

Cotton Port created and destroyed by progress

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It was just after Valentine's Day, 1818, when the Tennessee Herald trumpeted a huge land investment opportunity in nearby Limestone County, Ala., saying this was "the place which nature has distinctly marked out for the commercial center of the very fertile country adjacent."

This up-and-coming town was not the soon-to-be-named county seat of Athens; however, but a brand-new town named Cotton Port. Located about mile south of Mooresville at the junction of Piney, Limestone and Beaver Dam creeks – the nearest highland to the Tennessee River – Cotton Port was in prime position to become, as the name implies, a prominent port for the cotton trade of the day.

In fact, its importance had already been established by that time, even before Limestone County was established, as the same Herald ad stated: "It includes the well-known old boat landing, Limestone. At this place for several years past, not an inconsiderable part of the cotton from these parts of Madison County has been embarked in flat bottomed boats, which ascended with ease from the Tennessee, and with full cargoes descended from this place to New Orleans."

The Cotton Port area was advertised as being "high and dry... as healthy as any other place in the Alabama Territory," and "on almost every lot a well of good water may be had at a moderate depth without blowing rock."

Forethought went into the layout of the town, as the ad stated: "In the plan of the town the trustees have endeavored to avoid everything which will tend to bring all its population and business into one span and leave the rest of the lots unoccupied. They have endeavored to arrange the streets, lots, etc., so as to secure to the future inhabitants, as far as practicable, the benefits of shade and a free circulation of air, and to every family a piece of garden ground."

With all this planning, the Herald predicted that "Trade cannot stagnate here." In fact, that was true... at least for a while. Homes, businesses, schools and churches were established there, and the Limestone Democrat in 1910 wrote that "a considerable town was built, of probably 250 or 300 inhabitants."

Thomas Stith Malone wrote in 1867, "In 1818 the father of our distinguished architect, Col. H. H. Higgins, built a two-story edifice in Cottonport, containing 400,000 brick, the first brick edifice in the county."

However, the same progress that gave birth to Cotton Port left the town behind almost as soon as it was established.

Malone wrote that Benjamin French had settled there in 1808, before the town was founded, saying, "This was a place of considerable traffic for many years, cotton being shipped annually from it for a number of years and more largely than from any other in the county, until about the year 1818 or 1819, when Brown's Ferry outstripped it in the shipment of cotton."

Cotton Port was dealt its final blow with the growth of the railroad, which stopped the demand for canals and ended the building of the Muscle Shoals Canal.

"This left Cottonport without a reason for being since the town of Mooresville had a stronger claim for existence in its superior salubrity and Cottonport began to decline and was finally deserted, and no building is now left to mark its site," the Limestone Democrat reported in 1910.

Progress finally destroyed the last remaining traces of the town in the 20th century. After TVA's damming the Tennessee River to create the Wheeler Reservoir in the 1930s, much of the former town was already underwater when its last trace was erased, or more accurately, removed, in 1977. The Cotton Port cemetery was right in the way of construction of Interstate 565, so the cemetery was moved to the Hayden Cemetery near New Hope. While none of the graves were identified at the time, and in fact most of the bodies were nothing but dust in wooden boxes by that time, one body was still intact: An elderly man with a long, white beard in a glass-covered coffin. According to Valley Leaves of March 1991, the man's hands were folded across his chest and on a finger was a huge diamond ring, the last remaining evidence of the short-lived prosperity of Cotton Port, Alabama.