

Geneva County History (from Heritage book)

What is now Geneva County was once a part of the Mississippi territory, which extended from the Chattahoochee River on the east to the Mississippi River on the west, and from the present Florida line on the south, to Montgomery on the north.

At that time, all territory north of the latitude of Montgomery in Alabama and in Mississippi was the Indian reservation of the Choctaws, Cherokees and Upper Creeks.

Inside the Mississippi Territory, Washington County stretched from the Pearl River to the Chattahoochee River. This made Geneva County, at first, a part of Washington County. Then as other counties were formed it was a part of Monroe, Conecuh, Henry, Dale and Coffee Counties.

All of what is known today as the Wiregrass was at one time the Indian reservation of the Lower Creeks; "the white man's court held at St. Stephens" decreed that the county seat of Washington County had jurisdiction over the Creek tribe.

All written deeds to real property in this county first recorded describe the land as lying east of St. Stephen's Meridian. This was due to the fact that all lands were first surveyed east and west from the county site.

Living in the area that was later Henry County were a handful of white people and a few Indians who, according to early history, "generally attended to their own affairs without let or hindrance". The largest Indian village in the county was at Clayhatchee in what is now Dale County.

In 1811, these Indians took part in the attack on a white settlement. Their warriors then joined William Weatherford or Red Eagle, the powerful war chief of the Creek nation who nearly defeated General Andrew Jackson and the U. S. Army at the battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Most of these Geneva County Indians, after joining Weatherford, were killed by Jackson's men or by soldiers commanded by General John Coffee.

But the ones who stayed in the county kept up a constant strife with the white settlers. In one of their raids, these Indians attacked and killed the Josiah Hart family, and the Spears and Vaughan families, some of the county's earliest settlers. A few years later the county Indians killed Mrs. A. M. Alberson and her sister.

During all of these years, from about 1810 until 1837, the settlers had a fort near what is now Wicksburg, then called Stapleton Settlement. It was used as a place of refuge and was never attacked by the Indians.

The final battle with the Indians in this area was fought in 1837 by white men under General William Wellborn at the fork of the Pea River and Pea Creek near what is now the southern boundary of Barbour County.

In 1819, the year that Alabama became a state, Henry County was formed from the region which is now Henry, Houston, Dale, Coffee, Geneva and the southern sections of Barbour and Pike and most of Covington. The town of Covington (near River Falls) was the county seat of "this vast wilderness".

In 1824, the county of Dale was formed from what is now Dale, Coffee and Geneva counties. Daleville was the county seat.

Sometime after 1819 Henry Alexander Yonge established his trading post in the area of what is now Geneva. In 1824, Henry broke his leg, while on a visit to his half-brother, Walter S.C. Yonge's plantation in the area of Eatonton, Georgia. Dr. Iddo Ellis who had moved from New York to Eatonton, Georgia set the leg. While there, Mary, daughter of Dr. Ellis and Henry met and fell in love. Henry was 20. As Mary was only 13, they asked the permission of Dr. Ellis to marry. He said "yes" but they would have to wait until Mary was 20.

After returning to his trading post in Alabama, Henry began to enlarge his holdings. In Henry County he owned all the land that downtown Abbeville is built on. The Court-house Square and many streets are traced by deed to H. A. Yonge as the original owner.

There is documentation that on the 4th of December 1831, at the home of Walter S.C. Yonge, the half brother of Henry, a wedding took place. Mary Ellis became the bride of Henry Alexander Yonge. Thus, the seven year wait for his bride was over. It is reported they returned to what is now Geneva where Henry had built a home for his bride. She thought that it was a wonderful and beautiful place. To honour her, he named the place "Geneva" for her former home of Geneva, New York. Henry A. Yonge was born in Nassau, Bahamas and later moved to Florida.

Trade and commerce had begun in the 1830's. In addition to the boats of Henry Yonge, Dr. Edmond Jones had proven it feasible to operate boat service down the Choctawhatchee to the bay and then to

Pensacola. He would use a combination of floating down, sailing across the bay or using oars, then returning the same way except he would pole up the river. Milladge Cox also began service in the 30's from Geneva to Pensacola and returned weekly using a riverboat. Dr. Jones is buried in the field of E.A. Stewart, overlooking Choctawhatchee River.

Stagecoach lines were coming to life and Geneva County was on at least two east-west lines across northwest Florida and at least one north-south line in the mid 1830's.

The Alligator Line left St. Augustine, Florida and travelled by Tallahassee, Quincy, Campbellton, Whitaker Church, Hendrix, Geneva, Florala, and Crestview and on to Pensacola. Round trip passenger service was twice per week for both mail and passengers so the town grew along with Henry Alexander Yonge's family and fortune.

In 1841, Coffee County was formed with the town of Wellborn (near Damascus) as the county seat. This division split what is now Geneva County into Dale at the eastern end and Coffee in the western end.

Then in 1868, Geneva County was formed from parts of Coffee and Dale Counties. Dr. S. B. Moore, a representative from Coffee County, introduced the bill to create Geneva County. The Alabama Legislature, which during that time of reconstruction was in session practically all year, wanted to name the new county, "Choctawhatchee", but the presiding officer of the house couldn't spell Choctawhatchee, so they passed the act establishing Geneva County. The Act creating Geneva County named seven commissioners, whose task was to organize the county, establish voting places and conduct a county election. These commissioners were Thomas H. Yarbrough, Daniel Fulford, Daniel Miller, Asa Ray, William Hays, Ira D. Alberson and Jonas Bell. The commissioners also levied a special tax to pay the pro rata share of the debt acquired from Coffee, Dale and Henry counties.

When Geneva became a county, the population was less than 1500 and most of the land belonged to the government. This land was not subject to taxation and finances were low.

The county's first officers, elected in June 1869, were Thomas Yarbrough, Probate Judge; Henry C. Yarbrough, Clerk of Circuit Court; James M. Keith, Tax Collector; Archie Vaughan, County Treasurer; John William Keith, Tax Assessor; E. R. Porter, Superintendent of Education; J. H. Brooks, Solicitor. The commissioners were: Shadrack Box, Daniel Fulford, Henry T. Wilkinson and Bryant Spears.

The first grand jury met in 1869 at the local school, since the county did not have a courthouse. The school called the Academy was located at the corner of Church and Academy streets.

The first courthouse was built in 1869 of undressed pine planks, near the edge of a grove of trees, where South Academy intersects East Magnolia Street, today. This building was used for two years. Then the county bought a hotel building constructed by Dr. Angus McKinnon. The structure was located at the intersection of Commerce and Magnolia, served as courthouse until a new brick edifice was constructed at the same site.

An interesting note was the changing of the boundary of Coffee and Geneva County. An Act of the Alabama Legislature was approved on March 3, 1870 changing the bound-

ary line between Coffee and Geneva Counties, declaring William Russell of Geneva County, a citizen of Coffee County. This caused a notch in the county line located in the southeast quarter of section twenty-six, township three, range nineteen.

On February 13, 1879, the legislature authorized a change of name for the county from Geneva to Gordon. Act number 200 required the approval by a local referendum, but the election to approve the change never took place.

Geneva County has an area of 578 square miles. The population in the year 2000 was 25,764. Many farms are still operated, but many people work in manufacturing plants, government jobs and other employment.

Two festivals are celebrated: The Tomato Festival in Slocomb, where farmers sell the best tomatoes in the country; The Festival on the Rivers is celebrated in the city of Geneva. Submitted by Geneva County Heritage Committee. Sources: *Geneva, Alabama-A History* by the Geneva Woman's Club, 1987; *The Geneva County Reaper*, December 26, 1968; *Coffee Grounds A History of Coffee County, Alabama* by Fred S. Watson; *Possums Run Over Their Graves* by Rebecca Newsom Dobson; Acts of the Legislature of Alabama; *The Alabama Lawyer*, Vol. 61, No. 7, Nov. 2000; Research by G. Lamar Beck.