

# HABERSHAM COUNTY

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Habersham County was formed from two Cherokee Cessions, the first on July 8, 1817, and the other on February 27, 1819 (Legislative Acts of December 15, 1818, and December 19, 1818). It was named for Colonel Joseph Habersham and was originally 31 miles long and 23 miles wide, with an area of 713 square miles. The four main settlements in the county were Tugaloo, Soque, Nacoochee, and Batesville.

Parts of the county were later split off to become part of the counties of Rabun (1828, District 16, on the south side of the Tallulah River), Lumpkin (1831), Banks (1857), White (1858), and Stephens (1905), leaving the present size at 279 square miles.

On April 10, 1819, the first county officers were elected. In August of that same year, the first recorded session of court was held in the first courthouse, approximately four miles from where Clarkesville would be situated. In 1823, the county seat of Clarkesville was chartered and named for the Revolutionary General and Governor, John C. Clarke; and the original courthouse was replaced by one located in Clarkesville.

Shortly thereafter, in 1828-1829, discovery of gold in the Nacoochee Valley triggered "gold fever". Several mines began operation. Before it ended, the gold rush had brought wealth and new permanent or summer residents. Gold miners in the Nacoochee Valley also discovered in 1834 the remains of a subterranean Indian village of 34 log houses along with cane baskets and earthenware. The village was below the ground at a depth of seven to nine feet. (Note: "The Historical News" attributes the discovery to Spanish exploration and mining.)

During the 1830s, coastal Georgia residents trying to avoid malaria made Habersham their summer home. Clarkesville, with three hotels, became known as a fashionable summer resort. Besides Clarkesville, Tallulah Falls also attracted visitors; and later on, towards the end of the 18th century, Mt. Airy and Cornelia were founded and became popular with summer residents and tourists.

By 1845, the population had grown to 8,411. Records from that time reveal that many of the inhabitants made a living growing and selling wheat, corn, cotton, and apples; weaving jeans or making saddle cloths; or working in one of the sawmills, gold mills, jug factories, or distilleries.

Year after year came and went with the same peaceful routine of life: buying, selling, planting, harvesting, marrying, raising children, attending church. During the 1840s and 1850s, who among the inhabitants of this peaceful era could have visualized the anxiety, anguish and fear that the Civil War would bring?

During that war, approximately 1,000 men from the county fought for the Confederacy in almost every important battle, many never to return. Besides men, the County contributed cannons forged by the Habersham Iron Works and Manufacturing Company. Some of the cannons, stamped "Habersham Iron Works", can still be seen at the Chickamauga National Battleground.

Although life was hard due to war and the ensuing reconstruction years, the county began to recover, especially after railways were built. The Southern Railway opened in Habersham on July 17, 1873. Mt. Airy has the distinction of being the highest point on that railway. The famous Tallulah Falls Railroad also ran for many years. Although the Tallulah Falls Railroad was abandoned in 1961, it can be seen in the movies "I'd Climb the Highest Mountain" and "The Great Locomotive Chase."

New immigrants also contributed to Habersham's recovery. Around 1880, German and Swiss immigrants began to move into the area to grow grapes and make wine. Before a profit could be made on this industry, however, the county became dry; and many of the German-Swiss moved away, although some remained to farm and to become citizens. Around 1920, apple growers from England, Canada, and the North helped to make the apple industry an important source of revenue for the county.

In the latter part of the 19th Century, new technologies, such as the telephone (introduced in 1898 with the formation of the Clarkesville Telephone Company), eventually would cause major changes in the way of life of the county's residents.

Progress brought problems however. By the late 1890s, Clarkesville still had not grown as large as the city of Toccoa. Toccoa wanted to assume the role of county seat. For several years, the debate continued. Although in 1898 someone blew up its courthouse with dynamite, Clarkesville eventually retained the privilege. Toccoa then campaigned for the creation of a new county with itself as county seat, and in 1905 Stephens County was formed.

*(Information from The Hills of Habersham, by Mary L. Church; "F.Y.I. Habersham County, 1999- 2000 Directory", published by "The Northeast Georgian"; "Habersham Mills, An Historic Synopsis", compiled by Dudley Sisk; "Habersham County Visitor's Guide", published by the Habersham County Chamber of Commerce; "The Historical News", published by Southern Historical News, Inc.; The Light in the Mountains, by Carol Stevens Hancock; and Habersham County, Georgia: A Pictorial History by Jo and Stephen Whited)*