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Butler County

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IMAGES
of America
BUTLER COUNTY

Roger G. Givens and Nancy Richey



INTRODUCTION

When the first settlers moved into the area that would become Butler County, Kentucky, they found a land of plenty. Settlers noted flocks of turkey so numerous they blackened the sky, deer in herds of 50 or more, canebrakes so thick pioneers had to chop through them, and a virgin forest with trees as tall as 100 feet. In 1810, Butler County was officially formed from parts of Logan and Ohio Counties, and residents established a local government and built roads to other county seats. They also quickly constructed a courthouse and a jail and established ferries across the Green and Mud Rivers. As in other areas, many of these efforts were completed using slave labor.

The Green River severed the county into three distinct parts, which proved an impediment to growth due to unaffordable ferry fees and the winter and spring rains that prevented access to the county seat and its trading days. The pioneers realized that the Green River could be a major asset in getting products in and out of the valley and cleared it of navigational obstacles by 1811.

The county grew slowly at first. In 1836, the state of Kentucky began construction of a slackwater navigation system on the Green and Barren Rivers, with one lock and dam in Butler County and another in Muhlenberg and Ohio Counties. The Butler County lock and dam was within a few hundred feet of the Butler County settlement of Rochester. The system—which provided year-round navigation from Evansville, Indiana, to Bowling Green—spurred growth in the county and the development of the towns of Rochester and Woodbury and offered a needed incentive for the expansion of Morgantown.

After a few years of peaceful and productive growth in Butler County, the county developed two ideologically distinct factions regarding slavery. However, Kentucky's efforts to remain neutral kept the state out of the Civil War until September 1861. In Butler County, a staged show of support for the Union took place in August 1861, when Col. Pierce Hawkins provided tactical training and drills for three of four companies of potential Union troops. Not to be outdone, 40 or 50 potential Confederate cavalymen drilled on the same field with them.

On September 17, 1861, Confederate forces occupied Bowling Green, and Confederate captain Thomas Lewers set up an outpost of about 150 cavalymen at Woodbury to observe enemy activity. Around the same time, Colonel Hawkins set up Camp Underwood along the Green River above Rochester to recruit the 11th Kentucky Infantry to fight for the Union. Additionally, after hearing of the Confederate camp at Woodbury, Col. John H. McHenry, of the 17th Kentucky Infantry at Camp Galloway (near Hartford), believed the rebels were going to attack his men; he sent for reinforcements from Col. Stephen Burbridge, of the 26th Kentucky Infantry at Camp Silas Miller (in Owensboro). They joined forces at Cromwell, and the following morning—October 27, 1861—they set out for Woodbury. Splitting forces, they began their offensive with Colonel McHenry traveling up the south side of the Green River and Colonel Burbridge moving up the north side. At Big Hill, near Morgantown, Pvt. Granville Allen, of the 17th Kentucky Infantry, was killed after encountering a scouting party of 14 Confederate cavalymen from Woodbury.

Two days later, on October 29, Colonel Burbridge drove the Confederate forces out of Woodbury in a rout, and the Confederates retreated to Little Muddy Church, where they met reinforcements. After a two-hour rest, they headed back to Woodbury to find that Union troops had already left for Morgantown. They caught the Union forces as the last group was crossing the Green River at Borah's Ferry in Logansport, where a small skirmish took place and four or five men were wounded.

Other local action occurred when Confederate general John Hunt Morgan moved his brigade through Butler County in October 1862. He crossed the Green River at Aberdeen, originally heading toward Russellville. Upon being informed of a formidable force of Union troops nearby, in the direction of Bowling Green, close to the Russellville Road, Morgan turned his troops in a perpendicular direction—toward Rochester. In Morgantown, 16 of Morgan's stragglers were captured by Union troops; this supposedly happened at the Leach house on Roberts Street, as it is reported to this day that there are Civil War-era bullet holes in the older part of the house, and no other known actions in which bullets could have been fired occurred in the vicinity.

The occupation of Kentucky by Union troops during the war was detrimental to the state and Butler County, causing considerable political and emotional damage. Several of Butler County's Confederate sympathizers were arrested and incarcerated in Bowling Green, including county judge Thomas P. Wand. Dr. Francis Porter died while he was jailed in Bowling Green.

The two most famous prison breaks of the Civil War were both led by men from Woodbury. Maj. Andrew G. Hamilton, along with Col. Thomas E. Rose, engineered the escape of 109 Union officers—57 of whom safely reached Union lines—from Libby Prison in Virginia, and Confederate captain Thomas Hines led the escape of General Morgan and five fellow officers from the Ohio state penitentiary. In 1864, Hines was the military commander of the covert "Northwest Conspiracy" operating out of Canada; he eventually gained a reputation, according to various sources, as "the most dangerous man in the Confederacy."

The ideological differences of residents and the actions of Union occupational forces created partisan factions in the local population. The area north of Green River, with hilly terrain and small farms, had little need for slaves. However, slaves were widely used south of the river, where the land was flatter and contained larger farms—of the 792 slaves in Butler County in 1860, fewer than 50 resided on the north side of the river. Many of the original county leaders and their families were slaveholders and Southern sympathizers.

However, the period after the Civil War provided a boom for Butler County's economy and population growth. The river bottomland was still mostly virgin forest, providing an abundant supply of timber desperately needed for the railroads. These raw materials were used for the building and repair of tracks throughout the nation, and the Green River provided ways to get the timber to markets.

The federal government obtained ownership of the Green and Barren Rivers navigation system from the state and established a maintenance headquarters in Woodbury, which included a district office and a superintendent's home in 1912. From Woodbury, the government operated a fleet of dredge boats to keep the river clear and the locks operable. During the second half of the 19th century, both Rochester and Woodbury surpassed Morgantown in population, maintaining that lead until 1880. In 1900, Butler County's population peaked at 15,896, including an African American population of 726.

The economic boom produced a thriving, culturally enriched community centered on the river port towns of Morgantown, Rochester, and Woodbury. In the early 1900s, the county supported four banks, six hotels, five drugstores, three milling companies, two axe-handle factories, one outdoor and two indoor theaters, four high schools, and more than 80 one-room elementary schools, including six African American schools.

For a county with such a small population, Butler County has produced a number of notable people, including Oklahoma senator John W. Harreld; three members of the US House of Representatives, Everette B. Howard (Oklahoma) and Maurice H. Thatcher and John W. Moore (Kentucky); two chief justices of the Kentucky Court of Appeals (which served as Kentucky's supreme court until

1975), Bayless L.D. Guffy and Thomas H. Hines; Navy admiral Claude Bloch; Methodist bishop John Monroe Moore; and Congressional Medal of Honor recipient Don J. Jenkins.

Sadly, the saying “all good things must come to an end,” proved true for Butler County. Railroads and other forms of transportation began to dominate the freight industry in the early 1900s, driving riverboats out of business. The last packet boat, the *Evansville*, burned at the dock in Bowling Green on July 25, 1931, and was never replaced, thus ending regularly scheduled river transportation. The US Army Corps of Engineers shifted operations from Woodbury to Paducah in 1927, and from there to the district office in Louisville in 1947. In May 1965, the dam at Woodbury washed out, ceasing all river traffic to Bowling Green. Rochester experienced three major fires in its business district and has never rebounded from the destruction—in 2010, the town’s population was 186.

The entire county experienced a steady decline in population after the turn of the 20th century. The Great Depression brought about a significant decrease, particularly in the African American population, as no jobs were available. Seeking employment, people migrated to larger cities like Louisville, Indianapolis, Chicago, and Detroit. The decrease continued until 1960, when the county population bottomed out at 9,586, including only 70 African American inhabitants.

In the mid-1970s, a coal boom boosted the county’s economy and brought about a slight population increase, and in the mid-1980s, Morgantown secured three plants that manufactured automobile parts, giving a significant boost to the economy and spurring population growth to 13,010 (in 2000). By the early 2000s, however, the operations had ceased, resulting in a small population decrease. The 2010 US Census listed Butler County’s population at 12,690.

Images of America: *Butler County* includes photographs reflecting the riverboat era—Butler County in its heyday—and the area’s leaders, schools, churches, and the activities of its people, all painting a memorable picture of the great heritage of Butler County.