

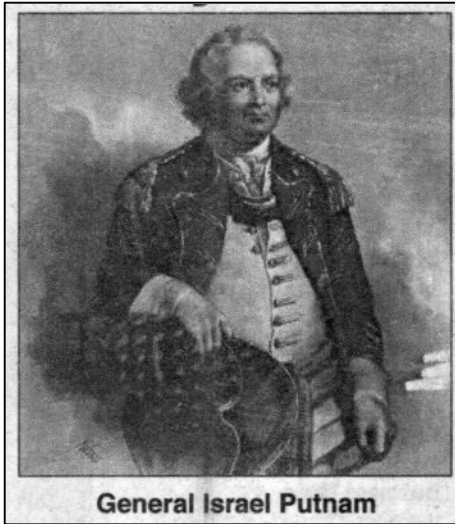
**PUTNAM COUNTY, TENNESSEE**  
**CELEBRATES 160 YEARS**

By Megan Trotter

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**PUTNAM COUNTY** – This Tuesday Putnam County will celebrate its 160<sup>th</sup> birthday with a proclamation signing at the courthouse to mark the historic occasion. However, if the county had stayed established when it was first formed, it would be already celebrating its 172<sup>nd</sup> birthday.



“A lot of people don’t know that – that Putnam County was dissolved,” Jude Duke, museum administrator of the Cookeville History Museum said. “As far as we know, we’re the only county in the state that was established twice.”

Before the county was established, the land was used by Native American – Cherokees in the east, the Creeks in the south and the Chickasaws in the west. Accounts from early explorers say that no evidence of Native American settlements was ever found, but instead it appeared the land was only used for common hunting grounds.

As settlers slowly traveled west, they are believed to have first settled in Monterey, near Standing Stone. From there, the people trickled in over the years. By the time Tennessee was admitted to the Union, most of the Upper Cumberland was a part of Sumner County. It became part of Smith County in 1799 and then Jackson County in 1801.

After a while, many residents of what is now Putnam County started to protest having to make trips to Gainesboro, Livingston, Jamestown or Sparta to get to a courthouse where they could carry out the necessary business of being a citizen, such as registering deeds, paying taxes, settling land claims and voting. Such journeys were long and hazardous, with difficult, muddy roads and swift-moving streams that could sweep unlucky travelers away to their deaths.

Petitions to form a new county circulated, and at Nashville legislature meeting, officials read three petitions that had a total of 528 signatures. Not long after, a fourth petition was sent that contained 440 signatures.

Because of such support for a new county to be formed, in February of 1842, the state legislature passed an act to establish Putnam County, “to perpetuate the name and public services of General Israel Putnam, of the Revolutionary War.” Though the general had never been to the south, the man’s courage and fighting spirit were well known to Tennessee settlers.

In order to form Putnam County, territory was taken from Jackson, Overton, White and Fentress. A surveyor from Jackson County was tasked with drawing up the boundary lines that, according to the Tennessee Assembly, had to contain at least 350 miles within this new county, have 450 qualified voters, and could not reduce its parent counties to less than 625 miles. From there, the county court would appoint five commissioners to create the new county seat, which they would name Monticello. These commissioners would have the power to sell lots in Monticello and establish a fund to use in purchasing land and public buildings.

However, just a few years later in 1845, Overton and Jackson Counties claimed that the formation of Putnam was illegal because it reduced their counties below the constitutional limits. Putnam was declared unconstitutionally established and was dissolved.

It was Tennessee Senator Richard Fielding Cooke who pressed to re-found Putnam County, and because of his dedication, the bill carried to the Senate. However when it got to the House of Representatives, it was rejected because House members still feared that the surrounding counties would be unconstitutionally small after the reestablishment.

Cooke tried again in 1854, and with the help of Representative Henderson M. Clements, assured that according to a new survey, there was sufficient room for the county to be created constitutionally. Finally, Feb. 11, 1854, the bill passed in the House, and Putnam County was re-established. However instead of Monticello, the county seat was named Cookeville, in honor of Cooke, who had fought so hard to see that Putnam County return.

It was decided that the courthouse should be set up on a property that contained two creeks which was owned by Charles Crook – despite rumors of one of the creeks drying up in the summer and rumors of a dead fox found in the other.

These were written off as ploys by other property owners to try to bring the county seat closer to their land instead, so that their property values would increase. However, the land proved healthy and was purchased from Crook – 40 acres for \$100.

“That’s another thing that people get mixed up,” Duke said. “A lot of people think that Crook donated the land for Cookeville for the county seat, but he did not.”

Even when Putnam County was finally reestablished, there were many settlers who lived on the borders who were still not satisfied. Some were angry that they were not included and insisted on being returned to their old counties. There were even some properties that were divided. A man named James B. Lowery had a property that straddled White, DeKalb and Putnam county lines.

Over the years, county lines were drawn and re-drawn until the county, which started with just a handful of families, has now grown to encompass more than 70,000 residents.

For more information about the founding of Putnam County, visit the Tennessee Room in the Putnam County Library or visit the Cookeville History Museum from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. Wednesday-Saturdays.

\*Read more about the history of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas at:  
<http://www.ajlambert.com>