

Knox County

Established 1792 County Seat Knoxville

Early History

In 1792, Governor William Blount used the Treaty of the Holston in order to define borders for a new county in the Southwest Territory. He named this new county after Henry Knox, a general during the Revolutionary War and, at the time, the Secretary of State. Over the next few decades, Knox County gave territory to other burgeoning counties, specifically Blount, Anderson, Roane, and Union. The new town of Knoxville became the county seat and is still the county seat today.

James White established Knoxville in 1791 after founding his home on the site in 1786. Knoxville became not only the county seat, but also the capital of the Southwest Territory in 1794. The city later became the state capital from 1796 to 1812, and again from 1817 to 1818, after which the state capital moved to Middle Tennessee. Knoxville never constructed capital buildings; instead, government officials used public places such as taverns to conduct business. The city quickly grew into the economic heart of the county and East Tennessee. That Knoxville began a newspaper, the *Knoxville Gazette*, in 1791 demonstrates such growth.

In addition to its political importance, Knox County was an economic crossroads for the American South. Two major rivers, the Holston and the French Broad, flowed through the county, allowing for river transport. The Tennessee River provided another waterway, but it forced cargo boats to travel slowly due to its impassable shoals and winding path. Railroad companies began moving in during the 1830s in order to remedy transportation troubles. The first train on the East Tennessee and Georgia Railroad rolled through Knoxville in 1855.

Civil War

On the eve of the Civil War, Knox County was divided on the issue of secession. Many Knoxvillians believed in the cause of secession as an issue of Tennessee's rights, especially as those outside the city chiefly participated in agricultural practices involving slavery. At the same time, many of the city's citizens were against secession, as it would hamper important trade relations with northern states and thereby endanger Knoxville livelihoods.

Parson William Brownlow was the head of the out-spoken Unionist cause in Knoxville. Originally from Virginia, Brownlow became a Methodist pastor in upper East Tennessee at a young age. After turning 33, he abandoned the ministry in order to pursue a journalistic enterprise. His newspaper, the *Knoxville Whig*, turned into the loudest pro-Union voice in Tennessee and won him recognition throughout the Union. After the Civil War ended, he became governor of Tennessee during its Radical Reconstruction era.

Since Knoxville served as a major railroad junction in Tennessee, the Union created a strategy to capture the city early in the war. In November 1861, Union supporters in East Tennessee sought to help Unionist forces by burning bridges in Charleston, Greeneville, and Chattanooga; among these burners were Knoxville residents. General Ambrose Burnside occupied Knoxville in September 1863, constructing Fort Sanders for the Union command. Confederate General Longstreet attacked the fort in November, but Burnside defeated him and, as a result, secured Knoxville as a Union stronghold.

Post-War Problems: The Million Dollar Fire and the 1919 Race Riot

The end of the Civil War carried Knoxville into the industrial age of the New South. Lumber, marble, and coal were the three greatest economic factors in the city. In fact, Knoxville churned out so much marble that it gained the nickname the "Marble City." Both foreign and domestic immigrants moved into Knoxville in order to attain jobs in its new factories and manufacturing centers. As the number of working class citizens rose, upper and middle class residents moved out of the city into more suburban areas of Knox County, leaving the city to industrialism and increasing tensions between races and classes.

Disaster struck Knoxville in the early morning of April 8, 1897. A fire broke out in the elevator shaft of the Hotel Knox on Gay Street and rapidly spread to adjoining buildings. At the time, Knoxville had a small fire department that was ill equipped to deal with such a calamity. The department therefore could not stop the fire from engulfing many buildings on the east side of Gay Street, the center of Knoxville's trade and business. The incident caused only a short hindrance to the Knoxville economy as businesses quickly came back from defeat. However, it forced Knoxville into the progressive era through the search for better safety for its citizens.

Knoxville also faced problems due to racial tensions. In late August 1919, an African American man murdered a white woman in North Knoxville. The man arrested, Maurice Mays, was a well-known in Knoxville for his escapades with married women and his close association with Knoxville Mayor John McMillian who was rumored to be Mays' birth father. Mays claimed innocence and the arrest sparked controversy in the African American community as a result. As news of the murder and arrest spread, a white mob began to gather near Market Square and the African American community began to organize for its own defence. The white mob eventually attacked the jail, but did not find Mays who had been removed to Chattanooga for safety. The mob turned its attention towards the African-American community. As the white mob approached the corner of Central Avenue and Vine Avenue, shots were fired. Fighting continued throughout the night with hundreds being beaten or shot. The arrival of the National Guard the following day finally put down the rioting, but the soldiers were no better than the mob in their treatment of African-Americans. Homes were searched, possessions stolen, and African Americans were beaten and shot by the Guardsmen. Neither the Knoxville Coroner nor Governor Roberts would authorize an investigation into the number of dead or the actions of the Guardsmen. Estimates of the dead widely vary from 25 to hundreds secretly buried in mass graves. The Race Riot of 1919 exposed deep racial tensions in a city that had considered itself superior to other Tennessee cities on the question of race.

The Tennessee Valley Authority

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the passage of the TVA, or Tennessee Valley Authority, Act in order to bring the New Deal to the South. TVA particularly influenced life in the Tennessee Valley itself in the dams it built and the subsequent electricity it brought. As with surrounding towns, Knoxville gained a new employer through TVA, as the city became the headquarters of the corporation. TVA built the New Sprinkle building in downtown Knoxville and used it for a variety of affairs: job applications, corporation oversight, economic developments in the region, and more. The plans for the Norris Dam project and future power plants originated in the building. As such, Knoxville became the center of TVA activity in its beginnings and remains so today.

The 1982 World's Fair

Knoxville hosted the World's Fair in 1982, following the success of the previous small host city of Spokane, Washington. The event ran from the first of May until October 31 and was indeed a great success. Over 11 million visitors, including many locals, came to the World's Fair. Under the title of "Energy Turns the World," the event featured technological advances from countries as far away as South Korea, Australia, and Saudi Arabia. China also entered this World's Fair for the first time since 1904, presenting a model of the Great Wall and bringing four of the famous terracotta warriors. Local architects designed the centrepiece of the fair, the Sunsphere, which still stands as Knoxville's defining landmark. Today, the Sunsphere contains an observation deck and restaurant; however, you do not need to pay \$2 for a ride up, as visitors to the World's Fair did in 1982.

Knoxville and Knox County Today

Today, Knoxville maintains its position as the center of East Tennessee's economy and culture. Downtown Knoxville has witnessed revitalization, a movement bringing residents back to a more pedestrian life and introducing new activities and eateries to the area. In addition, the Knox County area has grown by the thousands in districts and towns such as Bearden, Farragut, and Fountain City. The University of Tennessee based in Knoxville annually enrolls over 27,000 students and holds an esteemed position in engineering and scientific technologies. As it continues to grow, Knoxville and Knox County are increasingly gaining wider recognition as a progressive and innovative area aimed at bringing ever more economic and cultural appreciation to the East Tennessee region.

For More Information see,

***From The Shadow Side: And Other Stories Of Knoxville, Tennessee* by Jack Neely**

***Knoxville, Tennessee: A Mountain City in the New South* by William Bruce Wheeler**

***Secret History II: Stories About Knoxville, Tennessee* by Jack Neely and Ed Richardson**

***Knoxville, Tennessee: Continuity and Change in an Appalachian City* by Michael McDonald and William Bruce Wheeler**