

Hancock County

Established 1844 County Seat: Sneedville

Early History

Even though some of Tennessee's earliest settlers lived in what is now Hancock County, it took two acts of the legislature and the Tennessee Supreme Court to establish Hancock County in 1844. It was named for Revolutionary War leader John Hancock. The county seat of Sneedville was named for Knoxville lawyer W.H. Sneed who helped with the creation of the county.

Hancock was originally part of Hawkins County, North Carolina which became Hawkins County, Tennessee. Hancock County was created from parts of Claiborne and Hawkins counties. Creating a county from lands taken from more than one "parent" county actually violated aspects of the state constitution. Boundary lines had to be adjusted and eventually the legal questions came before the Tennessee State Supreme Court which ruled in favor of Hancock County.

As early as 1673, a group of people known today as Melungeons were reported to be living in the Hancock County area. Though many genealogists and historians have investigated, the origins of the Melungeons remains contested. Most scholars believe the word "Melungeon" comes from the French word "mélange" meaning mixture. However, other possible etymologies include the Middle English word "malengin" used to describe people of low character. A further hindrance to scholars is that census records often identified Melungeons as "free persons of color," a catch all phrase that could have described many variations of ethnicity. . One scholar has suggested that the widely known story of Portuguese descent is a result of a mishearing of the tribal name Potuskite (pronounced Po-chuck-key) as "Portuguese." Today, the strongest evidence suggests that the Melungeons were the descendants of Native American tribes displaced by white settlement in colonial Virginia

Civil War and Reconstruction

Hancock County saw little action during the Civil War. A skirmish occurred on October 21, 1864 near Sneedville in the Clinch River valley. Retreating Confederate forces found themselves attacked from the front and the rear. The Confederates were driven through Sneedville with a loss of 15 killed and 43 guns captured.

Twentieth Century

In the 1950s, zinc was discovered in Hancock County and mining provided much needed employment until 1971. Though the county has some industries and small businesses, it remains the poorest county in Tennessee and the 27th poorest county in the nation based on the 2010 census. Sneedville was home to WSJK-TV, the first state owned public television station in Tennessee.

Alex Stewart: Cooper

Born in Hancock County in 1891, Alex Stewart eventually went into the family business of coopering. Coppering or making containers out of wooden staves was very important in mountain communities before the introduction of galvanized buckets and crocks. Coopers produced barrels, casks and wooden buckets that were used to store an abundance of goods including water, whiskey, flour and molasses. Stewart was also a blacksmith, chair maker, basket maker, and whittler. Stewart was one of the 1983 National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellows. His grandson Rick Stewart learned to cooper from his grandfather and received a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts to travel to Japan to teach the art of coopering there. Stewart's work is part of the collections at the Smithsonian Institute, Tennessee State Museum and the Museum of Appalachia. Reflecting on his craft, Alex Stewart said, "I just delighted in it. Anything you delight in, it ain't no trouble for you to do it."

For more information, see

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***Melungeons: Examining an Appalachian Legend* by Pat Spurlock Elder**