

History of the North West Corner of Alabama

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If one looks at the north western most part of Alabama you will see a peninsula formed by the east bank of Big Bear Creek and the south bank of the Tennessee River, at that point is the site of historic Old Riverton. Riverton has undergone several name changes: Riverton 1890 to present, Chickasaw 1851 to 1890 and Point Smith 1846 to 1851. Prior to 1846, the land was part of the Chickasaw Nation. Once an important river port, the majority of what was Riverton is now inundated beneath the waters of Pickwick Lake.

The area of north west Alabama was originally occupied by both Cherokee and Chickasaw Indians. The boundary line between the great Cherokee and Chickasaw Indian Nations was Caney Creek, which flows in a south to north direction, located eight and one half miles east of the current town of Cherokee, Alabama. Lands east of the line were Cherokee Territory, and lands west of the line were Chickasaw Territory; however, the land lying between Big Bear Creek, six miles west of Cherokee, Alabama, and Caney Creek was disputed between the two tribes. In the early 1700's, three Cherokee villages were located in this disputed territory and a Cherokee town was located beside the Natchez Trace which dissected the disputed territory. The Chickasaw's claimed lands including all north west Alabama on both sides of the Tennessee River as far east as present Morgan County Alabama. The U.S. Government recognized this claim, and in 1786, at the Treaty of Hopewell, the first official U.S. Government negotiations with the Chickasaw Nation.

The Indians had recognized the importance of the land at the mouth of Ocohappo, the Indian name for Big Bear Creek. In 1790, Major John Doughty, conveying a message from the President of the United States to the Southwestern Indians, was ambushed by a party of Creek and Shawnee warriors at the mouth of Big Bear Creek. The Indians first made friendly advances, then opened fire, killing five of his fifteen privates and wounding six others. This attack prompted the Secretary of War to propose the establishment of a military post at the mouth of Big Bear Creek in 1791, but the four Indian Nations (Chickasaw, Choctaw, Cherokee, and Creek), in June of 1792, objected to this idea because they held common property on the west bank of Big Bear Creek

where Eastport, Mississippi later stood. The U.S. Government also recognized the importance of the land at the mouth of Big Bear Creek, and in Article I of the Treaty of Hopewell, reserved the right to a circular tract of land five miles in diameter for use as a future government trading post. The trading post was never established, probably because the route of the Natchez Trace was changed in 1801 from Big Bear Creek to present day Georgetown, several miles up the Tennessee River.

The Chickasaw Indians were friendly and helpful to the whites. At the meeting of Hopewell, Chief Promingo urged the Americans to use the Tennessee River, this action infuriated the Choctaws, Cherokees, and Creeks. In return, the US Government encouraged the Indians to adopt the simple arts of civilized life of farming, weaving, and the building of homes along with the improvements of property of their own. To direct them in these things and to represent the government, and to promote friendly relations between the two nations. the U.S. Government employed agents and stationed them at important points. At the agency stations were kept factories and store houses where the factory took from the Indians their produce of bear's oil, honey in kegs, beeswax, nuts and all kinds of skins and pelts, giving them in exchange merchandise such as iron tools, arms and ammunition, and even on credit; two purposes were thus served, first, the Indians were acquiring those implements: axes, plows, and other things - which would be needed in the settled life which the government was promoting; and second, debts were increasing which the Indians could pay by additional grants of land. In 1801 President Jefferson openly advised this policy - the policy of gradual extinction. The agency which the government maintained for the Indians of this area was located at the mouth of Mulberry Creek down in the Nation, as the section west of Caney Creek.

The Alabama Territory was created by an act of Congress March 1817. Franklin County was created in February 1818. The county was named in honor of Benjamin Franklin, a signer of the Declaration Of Independence. The county's' south boundary was approximately where it is now; the north boundary was the Tennessee River (including all the area of present day Colbert County); the east boundary is approximately where it is now; but the west boundary was approximately fifteen miles east of where it is now. The first agent to be appointed in the Chickasaw Nation was B.F. Smith appointed in 1825. The Chickasaw Agency was located near Malone Creek three miles east of Georgetown. In 1829, B.F Smith was replace by Benjamin F. Reynolds, a personal friend of President Andrew Jackson.

In August 1830, a conference was held in the Presbyterian Church in Franklin, Tennessee. This conference was attended by leaders of the Chickasaw Nation, John Coffee, John Eaton, and President Andrew Jackson himself. The Chickasaw Indians were told they must give up their lands in Alabama and Mississippi or the white man would take it. A treaty was signed, contingent on location of lands for the Chickasaw Nation west of the Mississippi River. Lands were never obtained for the Chickasaw, so the treaty was never submitted to Congress, but this treaty served as a basis for further efforts to get the Chickasaw Indians to give up their lands. A treaty was completed between the U.S. Government and the Chickasaw Nation at the Chickasaw Council House at Pontotoc, Mississippi, on October 20, 1832. Pontotoc was Chickasaw for "battle where the cattails stood." The Chickasaw had fought here against the French to defend their lands in 1736." Ironically, they were now giving up their lands here.

Under the Treaty of 1832, the Chickasaw were provided allotments (or individual reservations of land) for single men and for families. A single man received a section or 640 acres; families of five or fewer members 1,280 acres. The allotments increased in size in proportion to family size. Lands not assigned were put up for sale as Public Lands, with proceeds, to go to the Chickasaw Tribe. Jon Bell of Cotton Gin Port, son of a former missionary to the Chickasaws, was appointed Surveyor General of the Chickasaw Cession. The land was surveyed in 1833. The choice lands were located as allotments. The original patent to two sections and a half section of land, covering the entire original town area of Riverton, was granted to Pamela Reynolds (daughter of Chickasaw Agent Benjamin F. Reynolds).

Upon the treaty signing of 1834, Alabama extended her authority over all the territory to the Mississippi line. Sometime after 1840 and before 1846 Henry D. Smith bought the land from Pamela Reynolds. A settlement was begun on the peninsula formed by the east bank of Big Bear Creek and the south bank of the Tennessee River. The settlement was called Point Smith and its first United States Post Office was established on December 28, 1846. The first postmaster was Oliver E. Spencer.

The Chickasaw Land Company was formed on July 7, 1850. Issac Lane, one of the four owners, bought large holdings from the early settlers of the area, to include lands owned

by Henry D. Smith. The company laid off the town of Chickasaw in blocks containing one acre. The name of the post office was officially changed from Point Smith to Chickasaw on May 26, 1851. Throughout the Civil War years the area around Chickasaw became a strategic point on the Tennessee River. The area was frequently bombarded by union gun boats and occupied by union soldiers. After the Civil War economic growth in Chickasaw was slow. In 1867, Colbert County was created from Franklin County. It was named in honor of the Chickasaw Chief George Colbert of Georgetown. In 1887, Alfred Parrish of Philadelphia with British financial backing bought up all the land in Chickasaw and laid off a town; changed the name to Riverton; and proceeded to build a railroad to connect with the Memphis and Charleston intending for this railroad to be a part of a main line from Paducah to Birmingham. Riverton Landing did a thriving business for it was said that the navigation from Paducah to Riveron Landing was equaled in this country only to that of the lower Mississippi and Hudson Rivers. Rich beds of iron ore was found in the vicinity, as well as asphalt, ochre and other minerals. And so, Mr. Parrish had good grounds for the bases of his dreams of a great city there. For numerous reasons those dreams were never realized.