

# Union City History

## The Birth of Union City & The Railroad

In 1829, Attorney General George Gibbs of Nashville accepted 5,000 acres in Obion County as payment for legal fees. In 1839, Jacob Palmer built a cabin on a 200-acre plot of this land, on the site of Old Central School in Union City. Much of the area was low and marshy, being located between two creeks, Grove and Houser.

The Mobile & Ohio Railroad was chartered from north to south in 1848 across General Gibbs' holdings. The Nashville & Northwestern Railroad was chartered in 1851 to run from Nashville to a terminus in West Tennessee. General Gibbs arranged for the terminus to be on his land. He then chartered a line to run from Hickman to connect with this intersection. In 1854, he laid out a new city at the union of these lines. The name Junction City having already been used elsewhere, the name Union City was selected.

The rail intersection was then located just east of the present depot building, now the Obion County Chamber of Commerce. "Union City" was written in red chalk in a blazed spot on a large oak tree nearby. Lots were planned for 200 blocks on the west side, but not staked out immediately due to the heavy growth of timber.

The first depot constructed was burned by Confederate forces under the personal command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest in December of 1862.

## Kiwanis Park

Kiwanis Park, located across from the Chamber of Commerce, was once a low swampy area marked by a pond used as a water supply by a furniture factory. Today, it is a lovely park with a fountain topped by an impressive statue of Leda and the Swan. The fountain was displayed in Nashville during the 1897 Tennessee Centennial. Nearby is a bandstand, often the site of musical performances and political speeches, including an appearance by Roy Acuff during his run for governor. Other notables who have appeared there include William Jennings Bryan and Tennessee Governor Robert Love Taylor.

## The Palace Hotel

Across from the Chamber on the east side of the former rail line was the Palace Hotel. This now demolished grand 3-story structure was one of the best in West Tennessee and among its guests were John Phillip Sousa, here for a skeet-shooting match, the child Helen Keller, brought by her parents seeking medical help from Union City's famous Dr. Thomas J. Edwards, and principals in the Night Rider trials of 1908-1909.

The Night Riders of Reelfoot Lake were a vigilante group formed to fight the private ownership of Reelfoot Lake, a hunting and fishing paradise created by the earthquakes of 1811-1812. They ran rough-shod over the lake area until their activities culminated in the death of a prominent attorney. Some were then brought to trial and convicted, their sentences being overturned on technicalities.

## Civil War

Also in the park is a Confederate monument, originally located in front of the courthouse. This monument should not be confused with the Confederate monument located at the end of Edwards Street near the Obion County Museum. Erected in 1869, this is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and recognized as the first monument ever erected in honor of Unknown Confederate dead. The nearby museum features both permanent and changing exhibits on local history and is open 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. on weekends.

Growth of Union City was slowed by the Civil War. A training camp, Camp Brown, was located at the northern end of Union City and was used as a staging area for the invasion of Kentucky at Columbus. Union forces stationed here were twice captured by Confederate forces under the command of General Nathan Bedford Forrest.

## County Seat Origination

After surviving the war and then a cholera epidemic which decimated the population, a furniture factory industry developed in Union City from the heavy growth of timber in the county. This was nourished by the railroads which brought manufacture goods in and shipped out grains, livestock, and furniture. The growth of the city caused the county seat to be relocated here in 1880.

## Train Robbery

On October 27, 1871, a daring robbery of a Southern Railway Express car took place near the depot. Allen Pinkerton's eldest son, William, (Pinkerton Detective Agency) arrived in Union City to investigate the robbery. Eventually, the thieves were captured and returned to the city where one was shot and another hanged in the old city cemetery by outraged citizens.

## City Landmarks

At the corner of Second Street and Church Street on the western side is presently a parking lot. This was the location of the city hall for a number of years. The westernmost portion was purchased by the city about 1894. The lot extended north on Second Street for some distance. This area was later the site of the old fire station.

To the south was the calaboose or jail (originally located at the present site of the courthouse). A wire fence enclosed the remainder of the area. Here were kept stray animals picked up on the streets of the town. Until the "Cow Law" of 1900, hogs, horses, and cows roamed at will. After that time, they were picked up by the police and detained on the lot until claimed by their owner for one dollar (pigs were \$0.25 each).

Somewhat east of this city property in 1883 was located the first opera house, as theaters that offered traveling vaudeville shows were then called. Other opera houses were located in the building just east of the railroad on East Main Street (north side) and on South First Street at the corner of Harrison Street (east side).

On North First Street is located the Capitol Theatre, the home of Union City's community theatre group, the Masquerade Theatre.

Also located in Union City is the world-renowned Dixie Gun Works, founded by Turner Kirkland. It is the world's largest supplier of antique guns and parts.