History of Cahawba

Indian Heritage

Native Americans lived at Cahawba for more than 4000 years. The last Indians there were a remnant of the great mound building culture called "Mississippians." They migrated from their cultural heartland near the coast around 1500 to build a substantial frontier village on the banks of the Alabama River. Their fortified village had a ceremonial mound surrounded by a palisades and a moat. The Spanish explorer, Hernando de Soto, may have passed through it in 1540. Shortly thereafter, the Indian culture disappeared.

First State Capital

In 1819, when Alabama achieved statehood, Cahawba was selected as the first permanent state capital. Governor William Wyatt Bibb intended to build a statehouse atop the ceremonial Indian mound, and surround the capitol grounds with the semi-circular moat that Indians had dug nearly 300 years before. Due to a lack of funding, the grand statehouse was never built. The semi-circular Indian village was the centerpiece of Bibb's town plan.

The town was laid out on 1,620 acres acquired through federal land grants and spanned 14 blocks by six blocks. It was modeled on the city of Philadelphia with the north-south streets named for trees, and the east-west streets being numbered.

Lots were sold at public auction, and the proceeds went into the new state treasury. Many businesses were established including hotels, a theatre, two ferries, and two newspapers. The official state bank and the seat of Dallas County were located there, as well as a land office where settlers obtained land patents for most of the richest land in Alabama's Black Belt. The two-story brick capitol at the intersection of Vine Street and Capitol Avenue was completed in the fall of 1820. Steamboat service from Mobile up the Alabama River began in 1821.

All three branches of state government were based at Cahawba from 1820 to 1826. The State Supreme Court met for eleven terms, and the legislature met there for six sessions. Four governors presided at Cahawba.

A high point of the capital's history was the visit in 1825 by Marquis de Lafayette, the French hero of the American Revolution. The visit was part of his United States tour to mark the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

But Cahawba's days as the state capital were doomed. According to Alabama's 1819 Constitution, the General Assembly was to reconsider Cahawba as the permanent capital at the end of their 1825 session. North Alabama political interests used Cahawba's low-lying land to portray it as unhealthy and inaccessible when the river was high. This resulted in moving the capital to Tuscaloosa in 1826, and a decade of decline followed.

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Pre-Civil War Affluence

Within ten years, the town of Cahawba began to recover, reaching its heights in the 1850s. The "w" was dropped from the town's name. Located in the center of the Black Belt with its wealth based on cotton and slavery, Cahaba became a major cotton shipping point to Mobile. By the eve of the Civil War, it was the commercial and social center of a county with the fourth highest per capita wealth in the entire United States.

The wealth generated by the plantation economy was reflected in residences such as the Crocheron house, overlooking the junction of the two rivers, and the Perine Mansion, the largest private home in the state with one of the largest artesian wells in the world.

There were churches, academies for boys and girls, and businesses. Cahaba's Dallas Hall was advertised as the second finest hotel in the state. Cahaba's population rose to more than 3,000, but is sometimes estimated to have been as high as 6,000. The town was the scene of much political activity leading up to the Civil War.

The Civil War and The Sultana Disaster

When war came, two military units were formed in Cahaba – the Cahaba Rifles and Lewis' Battalion. Each saw active service throughout the war. Military authorities converted a former cotton warehouse into a prisoner of war camp for thousands of captured Union soldiers.

At the end of the war Union prisoners from Cahaba being returned to the North on the steamboat Sultana died when the steamboat's boilers exploded. The Sultana Disaster is among the worst maritime disasters in U.S History, killing 1,700 people.

After the war and the 1865 flood that inundated the town, the county seat moved to Selma, and Cahaba began to decline. Most residents moved away and abandoned their houses, relocating to Selma and elsewhere. The courthouse was used for political gatherings by freed slaves. During Reconstruction Cahaba was a freedman village considered to be the "Mecca of the Radical Republican Party" in central Alabama. However, by 1870 the population was fewer than 500. Most of the town eventually became a large farm that ultimately succumbed to flooding and hard times.

Decline and Decay

The deserted town fell into ruin and by the early 20th century, almost nothing remained of it. The only surviving brick mansion burned in 1935. The 19th century bridge spanning the Cahaba River was washed away in 1942. Only two original structures remain: a two-story brick slave quarters and one frame cottage raised atop a brick first floor. Several streets are still intact, and three cemeteries remain. Brick chimneys, columns and traces of cellars can still be seen. House sites can be identified by still-flowering plants and shrubs.