

George Colbert and the Colbert Ferry

Excerpted from the study, Colbert Ferry and Selected Document, by Dawson A. Phelps.

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In 1801, the United States sought from the Chickasaw Indians the right to lay out and open a road through Chickasaw land between the settlements of Mero District in Tennessee and those of Natchez, Mississippi. The agreement stipulated that any necessary ferries over streams crossed by the proposed road would be considered the property of the Chickasaw Nation.

George Colbert, a leading Chickasaw of the area, was the chief negotiator for the Indians and possibly had an eye to his own interest when he had the reservation concerning ferries inserted into the treaty. At Colbert's suggestion a site 20 miles upstream was selected as the place where the Trace would cross the Tennessee River. Also an inn to rest called Colbert House was his idea.

Government officials who dealt with Chickasaw affairs from about 1800 until the mid-1820's showed great respect for Colbert's opinions and frequently sought his support for their projects.

The ink was hardly dry on the Chickasaw treaty of 1801, which did not include a land cession, before the United States Government began a campaign to acquire parts of, and eventually all, the Chickasaw lands. The Indians resisted but were induced to surrender large parts of their domain in 1805, 1816, and 1818. Finally, in 1832, they accepted the inevitable, sold their remaining lands, and agreed to move west.

During the time that George Colbert was pursuing a public career, he did not neglect his personal affairs as a ferry operator and farmer. How profitable was the ferry operation? Colbert complained in 1806 that, because of the high operating costs and the seasonal nature of his business, a reasonable profit had not been realized. The truth of the matter is that on three occasions only were the profits large—that is, Colonel Daugerty's expedition of 1803 to Natchez, Jackson's expedition to Natchez in 1812-13, and the return of the veterans of the Battle of New Orleans to Nashville in 1815.

Colbert himself explained that the greatest volume of business was supplied by the "Kaintucks." Many could not pay, and he carried them free-of-charge and sometimes gave them food as well.

Overland travel from Natchez northward was giving way to travel by steamer. This and other factors

must have induced Colbert to close his business and move to a plantation near Tupelo, where he was living in 1820. Its memory lingered on, as until 1865 the name Colbert Ferry continued in use as a place name.

During the next 20 years, 1820-1840, there was insufficient business to justify keeping a ferry operating at this location. Apparently sometime after 1840 a ferry for local use was reestablished and continued in use until 1861. Active military operations along the lower and middle Tennessee began early in 1862 and continued until the end of the war. These hard times and those that followed, ended all ferry operations.

After the Civil War, the name Colbert Ferry was replaced by Georgetown, or George Town, although both written records and local tradition are silent on the reason for the name change.

Considerable economic recovery during the post Civil War Era prompted Leander F. Hyatt to reestablish the ferry at George Town in April of 1877. After an unprofitable first two years, he asked for, and received permission to terminate his business.

George Colbert is reputed to have been the richest man in the Chickasaw Nation. Convincing testimony about Colbert's wealth came from the field notes of the original survey of this section. The surveyor estimated that George Colbert's land included "about 350 acres."

In 1834, George and Martin Colbert took place in treaty proceedings and later that same year, George, Martin and James Colbert were named to the Chickasaw Incompetent Commission, established to help incompetent Indians sell their lands in preparation for their move. Three years later the Chickasaw were moved west of the Mississippi River to present-day Oklahoma.

In 1838 George Colbert moved to the Indian Territory where he died a year later near Fort Towson, Oklahoma, at the age of 75.

The house built by the government in 1801 for George Colbert survived until 1929 when it was destroyed by fire. Today the site is marked by the partial remains of the house foundation. Approximately 1,000 feet of Old Trace leads to the west bank of the Tennessee River. The original ferry landing site is underwater as a result of the backup of water behind Pickwick Dam.