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# Historical Overview of Allen County, Kentucky

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## Historical Overview of Allen County, Kentucky

By: Brookelyn Smith, 2017

Allen County, Kentucky, is located in the south central portion of the state along the Kentucky-Tennessee border. On that border, Allen County meets the Tennessee counties of Sumner and Macon. Within the Commonwealth, it is bounded by to the northwest and northeast by Warren and Barren counties (respectively), Monroe County to the east, and Simpson County to the west. The county's northern/eastern boundary is drawn by the Barren River and Barren River Lake. It is located in the Pennyroyal region of Kentucky, between the Central Lowlands and the Appalachian Plateau. Its area is equal to about 344 square miles, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.<sup>i</sup> The topography of this land area is comprised of limestone deposits, springs, and sinkholes, with soil that maintains a texture like clay. Overall, the county remains a relatively rural area, historically harboring agriculture, though some industry does exist. In 2010, the population was estimated around 20,600 people.<sup>ii</sup> The centrally located city of Scottsville serves as the county seat. Some communities/towns within the county include Adolphus, Allen Springs, Halfway, Holland, Petroleum, Pope, Trammel, Meador, and others.

Exploration through hunting parties, etc. brought the first settlers into Allen County. The first settlements in what is now Allen County were established north and east of Scottsville around 1797 by Joseph Ficklin, Tolivar Craig, Henry Hollins, Daniel Monroe, and others who remain unnamed.<sup>iii</sup> A large number of the settlers of the county were veterans of the Revolutionary War. Between 1801 and 1805, John Campbell and Lon Hagan from Virginia came and inhabited the area as well.<sup>iv</sup> In addition, a mill erected by Fred Carpenter, Ted Chambers, and Tom Oliver became the first building in the county in 1804.<sup>v</sup> On January 11, 1815, Allen County was officially formed using land from Warren and Barren Counties. It was named for Lt. Colonel John Allen, who raised one of the first regiments in the state. He was killed by Indians in route to Detroit during the Battle of the River Raisin.<sup>vi</sup> By 1820, the Federal Census estimated the population at 5,327 in the county.<sup>vii</sup> Upon its formation, the county's first officials, appointed by Governor Isaac Shelby, met on April 10, 1815 in the home of Willis Mitchell. These officials were Walter Thomas, Edward Martin, David Harris, Will Jackson, John Ragland, Hugh Brown, and Elias Pitchford.<sup>viii</sup> These men were the overseers of the county for quite some time. They established Scottsville as the county seat and even had 'patrollers' who served as a small militia for the county.

Scottsville became the location of the county seat after debate in the court by the county officials. Some wanted this important city to be located on the land of Willis Mitchell, where the first meeting was held.<sup>ix</sup> However, the deciding factor of the location was ultimately the spring found in what is now Scottsville. This 'Public Spring', as it became known, is an important landmark for that city and the county as a whole were chartered because of the abundance of water here. R.R. Pitchford is quoted saying, "There is a spring called the 'Public Spring' bubbling from under the hill a few hundred yards south of the courthouse, which issues

the most sparkling, rippling fluid of Nature's gift."<sup>x</sup> This spring was used for early industry, as well as for watering livestock, and even at times of drought within the county.

Because of the location of this spring, Scottsville, named after Governor Charles Scott, was established on land that was bought from John Brown. This land was divided into 'lots' that were sold and the profits were used to build a log courthouse and jail for the county.<sup>xi</sup> Some 'lots' from this purchase were reserved for public use, including churches, etc. Jacob W. Walker became the first lawyer admitted to the bar in Allen County in 1816. In 1819, an octagon shaped structure replaced the log courthouse building.

The first schools in Allen County were located in homes and churches. Eventually private schools furnished some of the educational needs in the county. One of the earliest schools in the county was the Old Dry School located on Big Difficult Creek, near Port Oliver. By 1900, there were 65 schools in the county. On August 25, 1906, the residents of Scottsville voted and approved a tax that permitted Scottsville Independent School to operate. The county's high schools consolidated in 1942. Allen County and Scottsville high schools merged later. Today Allen County-Scottsville High School and James E. Bazzell Middle School remain the only secondary schools in the county.<sup>xii</sup>

As Allen County has remained more of a rural county, agriculture has been an important part of its economy. An 1874 description of the county maintained that it was rather hilly, with soil that was in many parts fertile, timber in great abundance, and ability to grow cotton successfully.<sup>xiii</sup> The soil here is 'adapted to profitable growing of farm products', such as corn, wheat, oats, barley, rye, potatoes, tobacco, sugar cane, and strawberries.<sup>xiv</sup> In addition to harvesting crops, the ecology of Allen County is also suitable for raising livestock (because of the abundant streams, etc.). Due to the factor of agriculture in the county, it is not surprising to find that slavery existed here even before the county's formation. The slave plantations that functioned in Allen County were chiefly located along the Barren River's flood plain. By 1830, there were 864 slaves throughout the county.<sup>xv</sup> Glenn Conner points out that many histories omit slaves and their contributions, but the main source of information for slaves in the county would be the Federal U.S. Census. Some of the history involving slaves in Allen County can be found in Conner's book, *Til Freedom Came*. Here, it is recognized that Allen County slaves were active during the Civil War by joining the Union Army to fight against the Confederate South. In addition, the Scottsville Freedmen School, for freed slaves, was established in 1868 for the education of African Americans.<sup>xvi</sup> Conner discusses these and other interesting points in his book.

As the United States has engaged in wars since the time of Allen County's establishment, the sons of the county have contributed much to war efforts, some giving their lives. The Civil War brought divided loyalties in this area, and though Allen County officially took the side of the Confederacy, individuals enlisted in both the Union Army and the Confederate Army.<sup>xvii</sup> Seeing this division among members of Allen County solidifies the notion that the Civil War was truly a 'brothers war.' Sons of Allen County also took part in serving the

nation during World War I as well as World War II. WWI claimed 19 from Allen County, while WWII claimed 34.<sup>xviii</sup>

In addition to agriculture, some industry and business existed in Allen County, mostly centering around Scottsville. Steamboats on the Barren River allowed for transportation of timber and other related products to external markets. Port Oliver became a hub for this activity, due to its proximity and access to water. In addition to the revenue incurred by timber products, a small salt industry also began to emerge around Port Oliver. Some early industries included the W.W. Thompson Spoke Mill and Flour Mill, Scottsville Woolen Mill, and Scottsville Electric Light and Power Company. In 1886, a railroad was built, allowing for more commerce and faster transportation of goods. The railroad also was used for the continued production of timber and timber products. The thriving industrial center drew on Monroe county and Macon County, Tennessee. Oil was discovered in the county, and the first oil rig was brought in 1913 by Harry and Albert Greer. These men drilled wells for a company known as White Plains Oil Company.<sup>xix</sup> In 1916, the county experienced an oil boom, which had a largely positive impact on family and business incomes. In 1917, the first 'fast food' restaurant was opened by a black man named Perry Farmer close to the Public Spring.<sup>xx</sup> Banks were another important piece of infrastructure in Allen County. The Kentucky State Bank of Scottsville was established April 2, 1921, followed by the Farmers National Bank on November 12, 1923.<sup>xxi</sup> In addition, Allen County was the home of Forrest Springs, which was a once famous health resort. Another business that has had a long history in Scottsville is T.W. Crow and Son Funeral Home. It was established in May of 1915, and has served the community for over 100 years.<sup>xxii</sup>

In 1939, a business began in Scottsville with two investors each contributing \$5,000. These investors were J.L. Turner and Cal Turner, Sr.<sup>xxiii</sup> This investment converted Turner Bargain Stores into J.L. Turner and Son Wholesale Company. More stores were opened in the region and in 1955, one of the stores was converted into the first Dollar General Store in Springfield, Illinois, with no item in the store being over \$1.<sup>xxiv</sup> Today, the Dollar General Corporation owns over 12,500 stores across the country, selling hundreds of name brand products, as well as their own brands. Though the company's headquarters is not located in Allen County, it is amazing to think that this nationwide corporation was founded in Scottsville, Kentucky, in the heart of Allen County.

Another important aspect of Allen County's history is the presence of churches, even before the formation of the county. The oldest church in the county is Bethlehem church, originally known as United Baptist church. It was formed by James Atwood in 1801.<sup>xxv</sup> First Baptist Church of Scottsville was established in 1842. In 1897, a structure was erected by J.M. Guthrie, then called Scottsville Holiness Campground, that became known as 'The Tabernacle'.<sup>xxvi</sup> It came into being as an outgrowth of religious revival on the site where the structure was built. Many religious meetings revivals, and singing conventions have been held here since it was built. At one time, the Allen County Singing Convention began to be held regularly at the Tabernacle twice a year. Over the years, the building has had many

improvements, but remains a standing symbol of religion in the community, as well as of the tradition of southern gospel music in the area.

In the words of one Allen County historian, “The growth of the county since formation has been steady and healthy, and has kept pace with the ongoing rush of civilization and progress...”<sup>xxvii</sup> Allen County has witnessed growth in population, agricultural output and industry, while maintaining the feeling of a smaller community.

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<sup>i</sup> United States Census Bureau, “QuickFacts, Allen County, Kentucky”, [website], <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/RTN130212/21003>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1815-1965*, n.l.: n.p., 1965, 5.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History* (Morely, MO: Acclaim Press, 2015), 5

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 5.

<sup>ix</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1815-1965*, 13.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>xi</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 5.

<sup>xii</sup> *School Days of Allen County, Kentucky* (Scottsville, KY: Retired Teachers of Allen County, 1992).

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1818-1965*, 6.

<sup>xv</sup> Glen Conner, *'Til Freedom Came: Slaves in Allen County, Kentucky, 1815-1865* (Morely, MO: Acclaim Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, 214-217.

<sup>xvii</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen county, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 8-9.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1818-1965*.

<sup>xix</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1818-1965*, 19.

<sup>xx</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 7.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1818-1965*, 39-42.

<sup>xxii</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 285.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 268.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxv</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1818-1965*, 23.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Allen County Historical Society, *Allen County, Kentucky: A Pictorial History*, 7.

<sup>xxvii</sup> *Allen County Sesquicentennial, 1818-1965*, 5.