

# A Step Back in Time

## RUTHERFORD COUNTY – 205 Years Old

By Bobbie Sue Shelton-Lonas

Happy Birthday Rutherford County . . . In 1779-1780, James Robertson and John Donelson led a group of North Carolinians west and established on the banks of the Cumberland River a settlement that would eventually blossom into the city of Nashville. From that location, settlers gradually fanned out along the tributaries of the Cumberland, including the Stones River. White settlers, accompanied by slaves, poured into what was then western North Carolina. The Native American tribes, who had claimed the region as hunting lands for millennia, retreated against the relentless onslaught of the settlers. In 1796, citizens of the region applied for statehood. The United States Congress granted their request and the state of Tennessee was born. Just seven years later, the Tennessee General Assembly carved a new county out of Davidson, Williamson and Wilson counties. They named the new entity, Rutherford County, in honor of General Griffith Rutherford, (b. ca 1721 in Ireland – died August, 1805). He was a North Carolina Colonial Legislator and a Revolutionary War General who settled in Middle Tennessee after the Revolution and served as President of the Council of the Territory of Tennessee before Tennessee attained statehood. Two counties, Rutherfordton of North Carolina and Rutherford of Tennessee were named for him. In December 3, 1807 Bedford County was cut off from Rutherford County. Over the years, several adjustments were made concerning county lines.

Rutherford County was organized by an act of the General Assembly in Knoxville Tennessee on October 25, 1803. But it wasn't until January 3, 1804 that the courts for the county were organized. The same act that created the county also ordered the county board (justices) to meet in March, June, September and December, annually.

Thomas Rucker, Colonel John Thompson, James Sharp, Peter Legrand, Charles Ready, John Hill, and John Howell served

as the first members of the Rutherford County Court. Court sessions rotated among the homes of the members until a site was selected for the county seat and funds raised to construct a courthouse.

John Hill, Frederick Barnfield, Mark Mitchell, Alexander McBright and Peter Legrand were appointed, August 3, 1804, to select a central site for a seat of justice for the new county. They were to receive, by purchase or donation, forty acres of land upon which they were to erect, or cause to be erected, a courthouse, prison and stocks and to lay out a town, to be named by the commissioners. Lots were to be sold at auction to the highest bidder and the proceeds of the sale to be used in the building of the courthouse, jail and stocks.

The above named board selected a site within the forks of Stones River for a county seat. The town was named Jefferson. The rich farming lands surrounding Jefferson and river transportation gave it a prospect of becoming an important commercial empire. The following were among the first purchasers of lots in Jefferson; Peter Cook, Theophilus Canon, Joseph Bennett, William Carlisle, Harrison Gilliam, John Bell, Samuel Bell, Daniel Ferguson, J. A. Lewis, George Douglas, Robert Weakley, William Howell, Thomas Stone, H. H. Harris, Norton Green and Mark Mitchell.

The town was regularly laid out having about 150 town lots and a public square on which was erected a brick courthouse. This courthouse was built in 1804-05 at a cost of between \$2,000 and \$3,000. After

the county seat was moved to Murfreesboro, the old courthouse was transformed into the Jefferson Seminary of Learning and was of short duration, the old building stood till about 1835.

A whipping post was also erected on the corner of the Square for the punishment of grave offenses. Sheriff Samuel McBride demanded of the court a suitable jail for prisoners in his possession. A temporary jail was used until a more permanent one could be built.

Even though the town of Jefferson was getting well established and business establishments were growing, dissatisfaction arose. It was the consensus of the court that Jefferson was not a suitable location, as a seat of justice and a more central location in the county, was desired.

On October 17, 1811, the Legislature appointed Charles Ready, Hugh Robinson, Hans Hamilton, James Armstrong; Owen Edwards, Jesse Brashears and John Thompson commissioners, to select a more suitable seat of justice for the county. They were directed to have due regard to good water and a central location. Sixty acres of land

were to be procured by purchase or donation. A struggle was made to secure the seat. Readyville-Rucker's place, Black Fox Spring and Capt. William Lytle's place was offered. The commissioners visited the various places mentioned. The commissioners dined on a sumptuous dinner prepared by Charles Ready, and strong efforts were made to have Rucker's place chosen. Capt. Lytle also entertained the commissioners, where the vote was taken on his proposition to donate sixty acres of land south of "Murfree Spring Branch" to

the commissioners. Four commissioners, Robinson, Hamilton, Edwards and Thompson voted in favor of Lytle's offer. The opposition led by Ready, had Armstrong, Brashears and Ready, three votes in favor of Rucker's place. Such was their disappointment at their defeat that they refused to sign the deeds to the lots sold. All of the original deeds simply bear the names of Hugh Robinson, Hans Hamilton, John Thompson and Owen Edwards. The only reserve made in the deed was a mutual understanding that Captain Lytle should have one lot re-deeded to him. This was accordingly done and the commissioners gave him the lot on the southeast corner of the Square. The town as originally surveyed by Hugh Robinson contained seventy lots each 150 feet square, being numbered from the northwest corner to the northeast from one to twelve inclusive. The auction sale of lots began in 1812 and sold rapidly. Two acres of this donated land near the center were to be reserved on which were to be built a courthouse, stocks, and a jail. The proceeds of the sale of lots were to be used to pay for the erection of buildings mentioned above.

Also the act of October 17, 1811 named the new county seat Cannonsburg, in honor of a young politician, Newton Cannon, but on November 19, 1811, an amendatory to the October act changed the name to Murfreesborough, which was later shortened to Murfreesboro. This name was in honor of Colonel Hardy Murfree, a close friend of Captain Lytle, who was a Revolutionary soldier and held lands in the vicinity under a military grant from North Carolina.

In 1812 a new courthouse was erected and after only ten years in 1822 this courthouse burned. After realizing a need for more revenues, a called session in August of that year, granted premiums for a new levy of taxes for the purpose of building a new courthouse.

The commissioners levied a tax of 37 ½



Historic marker honoring General Griffith Rutherford for whom Rutherford County is named.

on each 100 acres of land, 75 cents on each town lot, 25 cents on each free poll, 50 cents on each black poll, 50 cents for each stallion, 10 dollars on each four wheel pleasure carriage, 5 dollars for each two wheel carriage and 10 dollars for each ordinary where liquors were sold. The money was accordingly raised and a new brick building erected in due course of time. This house stood until another substantial structure, the present courthouse, was erected in 1859 at a cost about \$50,000. A fence was erected around the courthouse at a cost of nearly \$4,000 and the courthouse was furnished with gas in 1874. It is one of only six remaining Tennessee courthouses built before the Civil War and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its significant political and military and architecture history.

Upon moving the county seat to Murfreesboro, a jail was built by the commissioners on College Street. This was a two-story brick building. On October 4, 1850, Mr. J. Lidsey, W. H. Helms, B. Clayton, J. E. Dromgoole, N. W. Carter and John Burke were appointed as a committee to investigate the needs of the county in regard to the old jail. The committee reported the old jail unfitted for repairs and that a new one was necessary. The cost of the new building, completed in 1852 was about \$8,000.

The act incorporating the town of Murfreesboro passed the General Assembly October 17, 1817. It was declared that the

citizens of the town of Murfreesboro, of the county of Rutherford and State of Tennessee were a body corporate and politic with authority to sue and be sued, etc. The town was organized with a mayor and aldermen.

Murfreesboro was the state capital of Tennessee from 1819 until 1826. The first General Assembly had met in Knoxville May 28, 1797 and continued to meet there till 1813, when it changed to Nashville and remained till September 15, 1815. At this time, it again assembled at Knoxville, but was changed to Murfreesboro, Sept 19, 1819. It continued to meet at Murfreesboro, until early in January 1826, since which time its sessions have been in Nashville. Legislative sessions were held in the Rutherford County courthouse building until it was destroyed by fire in 1922, and the General Assembly moved to the Presbyterian Church on Vine Street until a new courthouse was built. The bill for fixing a permanent seat of government (state capital) was called up Oct 4, 1843. The vote on the question of locating the state capital at Murfreesboro at the third reading in the House stood: yeas 40 and nays 34. In the Senate, on motion of Senator W. H. Sneed for Rutherford and Williamson Counties, the vote stood, 11 for and 14 against. On reconsideration Oct 10, 1843, the bill was carried in favor of Nashville, which became the official capital of Tennessee.

Although Rutherford County is 205 years old, our hometown Eagleville, didn't become a part of this county until 74 years

after its establishment. Prior to 1877, Eagleville was located in Williamson County. Due to population growth and new business establishments, the local politicians and citizens of Eagleville requested a direct road from Eagleville to Franklin, the county seat of Williamson County. Their request was denied. Chesley Williams, a prominent businessman and often referred to as "The Father of Eagleville" was instrumental in getting Rutherford County to agree to build a road from Eagleville to Murfreesboro (presently highway 99) and in turn, Eagleville agreed to be surveyed into Rutherford County. On March 24, 1877, the Eagleville area officially became part of Rutherford County.

### Early Rutherford County Facts

Captain William Lytle built a mill, blacksmith shop and a cotton gin near Murfreesboro in 1808.

Col. Joel Dyer moved his tavern from Jefferson to Murfreesboro in 1812; this building stood till it burned in 1854.

Porter & Spence moved their dry goods store from Jefferson to Murfreesboro in 1813.

The first newspaper published in Murfreesboro was The Courier that made its appearance June 16, 1814.

The Charter granting the Murfreesboro Tennessee Bank issued November 15, 1817.

In 1818 the town well was ordered begun and was not finished till 1824; owing to a destructive fire all wooden chimneys were ordered pulled down and brick or stone substituted instead. Also a fire watch of twelve men was put on duty.

In 1819 a man named Thurman was tried for horse stealing and found guilty, and according to the law and custom of the time, was condemned to be executed. The day

was set and the time arrived. The prisoner was seated on his own coffin and driven in a cart to the place of execution. The Rev. Dr. Henderson delivered the funeral sermon, and pointed out the evils of a sinful life; his hand were pinioned, and the sheriff, U. S. Cummins, was adjusting the noose when Daniel Graham, secretary of state, appeared and stayed the proceedings by reading to the Sheriff, a reprieve for the prisoner who was remanded to jail.

Soul's Female College was organized in 1825 and was known as the "Female Academy".

The Female County Academy was founded in 1829

The first turnpike in the county was the Nashville, Murfreesboro & Shelbyville Pike. The charter was granted in 1831 and the work was immediately begun. The road was completed and gates erected and ready for business in 1842. The State gave aid of one half of the cost and individuals furnished the remainder.

Union University was organized by charter dated February 5, 1842 under the title "Union University in Tennessee".

The Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway was completed from Nashville to Murfreesboro in 1851.

The Exchange Bank was established in the summer of 1852.

The Rutherford County Medical Society was organized in Murfreesboro, June 1, 1852.

The First National Bank was established in March 1869.

The Stones River National Bank was organized May 1, 1872.

The Stones River Creamery started in 1884.



Historic marker of Rutherford County as the Capital of Tennessee located on the Courthouse grounds.