

## CHAPTER I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

Long before white settlers came to what is now Talladega County, the area was a favorite location for Native American villages. Evidence of prehistoric Native American civilizations, such as mounds, are scattered throughout the county. By the time the area became part of the United States, the county was divided between the Creek Indians, who claimed the territory south of the Native American village of Talladega, and the Cherokee Indians, who lived north of Talladega. A U.S. Indian Agent, Benjamin Hawkins, reported at least five thriving Creek villages near Talladega around 1800. The Chalaka tribe of Shawnee Indians also lived in southern Talladega County. They moved to Alabama from Ohio in the mid-1700s and established the village of "Chalakagay" ("place of the Chalaka tribe") near present-day Sylacauga.

Europeans entered the area in about 1540, when Hernando DeSoto led an expedition up the Coosa River Valley in search of gold. The French made the next foray into central Alabama. They erected Fort Toulouse at the head of the Alabama River in 1717 and established trade with the Native Americans. Territorial records show that they traded with tribes at least as far north as Chalakagay. The French withdrew from the fort in 1763, after their defeat in the French and Indian War.

Some white traders stayed behind, co-existing with the Native Americans. After the United States was formed, the southern tribes granted the new government the right to maintain horse paths through their territory, so that white pioneers could travel to Mobile. White settlements sprang up along the horse paths. White government agents encouraged Native Americans to take up "white ways." In 1811, the great Shawnee leader, Tecumseh, called for Native Americans to unite and fight the whites. This call appealed to Creeks who wanted to maintain their traditional way of life but not to those who had become accustomed to whites. The Creek nation divided into Upper Creeks, who wished to resist white encroachment, and Lower Creeks, who were inclined toward peace. A civil war broke out between the two factions and soon involved white settlers.

In August, 1813, the Upper Creeks attacked Fort Mims near Mobile, killing both white and mixed-blood people. In response to this attack, General Andrew Jackson and the Tennessee Volunteers set out to quell the uprising. The battles took Jackson's troops through Talladega County and, ultimately, to Horseshoe Bend, the final battle of the Creek Indian War. The war officially concluded on August 9, 1814, with the signing of the Treaty of Fort Jackson. Under the terms of the treaty, Creek territory was reduced to the area lying between the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers. The end of the uprising brought about increased white settlement, and Alabama gained statehood in 1819. However, Talladega County remained part of the Creek nation until 1832, when the United States purchased the remaining Creek territory for \$210,000 and "other valuable considerations" in the Cusseta Treaty. By the late 1830s, nearly all Native Americans had been forced to move from Alabama to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. These actions opened the entire state to white settlement.

White settlers moving into Talladega County found beautiful valleys, rolling hills, and ample water for transportation and other uses. The blue mountains in the background added to the beauty of the countryside. Some of these settlers formed the village of "Syllacogga," derived from the name of



the Shawnee village Chalakagay. The city incorporated on January 31, 1834 as "Syllacauga" and was reincorporated in 1887 under its present name, "Sylacauga."

In 1838, the first Sylacauga post office was established, with George Washington Stone—later Chief Justice Stone of Alabama—as post master. In 1852, the first "paved" road came through Sylacauga, a plank road running from Montgomery to Winterboro. The first railroad, the Anniston and Atlantic Railroad, reached Sylacauga on December 1, 1886. In 1887, H.G. McCall became printer and editor of Sylacauga's first newspaper, the Sylacauga Argus. The first building on Broadway Avenue, Sylacauga's main thoroughfare, was built by the Smith Brothers in 1890. Although all of these human achievements helped Sylacauga gain status as a regional center, nature gave Sylacauga its chief claim to fame—a massive bed of the hardest, whitest marble in the world. The solid marble deposit underneath "The Marble City" is approximately 32 miles long, 1 1/2 miles wide, and 400 feet deep. Dr. Edward Gantt, a physician who traveled with Jackson's troops during the Creek Indian Wars, discovered the marble in 1820. The quarry still operates today. Sylacauga marble has graced many buildings, including the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the U.S. Supreme Court Building, the Al Jolson Shrine in California, and the Alabama Archives Building. It also has been used in numerous works of fine art, such as Giuseppe Moretti's masterpiece "The Head of Christ" and Gutzon Borglum's bust of Lincoln in the U.S. capitol building rotunda.

Cotton also played a major role in Sylacauga's development. In 1897, Braxton Bragg Comer founded Avondale Mills, a cotton manufacturing firm, in Birmingham. He was president of the company until his death in 1927, during which time he also served on the State Railroad Commission, as the governor of Alabama, and as a U.S. senator. He and his sons continuously expanded the company by acquiring other mills in Alabama. They purchased Sylacauga's Central Textile Mill in 1906. Avondale Mills expanded that operation in 1913, with the construction of the Eva Jane Mill. Avondale's expansions helped attract other mills to Sylacauga in 1919 and 1926. During the Depression, Avondale Mills looked after its employees, operating its own school system and allowing employees to continue their education there. The company created a mill village to house employees needing assistance. Employees also were able to utilize a company-owned dairy, hospital, poultry farm and recreation center. Over the past century, Avondale Mills has made a significant impact on Sylacauga's economy.

Like many cities, Sylacauga received a boost from defense plants during World War II. In 1941, the Department of Defense constructed a \$72 million smokeless powder plant along the Coosa River near Childersburg. Many of the workers lived in Sylacauga and commuted to the plant, resulting in the largest influx of new residents in the city's history. Although the powder plant closed in 1945, people continued to make Sylacauga their home. Another defense contractor helped spur growth in the 1950s. Rudisill Foundry Company opened a plant in Sylacauga in 1950 and became a major employer in 1952, when it began manufacturing 155mm shells. The foundry employed over 850 people during its peak and made growth in the 1950s almost as robust as the 1940s.

The rapid growth of the 1940s was a learning experience for local leaders. Sylacauga became an overcrowded city with many serious problems. This situation inspired City officials to undertake a major city planning effort in the 1950s, to insure orderly growth and development and to maintain a high quality of life. Sylacauga has continued its tradition of planned development and is one of

the few communities of its size to have a full-time planning department. Today, Sylacauga is an attractive city with a population of about 13,000. The downtown is still vibrant and is surrounded by pleasant neighborhoods of historic homes. Low crime rates help keep downtown active, even after dark. The Beautification Council, which was established in the late 1960s, is active in recycling, funding projects to landscape public properties, and restoring historical cemeteries. Local garden clubs maintain the landscaping. Sylacauga's community-wide efforts have earned the city fifteen state and national beautification awards. The spirit of volunteerism also is evident in residents' participation in civic and charitable organizations. Most chartered national organizations have local chapters in Sylacauga.

Sylacauga is located in southern Talladega County, just east of Alabama's geographic center (see Maps 1 and 2). The city is strategically situated along several major transportation routes. Alabama Highway 21 runs through the heart of the community, connecting Sylacauga with the City of Talladega, Interstate 20, and the Anniston metropolitan area to the north. U.S. Highway 231 joins AL Highway 21 south of U.S. Highway 280, carrying travelers to Montgomery and points beyond. U.S. Highway 280 runs through southern and western Sylacauga, providing access to Birmingham to the northwest and Columbus, Georgia, to the southeast. The Norfolk Southern Railway roughly parallels Highway 280, providing an alternate means of transporting goods to and from the community. Sylacauga is approximately 40 miles southwest of Anniston, 51 miles southeast of Birmingham, 63 miles north of Montgomery, and 85 miles northwest of Columbus, Georgia.



