

# Alabama's First Capital

## Efforts to restore Old Cahawba are underway

By David Haynes

**A**walk through the abandoned streets of Alabama's first state capital at Old Cahawba offers few clues about the thriving and prosperous city that occupied this location at the confluence of the Cahaba and Alabama rivers in the mid-19th century.

In the 1850s, Cahawba (the old spelling) was one of the wealthiest cities in the country in terms of per capita income. Dallas County as a whole was ranked third nationwide and there was talk of the booming city becoming the "New York of the South."

The abundance of nearby land that was well-suited for cotton growing and its location on a major river with access to markets for that crop, brought wealth and prosperity to the area.

Hundreds of stately homes and thousands of people walked the streets in fine clothes in what was then also the county seat for Dallas County. Today those streets are used only by the occasional chipmunk, squirrel or perhaps a family out for a picnic beneath the towering live oaks. The Spanish moss that drapes the twisted, sturdy trees seems to add to the ghost-town atmosphere.

Linda Derry, archaeologist for the Old Cahawba Archaeological Park, explains that in the town's heyday in the mid-1800s more than 3,000 people called Cahawba home. And that was after the state capital was moved to Tuscaloosa 20 years earlier.

When Alabama became a state in 1819 it was decided that the town of Cahawba would be designed and built for its capital. Located near the center of the state where the Cahaba flows into the Alabama, it replaced the territorial capital at St. Stephens in southwest Alabama, where the territorial legislature had met before statehood.

It was to be a completely new town, Derry said, and lots were sold for houses, businesses and others set aside for government buildings. The state Legislature convened in the new capital for the first time in 1820, but just six years later the capital was moved to Tuscaloosa.

In the early 1820s prospects for the newly established town looked bright. Land that originally sold for less than \$2 and acre quickly increased in value to \$60 or \$70 an acre. By 1822, some centrally located unimproved lots sold for as much as \$5,000.

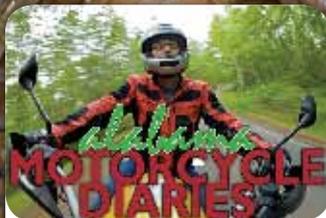
The bustling town boasted a variety of business, including stores, two newspapers, a modern school for girls, a theater, bank, hotels, two ferries and a two-story brick capitol building.

Many factors contributed to the capital being moved. Uncertain economic times forced many into debt, in 1821-22 there was an outbreak of yellow fever. Also in

### Walking trail on the site



Left, new St. Luke's Church



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1822 heavy rain brought the nearby rivers up the edge of town and people began to ask for the capital to be moved. Then, by a single vote in 1825, the Legislature moved the state capital to Tuscaloosa.

Over the next few years the population dropped into the hundreds, and many of the town's elite who had built houses there disassembled them and took them to be rebuilt in towns like Selma, Mobile or Tuscaloosa.

But in spite of this period of decline, the growth of the cotton industry and the completion of the Marion-to-Cahawba railroad helped propel the town back to prosperity and it thrived until just after the Civil War.

During the war, just after the Battle of Selma, opposing generals Nathan Bedford Forrest and James Wilson met at the Crocheron Mansion, had cordials, cigars and generally took stock of one another as they discussed prisoner exchanges, according to Derry. Then they went their separate ways back to the war. One of the few remnants of any buildings in Cahawba are the red brick columns that supported a side porch of the mansion, which is situated just at the meeting point of the two rivers.

The town was also home to a prison for captured federal troops during the war, and at the war's end many prisoners from

### Monument on the grounds



Cahawba found themselves on the ill-fated and overloaded steamboat Sultana, which exploded and sank on the Mississippi with 2,300 freed Union prisoners from Andersonville and Cahawba prisons on board. More than 1,600 perished in the disaster.

Surprisingly, Derry said some of the most frequent visitors to the park and most ardent supporters of preservation efforts are descendants of the federal prisoners who were at Cahawba.

With the removal of the railroad and the departure of the county seat in 1866, the town became home to freed slaves and the population continued to dwindle and buildings to decline. By 1870 the population was less than 500, and by the turn of the century most buildings were in ruin with many being dismantled and sold for scrap. By 1930 fishermen and hunters were among the few who still came to the once thriving capital.

Today there is a resurgence of efforts to preserve the history of Alabama's First Capital. The Archeological Park is now using a temporary visitor center after a fire destroyed the previous center about two years ago. Plans are to build a new visitor center to open in 2010.

Across the street from the park entrance a project to reinstall the St. Luke's Episcopal Church is about half completed. The church, originally built in 1854 at Cahawba, was disassembled and moved 10 miles away in 1880 to Martin Station. At present the project to rebuild the church is under way under the direction of the Rural Studio Project at Auburn University.

Other recent developments include the acquisition of approximately 3,000 acres between the existing park and the Cahaba River by the Nature Conservancy, which in turn is expected to allow extension of hiking trails to the river and help protect the rosin weed plant that's only found in Alabama in parts of Dallas County.

For additional information on the park, which is operated by the Alabama Historical Commission, call the visitor center – which is open daily year-round from noon to 5 p.m. – at 334-872-8058, or visit its Web site at: [www.cahawba.com](http://www.cahawba.com).

**Right, column from the old mansion**



The park is located about 15 miles from Selma. To get there, take Alabama 22 west from Selma approximately nine miles then turn left on County Road 9 and follow the signs.

