

HOW PUTNAM GOT ITS NAME

By Dale Welch/Hilltop Express Newspaper,
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Pg. 364 – History books about Putnam County have been silent as to why the county was named after Major Gen. Israel Putnam, a native of Massachusetts and hero in the Revolutionary War but a man who never made it to Tennessee or even to the South.

Or at least the historians just declare the question a mystery and leave it at that.

But while Gen. Putnam had no direct connection to Tennessee, it had been discovered that he had an indirect connection. Putnam County is unique among its neighboring counties by having been named for someone or something with no direct connection to Tennessee, with the exception of DeKalb county which was named for a German baron who came to America with Lafayette.

Jackson County was named for Andrew Jackson, a congressman, senator, Tennessee Supreme County judge, general and the seventh President of the United States. Overton was named for Jackson's friend, Judge John Overton, a Tennessee Supreme Court judge and co-founder of the city of Memphis.

Fentress County was named for James Fentress, once a speaker of the state House of Representatives. Cumberland was named for the Cumberland Mountains, which were in turn named for the Duke of the Cumberlands by Dr. Thomas Walker in the mid-1700s.

White County was named for its first pioneer settler, John White; and Smith was named for Daniel Smith, the secretary of the Territory South of the River Ohio, which later became Tennessee. He was also a senator and maker of the first map of the state.

So, why was Putnam County so named and what in fact is Major Gen. Putnam's indirect connections? It's this: his grandson, Albigeance Waldo Putnam, who became a prominent citizen and resident of Nashville.

A. W. Putnam was born March 11, 1799 at Maple Shade, the family plantation in Marietta, Ohio. His father was Col. Israel Putnam, the oldest son and *aide de camp* to major Gen. Israel Putnam. His mother was Charlotte Loring, daughter of Judge Daniel Loring of Salem, Mass.

After receiving a Bachelor of Arts degree from Ohio University at Athens, A. W. Putnam went to Gallipolis Island and boarded with a French family to perfect himself in the language. In a biography by his daughter, she writes that "he was a fine linguist and passionately fond of the dead languages."

While there, he met Samuel W. Vinton, with whom he studied law. Upon completing his studies in law and language, Putnam was admitted to the bar, back in Ohio, at the age of 21.

At the urging of a bachelor uncle, Israel Loring, Putnam came down South to Port Gibson, Miss., where Uncle Israel built Putnam an office, complete with an adjoining bedroom, in his own yard. He also furnished Putnam with a bookcase of law books, valued then at \$600. Young Putnam didn't even have to advertise and soon became a successful lawyer and later a director of the First Bank of Mississippi.

While in Mississippi, Putnam met and married his first Tennessee connections. In April 1825, he and Catherine Anne Sevier, the granddaughter of John Sevier, the first governor of Tennessee who is considered by some the "father of Tennessee," were wed. The two had met while Miss Sevier was staying with her aunt, Mrs. Daniel Vertner, upon her death, Putnam married her sister, Cornelia, in June 1834.

In 1836, A.W. Putnam moved his family to Nashville, purchasing the William H. White place; and in 1839 he bought Waverly Place, then two miles south of Nashville on Franklin Pike.

Shortly thereafter, his second wife also died. In 1838, he married Mrs. Mary O. Walker Edwards who died in 1848. She was a niece of A.O.P. Nicholson, a pioneer judge who had filled other important civic positions such as speaker of the House of Representatives and who had also served in the U. S. Congress. In his three marriages, Putnam fathered 10 children, most of who lived to adulthood.

Putnam eventually gave up his law career and devoted his time to managing his large property holdings, but not before he became a Tennessee Supreme Court judge and at one time the chief justice. He was also an elder in the Presbyterian Church for 30 years.

The later years of his life he mostly spent in literary pursuits, writing many essays and manuscripts. The most widely known is his History of Middle Tennessee which is said to have brought him more honor than money. He was one of the founders and first presidents of the Tennessee Historical Society.

Unfortunately, most of his papers were destroyed by fire during the Civil War. There are, however, several of his personal papers preserved in the Tennessee Historical Society's collection at the State Library and Archive in Nashville. Among them is a day book and his autobiography, hand written on several pages. Also in those files is the original commission presented to his grandfather, Israel Putnam, by Congress, making him a major general, a document signed by John Hancock, no less.

On January 20, 1869, A. W. Putnam died. He is buried in the Mount Olivet Cemetery in Nashville.

So when the Tennessee General Assembly named Putnam County after Major Gen. Israel Putnam, first in 1842 and again in 1854, it was also actually conveying a double honor, first to a major general in George Washington's Continental Army (or "Old Put," as he was sometimes called) and also to one of Tennessee's adopted sons, Albigeance Waldo Putnam, lawyer, linguist, farmer, Supreme Court justice, writer, Tennessee Historical Society co-founder and president, church elder and, most important, of course, a gentleman.



Israel Putnam (January 7, 1718 – May 29, 1790) was an American army general who fought with distinction at the Battle of Bunker Hill (1775) during the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783). Although Putnam never quite attained the national renown of more famous heroes such as Davy Crockett or Daniel Boone, in his own time his reckless courage and fighting spirit were known far beyond Connecticut's borders through the circulation of folk legends celebrating his exploits.

Putnam was born in Salem Village (now Danvers), Massachusetts, to Joseph and Elizabeth Putnam, a prosperous farming family of Salem Witch Trials fame. His birthplace, Putnam House, still exists. In 1740, at the age of 22, he moved to Mortlake (now Pomfret) in northeastern Connecticut where land was cheaper and easier to obtain.

Putnam died in Brooklyn, Connecticut in 1790, and was buried in an above-ground tomb in Brooklyn's South Cemetery. Within a few years, however, so many people visited Putnam's tomb that the badly-mutilated marble marker was removed for safe keeping to the Connecticut State Capitol in Hartford. In 1888, Putnam's remains were removed from the Brooklyn cemetery and placed in a sarcophagus built into the foundation of a monument, newly erected on a plot of ground near the Brooklyn town green.

In the early days of the war, Putnam was regarded by Washington as one of America's most valuable military assets, but this view was probably based primarily upon earlier exploits from his colorful past. In the War for Independence, however, Putnam proved to be incapable of commanding complex campaigns, which sharply reduced his value to the cause.

Today there are many places named for Israel Putnam, including as many as eight Putnam Counties across the United States and an elementary school located in Brooklyn, New York. There is also an East Putnam Avenue in Greenwich, Connecticut which is named after the path in which he retreated from British forces. Along East Putnam Avenue lies Putnam's cottage an eighteenth century residence that may have served as a tavern at the time of Putnam's escape.

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