

Big Spring's waters still flow through Athens's heart

By Rebekah Davis
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On any given pretty day, Big Spring Memorial Park in the heart of Athens is full of ducks, geese, and children running around to feed them in between turns on the park's swings and slides.

But for generations, the Big Spring was not just a pretty spot in town, it was the source of the water that fueled life in the community that grew up around it.

By the time Jim Craig, the first known white man to attempt to settle Limestone County, camped on the hill overlooking the spring in around 1800, he was surrounded by native Chickasaws and Cherokees who had already been using the spring for centuries.

"Mr. Craig only remained three days here, not liking the temper of the Indians, as manifested by their maneuvers," early historian Thomas Stith Malone wrote. "He broke camp and returned to Tennessee."

But the natives' claim to the spring and surrounding countryside steadily dwindled away over the next two decades, as settlers continued to establish homes and communities in what had been protected as Chickasaw Territory. After the Chickasaw Nation ceded its Tennessee Valley land to the United States government in 1816, a town sprang up around the Big Spring.

The Alabama Territorial Legislature established Limestone County on Feb. 6, 1818, and then incorporated the town around the spring as Athens, Alabama, on Nov. 19, 1818. Athens was voted county seat by two votes over the other two contenders – Cambridge in eastern Limestone County and English's Spring in what is Tanner today – partly because of its central location, and partly because of its good source of drinking water, the Big Spring.

On Sept. 8, 1829, Athens town founders Robert Beaty and John Carriel deeded the spring to the town trustees "for the use and benefit of the inhabitants of said Town of Athens;" however, it wasn't until after the turn of the 20th century that Athens residents switched from using private wells to using city water piped in from the Big Spring.

When the city first installed water mains, each household paid \$2 per month to hook onto city water, but once city leaders determined residents were wasting water, the city added water meters. The fee also helped Athens solve a problem with the spring: cotton field runoff. After each big rain, the spring would get dingy, so the city installed walls around the spring and a partition wall in the middle to keep surface water from running in.

The walls didn't take care of the other problem, though – fish and moss. The spring would get so full of moss that moss would clog water meters, so periodically, the city would close one half of the spring to clean it out and then clean out the other half. This was such a tedious and costly undertaking, though, that in 1936, the Works Progress Administration covered the entire spring with a concrete slab to keep it clean.

That slab stayed over the spring for 50 years, even as a Big-Spring-fed city pool opened up next to it, and the city switched its water source to the Elk River in 1969. Athens residents who learned to swim in that city pool in the 1940s through the 1970s still talk about how cold that pool stayed, year-round, with the water from the spring.

In 1976, Athens resident Donald Isom started a letter-to-the-editor campaign, begging to uncover the spring again and turn it into a park with a fish pond and a playground.

"There is a sleeping beauty in Athens," Isom wrote on March 3, 1976. "She is living entombed beneath dirty concrete and rubbish piled on top with weeds around her tomb, an eyesore to passersby."

In the mid-1980s, the City of Athens heeded the call of Isom and other residents and uncovered the spring, creating the Big Spring Memorial Park that Isom had dreamed of.

Today, the spring where natives and settlers once gathered is once again a popular gathering place, no longer for natives and settlers gathering buckets of drinking water, but for picnics and community events such as Superhero Fun Day each fall and the North Pole Stroll each Christmas season.

Note: Information for this article comes from “The History of Athens Big Spring” by Donald Isom and “Scraps” by Thomas S. Malone.

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