

History of Montgomery County

By Eleanor S. Williams, Former County Historian

Long before the dawn of written history, humans inhabited the lands along the Cumberland and Red Rivers. In successive order the Paleo-Indian, the Archaic, the Woodland and the Mississippian Indians have left evidence of their occupancy in this area.

Knowledge of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers led to the historic journey of John Donelson with his flotilla of flatboats and an excerpt from Donelson's journal notes that on 12 April of 1780, Moses Renfroe and company took leave of the main party, ascended the Red River and made a short-lived settlement upstream.

By the early 1780s, three principal stations were in the Cumberland Red River area: Prince's Station, established in 1782, near Sulphur Fork and Red River; Neville's Station founded circa 1784 between Prince's Station and Clarksville; and Clarksville, the only station to become a city, established in 1784 near the confluence of the Cumberland and Red Rivers. In January 1784, John Montgomery and Martin Armstrong surveyed the present site of Clarksville and proceeded to sell lots. The town was named for General George Rogers Clark, Indian fighter and Revolutionary War leader. On 29 December 1785, North Carolina established Clarksville as a town. Despite frequent Indian attacks, the town survived and prospered as early settlers attempted to recreate and perpetuate the culture of their former homes in their new environment.

In 1796 when Tennessee became the 16th state, Tennessee County of which Clarksville was a part, was divided into Montgomery and Robertson counties with Clarksville the county seat of Montgomery County. The name Montgomery honored John Montgomery, who was a founder of Clarksville as well as a renowned Indian fighter and Revolutionary War leader.

The early years of the nineteenth century were progressive ones, chiefly devoted to the building of roads, railroads and bridges and the establishment of churches and educational institutions. The outbreak of the Civil War in the 1860s forced residents to declare their loyalty to the Union or the Confederacy. On 8 June 1861, citizens of Montgomery County cast 2,631 votes for secession and only 33 against. Fort Donelson, Fort Henry and Fort Defiance were established in preparation of the Union advance, only to fall to Federal troops in 1862.

After the Civil War, traffic on the Cumberland River continued to be of great importance to the community and Clarksville became well known for its production of dark fired tobacco, the primary money crop. From 1900 to 1940, Clarksville's trade and business progressed with the growth of the town being closely connected to the county farming area.

Education became an important theme in the county in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the establishment of the Rural Academy in 1806 on the present site of Austin Peay State University. Austin Peay State University had its beginning in 1929 as Austin Peay Normal School, a two year school to train teachers for the rural public schools of the state.

Military activity again would impact the county during World War II when the army established Camp Campbell in Montgomery County. Over 42,000 acres were purchased and in June 1942, relocation of families was completed. The post was named in honor of General William Bowen Campbell. On 15 April 1950, the post became Fort Campbell after it changed from a temporary installation to a permanent one.

Montgomery County furnished two governors to the state, Willie Blount and Austin Peay; a United States Supreme Court Justice and a Postmaster General, Horace H. Lurton and Cave Johnson, respectively. Clarksville has the distinction of having been home to the oldest bank in the state, the Northern Bank, established in 1854, later to become First American; the state's oldest newspaper, the LEAF-CHRONICLE, established in 1808; and the first and only bank in the world established and operated entirely by women, the Woman's Bank of Tennessee which opened in 1919.

During the twentieth century, Montgomery County has profited from communication and mechanical technology with a growth in population and industrial expansion. No longer dependent upon an agricultural base, the county has become an important transport, industrial, retail and professional center with numerous recreational facilities. Such facilities include two state operated areas, Dunbar Cave Natural Area and Port Royal State Historic Park.

Today, Clarksville, county seat of Montgomery County, is Tennessee's fifth largest municipality and one of the fastest growing cities in the South.

Editorial note:

We thank Ms. Williams for this contribution to our Society and praise her for the contribution she has made to our regional literature.