The Cahaba River begins as most rivers do as a simple stream. It begins on top of the 1,500-foot Cahaba Mountain and grows to a 190-mile long river as it drains 1,870 square miles of the heart of Alabama. It remains the longest free flowing river in the state of Alabama and it has become a recreational, biological and geological treasure. Near Selma, Alabama it joins the Alabama River, and the fork of these two rivers is a place where important events occurred in the history of the state.

Surveyor General Thomas Freeman visited this site in 1817 and noted signs of early Indian inhabitants. He is buried in Huntsville’s Maple Hill Cemetery.
Vine Street, located between Capitol Avenue and First South Street – Old Cahawba

The Old Capitol at Cahawba
In 1818, a law was passed which established a committee to determine the most eligible site for establishment of the Seat of Government for the Alabama Territory. Competition was intense between the several backers of various sites that suited their political and economic purposes. The commission was prepared to recommend Tuscaloosa as the permanent site, but they were unaware that Governor William Wyatt Bibb had acted on his own authority and obtained a federal land grant at the site where the Cahaba and Alabama Rivers converged. The Governor stated his reasoning as follows: “The necessary advantages, approaching certainly nearer to the center of the Territory, and probably of its future permanent population than any other place equally eligible.” Furthermore, the site itself was “beautiful” with “springs of good water and the prospect of good health.”

In Huntsville, on October 26, 1819, the Governor announced the receipt of land grants that increased the size of the proposed site to 1,620 acres. He further advised that he anticipated at least $300,000 from the sale of lots that he considered “ample sufficient to provide permanent building and accommodations for several departments of government.” Profiteers and politicians began to flock to Cahaba making it one of the wealthiest and most populated towns in the state. Bibb carefully planned the town after colonial Philadelphia with wide tree-lined streets and avenues. As he had predicted the new capital city prospered and doctors, lawyers and merchants set up offices in two and three-story buildings on Vine Street. Almost immediately, two fine hotels appeared and by 1820 there were two newspapers.
Political factions in Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, and north Alabama remained unhappy with the Governor’s choice of Cahaba as the capital city and they began to undermine the choice by exaggerated reports of flooding in Cahaba. After a big rainstorm in the spring of 1822, the Montgomery paper reported that legislators were forced to enter the capital building by rowing up to the second story window. The complaining continued until 1826 when the capital was moved to Tuscaloosa where it remained until 1846 when Montgomery became the permanent location.

Cahaba survived as a town although times were hard until the 1830s when several cotton warehouses were built and the situation improved. When the railroad came in the 1850s, the town went through another boom. As the Civil War approached, approximately 2,000 people lived in the town although most of them were slaves who worked for the prosperous plantation owners and merchants. Some have estimated that the population grew to nearly 6,000 during the Civil War as refugees sought safety in the Alabama heartland from other areas of the state.

As the war progressed, the cotton warehouses at Cahaba were taken by the Confederate Army and used as a prisoner of war camp. The Confederates crowded as many as 3,000 prisoners into the 16,000-foot prison compound, which was surrounded by a tall brick wall. As it was in both Federal and Confederate prison camps, conditions at Cahaba, or Castle Morgan as it was called, were extremely poor. Prisoners slept on bare floors with only one fireplace in the building to keep them warm. The water supply was an artesian well, which had become extremely polluted by the sewer runoff from the town and the prison itself. The daily meal consisted of 10 to 12 ounces of corn meal and 5 to 7 ounces of bacon. In February of 1865, a devastating flood swamped the town and the prison camp. The floodwaters were so deep in the prison stockade that prisoners were forced to stand in water up to their waist for four days and nights until arrangements were made to move 700 of them to Selma. Others were allowed to leave the compound in search of driftwood that could be used as flotation devices.

Among the Union prisoners were many that were captured by Forrest during his September 1864 raid into north Alabama and at the battles at Athens’ Fort Henderson and Sulphur Trestle north of Athens. Once the Union prisoners were free, they became desperate to return to their northern homes. As quickly as possible, they made their way to Vicksburg where they hoped to find riverboat transportation up the Mississippi. A riverboat known as the *Sultana* was waiting at the Vicksburg wharf. The
crew and passengers of the *Sultana* numbered about 200. An additional 1,800 to 2,000 Union soldiers were allowed to board and the capacity of the *Sultana* was greatly exceeded. Very unsafe conditions resulted.

For 48 hours after casting off at Vicksburg, the *Sultana* made its way upstream without trouble, making a few scheduled stops and finally docking at Memphis on the evening of April 26, 1865. While taking on coal for fuel at Memphis, a leaky boiler was discovered. A crew was called in to repair the boiler and on April 27, the *Sultana* disembarked on her way to Cairo where most of the soldiers expected to disembark. As she swung around a bend about six miles north of Memphis, the leaky boiler exploded. Those men who were not killed in the explosion were thrown into the ice-cold water. Many could not swim and there was little wreckage to cling to. It is estimated that 1,500 to 1,900 lost their lives in the tragedy. Some of the dead may have been those who had served the Union at Fort Henderson in Athens and Sulphur Trestle north of Athens. The wreck of the *Sultana* is considered to be one of the most devastating boat disasters in history.
Westmoreland: Cahaba -- Alabama's First Permanent Capital

As the Civil War came to an end so did the slave-based economy of Cahaba. As the prisoners were set free, they left Cahaba on their journey home. Most of the white citizens of Cahaba fled to the emerging industrial town of Selma. Later, many dismantled their homes and took them to Selma. The free black people chose to remain in the town, and they converted the town lots into fields and formed a rural community of their own. By the turn of the century, there were practically no traces of the glory days of Cahaba left. Only 70 houses were left standing empty, but they eventually collapsed. Today, Cahaba is a ghost town although the original streets are still very visible. Archaeologists are working on uncovering the past of Cahaba Prison and town. It has become an important archaeological site as well as a place to visit and see the ruins. There is a visitor’s center where one can find knowledgeable people to provide maps and other tourist information.

Sources:

