

“A PEN PICTURE OF OLD AND NEW FAYETTE”

Less than nine years after the town of Latona, which sprang up around the railroad, was officially incorporated in late 1881 and the courthouse relocated to that site in 1882, the town of Fayetteville (Old Town) at five-points lay in ruins.

Latona served as the county seat until 1898 when the required number of legal voters signed a petition to have an election changing the name from Latona to Fayette. Forty-seven votes were cast – 43 white males and 4 black males (women were not yet allowed to vote). All votes were for changing the name and Latona officially became Fayette, Alabama.

The following article “*A PEN PICTURE OF OLD AND NEW FAYETTE*”, written in flowery prose by an unknown staff writer is a reprint of an article appearing in the *Birmingham News* newspaper on February 20, 1900.

“Fayette, Ala., Feb. 20. – That the onward march of progress is merciless, demanding absolute crucifixion of everything purely sentimental was never more fully depicted than in old Fayette, the principle town of Fayette County for years. Desolation and dilapidation have claimed it for its own and everything seems to revel in the very ultra of ruin and confusion.

Time was when the streets of the village, now barely a skeleton of its former self, held wagon after wagon of the products of the farmers and around three sides of the square were arranged business houses well stocked and prosperous. It was the chief trading point for a large territory and a cotton center of note and prominence.

But Fayette was a very small hamlet fifty years ago [1850], when John C. Robertson and his thrifty wife settled there, he to ply his vocation as a tailor, she to aid him in his work. They grew as a family and in wealth and influence, ere long saving enough to go into the mercantile business. The store soon became the trading point of the farmers for miles around and little by little much of the business that had gone before to Columbus, Miss. and Tuscaloosa, found its way to the Robertsons. Years followed years, all filled with prosperity for the little town perched upon a hill, and shedding its light into a constantly increasing radius. Churches were erected, a school established and handsome homes built.

As business expanded, more stores were opened, and by the time the Georgia Pacific railroad was built, Fayette [Fayette Court House /Fayetteville] had become one of the best towns in all of West Alabama.

At this time a brick house of old fashioned architecture, with large white columns supporting and extended portico, stood in the center of the square. It was the temple of justice – the pride of the citizens of both town and county. Surrounding it was a neatly kept lawn, enclosed by a low fence. Round this in turn were the hitching posts and on court days or during occasions of public interest, these were all in use, securing the tethered mounts of the people from the county precincts. The town lay to the four sides of the court house square and spread out into the pretty groves on rolling table lands. The court house itself sat on a hog’s-back water to the east flowing into the Sipsey river, on the west to the Luxapallia, both of which streams are often spoken of in the history of Alabama. The geological formation is beautiful white sand and gravel and so loosely has nature packed the earth together that great gulches have washed wherever vigorous streams were allowed free play.

Associated with the town are some of the leading names of the State's history. There arose there in the old day the magnetic oratory of William R. Smith, statesman and lawyer, and in that same building of county pride the immortal Houston [George S. Houston, 24th Governor of Alabama during the Reconstruction years, 1874-1878] was heard in impassioned eloquence pleading for a suffering people and protesting against the robberies of carpet baggers and skalawags. And it may be said to the honor of the people that when the test came old Fayette stood to the front, bravely adding its votes to the cause of the great Limestone county hero.

Along with the above might be mentioned the Burrises, the Cannons, the Harkinses, J. B. Sanford, Dr. McKay, Dr. Harris, Dr. Agnew, Capt. J. H. Moore who commanded Company A of the great Twenty-sixth Alabama, of the Confederate Army, and who came near being its colonel when W. R. Smith resigned to accept a seat in the Confederate Congress, Prof. A.M. McKates, J. H. Bankhead, the Caines, the Sudduths, John Moore and hundreds of others of local note who have been moving spirits of the community.

But the coming of the Georgia Pacific railroad brought the first shadow to the happiness of the town. Effort to get the road run through the town failed and in spite of all influence the locating engineer put the line a mile away.

"The town must go to the railroad," said many of the long-head men, who foresaw the intervening mile from their transportation depot to their stores would soon have to be abrogated for business reasons. Time made good their word and the idea of moving to the railroad got firmer and firmer hold of the businessmen, until some seven years ago, when it was decided to erect a new courthouse. An election resulted in the decision to build this new temple on the railroad at a point where at this time a few houses and a couple of little stores had been erected.

From the time the election to move was declared carried, the old town began to retrograde and today it is a yawning graveyard of ragged relics of the happy days of yore. The court house is gone – its sacred bricks made up into mud-sill foundations for others structures. The jail hard by is a farm house, chickens and pigs occupying the space once enclosed by bustling stockade and the cot space of the criminal in the inside is now the resting place of the honest toiler of the field. The forbidding old outside of the prison looks repulsive, however, as if angry at being shorn of its power; and the broken planks and jagged eaves give it the appearance of a snaggle-tooth old witch intent on casting an evil spell on everybody who comes near.

Moving around the square, the wreck is more evident. The old stores are mostly gone, only a few here and there left standing to emphasize the absence of their fellows. Here is an ugly hole where some building has been moved from over a cellar, and there the gaping sides of some old structure once the pride of its owner.

Halfway between the old and new towns is an immense ditch, washed by the waters that from year to year rush through it. This seems to be the dividing line. Going toward the new community one begins to lose the idea of antiquity, as this ditch spanned by a bridge and some loose planks, is crossed, and by the time the edge of the present corporation is reached, old age gives way to youth, confusion to order, and the dead past to a new and prosperous present. As old Fayette, in its glorious days, was the pride of its people, so new Fayette is the apple of the eye of a community more progressive and more prosperous than was ever the case with its predecessor.

In the new town there is much building, both of stores and residences. Streets already open have been repaired and graded and those not so have been opened and made passable. Messrs. E. M. and W. C. Harkins have recently put up a handsome new store, with glass front, and the Turner Hotel has been enlarged and repaired. Some fifteen or twenty new dwellings have been erected in the past few months, and many of those from three to five years old have been repaired and beautified.

Other good things are promised soon, not the least of which is a cotton factory, which enterprise has been quietly figured on by an Eastern gentleman who recently spent three days there looking over the field. So quietly was the matter kept that few people even of Fayette knew of his presence. But he may return, and when he does he will bring good tidings. The Methodist people have a new church, just finished, which is an ornament to the town, and the school building has been made comfortable and convenient.

Push and enterprise are everywhere evident, and the outlook presages a town three to four times the present size.”