

JOSEPH REED SR.
AND
HIS FAMILY THROUGH THE YEARS

JOSEPH REED
(1764/68-1861)

Frontiersman. Farmer. Blacksmith.
Husband and Father.
First White Settler (1817) in What is Now Known
as Henderson County, Tennessee.
Legend to His Posterity

Typically, a biographical history would begin by noting birthplace, parents' names, and number of siblings; but when it comes to Joseph Reed, Sr., although there has been much speculation, these facts are simply not known.

However, there are family records which show that his five children were born in Georgia in 1802, 1803, 1806, 1808 and 1810. From that time, the records are silent until 1817. In 1817, the records show he was preparing to emigrate to Henderson County, Tennessee.

It is deduced that the reason for this emigration was due to world conditions of that time.

World Conditions

In 1815, with the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo, Europe entered a period of peace which lasted with few interruptions until the outbreak of WWI in 1914. During this time, Beethoven wrote his famous music; smallpox was discovered; Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. As Bragon & McCutchen (1961) summarize:

For nearly a century (1815-1914) no warring nations preyed on American commerce or violated American rights. Free of foreign entanglements, the United States turned its back on Europe.

During this long period (1815-1914), the American people were engaged in a colossal task—the “Conquest of a Continent.” For the most part this was not a military

conquest, although it involved us in numerous Indian Wars and a war with Mexico. Instead, it was a struggle between men and their environment—the conquest of forests by the Axe, of prairies by the plow...

Indeed, Americans were braving new frontiers in their quest for new lands; and so it was with Joseph Reed, Sr.

Search for a New Land

In 1817, according to historians, Joseph Reed, Sr., and his two young sons, John Leverett (Jack) and William, left a comfortable home to cross the mountains, float down the Tennessee River, sleep on the ground, hunt game, make friends with the Chickasaw Indians, and arrive at what would later be known as Henderson County, Tennessee. There they found the land they sought. There they would build their new home near the Beach River and by a large cold spring (later called Reed spring) five miles east of the present city of Lexington, Tennessee.

Before they could build their new home, however, Joseph had to return to his former home to bring the rest of the family to Henderson County. For an unknown reason, Jack and William were to stay with the Chickasaw Indians while Joseph made the round trip. This trip would undoubtedly require him to leave them for at least a year.

Apprehensively, the boys bid farewell to their father; they recognized that death in the wilderness was an ever present reality, that they might never see or hear of their father again. Nevertheless, they parted in the fall of 1817 hoping for a reunion and a home in that unsettled land.

While their father was gone, Jack and William lived with the Chickasaw Indians enduring many hardships. They ate unpalatable food, slept in the cold and waded through snow with nothing but animal skin wrapped around their feet and legs. No histories record in detail the experiences of these boys, although a few allude briefly to it and give an insight into their lives. For example, Power's History of Henderson County records:

Many stories have I heard of the hardships they underwent. They were alone so far as white friends were concerned, nothing to do except tramp through the woods and live as their friends, the Indians, lived...to discuss fully what these two boys

experienced, would take too much space.

In the spring of 1818, Joseph Reed, Sr., his wife and three of his children (Armintee, Polly, and Joseph, Jr.) came “overland by ox wagon, cutting and fording their way through dense undergrowth, streams and swamps” (Grissom). When they arrived in Henderson County, they were joyfully reunited with Jack and William—“Reed also brought some slaves indicating that he was a man of some means who did not have to leave his settled home” (Stewart, 1979).

Finally, the family was able to build their long hoped-for home. They built a log house near the spring in the year 1818. A History of Henderson County describes how they accomplished this:

The father and boys went to what is now known as “Pine Knob” and began to fell trees with which to build their new home. They cut and hewed the logs out of huge pine. The manner in which Mr. Reed hauled them to the desired place is unknown, but he forded Beech River with them, there being no bridges or ferries at that time. They built the house out of logs and covered it with boards held in place by Poles, for there were no nails to be had; but, all-in-all, it was a good house, the logs still being sound in use. Mr. Reed finished his house, moved into it, deadened timber, planted a crop, and became the first white settler in Henderson County.

Henderson County

Stewart (1979) describes Henderson County as Joseph Reed and his family found it:

Henderson County was a hunter’s paradise when settlers first arrived. County topography was conducive to the propagation of wildlife. Forests were full of hickory and persimmon trees which provided food for both man and small game. There were also chestnuts and hazelnuts. Wild blackberries, dewberries and strawberries were delicacies consumed by man and such animals as rabbits, raccoons, squirrels and groundhogs. Area carnivores were panthers, wolves, wildcats, and bobcats, and the small furbearing animals were mink, muskrat, weasel, and red and gray fox. Colonies of beavers thrived in most streams, and their dams sometimes backed water onto cultivated crops. Black bears roamed

the hills and valleys. Buffalo were plentiful west of Highland Ridge.

When Henderson County was settled, song birds, both migratory and native, were abundant. Quail and wild turkey were plentiful. Wild pigeons were prized because of their plumage and delicious meat. Cardinals, bluebirds, mockingbirds, house wrens, jaybirds, and whippoorwills were present.

The county was never inhabited by rattlesnakes, although some existed at one time on Pine Knobs. Area poisonous snakes are copperhead, cottonmouth, and water moccasin. Chicken snakes and black racers have been the most plentiful of the harmless snakes.

Early settlers found the county's virgin timber to be of excellent quality, and the area is still considered to be a hardwood center. Trees dominant in the county are red and white oak, black jack, hickory, poplar, beech, cedar, sweet gum and tupelo gum, as well as chestnut, sycamore, black walnut, and willow.

Soon after Joseph built his cabin, other settlers began pouring into Henderson County. They came in all manner of ways. Some floated down the Tennessee River and walked the remainder of the way. Some drove through in two wheeled carts drawn either by oxen or horses. Some brought their scanty supplies on pack horses and themselves walked. Some even walked without cart or horses. By 1830 there were 7294 white people and 1447 negroes, five of whom were free, thus making a total population of 8741, all coming since the first settlement in 1818 by Joseph Reed (History of Henderson County).

In 1859, Mary (Polly) Leverett died. Joseph followed in 1861. Both died in their new settled land, Henderson County. Joseph's will was offered for probate January 6, 1862. John L. Reed and William acted as executors, bond \$2,500.00.

Joseph Reed was truly a legend, both to his posterity and to the citizens of Henderson County. In life, he set his course and persevered. As L'Amour observed: "It is one thing to talk of and plan a venture--there is room for excitement, enthusiasm, and conjecture--but it is quite another to begin a new life, to take one's family and step off into the nothingness of the unknown." Joseph truly accomplished this feat; he led his family to face the unknown and to emerge, after the struggle, victorious.

For more information on the Joseph Reed settlement in Henderson County, Tennessee, see:

*History of Henderson County, Tennessee, Goodspeed (1886)

*History of Henderson County, Tennessee, Stewart (1979)

*History of Henderson County, Tennessee, Powers (1930)

*History compiled by B. Grissom, Henderson County Historian