

Q: Was Limestone County ever part of Tennessee?

By Rebekah Davis
Limestone County Archivist

A: No.

Well, that was an easy article to write, hee hee!

Actually, if you want the full answer to the question a reader posed to me recently, read on. The reader had heard that one time Limestone County was called Elk County, Tenn. He was half right, and to explain what I mean, I'll take you back to 1665, when King Charles II of England granted the colony of Carolina land between 31 and 36 degrees north latitude from the Atlantic Ocean "west in a direct line as far as the South Seas."

In 1735, North and South Carolina separated, but North Carolina kept its lands west of the Appalachian Mountains. Called the Washington District of North Carolina by 1775, this area had the same boundaries as today's state of Tennessee, including the southern boundary that forms the Tennessee-Alabama state line today.

Meanwhile, the Tennessee Valley area was still hunting grounds for both the Chickasaw and Cherokees, remaining free of whites until 1783, the year the North Carolina legislature passed the "Land Grab" Act to sell western lands. Land sales were fast and furious for nine months, and then North Carolina ceded its western lands to the U.S. government.

In the early days of 1786, the U.S. government created the Chickasaw territory, lands protected from white settlement, and that's where Limestone County comes into the picture – literally, as you can see from the "Giles County and the Chickasaw Cessions" map.

For the next 30 years, a tug-of-war raged over the Chickasaw lands of the Tennessee Valley. Fort Hampton was established near the fork of the Elk and Tennessee Rivers for the express purpose of driving white settlers out of these lands, but the wave of settlement was relentless. Tennessee began opening settlement up in the area in 1807, and meanwhile, the Mississippi Territory claimed all lands that include today's Mississippi and Alabama. Through it all, Tennessee's southern boundary remained as fixed as it was when King Charles first set it 150 years before.

So even though the Limestone County area never was a part of Tennessee, it was actually called Elk County for nine short months, and Mississippi and Alabama both staked a claim on it.

On May 24, 1817, the Mississippi Territory created Elk County out of what is now Lauderdale, Limestone and the southwestern part of Madison counties, as you can see in the 1805-1817 map. Less than three months later, Mississippi gained its statehood and gave Elk County up to the newly-formed Alabama Territory.

In one of its first acts, the Alabama Territorial General Assembly carved a new county out of Elk County on Feb. 6, 1818. Named Limestone County for the limestone bedrock that it sits on, its boundaries are the same as today's Limestone County, with one exception: The "forks of the river," that piece of land in between the Elk and Tennessee Rivers, was part of Lauderdale County until Nov. 27, 1821, when the state gave it to Limestone County, too.

So yes, we were once Elk Countians, but no, we were never Tennesseans. I'm so glad, too – I much prefer Auburn orange to that Tennessee yellow-orange!

Sources: The National Park Service; The Early History of Giles -- 1765-1820 by Sarah Smith; TNGenWeb