The History of Smyrna

Source: The Smyrna, Georgia Historical and Genealogical Society Web page

With the 1828 discovery of gold in the Cherokee Nation at Dahlonega, the US Federal Government and the State of Georgia initiated a relentless series of efforts to remove the Cherokee from Northern Georgia. These efforts ultimately resulted in the settling of Cobb County and the subsequent founding of Smyrna.

Up until 1832, all of the land that today comprises Smyrna and Cobb County was part of the Cherokee Nation. During or prior to 1832, the state of Georgia surveyed the Cherokee Nation and divided it into land lots of 160 acres and gold lots of 40 acres. Gold lots were believed to possibly contain gold. The initial expectation was that a treaty would be negotiated and finalized between the Cherokee Nation and the US Government to open the land to white settlement.

On October 22, 1832, at the then state capitol in Milledgeville, a land lottery was held and the Cherokee land was allotted to the winners without a treaty being in place. Later that year, the Georgia Legislature went ahead and claimed sovereignty over all Cherokee Nation land in Georgia on December 21. The area was then renamed Cherokee County.

White settlers first arrived in the Smyrna area to claim the land they won in the lottery in the fall of 1832. Tensions were high since the original Cherokee landowners were still living in the area. It is believed that the Cherokee left the Smyrna area by 1835.

Reverend Thomas Burke established the first church of any denomination in Cobb County in present-day Smyrna in late 1832. It was named Concord Primitive Baptist Church and services were held in a log cabin schoolhouse. It was located at the present-day intersection of Concord Road and South Cobb Drive at the Crossings Shopping Center. The church moved to the Mableton area in 1833. It is now known as Concord Baptist Church and is located on Floyd Road four miles from its original cabin.

The size of the new Cherokee County proved to be unmanageable as a county governmental entity. It was subdivided into nine additional counties on December 3, 1832. Cobb County was one of the newly created counties and Marietta was named the county seat. Cobb County is Georgia's 81st county. It was named for a famed Georgia Congressman, Senator and then later, Judge, named Thomas Willis Cobb. Judge Cobb died in 1830 at the age of 46. Marietta was named for his wife Mary.

In 1833, Methodist pioneers established a meeting spot near the present-day downtown Smyrna where traveling ministers would hold services. In pioneer times, this was also an important place to meet and socialize since long distances typically separated neighbors. A brush arbor, under which people would gather, was built near a fresh water spring that once ran through the area to identify the meeting place.

In 1836, the State of Georgia authorized construction of the Western and Atlantic Railroad from Chattanooga, Tennessee. The railroad ran through the heart of what is now downtown Smyrna onward to Decatur 19 miles away. The train tracks are in essentially the same location upon which they were built more than 160 years ago. Terminus, which later became Atlanta, had not yet been established.

In 1838 the Smyrna Espicopal Methodist Church is believed to have been established. The church is now known as Smyrna First United Methodist Church. In 1840, the land used as the Methodist meeting area became known as the Smyrna Camp Ground. It was available to all religious denominations for use. Within a few years the camp ground was well known as a religious center throughout Northern Georgia.

After land was donated and properly titled, the Methodists built a log cabin church in 1846. They also established Smyrna Memorial Cemetery in 1838. Title was officially granted to this land in 1848 even though the cemetery is believed to have been in use for the previous decade. The Methodists built new and larger churches in 1911 and 1968.

Both the camp ground and cemetery were on Land Lot 522, District 17, Section 2. That land was awarded to Wiley Flanigan of Campbell County, Georgia in the 1832 land lottery. He took possession of the land on July 1, 1843 and later formally donated some of it for the cemetery and camp ground. Other donors were erroneously credited with donating the land in the past. Mr. Flanigan's 10 plus year delay in establishing residency on his land after the lottery was attributed as the most likely reason why the vacant land began being used as the meeting place, camp ground and cemetery.

Cobb County's first State Senator, John Gann, built the Gann House just west of Nickajack Creek on present-day Concord Road in 1841. It is the oldest remaining building in the Smyrna area.

The Western & Atlantic railroad was completed through the area in 1842. Like many towns in North Georgia, today's Smyrna started out as series of railroad stops with nearby homes and a few large farms. The area around the current Smyrna Museum (a replica of the train station demolished in 1959) was first named Varner's Station. North along the train track in the current vicinity of Windy Hill Road existed a train stop named Ruff's Siding. A siding is a short stretch of railroad track on which a train temporarily parks to allow another to pass. A mapped location named Fulton existed in what appears to be the vicinity of present-day Campbell Road south of downtown.

The Concord Woolen Mills opened in 1847. It was one of the first industrial employers in the county and the neighborhood that grew around it was named Mill Grove. During the Civil War the mill made Confederate uniforms. The mill was burned by Sherman's troops on July 4, 1864. It was rebuilt after the war and prospered for many years. An October 1889 fire destroyed most of the facility. It was rebuilt again and eventually went out of business in 1916. The ruins are now part of Cobb Heritage Park.

The nearby covered bridge on Concord Road over Nickajack Creek was built in 1848. It too was burned on July 4, 1864 . It was rebuilt in 1872 using the original stone support footings shown in the photo below. The bridge was upgraded in the 1950s and renovated in 1999.

The railroad helped establish a permanent location for what became Smyrna and started it on its way from a frontier village to a growing community. Smyrna's first brick building, a school named the Smyrna Boy's Academy, was constructed on property formerly owned by the Methodist Church in 1849. It was later known as Smyrna Academy.

Telegraph service was established along the railroad track in 1851. The Ruff family purchased the existing grist mill near the covered bridge in the 1855 and renamed it Ruff's mill. They also purchased the adjacent large home.

The Civil War began at Ft. Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina on April 12, 1861. On April 23, Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown established an officer's training camp at Smyrna Camp Ground. It was selected because of its easy rail access. The training camp was named Camp Brown. The nearby Smyrna Academy was also designated as a training facility for Confederate soldiers. Volunteers quickly signed up after the Governor's request.

An important historical fact of the time to remember was that Americans in 1861 did not identfy themselves primarily as *Americans*. They were far more likely to first identify themselves by their state of birth (i.e. Georgians, New Yorkers, Texans) and secondarily as a citizen of the union of states. Today's unifying belief that we are *Americans* first was cemented in the public's mind later in the century.

The unit that trained at Camp Brown became known as the Fourth Brigade, First Division of Georgia Volunteers under the command of General Phillips of Marietta.

Civil War battles in the area took place in the first week of July 1864. On July 2, Confederate General Johnston withdrew from Kennesaw Mountain south towards the Smyrna Camp Ground and to the Nickajack Creek area four miles to the west. The Battle of Smyrna Camp Ground took place on July 3 and the Battle of Ruff's Mill at Nickajack Creek occurred on July 4. Most of the buildings in the area were burned by Sherman's troops. Notable exceptions were the Smyrna Academy which served as a Confederate and Union hospital, Ruff's Mill, the Ruff family home and the Gann House.

Johnston then withdrew to the Chattahoochee River and the Smyrna area was temporarily occupied by Union troops. The Union troops moved out to Vinings Station (now Vinings) and Mableton on July 8, en route to Atlanta, and east to Sope Creek and Roswell on July 12. Click here for a listing of local Civil War markers.

Archived maps show that Varner's Station was renamed sometime before 1863 to Neal Dow. Records from the Marietta Journal show that Ruff's Siding was being called Ruff's Station in 1869.

Smyrna was incorporated as a municipality by the state legislature on August 23,1872. The boundaries extended one mile in every direction from the Smyrna Academy. Incorporating legislation named John C. Moore Mayor (Intendent). Four aldermen were also named: E.D.L. Mobley, W.R. Bell, W.L. Davenport, and G.P. Daniel. The city was incorporated a second time in 1897 reducing the city limits from 1 mile to 1/2 mile but most early records were destroyed in a city hall fire in the 1920's.

The name Smyrna was selected by the city's *Founding Fathers* from the Bible - a common practice in 18th century America. It was the name of one of the churches established by the Apostle Paul in present-day Turkey. The ancient Ionian seaport of Smyrna was also the birthplace of the famous Greek poet Homer in the ninth century BC.