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Historic Huntsville Foundation

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Huntsville Becomes A Town



From Wilderness Log Cabins to Sturdy Brick Buildings

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Site Is Ordered For Twickenham

South Half Of Square And
Areas To Williams Bought
By Commission

The Town of Twickenham, later Huntsville, was created by an act of the Territorial Legislature Dec. 22, 1809.

This was the first government act having to do directly with the Hunt's Spring settlement, the other acts up to this time relating only to Madison County.

This was not an act of incorporation, but simply set up a commission of three men to select a site for public buildings. In the land sales held in August in Nashville, LeRoy Pope had bought the quarter section of land on which the big Spring was located at \$23 per acre, about four times as much as surrounding land. Pope had

bought the land with the intention of laying out a town site. The sixty acres were platted. The platted area was bounded on the north by what is now Holmes Street; on the east by Lincoln Street; on the south by Williams Street; and on the west by ... Gallatin Street.

The Twickenham Act had named William Dickson, Edward Ward, Louis Winston, Alexander Gilbreath, and Peter Perkins, all of whom resided in the county, as commissioners "for the purpose of fixing on the most convenient place for establishing the public buildings of the said county."

The act further provided that they were to buy or otherwise procure 30 to 100 acres of land, reserve three acres for public buildings, and to plat the town on the remainder into half-acre lots.

These lots were to be sold, and the money used to pay for the land. All the remainder was to be used for public buildings.

As soon as a public building was erected, the commissioners were to notify judges of the county courts, who would have to hold courts in the Courthouse thereafter.

Since Pope had already bought the land on which the town was platted, probably by J. W. Leake, a local surveyor, the commissioners bought 30 acres from him, including only half of the Public Square and land to the south of the Big Spring, for \$25 per acre. Pope donated the north half of the Square to the town, including a lot for the jail on the northeast corner of the Square.

This deed was made Sept. 1, 1815, and was made to the five commissioners, then elected annually each February. In that year, John Brahan, who had come here from Nashville as a government surveyor and receiver of public monies, Peter Perkins, David Moore and Louis Winston were the commissioners.

The area was generally bounded by Henry Street (now Gallatin), Williams Street, Lincoln Street, and the Square.

The "free and uninterrupted" use of the water for the citizens of the area was guaranteed in the deed, and it also prohibited dams or machinery that would produce stagnation at the spring.

Stores And Inn First On Square

Town Of 1810 Mainly Scattered
Log Cabins, Rock Pile
On Square

When men first vied for purchase of lots in the town site of Twickenham, a big pile of bare rock, sloping on every side and holding a pond at one side, was the area to be the Public Square.

Around the rocky knoll were dense trees, and a ridge of cedar stretched eastward to Pope's Ridge, the present Echols Hill. Along this cedar ridge were scattered cabins. Other cabins were around the Big Spring, and southward to what is now [in 1955] the city limit at Donegan Lane.

Water stood in ponds west of what is now the Whitesburg area and west of the Big Spring. Between Clinton and Holmes streets were low, marshy lands.

After the city was incorporated, five trustees elected and work begun on streets, the picture changed rapidly. John Read, register of public lands, who came here in 1811, built three stores on the south side of the Square at the west end of Commercial Row, and a house in the next block at the southwest corner of the Square. Here later lived David T. Knox, a silversmith of high repute among early settlers.

The first brick stores were erected on the east half of the block north of the Square. Talbot Inn went up on the east side of the



Square, taking up the northern half of that block, and the first market house was nearby. At the southeast corner of the Square, Calvin and Luther Morgan built a home and at the back on Franklin Street, Clement Comer Clay set up his law office in 1811. He arrived here with only one Negro servant, two horses, his law books in a saddlebag, and a small sum of money.

The lot at the northeast corner of the Square was also used for a residence, that of James Brock.

During the first 10 years in the city, there was a small drygoods store, a grocery which was then called a "whiskey shop," a hatter's shop, and a bowling alley.

By the time lots sales in the downtown area were completed in 1816, Pope was erecting his beautiful residence, which still stands, on Pope's Ridge, and had subdivided an area to the south, including Adams Avenue and McClung Street, with some lots as big as three and four acres, and which were being bought for homes of the wealthiest residents.

[ED. NOTE: The following information is excerpted from a long article about the general history of early Huntsville.]

Huntsville's Influence Spread Rapidly After Incorporation As Town

City Became
A Dominant Power
In The Territory

By John Craig Stewart

After the town of Huntsville was incorporated [on Dec. 9, 1811; the name was changed to Huntsville that year, also] and established as the county seat of the recently formed county of Madison, the people set about building a city which was to be the nonpareil of the Mississippi Territory.

It soon became a dominant influence in the territory, a power which, through its financial and cultural

growth and the influence of its citizens, was to play the leading role in the establishment of the Alabama Territory in 1817, and the State of Alabama two years later in 1819.

During this period, Madison County had a population equal to more than half the total population of all that area which was to be the State of Alabama. And that population was centered in the town of Huntsville.

Starting in 1810, and accelerating itself immediately following the incorporation of the town, a fever of building began. The old log huts of early settlers had to be replaced with buildings of stone and brick.

In 1810, two masons, the brothers Thomas and William Brandon, settled in Huntsville, and there was more than sufficient opportunity for their skills. The Court-

house was completed by 1816, and by this time the Square was the site of many handsome brick buildings housing the early commercial establishments.

One of the earliest mercantile houses was founded by Alexander Gilbreath in 1810 at the corner of Gates and Henry [Gallatin] streets....

On the north side of the Square, John Brown built the first two stores on Exchange Row. A little later, J. O. Crump built another store near these. John Reid built the first house on the old Schandies property which was located at the southwest corner of the Square. Mr. A. Jameson afterward bought this and ran a hotel there. This hotel was later owned and operated by Allen Cooper, Neal B. Rose, and John Hickman. LeRoy Pope built the first store on the east side of the Square.

There were no ABC boards or State liquor stores in those days, but taverns were not lacking in early Huntsville. A Mr. Cheatham owned and operated a tavern [Bell Tavern] on the west side of Jefferson Street near the Square, and just across the street in the center of the block, a large tavern was operated by Archibald Madera. This building, also a hotel, was to be the headquarters for the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1819.

But one of the most important indications of the progressive growth of early Huntsville was the rapid es-

tablishment of newspapers here.

The first paper began publication in 1812. It was named the Madison Gazette and was originally owned by T. G. Bradford and Company.... The Gazette was the second newspaper published in the Territory....

The Madison Gazette, however,... was replaced in September 1816, by the Huntsville Republican, an enterprise of Thomas B. Grantland....

Another Huntsville newspaper, the Huntsville Advocate, had been established in 1815....

All the building which took place in this period did not have to do with commercial and business establishments. The people built with an idea of permanency and beauty.

As to the location of some of the earliest homes, let us again quote from General Betts' "History:"

"Most of the wealthier citizens built houses along the south of the town, just out of the town limits, ranging from Pope's - now Echols - Hill on the east, to the spring bluff on the west, along what is now Williams Street, which was lined with towering oaks and stately poplars; while others erected their houses along Maiden Lane [Eustis], just south of a rugged and picturesque bluff, upon which was later situated the home of LeRoy Pope...."

Remarkable as it may seem, these and other fine homes were erected during a period when most of Alabama was a wilderness....

The growth of the town in the first few years of this period (up to 1816) was phenomenal, but to some extent was held in check by the uncertainty of the times, clouded by the Creek Indian War and the War of 1812. The most fabulous growth was to come, as we shall see, between 1816 and 1829, a period which included the land sales of 1818, and a rise in prices which approached actual inflation. However, by 1816, Huntsville had planted its foundations firmly in the bedrock about the "Big Spring," and was "on its way." The population of Madison County in 1816 had reached the incredible figure of 14,200.

To give some insight into the optimistic outlook of the town, let us quote from a letter written in 1815 by John W. Walker to the Secretary of the United States Treasury, W. H. Crawford. This is what he says of Huntsville and the county:

"Huntsville is situated about ten miles from the Tennessee River, immediately round one of the finest springs in the world, issuing from a fine perpendicular cliff 50 feet high, in a sheet of water 150 wide in a semi-circle forming instantly a fine bold creek, which it is now confidently believed can, at a trivial expense, be rendered navigable for batteaux to the Tennessee. Each square contains two acres,

divided into half acre lots, so that every lot is a corner lot. The Public Square contains about three and a half acres, lying immediately back of the spring cliff. On this are a courthouse, and market of brick, and a small wooden jail. The first lot was sold on the 4th of July, so that the whole town is the growth of six years. In the suburbs are five cotton gins."

And so it was, as the year 1815 ended, that Huntsville and all of Madison County stood upon the brink of its most prosperous days....

Soon after the Government Land Office was moved from Nashville to Huntsville in 1817, the fabulous land sales of 1818 took place here. If the land sales of 1809 at Nashville represented heavy buying, these sales of 1818 represented a rush of purchasers, which "created as great excitement, all things considered, as the California gold fever of 1848-49."

Nothing like it had been seen in the South before. It so happened that at this time new lands in the Territory were put up for sale. These included not only lands in Madison County, but lands throughout ... North Alabama, in what are now the counties of Morgan, Blount, St. Clair, Jackson, Limestone, Lauderdale, Lawrence and Franklin....

Perhaps lending to the speculative, optimistic spirit of the times was the fact that Alabama had been authorized as a territory in December 1817. The people of the

great Tennessee Valley were now free of the Mississippi Delta influence in their affairs.

William Wyatt Bibb was governor of the new territory. The population of Huntsville far exceeded that of any other town. Huntsville was without question the leading town, the heart and soul, of the new Alabama Territory.... These were the truly golden years of Huntsville's early development. ...

And so we come to the end of that early period, the turbulent first fifteen years, in the history of Huntsville.

For one last look at the old town of that time, let us read what an eye witness, a visitor, had to say. As quoted in Brantley's Three Capitals, Anne Royal in her "Letters from Alabama" wrote on January 1, 1818, that Huntsville had:

260 houses principally built of brick, has a bank, a courthouse and a market house. There is a large square in the centre of town, like the towns in Ohio. Facing this are the stores, twelve in number. The buildings form a solid wall, though divided into apartments.

The workmanship is the best I have seen in all the State; and several of the houses are three stories high and very large.

There is no church. The people assemble in the Courthouse to worship.

Huntsville is settled by people mostly from Georgia and the Carolinas - though there are a few from almost every part of the world; - and the town displays much activity.



The citizens are gay, polite, and hospitable, and live in great splendor. Nothing like it in our county.

It was this group of "gay, polite, and hospitable" citizens who in July, 1819, received the Constitutional Convention which made Alabama a state of the Union.

... Huntsville's sons played a commanding part in the framing of that Constitution and in the "lone but memorable" first session of the General Assembly when Huntsville was the "temporary Seat of Government" for the infant state.

First Cemetery Across End Of Greene Street

The first cemetery for Huntsville was located on Meridian Road, at the point where Greene Street now meets the road.

Greene Street came to a dead end about two-thirds of its present length from Holmes Street, and the city used this as a burial ground until purchase of the present Maple Hill Cemetery in 1824.

Walker Street did not exist then, being opened after the Civil War.



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