

## **EXPLORING JACKSON COUNTY'S FRONTIER TOWN, OLD COLUMBUS**

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Just imagine the long-forgotten river town, which sat between the Cumberland River and the mouth of the Roaring River; where the Roaring River spills into the Cumberland; the place where Old Man Gray operated a mill and where he and his family built their home place on the bank. The post office, opened in 1847, was located in a private home, where people would congregate and anxiously await news from afar. It was also the place where the "Rowdy House" Saloon added a much-needed escape from the hardships of life.

Danger lurked every spring, as the waters of the rivers rose and bottomlands were flooded. The people learned from the harsh flooding and built their dwellings on the highest ground possible for protection. In 1820, Old Columbus also served as a temporary county seat while the courthouse was being built in Gainesboro when a more centralized location was sought. It could also boast of some very important people as its residents, one of the more notable being Secretary of State Thomas Harvey Butler.

At the end of the Mexican War, three men from Overton County paid the ultimate price and were honored for their bravery by one of the largest crowds ever to gather in Old Columbus. The Overton County Court desired a tribute of respect upon the arrival of the three lead caskets containing the corpses of Capt. Creed T. Huddleston, Lt. Tillman Cullom and Sgt. William W. Bledsoe. The court ordered that Thos. J. Finley, Johnathon Fowler, N. M. Lane, Alexander Crawford, Arkely Fisk, Henry Andrews, Wm. Chowning, William J. Overstreet, J. M. Goodbar, Jacob Gardenhire, George Christian, Daniel McMillin, Louis Stover, William C. Herd, M. L. Armstrong, John M. Turner, Wm. A. Officer, F. M. Daugherty, James R. Copeland, Abram Hater, Landon Armstrong, Jessie Roberts, Wm. C. Harrison and Willie M. Parris be appointed a committee of escort to attend at the town of Columbus in Jackson County to receive the remains expected to arrive from the City of Mexico. Capt. John Kennedy was the officer on the occasion, and a general invitation was sent to all persons to attend. William Morris and Walker Brown were appointed musicians for the occasion; the sad sounds emanating from the bugler's horns could be heard throughout the river town as the lead caskets, unloaded from the ship, were being pulled up the hill by ox carts, traveling the Moses Fisk Road to Hilham.

During the Civil War, Old Columbus was a place of unrest; a time when food was scarce, the people's stomachs gnawed with hunger, brother fought against brother and neighbors no longer trusted one another. It was a time when men sat on the bluffs along the river and shot at the Union Navy gunboats – magnificent, iron-clad vessels armed with cannons positioned for the ready and firing back at the guerilla gunfire. Col. H. K. McConnell described his role in the destruction of Old Columbus in a dispatch "a various den of thieves and murders, I removed the women and children and burned it. I have no means of knowing the number of mules and horses taken. They were

considerable, but the quality and condition of the stock was so inferior that its only importance to us was to get them out of the hands of the enemy.”

Although the river town is long forgotten now, and all the town lots were eventually sold at the steps of the courthouse and turned into a farm, Old Columbus still remains an area of great beauty; the rich fertile bottomlands nestled near the majestic riverfronts remind one of days gone by, when people fought the ravages of war and poverty, plowed farms and grew crops, had large families who knew both hardship and deep love and where people claim that on a very foggy night, if you listen real hard, you can still hear the faint sound of a steamboat’s whistle throughout the valley.

*The editors, Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell, invite anyone to submit a story of 800 words concerning the history/folklore of the Upper Cumberland region. Send stories to the editors at history Department, Box 5064 TTU, Cookeville, TN 38505. E-mail addresses are [cdickinson@tntech.edu](mailto:cdickinson@tntech.edu) and [birdie@tntech.edu](mailto:birdie@tntech.edu).*

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