

NEWS

Franklin Parish was settled by adventurers

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Editor's note: One in a series of history pieces published in conjunction with The News-Star's 125th anniversary. This story originally ran in July 1976 and has been edited. Most information in this article was furnished from a history paper written by Mrs. Teddie C. Hatfield of Franklin Parish.

WINNSBORO — By the beginning of the 18th century, land-hungry adventurers began establishing homes in Franklin Parish. Settlements naturally first occurred along waterways. After 1750, colonists settled near the Boeuf River, making the town accessible to Harrisonburg and Natchez.

Charles Gayarre wrote in his journal that in 1795 farmers from the Canary Islands were living in Terre-aux-Beoufs, better known as Beouf Prairie. The farmers were joined by the Doyal, Lindsey, Seay, Weeks, De Garsa and Leavins families. Artifacts and relics found south of Beouf Prairie Methodist Church and four Spanish land grants confirmed in the federal land office of Ouachita Parish helped establish that this was the first community in the parish. The documentation proved these people settled prior to 1800.

With the signing of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, settlers from the north, east and other countries began flooding west of the Mississippi River. Most emigrants came by boat from Natchez, down the Mississippi to the Red River, up the Black and Ouachita rivers and into the Boeuf at Point Landing, using horse-propelled boats on the smaller waterways.

After 1817, steamboats made regular trips up the Ouachita River. Dave Stafford, among other, founded a tow service that picked up merchandise from New Orleans for settlers at Stafford Point and distributed it to the Desha, Dailey, Potter, White Oak, Thomas and

Prairie landings. By 1830, steamboats made regular trips up Boeuf River, navigable for 240 miles during high waters.

There was a large population in the parish by 1833. Colonists settled not only in the western part of the parish near Beouf Prairie but also on the high ridge of Bayou Macon and near the Tensas River lowlands. Between the two main settlements lay a large, snake-filled canebrake.

Most of the settlers in the eastern settlement were English or French, but those in Beouf Prairie included English, French, Spanish and Canary Islanders.

The northern and central regions of the parish, which were not navigable by water, were sparsely settled with a few hunters and trappers when the federal land survey of 1829 was conducted.

In 1830, a wagon trail was blazed through the wilderness from Delhi to Prairie Landing, which allowed for the creation of Winnsboro.

Others began populating the midsection of the parish, gradually connecting established communities. Families began planting crops.

One thing they agreed upon was they must have home government as both Catahoula and Ouachita were too far away. Their spokesmen enlisted the aid of John Winn, a pioneer of this section of the Ouachita Valley who had been elected senator when Louisiana became a state. He pleaded their case so well that the Legislature passed Act 41 on March 4 1843, creating a political subdivision of 616 square miles, more or less, named Franklin in honor of Benjamin Franklin. The new parish was organized from Ouachita, Catahoula and Madison parishes.

The action was approved by Alexander Mouton, governor from 1843-1846, who appointed E.K. Wilson of Ouachita Parish as the first district judge and John. W. Willis sheriff.

On May 22, 1843, Marcus B. Desha, Wiley Be. Grayson, Lemuel H. Bowden, James Gwin Sr., Samuel Norris, John Ward and C.W. Saunders took oaths of office as the first police jury. They met in the home of Enos Mackey on Bayou Macon.

Beouf Prairie was the most populous community and had an empty building available for use as a courthouse, so the group agreed to meet there in the future.

By the September 1843 meeting, the Macon, Osborn and Oakley settlements contended that Boeuf Prairie was too far from their homes and citizens appearing before the court had to travel many miles. Willis proposed that the police jury, for a nominal fee, buy 160 acres of his land that was situated almost in the center of the parish. The courthouse then would be equidistant to everyone living on the perimeter of the parish.

The courthouse, jail, cemetery and taxes were established on the order of the police jury in Winnsborough, a town created to be the parish seat.

Civilization destroyed much of the prairies and dense woodlands that stretched from east to west before 1830. Fire destroyed the canebreaks in 1917; planters cleared forests and drained swamps to make way for cotton, corn and soybean crops; ranchers felled trees and brush to make way for cattle.

The parish, however, remains a great source for hunting and fishing. Tensas River National Wildlife Refuge partially lies within its boundaries.