

MCNAIRY COUNTY, TENNESSEE

a brief history

by Nancy Wardlow Kennedy

In the latter part of the 18th century, Tennessee opened as a new frontier. An explosion, as the people passed over the mountains to a land of milk and honey, they came westward, to east Tennessee, then Middle Tennessee and last to West Tennessee.

In 1818, the U. S. government paid 15 million dollars for a tract of land from Yazoo River in the south to the Ohio River in the north, bound on the east west by the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers. Part of this purchase was West Tennessee.

By 1820, they were beginning to settle in to a place we now call McNairy County. They left their worn out lands in Virginia, the Carolinas and other parts of Tennessee, to a virgin land in search of fertile soil and a better place to rear their families.

The land, we now call McNairy County, had been occupied by the Chickasaw Indians and was originally a part of Hardin County. As the area grew, the pioneers petitioned the General Assembly for a new county. On October 8, 1823, history was made, when McNairy County came into being, taking its name from Judge John McNairy.

In 1824 the county was organized with an active militia and commissioned Justices of the Peace, who constituted the County Court. The County Court, then elected our first officials: Pressley Christian, Chairman of the County Court; Joseph Barrett, Clerk of the County; and Henry Wilson, Sheriff. The first trustee was Robert M. Owens, William Murray the first register and Benjamin Wright was the first county surveyor.

The first Courthouse was held in a log house erected for that purpose, about four miles southwest of Purdy, two miles south of Bethel and ½ mile from the Mobile & Ohio Railroad that was laid about 1850. The farm later belonged to a A. V. Murry and today (Sept, 2000) belongs to the Rowland family.

This Courthouse was used until the county seat of Purdy was selected. McNairy County was originally almost square in miles and Purdy was chosen as the county seat since is was the center of the county.

During the years, McNairy County lost it's square shape and our distinct little shape developed. Originally Adamsville and Milledgeville were in Hardin County. In 1849, a strip on the complete western edge of Hardin County was annexed into McNairy County, which included Adamsville. In 1870, Chester county was formed from the northern part.

The first courthouse built at Purdy, about August 1825, was a log house about 18x20 feet with clap board roof and puncheon floor. A more substantial building was erected about 1830. This was a brick building and stood until 1881, when it was destroyed by fire and was not rebuilt. This courthouse was built by James Reed and Reuben Walker with Henry Kirkland as brick mason. The first jail was built about the same time. In 1850 a more substantial brick jail and sheriff's residence was built with ample accommodations.

Purdy, the little town among the hills, obtained a high level of social, educational, cultural and economic welfare. The courthouse was surrounded by general merchandise stores, saloons, livery stables, eating houses, shoe and saddle shop, stage stand, masonic lodge, offices of lawyers and doctors, at least one hotel and one or more taverns. On the west side of court square was a theater called Thespain hall where many masterpieces of Shakespeare was enacted.

A. W. Stovall, in 1897, called Purdy beautiful and historic. He described the Purdy of his youth, in 1854, a place of beautiful streets, costly houses, rich gardens, aromatic flowers, brave

men, noble women, pretty girls and playful boys. A picture of perfection.

Purdy University opened in 1859, was considered one of the best facilities of higher education, with courses offered in Greek, Latin, science and philosophy. The University closed its doors during the War Between the States, never to reopen as a University.

As the railroad tracked its way through McNairy County, little villages began to flourish near the better way of transportation. First known as stations, was Finger, McNairy and Bethel in the north, Falcon in the middle, Ramer, Guys and Chewalla in the south.

Other villages were Montezuma (now Chester Co), Camden, later called Rosecreek, Gravel Hill, Adamsville, Stantonville and Monteray, later known as Michie.

The Civil War divided the county. 1,318 voted for separation and 586 voted against it. The county furnished two brigadier generals: Marcus J. Wright and Mark Perrin Lowery who was born in McNairy County but had moved to Mississippi.

After the war, talk began of moving the county seat to a point on the railroad. A twenty year struggle and at least twelve attempts were made before a successful move to Selmer was made in 1891.

Bethel Springs, Falcon and New South bid for the county seat. Falcon won the bid by election once, in 1884, only to have the Supreme Court to knock down the results and the court went back to Purdy.

In 1890 another election was carried to move the courthouse from Purdy to a place called New South by a margin of 2063 to 563. The postal officials in Washington would not recognize New South as a name so it was changed to Selma. When the papers came back from the authorities it was spelled Selmer.

The first County Court held at the new county seat was April 1891. One June 16, 1891, ceremonies were held to lay the corner stone for the new courthouse.

After 65 years of glory, Purdy died because it would not allow the railroad to come through the town. Death was almost immediate as many families moved to the new county seat.

McNairy County sent her young to answer freedom's call. In WWI we sacrificed 29 lives for that call. WWII took 74 lives, 45 received Purple Hearts, and 26 were prisoners of war. We lost 6 in the Korean Conflict and 8 in Vietnam.

Today, McNairy County is a small county. Population in 2000 was about 25,000 and yet we try to stay abreast of technology. Our schools are A+, we have industry, farms, a hospital. We have ten incorporated towns but since they are small towns we are considered a rural area.

With the railroad no longer king, McNairy County has two major highways winding through the county, Hwy 64 and Hwy 45 and a small airport.

Many passed through the roads of McNairy County. Many went on in search of better land - but many stayed. The road goes on from here until the end of time. We must hold on to our heritage and pass it on to our children and our children's children. Just as we were influenced by those that were before, so will our lives, thoughts and deeds help those that follow as they tread the road of life. May we always be proud that we traveled the road through McNairy County.

Resources: Reflections, A History of McNairy County

Reminiscences of the Early Settlement and Early Settlers of McNairy Co, Tenn
By Marcus J. Wright

Papers of A. W. Stovall
Early History of Hardin County, by P. M. Harbert