

Montgomery Bell Tennessee Frontier Capitalist

By John P. Williams

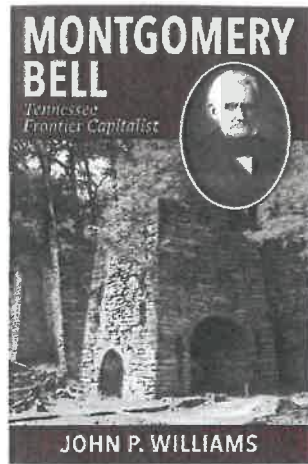
Reviewed by
Suzanne Craig Robertson

The amount of research that Nashville lawyer John P. Williams put into writing *Montgomery Bell: Tennessee Frontier Capitalist* is remarkable, not only in scope and detail, but also persistence. Including personal interviews, archives, old files, newspapers and travel — he even attended a Bell family reunion! — Williams has put together the only all-encompassing, full-length biography of this major figure of Tennessee history.

Williams' book explores Bell's life (1769-1855) and business ventures and the impact both had on the iron industry. Because of his business efforts and instincts, he helped make Tennessee the third highest iron-producing state by the mid-1800s.

Organized by topic, the book covers Bell's start in Pennsylvania as a hat maker and tracks him through Kentucky to Tennessee, where he experimented with various industries. But it was his innovative work with iron production that earned him a place in history. Bell created and profitably ran several iron furnaces for many years in Middle Tennessee, beginning with the Cumberland Furnace that he bought in 1804. The book follows the incredible transformations and subsequent ownerships of Cumberland Furnace, all the way through its closure in 1942.

His other business endeavors are detailed, including perhaps the most innovative, the Narrows of the Harpeth Tunnel in Cheatham County. Calling the tunnel an engineering marvel,



Williams describes the genius of how the tunnel was created between two sections of the Harpeth River, “representing the first application of rock tunneling technology to the field of water power.” The tunnel, created to power Bell's Pattison Forge, is now Harpeth River State Park, where hikers and kayakers can enjoy its inventive and natural beauty. It is worth the drive just past the edge of western Davidson County to see it.

Like most industry in the area and at that time, the labor was done by enslaved people. Bell used them throughout most of his career, but toward the end of his life had a change of heart. The book spends significant time on Bell's desire to free many of the people he had enslaved.

The Tennessee laws for how a slave-owner could free his slaves in the early to mid-1800s are both tedious and horrifying, and we learn how Bell did what was needed to accomplish that. For instance, among the state's disincentives for emancipation: once slaves were freed, they were not allowed to stay in the state. The fear was that a freed slave remaining in the vicinity would cause an uprising from those still in captivity. By 1854, the legislature passed a law stating that all enslaved who were freed “shall be transported to the western coast of

Africa.”

So sometime in the 1830s, Bell arranged for a ship to take his former slaves and others to a new African colony, iron-rich Liberia. Williams notes that Bell sent with them tools so they could use the skills they had learned while enslaved to him, describing the people as “mechanics, miners, colliers, moulders, and fully competent to build a furnace for making iron and carrying it on themselves.”

Bell is described as what we would call a workaholic today, and apparently did not have much of a personal life. He was, however, fiercely loyal to his nine siblings, having helped raise the children of one sister, but little is written about his own immediate family. He never married but fathered two daughters, in 1808 and 1838, with two different women. The first daughter, Evelina, married Bell's nephew, and they had 13 children. The second, Patsy, who was an enslaved woman, had a daughter, Lucy, when Bell was almost 70.

As a successful businessman, Bell from time to time found himself in litigation, such as ownership disputes and debt and collection disputes. In addition to six lawsuits filed in Williamson County against him, there were 10 that he had filed against others. In nearby Dickson County, where Bell transacted most of his business, there were 40 suits filed against him between 1804 and 1828. When Bell lost, Williams writes, he often appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court of Errors and Appeals, usually represented by Nashville attorney Francis B. Fogg. Bell won four and lost three cases appealed to the Tennessee Supreme Court. One case went to the U.S. Supreme Court, as Bell sued to recover the value of iron castings sold to a Kentucky defendant.

The book also details Bell's last will and testament, notably in which he provided \$20,000 to start a school for

boys to be called Montgomery Bell Academy, a Nashville institution that thrives to this day.

In addition to the state park bearing his name and other land masses, towns and communities (for example, Bell's Bend, Bellsburg, Bell Town, Cumberland Furnace), another institution that lives on is an iconic restaurant. Bell's daughter Lucy had seven children, the youngest of whom married Robert Lee Simpkins Swett. Their fourth child, Walter Swett, founded Swett's Restaurant in Nashville in 1954. The family has carried on the tradition and still today you can go there for a delicious meat-n-three dinner.

To achieve this master work memorializing Montgomery Bell's life and accomplishments, Williams spent more than two years interviewing countless descendants and traveled to many places in Tennessee, as well as Pennsylvania, Kentucky and research by phone to Maryland. He utilized collections at the Tennessee State Library & Archives, public libraries, and those at Lipscomb University, Vanderbilt University, Rhodes College and Montgomery Bell Academy. He even took most of the photographs in the book. This short review cannot do justice to the amount of information Williams has collected — it is fascinating reading — so that we can easily learn about Montgomery Bell's accomplishments and contributions. ■■■

SUZANNE CRAIG ROBERTSON is author of *He Called Me Sister: A True Story of Finding Humanity on Death Row* (Morehouse Press, 2023) and a former editor of the *Tennessee Bar Journal*. She spent her childhood visiting Montgomery Bell State Park, the Narrows of the Harpeth and Swett's Restaurant, not knowing the full significance of these landmarks until reading this book.

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