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1819 -- Alabama Becomes a State

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Douglas Convention, at Huntsville, the second day of August
in the year of our Lord, one thousand eight hundred and twenty
and of American Independence, the forty-fourth,

1st Week.

President of the Convention,
and Representative from Madison County,
Washington County
James P. Tucker
Henry Hitchcock
Madison County.

Abner Williams
Jos. D. Summerville
Lawrence County
Arthur H. Blythe
Nathan Wright
William M. Hall

Robert Ellis
Obion County.

Mr. D. Chad.
McKee & Young
Clark County.

Rusk & Daffodil
James Madison
The summer of 1819 was probably much like all the summers before — hot, humid, mosquito-laden, with ever-present horse flies buzzing around. However, one thing out of the ordinary was happening in Huntsville. A committee of 44 men, the best and brightest from throughout the Alabama territory met to frame a constitution. They had been elected by their peers to frame the document which would lead to statehood for the Alabama Territory. As part of the Mississippi Territory, Alabama had already passed the first stage necessary to become a state when the Congress of the United States appointed a governor, a secretary and three judges to manage the affairs of government for the area. Only a year before, a census had been taken that placed the population at 67,594 (45,871 whites, 339 free Negroes, and 21,384 slaves) – well above the needed 60,000 required for statehood.

Settlers had flocked to the territory when, in 1811, the horse path from Ocmulgee to Fort Stoddart was broadened to include a road. Senator Charles Tait, a prominent Georgian and close friend of Huntsville resident John Williams Walker, presented a petition to Congress to enable the territory to complete requirements for statehood. This same petition brought Mississippi into the Union as the 20th state. What was left of the Mississippi Territory now became the Alabama Territory and opened the door for statehood.

Three requirements had to be met for statehood: at least 60,000 residents, land, and a constitution. With the first two requirements having been met, it was time to tackle the writing of a constitution.

Huntsville, originally known as Hunt’s Spring, was the first successful settlement in the Tennessee Valley. John Hunt and a few other hearty pioneers immigrated to the area because of the rich soil, the agreeable climate, and the peaceful Indians. It was the heaviest populated area in the Alabama Territory with 2,223 white people and 322 black people. In 1809, the town, re-named Twickenham for a brief period and later named Huntsville, served as the county seat.

On July 5, the Constitutional Convention convened in Huntsville. The men, representing Madison County, were Clement C. Clay, John Leigh
Townes, Henry Chambers, Lemuel Mead, Henry Minor, Gabriel Moore, and John M. Taylor. They were well educated and most had experience in the political realm of other states. Their role as Alabama’s founding fathers is studied by every school child in the state.

Their leader was the well-liked and amiable John Williams Walker. Although his father-in-law, LeRoy Pope, was the leader of the “Georgia Faction,” Walker had made it clear long before he entered the family that he would never bow down to his powerful father-in-law. In fact, Walker once said, “I drink buttermilk for the health of my body, wine for the exhilaration of my spirit and whiskey to prove and strengthen my republicanism. I sleep till 8 o’clock because I am lazy and smoke at all hours of the day and night because it is my good pleasure.”

The end result, a new constitution, was considered quite progressive for the time. It had been patterned on other state constitutions obviously, but tweaked in ways that surprised the wise men of other states. It was something to be proud of, for sure. In fact, only three amendments were added between the years 1819 and 1861. But what became of these men, and the others who forged our Constitution, after that hot summer of 1819? Unfortunately, for some of these men, the only information available is simply a reference that they were attendees. Others went on to noble endeavors. Here are their stories.