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The Early Days of Limestone and Alabama

What: Limestone County Archivist Rebekah Davis and Athens State University Professor Dr. Harry Joiner will tell stories about the beginnings of our county and state.

When: 11:30 a.m., Saturday, March 4

Where: Revival Center, W. Washington St. across from First Presbyterian Church of Athens

For more information: Call 256-233-6404 or e-mail archives@limestonecounty-al.gov.

Limestone's first settlers were illegal immigrants in Chickasaw nation

By Rebekah Davis

Limestone County Archivist

They came to the "great bend" of the Tennessee River as they pushed westward across the new country, and, drawn by the lush beauty of the land, they stayed.

But they were not welcome.

The story of Limestone County before it ever became known by that name is one of two tenacious societies, both fighting for the right to live and thrive in the place that they called "home."

Long before the first European soldier, a member of Hernando de Soto's expedition, set foot in the Tennessee Valley in 1540, the Cherokee and Chickasaw nations fished the rivers and hunted the elk in what would one day become Limestone County.

The Chickasaws inhabited the western area of the valley, raising their crops on land controlled by the women of the families, while the men of the villages waged fierce battles with rival tribes and settlements. Meanwhile, the Cherokees established settlements northeast Alabama, raising crops and hunting in the river valley. The two tribes clashed where their lands met – in central North Alabama, today's Limestone County. After the Cherokees ceded this area to the United States in 1806, the Chickasaws moved right in and claimed it.

The only problem was, the Europeans kept on coming. And in the fall of 1806, a group of settlers piled into flat boats in East Tennessee and paddled down the Tennessee River and up the Elk River, finally settling at Buck Island. The first ones to build a cabin were brothers William and James Sims, and the group became known as the Sims Settlement. The settlers had names that you can still see in the Limestone County phone book today, like Murrell, Redus, French, and Greenhaw.

They planted corn and started making a living and a life in different ways. Thomas Redus built a mill on Witty Creek, while James Ford established a ferry service near Prospect, Tenn. Benjamin French built a cabin for his wife and 11 children, and Elizabeth Sims got a job teaching native women how to spin and weave for \$15 per month plus 37.5 cents a day for board.

But they were illegal immigrants in the Chickasaw nation. The Chickasaw border ran diagonally across the northeast corner of today's Limestone County, and any settler living west of that line was breaking federal law.

The Chickasaws weren't having it. They wrote to the federal government in 1808, saying that allowing the squatters to remain would be an example for others to follow, and "we can be no more a nation."

So President Madison dashed off an order as soon as he took office in 1809, demanding that the troops be sent in to forcibly remove the settlers. Fort Hampton was established as home base for these troops, and time and again they tore down homes and fences to drive out the squatters.

Amos French was one such squatter, about whom R. A. McClellan wrote:

“In about 1810 one of the Indians, who had shared his hospitality, came to him in a ‘little new ground’ in which he was at work, and in bad English, made him understand that evil was impending and he left as quickly as he could. Before he had gotten out of sight, however, he saw the smoke arising from his cabins on fire.”

However, one Chickasaw chief compared the settlers to crows frightened away by a passing person, saying as soon as he is past, they return.

The settlers wrote to Madison in 1810, and 450 of them signed the letter begging him to let them stay. Part of that letter read, “We will not remove our fellow citizens off, which will bring many women and children to a state of starvation merely to gratify a heathen nation who have no better right to this land than we have ourselves.”

Ultimately, the tenacity of the settlers won out. The Chickasaws ceded the land including Limestone County to the federal government in 1816; the area was designated Elk County and then became part of the Alabama territory in 1817; and Limestone County was established in 1818 prior to Alabama’s statehood in 1819.

On March 3, 2017, as Alabama kicks off two years of celebration of the state’s bicentennial on the anniversary of its establishment as a territory, Limestone County will kick off its own bicentennial celebrations. You are invited to learn more about the Chickasaws, the Sims Settlement, and more about the earliest days of Limestone County, Alabama by joining me and Athens State University Professor Dr. Harry Joiner for a learning event at 11:30 a.m., Saturday, March 4, at the Revival Center on Washington Street, across from the First Presbyterian Church. We’ll see you there!

Sources for this article include “Encyclopedia of Alabama;” “An Archaeological and Historical Study of Fort Hampton, Limestone County, Alabama (1809-1816)” by Tonya Chandler; “Sims Settlement: Our Squatter Ancestors;” by Ruth Dixon and Bob Priest; and “Early History of Limestone County” by R.A. McClellan.