

HISTORY OF CHEROKEE COUNTY, ALABAMA

part 1

In 1836 they saw Halley's Comet, Texans fighting Santa Ana at the Alamo, the first Colt revolver, and the invention of the phosphorous match. Andrew Jackson was President. The Alabama state capitol was in Tuscaloosa, and ... on January 9, 1836 Cherokee County, Alabama was created by the state legislature.

THE EARLY INHABITANTS

The Cherokee Indians inhabited an area which included what is now north Alabama, north Georgia, a large part of Tennessee and eastern North Carolina. In Cherokee County, Alabama, at a city on the Coosa River (near the present day city of Cedar Bluff), DeSoto first met with the Cherokees in 1540. He camped at McCoy's Island for 30 days, and fought a skirmish with indians at Seven Springs. Many believe a site in Cherokee County was the site of the legendary Cherokee Indian town of Coosa.

In 1816, in Turkey Town, Andrew Jackson met with representatives of the Cherokee, Creek and Chickasaw nations to settle the peace ratify a treaty to establish territorial boundaries.

Among early Cherokee visitors to this area were Major Ridge, John Ridge, Elias Boudinot, John Ross, Double Head, Tarkagee, and Pathkiller. Pathkiller operated a ferry on the Coosa River near present day Centre, Alabama.

The Cherokees had, in the first three decades of the 19th century, become a strong agrarian society, cultivating land, raising grain and livestock. They had built homes and schools. They fought with Andrew Jackson at Horseshoe Bend against the Creeks in 1814, and had established themselves as valuable allies to the white settlers. Sequoyah (George Guess or Gist) had developed the Cherokee Alphabet and Elias Boudinot had published the first bi-lingual newspaper, The Cherokee Phoenix.

In 1826, the Cherokee had formed a democratic government with a written constitution with two representative assemblies, regular elections and a sophisticated court system. Many in the Cherokee Nation had become Christian, and missions and schools had been established. They had been successful in emulating the white man's culture.

By 1835, the white man had signed more than 30 treaties with the Cherokees, and had broken all of them. As early as 1802, President Jefferson had sealed the fate of the Cherokees. In order to get Georgia to sell the territories of Alabama and Mississippi, Jefferson had agreed to remove the Cherokees to the west. John Ross and others tried in vain to prove the Cherokees had a longer and more legitimate claim to their lands than did the U. S. government.

In 1835, J. F. Schermerhorn, a missionary and agent of the U. S. Government, entered into an agreement with a group of Cherokees, not legally empowered to act, to draw up an treaty ceding all Cherokee lands east of the Mississippi River, and to migrate to the Oklahoma Territory. In a vote at Red Clay (Tennessee), this treaty was rejected by ninety-five percent of the voting Cherokees, but was ratified anyway by the United States Senate.

With the help of Samuel Worchester, a missionary in the Cherokee Nation, Chief John Ross fought this treaty - even carrying it to the U. S. Supreme Court, in the case of *The Cherokee Indians vs. the State of Georgia*. John Marshall, first Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court, ruled in favor of the Cherokees in practically all their contentions, ruling that the Indians who entered into the treaty were not legally empowered to do so.

Ironically, this treaty was forced on the Cherokee by their old ally, President Andrew Jackson, who made this statement concerning the Supreme Court ruling, "John Marshall has made his decision, now let him enforce it!" With no policing powers, the Supreme Court could not do so and the illegal treaty prevailed. In 1838, just two brief years after the Alabama County bearing their name was created, the U. S. Army forcibly removed the Cherokees from their homes and put them into fenced collection camps, then marched them west on the infamous "Trail of Tears." Thousands of these Cherokees, mostly the sick, the old, the women and the children died along the way. And a great heritage was lost to Alabama.

EARLY SETTLEMENT

In 1835, few white people lived in what is now Cherokee County. A few settlers had come from Georgia and South Carolina. Times were hard for these early settlers. They had to clear land for farming, as well as construct dwelling houses and other farm buildings by hand and ax. Corn had to be sent back to Georgia to the grist mill to make cornmeal, or pounded out (with a pestle) in a hollow log (a mortar).

More serious, however, was the lack of law and any system of government. Roving bands of lawless men called "slicks" terrorized the area. The first court of Cherokee County was established soon after the County was established in January 1836. Threats to the courthouse caused the good citizens of the county to join together to protect it, and organized government came into being.

In an area the indians called "Costa," the present town of Cedar Bluff was established. Cedar Bluff, established in 1836 as Jefferson, was the original county seat. Since there was another town in Alabama called Jefferson, the name was changed to Cedar Bluff in 1842.

Centre was established as the county seat of Cherokee County in 1884 after two referendums were held to change the location to a more centrally located area. The name was chosen, and carries the old English spelling, because of this central

location. In 1886 Gaylesville was established and is the oldest incorporated town in the county. Two stories exist about the naming of the town. One says that it was named for John Gayle, an early settler. The second version is that it was named for the Indian Chief Gayle, a hunter and trapper, who settled with his tribe near the present Chattooga River (Cobia) Bridge.

HISTORY part 2

WAR BETWEEN THE STATES

Alabama withdrew from the Union on January 11, 1861. The Alabama secession convention invited the other Southern States to send delegates to Montgomery for the purpose of "securing concerted and harmonious action in whatever measures may be deemed most desirable for the common peace and security." On February 8, this convention brought the Confederacy into official existence, and Montgomery was the first capital of the Confederacy.

Cherokee County provided 15 companies of infantry and two of cavalry to the Confederate Army. G. Jeff Edgens was a member of the battery that fired on Ft. Sumter. Six hundred fifty Cherokee County men joined the Confederate Army. Of them, only 79 returned at the end of the war. The 19th Cavalry was composed almost entirely of Cherokee volunteers under the leadership of General Joseph Wheeler. They fought at Corinth, Shiloh, Chicamauga and Missionary Ridge, Franklin and Atlanta. They surrendered at Salisbury, North Carolina.

Fifteen percent of the iron ore, used in the manufacturing of armaments produced for the Confederacy, came from Cherokee County furnaces (Cornwall, Rock Run and Round Mountain). Stroup Furnace at Round Mountain was destroyed during the war but was rebuilt in 1870 finally ceasing operations in 1905. Rock Run was destroyed by the Union Army and rebuilt in 1879. It ceased operation entirely in 1928. Cornwall Furnace, built by the Noble Brothers of Rome, Georgia in 1862, between Cedar Bluff and Gaylesville, was twice ordered destroyed by General Sherman.

Two stories survive. One is that, due to the surrounding mountainous terrain and undergrowth, it survived the war intact. The second story is that the Furnace was partially destroyed by Union Maj. General J. D. Cox in 1864, and rebuilt by the Confederate Army. In any case, the Furnace was in use until 1870, when it was damaged by an accidental explosion. It was shut down forever in 1875. Cornwall was the only furnace in the country whose blowing engine (blast) was furnished by water power.

In 1863, the war came to Cherokee County. General Abel D. Streight, 51st. Indiana Infantry Volunteers, Union Army, received orders at Tuscumbia, Alabama to destroy Cornwall Furnace in Cherokee County, Alabama, and the foundry and machine

shops in Rome, Georgia which produced rifled cannon, smooth-bore howitzers, siege guns cannon carriage and caissons, shot and horseshoe iron. Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest fought a running gun battle with Streight's 2,000 man force all the way from Tuscumbia.

At Gaylesville, on May 3, 1863, General Forrest finally captured General Streight's entire army by tricking General Streight into believing he was surrounded by Confederate troops. The Confederates had stayed on Gen. Streight's heels until they reached the area just east of Cedar Bluff, where the Union army stopped to rest. They had just dismounted, when Forrest's troops were seen at a distance. In a few minutes a courier reach Gen. Streight under a flag of truce, bearing a note requesting immediate surrender. A conference was then held between the two leaders during which a courier rode up to Gen. Forrest and stated that Gen Van Dorn, with a division of troops, was stationed at a half-mile distance awaiting orders. Just as this courier was leaving another rode up with the statement that Gen. Roddey presented his compliments and was awaiting orders. Forrest replied to both that they were to instruct their commanders to await his signal gun, whereupon a charge was to be made.

Of course, there were no Generals Roddey or Van Dorn in the state, but the strategy so dismayed Gen. Streight that he readily agreed to the terms demanded by Forrest and surrendered his entire army.

On October 19 of 1864, General William T. Sherman camped at Gaylesville, and completed plans for his famous (or infamous) "March to the Sea." While here, the Union Army laid waste to upper Cherokee County. Schofield's Corps, the Army of the Ohio, also quartered in Cedar Bluff, using standing buildings and homes for lumber to erect their barracks.

RECONSTRUCTION

Times were very hard in the South following the Civil War. With the support of U. S. soldiers, the South was controlled by dishonest men from the north called "carpetbaggers." In 1874, conservative Alabama Democrats succeeded in electing all the state officials, and reform began. A new state constitution was adopted in 1875, and a new prosperity began.

The years following the Civil War was as traumatic in Cherokee County as in all other parts of the South, however the farmers gradually adjusted to changed conditions and made progress. Iron ore was heavily mined in Cherokee County, and several blast furnaces provided jobs and income. Ironically, General William Tecumseh Sherman bought land and established the Tecumseh furnace in the south east part of Cherokee County. Many of the workers were former Union soldiers who had served under Sherman.

Cherokee County's boom town, Bluffton, was established in the 1880's and had, at one time, 8,000 inhabitants. Bluffton had been laid out for a city of 50,000 and plans had been drawn for the "University of the Southland." It had the first electricity in Alabama, a water works system, side walks, a school, a post office, a church, a newspaper and a "grand" hotel, the Signal. The Signal hotel was three stories tall and had 45 rooms. (Note: the third floor was never completed.) (The hotel was torn down in 1950 to make way for the Pleasant Gap Tabernacle.)

The iron ore was mined out by the 1900's and the town could no longer support the businesses that had sprung up around the mining operations. People moved away and the town no longer exists. About 1950, a storm wiped out almost all that was left of the town.

HISTORY

part 3

FAMOUS CHEROKEEANS

John J. Pratt.

Typewriter inventor, John J. Pratt lived in Centre from about 1853 to 1864. He was a lawyer who had invested in a newspaper, The National Democrat. Becoming tired of bruised fingers from doing so much writing, he decided to invent his own "writing machine" based on a printing wheel principle. He moved to England during the Civil War and secured a patent for his machine in 1867. He returned to the United States in 1868, and produced typewriter patents as late as 1894. The 1868 patent machine is in the National Museum in Washington, D.C. The original machine is in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The 1882 patent was sold to Hammond Typewriter Company in 1885. His family resided in Centre and he was Editor of the Gadsden Times for a brief time in 1873. He is buried in Cherokee County, two miles west of Centre.

John Lawson Burnett.

John Burnett was born at Cedar Bluff, elected to the U.S. Congress in 1899 and became the "father of the U.S. Immigration Law." He succeeded in passing the law after it was vetoed by Presidents Cleveland, Taft, and Wilson with a two-thirds vote in Congress over President Wilson's veto. John Burnett was the only Congressman born and raised in Cherokee County.

MORE RECENT TIMES

Farming had been the main industry in Cherokee County, with cotton, corn, and more recently, soy beans as the main crops.

However, in 1961, a dam was completed near Leesburg, and waters of the Coosa, Chattooga and Little rivers was impounded to create Weiss Lake. A cottage industry

has sprung up in tourism and fishing in the area. Weiss Lake proclaims itself the "Crappie Capital of the World" because of the size and amount of crappie caught in the lake.

Manufacturing is making a strong come-back in the County. There are now some thirty companies making a variety of products: socks, uniforms for the U.S. service branches, prosthesis underwear, and porcelain enamel frit, to cite a few.

With the growth of industry, the number of service businesses has increased to support the growing population, which is estimated to be 22,000.

Cherokee County is a lure for retirees, who are looking for good weather, good taxes, and easy access to the more metropolitan areas of Atlanta and Birmingham. We were recently listed as number 22 of the 67 counties in Alabama in attracting retirees.

In addition to Weiss Lake, Cherokee County has one of the newest of the National Parks, Little River Canyon National Preserve. The 14,000 Preserve contains an outstanding example of an Appalachian Plateau Province canyon system, and is one of the deepest canyons east of the Mississippi River, with Little River forming and flowing almost its entire length on the top of a mountain (plateau). The canyon covers 18 miles and is 2 to 1-1/2 miles deep.

Little River is classified by the State of Alabama as an Outstanding National Resource Water.