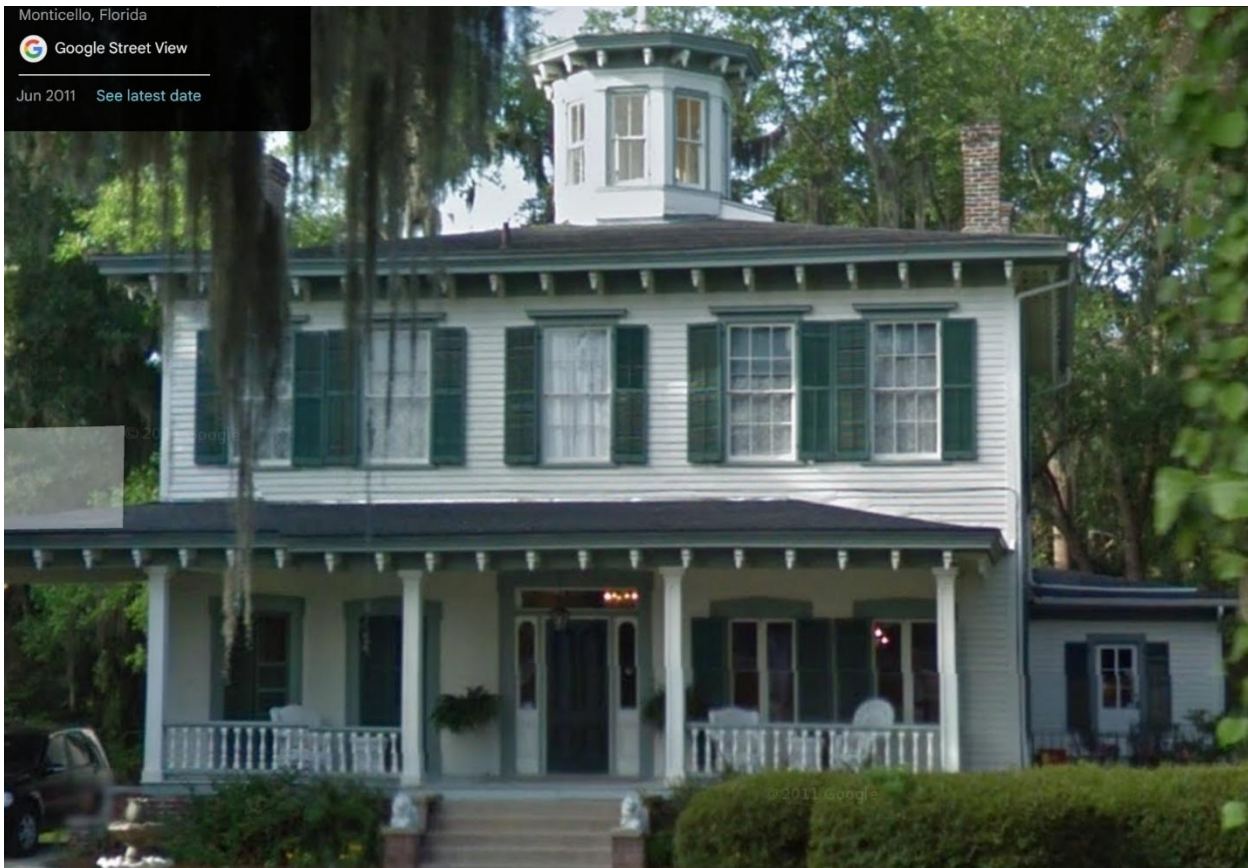
Some years later, perhaps when I was a young teenager, my parents and I visited Miss Puleston at her house in Monticello. She was very old and very ill at the time, and we were saddened to find her in that condition.

After Dad taught for one year in Monticello (1947-48), we moved to Tallahassee, and Dad started working on his Ed.D. at Florida State University (1948-49).

Monticello: Second time

In the summer of 1949 we moved back to Monticello, and Dad served as the principal of the high school (and supervising principal of all the schools in Jefferson County) for two years (1949-50 and 1950-51).

For that two-year period, our landlord was Mrs. Ollie Lacy, who built, for us to rent, a small house behind her mansion. (I believe she built three or four such little rental houses behind the mansion.)



The front of the mansion six decades later (Google Street View, 2011)

I have memories from that time and place. I was two-and-a-half years old when we moved there, and a bit over four when we left.



This is me at age 2^{1/2}, with my new fire engine and my puppy at Christmas time in 1949. (Photo taken in either Monticello or Tallahassee.)

The little house we lived in was just across the alleyway (or driveway) from the elementary school, which was adjacent to the high school. I loved walking over to the elementary school playground and playing with the kids when they were at recess. I recall the boys picking on me and the girls protecting me.

I do not recall standing outside the classroom windows and distracting the students, but I'm told that I did (and was forced to quit doing that).

I believe I do recall wandering inside the building and sitting on a bench one time and being kindly asked by someone (the janitor?) whether I was waiting for somebody. I think I said I was, but I don't remember what happened next.

These photos show me at age 2^{1/2} in front of the little house that Mrs. Lacy built to rent to us, behind the mansion.



Near the playground was a small shack with a ticket window (perhaps for high school football games), and I found it challenging to climb in through the window and go out the door. I got better at it over time. I vaguely recall some boys trapping me inside one time.

I remember one boy in particular at recess, who said that if I gave him a dime today he'd give me a dollar on Friday. I was innocent enough to believe him, and I think I gave him one. I'm sure I never got a dollar in return. I don't remember his name now (his first name may have been Jimmy), but decades later when I did still remember his name, I read in a newspaper that he was in prison.

Mrs. Lacy

I have vague memories of Mrs. Lacy as a friendly older woman. My strongest memory of her is that at least once she baked a delicious cake (it was sweet and had slices of banana), and she shared it with us in her house.

From census records, it seems likely that Mrs. Lacy was the widow of a farmer named Jim Lacy, that her maiden name was Ollie Sheffield, and that she was born in about 1906 or 1907. She was thus in her early-to-mid-forties when we lived on her property behind the mansion.

This is an excerpt (sheet 76, lines 20, 21, 22) from the 1950 census of Monticello, Florida. It shows Donald J. Tolle and Mary Alice Tolle and me (Donald MacDavid Tolle, with my middle name misspelled as McDavid). The sheet is dated 4/14/1950, so I was one week short of turning 3 years old:

20	172	no	Tolle, Donald J	Head	w	M	31	mar	Kansas
21			—, Mary Alice	Wife	w	F	30	mar	Florida
22			—, Donald McDavid	Son	w	M	2	new	Florida

Evidently, two days earlier, on 4/12/1950, my parents were not at home when the census taker came by, but Mrs. Lacy was, and she and her 64-year-old mother, Irene Sheffield, were living in the mansion on Palmer Mill Road:

25	171		not at home	See sheet	76	Line	16				
26	172		not at home	See sheet	76	Line	20				
27	173	no	yes	5	Lacy, Ollie S	Head	w	F	43	wd	Florida
28					Sheffield, Irene	Mother	w	F	64	wd	Georgia
29	174		not at home	See sheet	75	Line	17				
30	175		not at home	See sheet	75	Line	15				

Ten years earlier, the 1940 census of Jefferson County showed Mrs. Lacy as a housewife living on "Rt. #1 Monticello" on a farm, with her farmer husband Jim Lacy.

Lacy, Jim (X)	Head	0	M	W	40	M	NO	H2	10	7 Florida
Lacy, Ollie	Wife	1	F	W	34	M	NO	H4	30	7 Florida

History of the Denham-Lacy Mansion

As of this writing (October, 2025) the mansion mentioned above is a bed-and-breakfast inn, known as the [1872 Denham Inn](#) (or the Denham-Lacy house). Its street address is 555 W Palmer Mill Rd, Monticello, FL 32344.

In 1982, one hundred and ten years after the mansion was built, it was approved for listing on the National Historic Register as the Denham-Lacy House. [The 1980 nomination form](#) lists Mrs. Ollie Lacy as the owner of the house. Here is the history of the house, as laid out in the nomination form (bolding is mine):

Throughout its century of existence, the Denham-Lacy house and property has been owned by Monticello citizens who were active in the development of their city, county, and state. In 1834 **Martin Palmer**, one of Monticello's first settlers, bought the land on which the house is built. Palmer bequeathed the property to his son, Dr. Thomas Palmer, one of the many Palmer family physicians. **In 1871, Dr. Palmer sold the land to his good friend and twice brother-in-law, John Denham.**

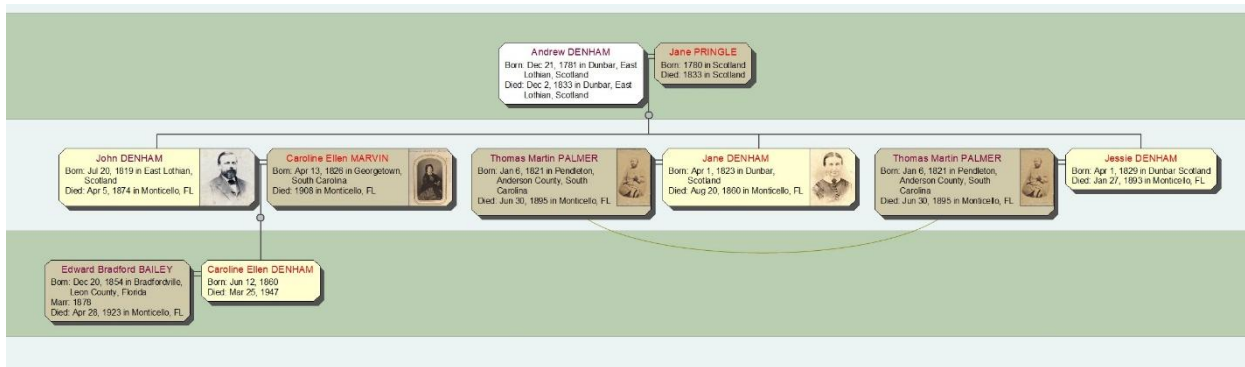
Scottish-born John Denham was an ante-bellum Monticello businessman and cotton merchant. By the time Denham purchased the property for the house which bears his name, he was a Florida representative of the New York firm of H. L. Rich and Co.. In 1872 he served on the Jefferson County Commission. Denham is credited with building the house sometime prior to his death in 1874. In 1883, Denham's widow, Caroline Denham, sold the house to Samuel J. Turnbull.

Like John Denham, Samuel Turnbull also was active in north Florida politics. An unsuccessful candidate for the legislature in 1878, Turnbull, during his residency in the Denham house, finally realized his political ambitions. In 1885, he served in the Constitutional Convention. Four years later, he fulfilled one term in the Florida House of Representatives.

Samuel Turnbull married twice, once to Rose Amelia Williams in January 1860, and again to Virginia C. Finlavson in November 1865. Reference to the "old Virginia C. Turnbull residence lot" is noted in the 1946 deed record, but the persistence of Virginia Turnbull's name is probably due to her longevity rather than to any outstanding civic contribution. Samuel Turnbull died in 1897, Virginia Turnbull in 1913. Dr. W. E. and Mary Williams acquired the house in 1917. The next and present owner was **Mrs. Ollie Lacy**, who purchased the house in 1946. Until recently, her son, Jefferson County Judge Charles A. Anderson, made his home at the Denham-Lacy house.

The Palmer and Denham families in Monticello

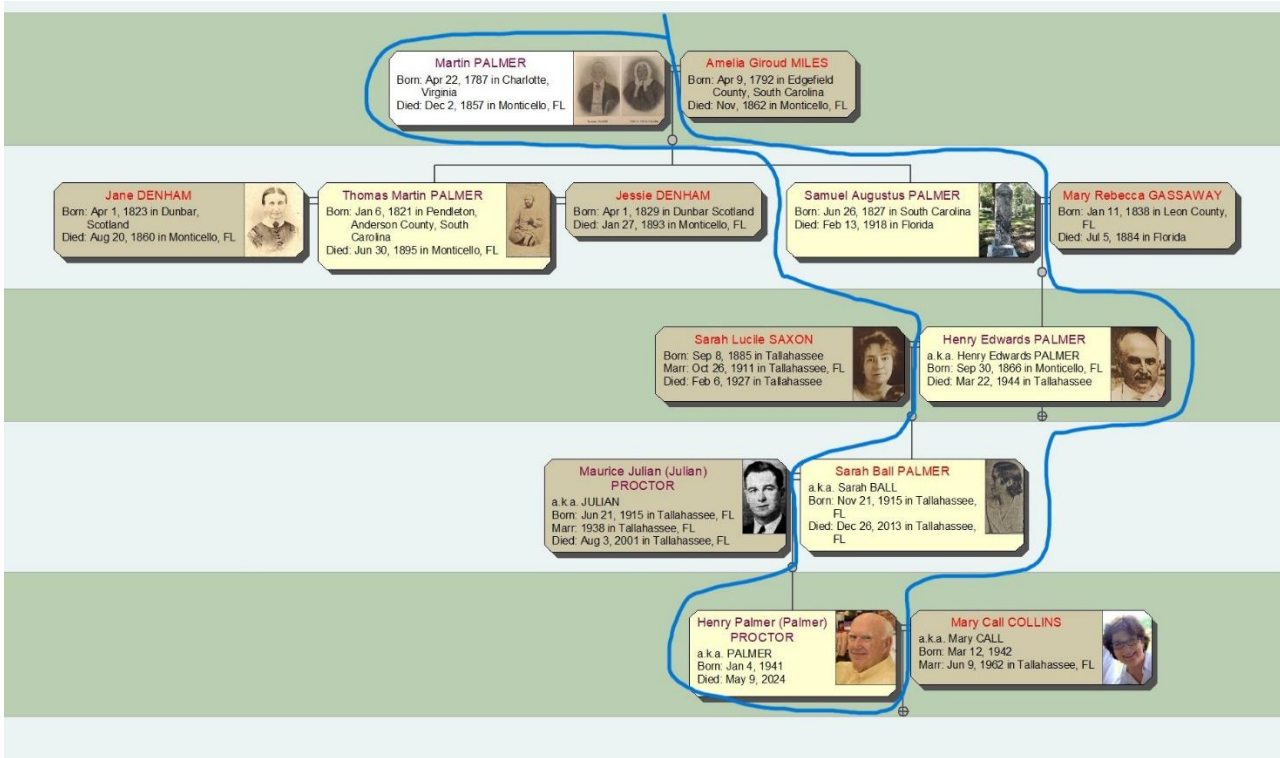
The Denham and Palmer families were linked by friendship and marriage. John Denham and his wife and his two sisters and his twice brother-in-law Thomas Palmer all lived and died in Monticello.



The Palmer, Proctor, Saxon, McNeill, Tolle family connections

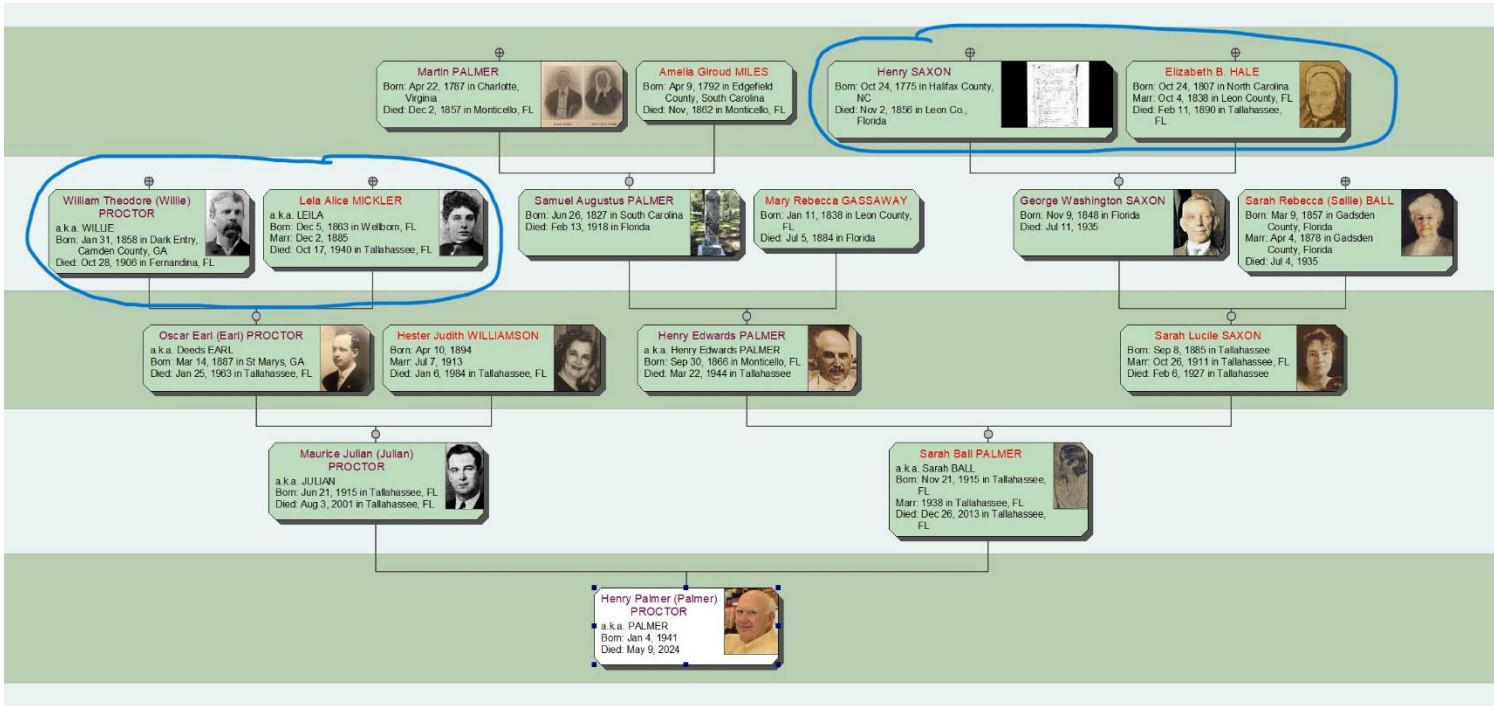
When I read the history of the mansion, the name “Martin Palmer” struck a chord with me. I have a second cousin named “Palmer Proctor,” and I wondered if there might be a family connection to the mansion. There is. Six of my Tallahassee cousins (Palmer Proctor and his five siblings), are great-great grandchildren of Martin Palmer. These six Tallahassee cousins are the children of Sarah Ball Palmer and Julian Proctor, both of whom are cousins of mine: Julian Proctor is my first cousin, once removed; Sarah Ball Palmer is my second cousin, twice removed.

Martin Palmer, who bought the land in 1834, had at least two sons: the one he left the land to (Dr. Thomas Palmer), and another: Samuel Augustus Palmer. This chart shows the descent from Martin Palmer to my second cousin Palmer Proctor:



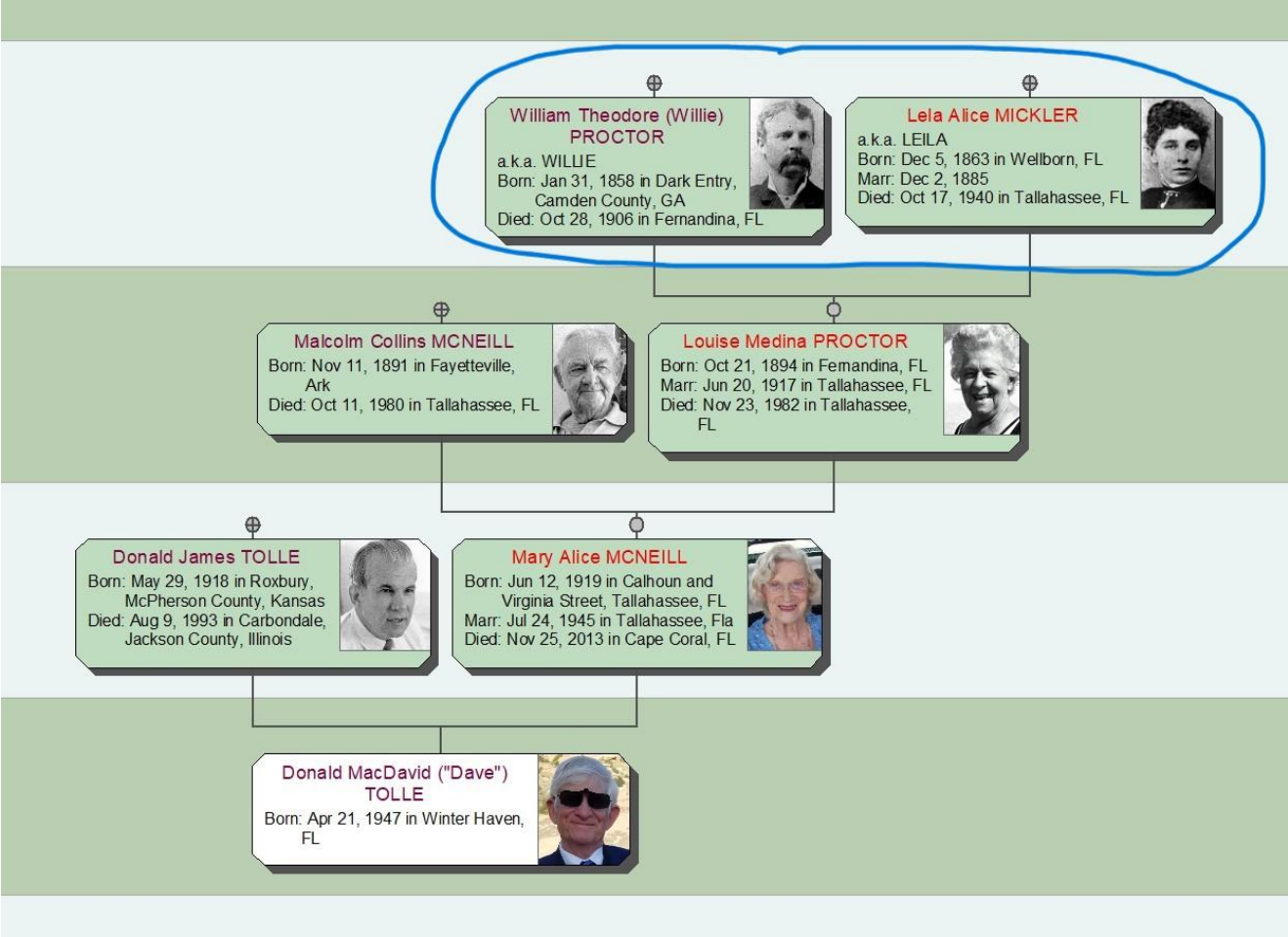
Palmer Proctor, unfortunately, died last year. (His widow, Mary Call Collins, by the way, is the daughter of Leroy Collins, former Governor of Florida.)

This chart shows more of Palmer Proctor's ancestry:

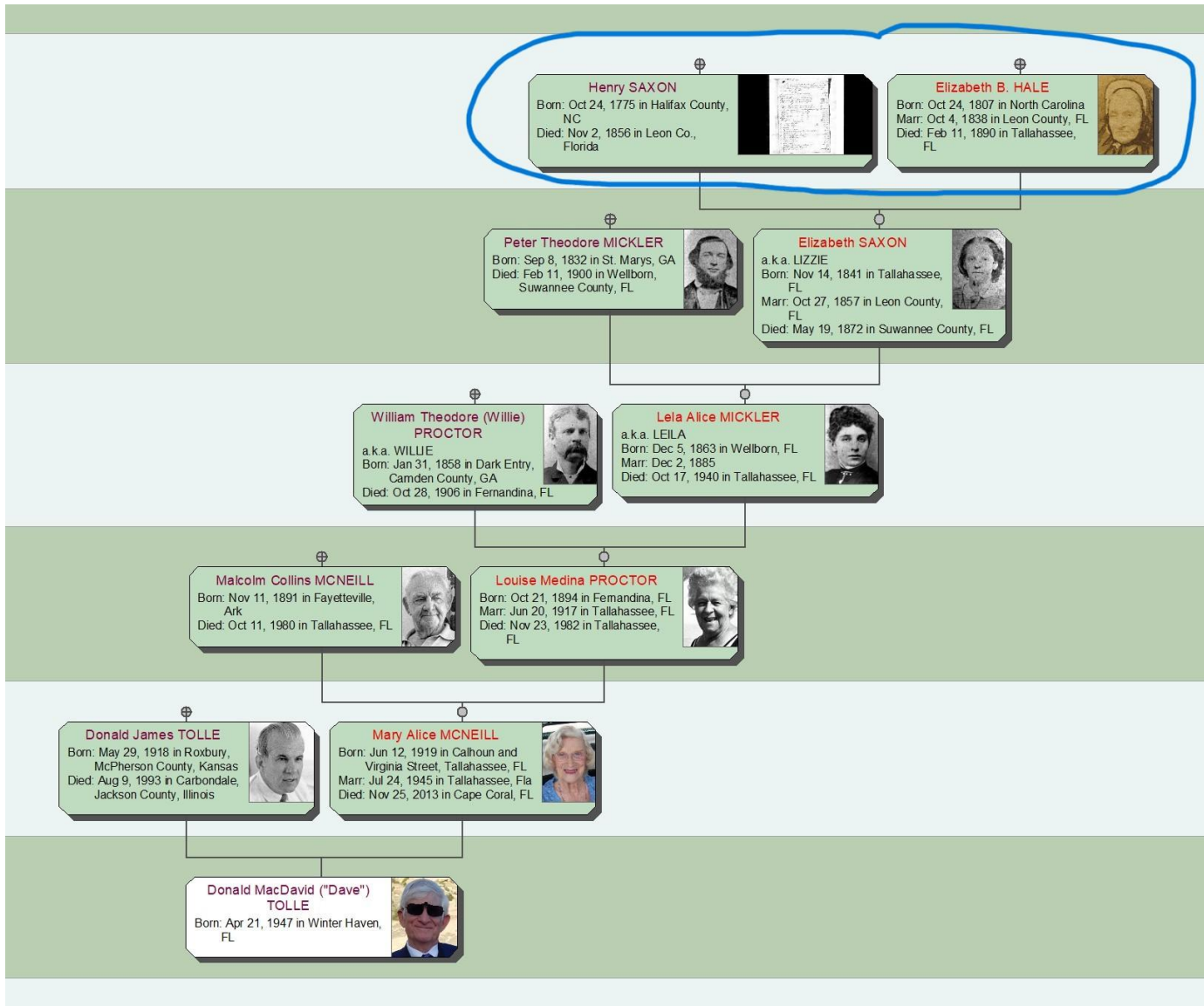


His Proctor great grandparents are also my Proctor great grandparents. And his Saxon great-great grandparents are my Saxon great-great-great grandparents.

Here are my Proctor great-grandparents:



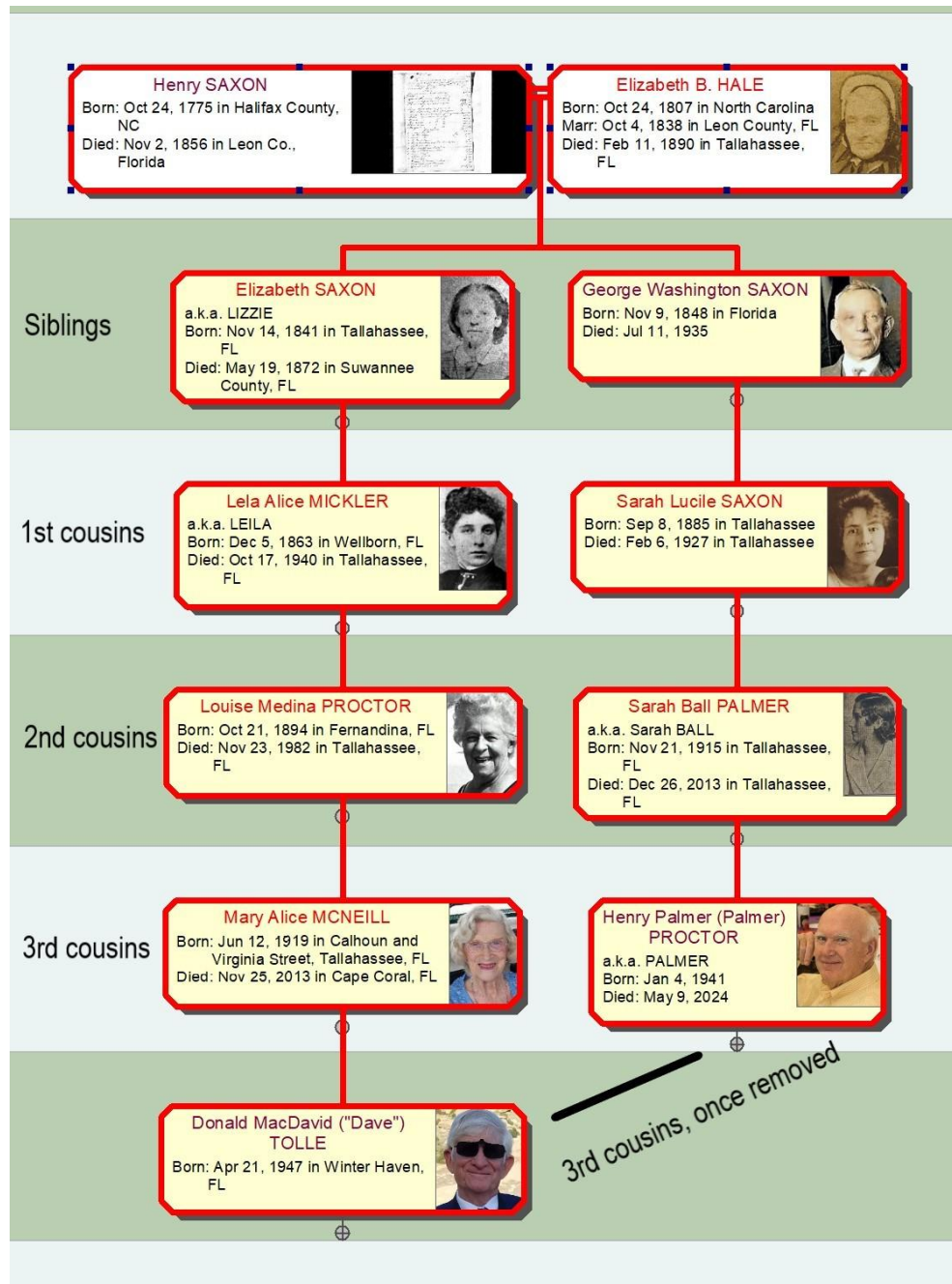
Here are my Saxon great-great-grandparents:



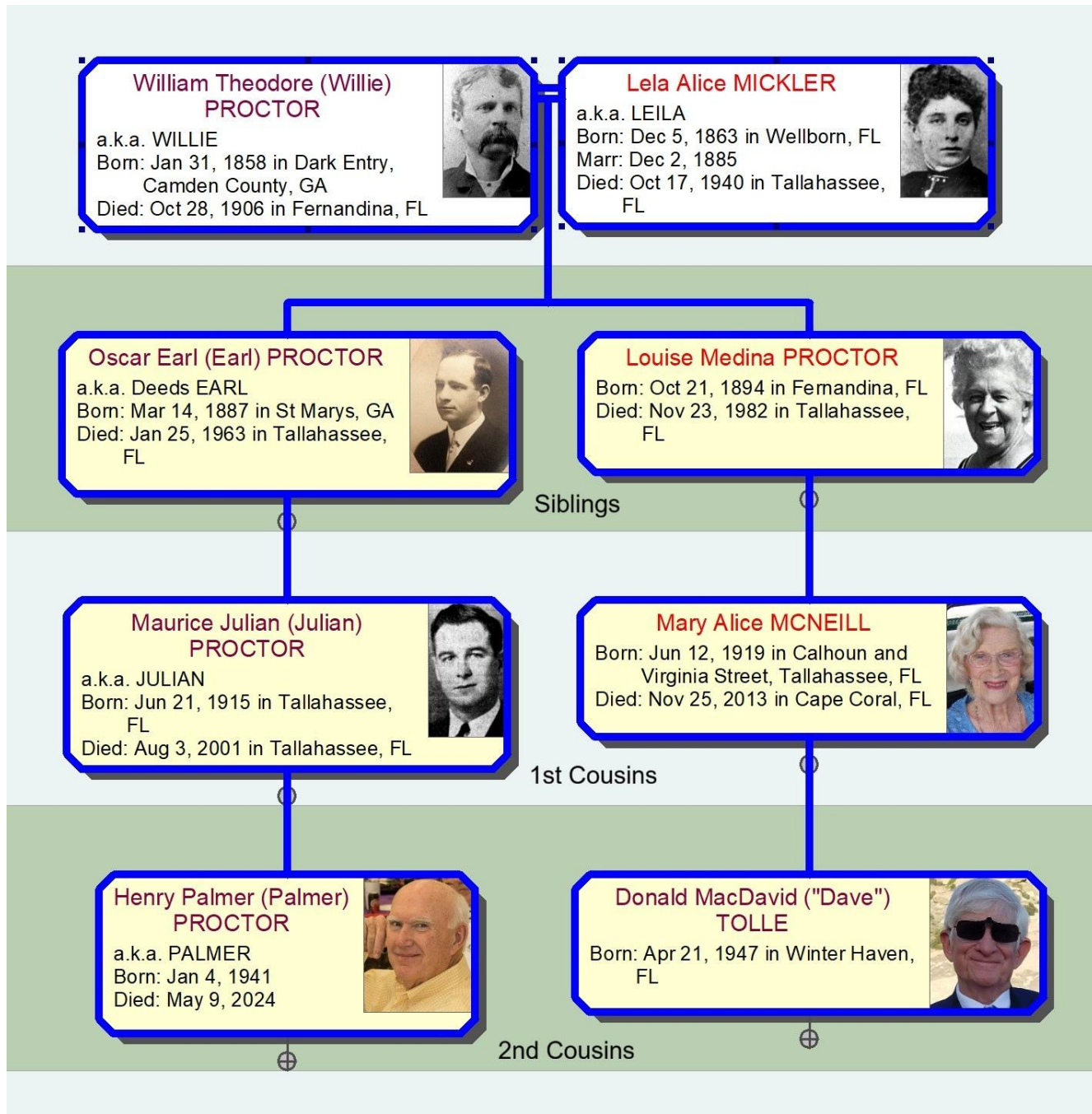
In Summary

Here are my connections to the 1872 Denham Inn in Monticello, Florida:

- (1) My parents and I lived on the property behind the mansion for two years (1949-1951). I was very young then, but I do remember the mansion and a few events from that time and place.
- (2) I am doubly connected (through his mother and through his father) to Palmer Proctor, a great-great grandson of Martin Palmer, who bought the property in 1834. My mother, Mary Alice McNeill Tolle, was a third cousin of Palmer Proctor, through his mother, thus making me a third cousin, once removed, of Palmer Proctor and his five siblings.



Furthermore, my mother was a first cousin of Palmer Proctor's father, Julian Proctor, thus making me a second cousin of Palmer Proctor and his five siblings, all of whom are great-great grandchildren of Martin Palmer.



I did not know about any of these Palmer/Proctor/Saxon family connections to the 1872 Denham Inn until a few weeks ago.

Dave Tolle (Donald MacDavid Tolle)
DaveTolle@acm.org
DaveTolle@davetolle.com
 October, 2025