

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLAY COUNTY, ALABAMA

BY

DON C. EAST

Clay County has a long and rich history. Unfortunately, very little of its story has been put into print. Perhaps this brief summary of the county's history will give the reader an idea of the nature of the land and people of this unique county. Situated at the seam of Alabama's Piedmont and Mountain/Valley regions, the rugged terrain of Clay County has been both a fortress and an impediment for its inhabitants over time.

Beginning at least 10,000-20,000 years ago, this area was inhabited by native peoples. Over time, these early peoples coalesced into Native American tribes such as the Creeks, Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and many other minor tribes. By the mid to late 1600s, the Creeks became the dominant Indian tribe in this area, separated from the Cherokees by the mountain range to our north. Perhaps the first white to settle in what is now Clay County was Robert Grierson. He was a Scot trader, married to a Shawnee Indian woman. He owned a large trading post, farm and nut oil/fabric factory complex which was collocated with the Creek Hillabee Town in the southern part of what would eventually become Clay County. During the 1700s, the Creeks crafted a lucrative deer skin and nut oil business with French, Spanish, British and American traders.

Illegal white settler encroachment on the Creek lands eventually led a subset of the War of 1812, better known as the Creek Indian War of 1813-14. General Andrew Jackson was sent south by the American government with four armies under his command. After several bloody battles, he finally defeated the Creeks at the battle at Horseshoe Bend in March of 1814. The treaty concluding this conflict took the majority of the Creek lands for the United States except for 5.2 million acres in an area that would become east central Alabama. The discovery of gold in this area in 1832 amplified a flood of illegal white settlers onto these Creek lands. Later with General Jackson becoming the 7th U.S. President, his Indian removal legislation eventually forcibly moved the Creeks to Oklahoma from their homeland in the 1835-38 time frame.

The white land rush that ensued, especially those from Georgia, quickly populated east central Alabama. Two major arteries were used by the early white settlers to enter the area that would become Clay County. The McIntosh Road, which crossed the center of the county east and west, and the Chapman Road which crossed the southern part of the county east and west. Those areas in between and on either side of these two routes were filled in by settlers using narrow Indian trails. After Alabama became a state in 1819, one of the first white settlements to attain any sizeable population in the future Clay County was Lineville. This hamlet began as Lundy's Cross Roads, was later renamed as County Line, and finally became Lineville. Although the county was not in the large slave-holding category, the American Civil War nevertheless delivered a severe economic blow to the area. There was a huge loss of manpower from war casualties and a very negative impact from the painful post-war reconstruction period.

During these early days, those citizens of Talladega and Randolph Counties were isolated from their court houses in Talladega and Wedowee respectively by the mountains to their west and the Tallapoosa River to their east. They eventually won their bid for a separate county in 1866. Clay County was formed from a six mile section of eastern Talladega and a six mile section of western Randolph Counties. The donation of private land near the center of the new

county determined the location of the county seat at Ashland, much to the chagrin of Lineville residents.

Education in Clay County began with as many as 67 “field schools.” These largely one-room log schools usually had only one teacher for all grades. Over the years, with improved transportation and roads, the county schools have been consolidated to two, and soon will have a single county school.

The ethnicity of the early Clay County residents was largely Scot, Irish or Scot-Irish. The county’s early blacks were from either Creek Indian or white planter ownership. The livelihood of most early county settlers consisted of “one horse” subsistence farming and living off the land. However, with the land eventually cleared for larger farms, the economy shifted to one of an ill-fated corn and cotton cash crop system. The shallow top soil of the area kept farm income low. With the railroad coming through the county in 1907, large logging operations such as Kaul Limber Company of Hollins, and the discovery of large graphite and other mineral deposits, the economy improved somewhat. The county reached an apex in population in the early 1920s with over 22,000 residents. Cash crop farming remained the mainstay of many county residents until the fabric mills and defense plants during the WWII era delivered a shot in the arm for the economy.

During the mid to late 1950s, large paper companies introduced artificial reforestation to the area with the establishment of thousands of acres of loblolly pine plantations. With the advent of federal and state cost shares provided to local farmers, they too enjoined the pine plantation boom. About the same time, the chicken and cattle industry spread quickly in the county. After decades of low income cash crop row farming, the citizens of Clay County had finally hit upon a diversified economy suited to these rocky hills that continues until this day. Adding to this economic diversification was the construction of Lake R.L. Harris (better known as Lake Wedowee) and the rise of the wood-based cabinet, furniture and truss manufacturing plants. With 90 percent of the county being in forest land, forestry and forest products industry remain Clay’s primary economy. This industry includes the forest landowners, logging crews, forest rangers, 66,800 acres of the county in Talladega National Forest, cabinet plants, sawmills, floor/roof truss plants, and those individuals such as surveyors, consulting foresters, heavy equipment operators and others that support the industry.

The often explosive history, rugged landscape, and hardscrabble economic existence of Clay County natives has produced a breed of people with a great deal of individualism, grit and determination. These traits tend to set them apart as somewhat unique. It has also produced many individuals from humble backgrounds that have achieved fame beyond our county borders. These noted native Clay Countians included a Supreme Court Justice, an Alabama Governor, a private counselor to England’s Queen Victoria, an astronaut, a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, an Olympic Gold Medal winner, a family of college presidents and deans, pro football players, noted medical researchers, and nearly 100 medical doctors.

Although it has not been well publicized, Clay County does in fact have an extensive history. Other articles on this web site contain this interesting story.