

Putnam County, Cookeville: it's their sesquicentennial year

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Editor's Note: We are in the sesquicentennial year of Putnam County and Cookeville, both crafted by the Tennessee General Assembly 150 years ago, in 1854. Following is a brief history of Putnam and its 'county town,' Cookeville, and inside today's Herald-Citizen is a special 48-page section providing more historical details, photos and sesquicentennial greetings from advertisers.

Putnam County. Once impoverished and isolated, the county was a 'poor relation' of neighboring counties in the Upper Cumberland. Yet today it is the business, medical, educational and cultural center of the region. We must return to the past to understand why.

White settlement of the area began relatively late. It was not until 1805 that the Cherokee relinquished rights to hunt in the wild beauty of the eastern half of today's Putnam County.

Moreover, to pioneers traveling west along the North Carolina Trace linking Kingston to Nashville in the 1780s and 1790s, the rocky terrain and steep slopes offered little incentive to stop.

About 1800 a few families, migrating from both east and west, began to filter into this land. Tough, practical and fiercely independent, most had come earlier from North Carolina, Virginia and Pennsylvania and their forebears from England and Scotland.

They staked claims to homesteads granted in payment for military service or road construction. Others had bought acreage from eastern land companies. Some simply 'squatted' at a likely place -- upon fertile soil in a creek bottom, at a spring site or on land along the trace.

The early decades of the 19th century, however, brought steady growth, and by the 1830s residents hereabout, in order to secure a courthouse nearby, petitioned the Tennessee legislature to form a new county.

The General Assembly established Putnam County in 1842 and named it for the Revolutionary War hero, Israel Putnam. Because the new county violated state constitutional provisions, however, court action dissolved it in 1844.

Then in 1854, Richard F. Cooke, a state senator, persuaded the General Assembly to re-establish Putnam County, carving it primarily from Jackson, Overton and White Counties but adding also small slices of DeKalb, Fentress, and Smith Counties.

Legislation creating Putnam County also specified that the "county town" would be named Cookeville in recognition of State Sen. Cooke. The town grew rapidly but haphazardly. Log and a few frame stores and homes clustered around the Courthouse Square.

There were also small communities at Standing Stone (which would become Monterey), White Plains (now in Algood), Bloomington Springs and Pekin; but most county residents were rural folk, subsistence farmers who drudged from daybreak until long after dark to provide for family needs.

Here and there a few schoolmasters, themselves poorly lettered, taught the Three R's but few children received any formal education beyond the third grade level. Scattered church congregations, largely Baptist, Methodist, Cumberland Presbyterian and later Church of Christ, offered spiritual solace at autumn camp meetings and monthly 'preachings.'

The disastrous Civil War broke out only seven years after Putnam was re-established. Although less than 8-percent of the county's population was slave, the majority of its voters cast their ballots in June 1861 in favor of leaving the Union. Its men fought in both armies.

While Putnam was the scene of no major battles, the war was a nightmare for its citizenry. Marauding Union and Confederate soldiers plundered the land, and guerrilla bands spread terror.

When the conflict ended, the county recovered slowly. The completion of the Nashville and Knoxville (later the Tennessee Central) Railroad through the county in 1893 aided the healing. Belching locomotives stimulated the county's economy and created new towns and villages -- Buffalo Valley, Silver Point, Algood and Monterey.

Farmers turned to staple farming, and boxcars of corn, tobacco, mules, hogs, chickens and eggs rolled to distant markets. Coal mining and lumbering increased.

With its train repair shops, Monterey became Putnam's railroad town. Because of its pleasant climate and spectacular scenery, in the early 1900s it also flourished as a summer resort. Its eight hotels advertised balls, theatricals, musicals and genteel athletics for the edification and health of patrons.

The construction through the county of US Highway 70-North in the 1930s and Interstate 40 in the 1960s, though, spelled the eventual demise of rail travel. Cookeville became a fuel, food and lodging stopover for truckers and tourists and a mecca for shoppers.

Meantime, educational opportunities steadily improved. In the early 1900s church groups established Silver Point Christian College (to train black ministers), Baxter Seminary and Dixie College in Cookeville.

In 1915 the state chose Cookeville as the site of Tennessee Polytechnic Institute. Achieving university status in 1965, Tennessee Tech [Tennessee Technological University] now enrolls more than 8,500 students and attracts area residents to numerous athletic events, workshops, lectures and concerts. Its Appalachian Crafts Center draws students and visitors from throughout the nation.

With consolidation, smooth racial integration and well-trained teachers, Putnam County schools also improved. Today Cookeville students consistently rank above the state average on standardized tests.

Cookeville is a cultural center. It is the smallest city in Tennessee to support a symphony orchestra and a Public TV station. Adults and young people perform in community choruses and drama groups. There are regular art exhibits. Citizens grant tax support to an excellent public library, a drama center and railroad history museums and therefore enjoy a variety of events from classical and bluegrass music to ballet to storytelling.

This article was adapted from the work of Mary Jean DeLozier of Cookeville who became the county's official historian with the publication in 1979 of Putnam County, Tennessee: 1850-1970. She is a former member of the Dept. of History faculty at Tennessee Tech.

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