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Historical Overview of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee

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The city of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee, lies in the eastern portion of Macon County along the Tennessee-Kentucky border. It is located in Middle Tennessee and is part of the state's Upper Cumberland region. According to 2017 U.S. Census estimations, the city is about 1.7 miles in area with an estimated population of 1,659 people.¹ Red Boiling Springs is located 11.9 miles east of the county seat of Lafayette, Tennessee. The unique geology of the area allows multiple types of mineral springs to flow including Red, Black, White, Freestone, and Double-and-Twist waters, and these mineral waters were valued for many years for their medicinal properties.² Today, Red Boiling Springs is a rural area with little industry, but in the early twentieth century, it was a booming resort town that attracted visitors from all over the country.

It has been speculated that before the settlement of white people in the area, Red Boiling Springs was a favorite hunting ground of nearby Cherokee Native Americans.³ According to accounts, a Cherokee tribe under Chief Katawley was the last to leave the area when white settlers began claiming the land. The first white settlers of present-day Macon County settled along the tributaries of the Cumberland and Barren Rivers between 1787-1800. Most of the area's first land grants came from North Carolina and were given to Revolutionary War veterans, who then resold them.⁴ After 1806, new land grants were issued by Tennessee. From 1825 to 1923, Kentucky could also make land grants to the area due to a latitudinal miscalculation on the "Walker's Line" boundary drawn by Dr. Thomas Walker and Daniel Smith. People who lived near the Walker's Line were unclear on whether they lived in Kentucky or Tennessee until a new boundary line, "the Matthews Line," was drawn in 1826.⁵ The early settlements of Macon County were originally part of Smith County, Tennessee, but in the late 1820's, people petitioned to form a new county from parts of Smith and Sumner counties. In 1842, the Tennessee Legislature granted the request, and the new county was named after Nathaniel Macon, Revolutionary War veteran and U.S. legislator from North Carolina.⁶

Local legend states that hunter Edmund Jennings was the first white settler to "discover" Red Boiling Springs in the 1830's upon finding a salt lick that attracted animals to the area.⁷ For this reason, the community was known as "Salt Lick" for many years. Jennings is a widely known figure across parts of Northern Middle Tennessee and South Central Kentucky, and while it is possible that he was one of the first white individuals to exploit the area's resources, Red Boiling Springs had already been discovered by 1830. Research done by Macon County historian Vernon Roddy implies that if Jennings did in fact discover Red Boiling Springs, it would have been in the late-1700's to early-1800's.⁸

Another legend that dominates the popular history of Red Boiling Springs explains how the waters' healing properties were first discovered by settlers. The legend of Shepherd Kirby states that Kirby, who settled in the area in the 1840's, had long suffered a chronic eye infection which prompted him to rinse his eyes out in a local spring. The next day, his eyes were so much improved that he kept returning to the spring, and in a short amount of time, Kirby's eyes were

entirely cured. Word quickly spread of the “healing waters,” and people began flocking to the area.⁹ However, it has also been stated that Shepherd Kirby’s sister, Susanna “Sooky” Goad, likely discovered the water’s healing properties before her brother. Sooky had suffered dropsy and found that drinking the spring water cured her illness sometime in the early 1800’s. According to this story, Sooky was the first white settler to use the springs for medicinal purposes, and she began making a widely distributed salve named “Aunt Sook’s Salve.” Both of these stories provide that the Kirby-Goad family played an important role in popularizing Red Boiling Springs as a place of healing.¹⁰ Little else is known about the earliest settlements in Red Boiling Springs beyond these legends, likely due to the isolation of the area and loss of records.

Around the late-1830’s to early-1840’s, it was realized that the red sulphur springs on Jesse Jones’ land bubbled up around the same time each morning. This gave rise to the name “Red Boiling Springs” that would eventually become the name of the community.¹¹ In 1847, the name of the postal office was officially changed from “Salt Lick” to “Red Boiling Springs.”¹² In 1844, Samuel E. Hare of Jackson County visited the area and realized the business potential of the springs. Hare purchased Jones’ land and the springs surrounding it, and in 1849, Hare built an inn that started to attract tourists.¹³ After the construction of the hotel, road improvements in the 1850’s led to an increasing number of visitors in the area.

While many developments were made in the 1840’s and 1850’s, the Civil War brought a halt to the growing resort industry. In 1861, the area was an organizing point for at least two Confederate infantry companies, but eventually, it came to be under Union control.¹⁴ Overall Macon County was largely divided over the war, and most of the young men in the area enlisted in the army. Those who favored the Union traveled the short distance over the state line to enlist in Kentucky, while others stayed in Tennessee to enlist in the Confederate Army.¹⁵ General historical records state that Red Boiling Springs saw little action during the war, but local accounts indicate the area was a dangerous “kind of crossing place” subject to fire from guerilla warfare.¹⁶ Red Boiling Springs may not have been affected as directly as some other regions in the Upper Cumberland, but nonetheless, the community obtained damages that would take years to recover from.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the construction of railroad lines in nearby Hartsville and Carthage and the opening of a local stage line allowed the resort industry in Red Boiling Springs to grow. Along with the transportation improvements, an emerging national interest in leisure activities caused the first big economic boom in Red Boiling Springs.¹⁷ Visitors from more urban areas of Tennessee, such as Nashville and Memphis, began frequenting the resorts. By the 1890’s, at least two hotels were in operation in the area. In addition to the mineral bathhouses, the resorts boasted activities such as dancing, fishing, and tennis.¹⁸

The second boom of Red Boiling Springs’ resort industry occurred after the introduction of the automobile and improved roads in the early-twentieth century. By 1916, there were at least four hotels in Red Boiling Springs, and by 1924, that number had grown to six large hotels and at least nine boarding houses to accommodate the influx of visitors flocking to the area.¹⁹ Mineral spring health spas remained the main attraction to the area, but a number of additional activities were available to visitors who chose to vacation there. One popular recreational spot was

Simmons lake, built by Mr. M.A. Simmons in 1924. The lake was enjoyed by hotel guests as well as locals, and it was accompanied by a two-story building that held a dance hall and bowling alley.²⁰

Following the heyday of the resorts in the early-twentieth century, the 1940's-1950's brought a period of rapid decline in Red Boiling Springs. Post-World War II improvements in labor, transportation, and biological medicine resulted in the close of many hotels and bathhouses in the area. During World War II, approximately 1,000 young men in Macon County enlisted in the armed services, and the remaining men and women in the area found higher paying jobs outside of Red Boiling Springs as a result of the war economy. The resort industry that had once employed many locals could not compete with the new labor market, and some hotels were forced to close.²¹ Road and transportation improvements allowed guests who once flocked to Red Boiling Springs to travel further and vacation elsewhere, while improvements in medicine diminished the appeal of the "healing waters."²² A few hotels remained open, but the period of prosperity that once vitalized the town had come to an end by 1950.

Beginning in 1947, the Red Boiling Springs Lions Club sought to make civic improvements to the community and suggested that incorporating the town would help revitalize it.²³ At first, the incorporation warranted great opposition from locals concerned about paying city taxes and shifting authority to a city government.²⁴ Initial efforts to vote on the incorporation in 1951 were halted due to the opposition, but a referendum was finally passed to incorporate Red Boiling Springs on April 27, 1953.²⁵ The first mayor of Red Boiling Springs was Dayton Chitwood, and the first city councilmen were Glenn Witcher, C.H. Russell, B.W. Chitwood, C.R. Joines, Cordell Parkhurst, and Charles McClellan.²⁶

On June 22, 1969, a devastating flood hit the town, resulting in two deaths and an estimated \$2.2 million in damages.²⁷ The flood was considered a federal disaster and warranted federal aid and grants to rebuild the town. Improvements that were made possible by the federal aid included a low-rent housing project, a factory, a park, and watersheds to prevent future flooding.²⁸

Today Red Boiling Springs' industry is largely made up of various small businesses, as well as the lumber mills and farms that exist on the outskirts of the city limits. In 1989, the garment factories in the area employed approximately 660 people, but only one of these garment factories remains today.²⁹ For several years the Nestle Bottling Plant in Red Boiling Springs provided revenue for the town, but the plant was permanently closed in December 2018. Three hotels remain open in Red Boiling Springs—the Donoho, the Armour's, and the Thomas House. The hotels host a modest number of visitors every year and often serve as entertainment venues. The Armour's Hotel, built during the resort heyday in 1924, is the only mineral bathhouse remaining in Tennessee.

Red Boiling Springs has also served as an important site for education in the county. Purportedly several log schoolhouses provided sites for education during early settlement.³⁰ Following legislation that supported public education, schools in the area became more sophisticated. Red Boiling Springs was the site of Weslyn College in the late-1800's to early-1900's, which served as an institute of higher education for those who wished to become teachers. Weslyn College

closed in the early 1900's, but the building continued to be used as a common school.³¹ In the late 1920's, this building burned, and a new one was built to house the first ten grades. Students in the 11th and 12th grades traveled by bus to the Macon County High School in Lafayette until 1939 when the first four-year high school was implemented in Red Boiling Springs.³² Today, Red Boiling Springs School remains a Pre-K-12 school.

While Red Boiling Springs is small in size and population, it is a community that has great significance on a regional and national scale. From its earliest settlement to the present day, the town has certainly experienced many changes. Throughout periods of prosperity and decline, Red Boiling Springs has remained a strong and unique community with a rich history.

¹ United States Census Bureau, "Red Boiling Springs, TN," Census Reporter, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US4762000-red-boiling-springs-tn/>.

² Vernon Roddy, *Early Story of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee* (n.l.: Upper Country People Probe, 1991), 273.

³ Harold G. Blankenship, *History of Macon County, Tennessee* (Tompkinsville, KY: Monroe County Press, 1986), 87.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid*, 9-11.

⁶ *Ibid*, 15, 22, 27.

⁷ Vernon Roddy, *Early Story of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid*, 127, 135.

⁹ *Ibid*, 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

¹¹ Jeanette Keith, *Simple Pleasures* (n.l.: Vision 2020 Inc., 2012), 9, 10.

¹² Vernon Roddy, *Early Story of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee*, 43.

¹³ Jeanette Keith, *Simple Pleasures*, 10.

¹⁴ Vernon Roddy, *Early Story of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee*, 69.

¹⁵ Harold G. Blankenship, *History of Macon County, Tennessee*, 171,174.

¹⁶ Vernon Roddy, *Early Story of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee*, 69.

¹⁷ Jeanette Keith, *Simple Pleasures*, 10, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 13, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 43, 44.

²¹ *Ibid*, 57, 58.

²² *Ibid*, 58, 59.

²³ *Ibid*, 62.

²⁴ *Ibid*.

²⁵ Vernon Roddy, *Early Story of Red Boiling Springs, Tennessee*, 273.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 273.

²⁷ Jeanette Keith, *Simple Pleasures*, 63.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

²⁹ Paulette Davis, "Letter to the Editor," *Macon County Times* (Lafayette, TN), May. 25, 1989.

³⁰ Harold G. Blankenship, *History of Macon County, Tennessee*, 106, 109.

³¹ *Ibid*, 113, 114.

³² *Ibid*, 118.