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HISTORY OF EARLY CAHABA ALABAMA'S FIRST STATE CAPITAL*

by

Sam Earle Hobbs

DeSoto, we know, passed through this part of what is now Alabama in 1540, on his way to Mauvilla, but despite assertions to the contrary, no hard evidence permits us to conclude that he or his men actually passed or visited the exact site of Cahaba.¹ Later Spanish maps show an Indian town at the location known as Casiste. Thomas M. Owen reports that the name Cahaba, or Cahawba “. . . is doubtless of great antiquity, although the first known reference to it is on D’Anville’s Map of 1732 as ‘Caba’. On DeCrenay’s map, one year later, it is spelled ‘Capo’. This is said to be a corruption of two Choctaw words meaning ‘Water Above.’” Undoubtedly, an Indian town of considerable size existed here during the early 18th Century² and the tribe was probably Choctaw although the possibility that the Indians were Alabamas cannot be excluded.³

*This paper was read at the Alabama Historical Association’s pilgrimage to Selma and Cahaba, October 25, 1969.

¹Albert James Pickett, *History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi from the Earliest Period* (Tuscaloosa: Willo Publishing Company, 1962, republication), 34, 35, hereafter cited as Pickett, *History of Alabama*. Pickett asserts that DeSoto marched through the territory embraced by the southeastern part of Dallas County and crossed to the northern or western side of the Alabama after arriving at a strongly fortified Indian town called Piache. He surmizes Piache must have been near where Chilatchee Creek flows into the Alabama on its northern side. Chilatchee Creek forms the present Boundary between Dallas and Wilcox Counties in the area lying north of the Alabama river. If Pickett is correct, DeSoto’s expedition passed across river from Cahaba and probably some miles distant to the south. See also: *Final Report of the United States DeSoto Expedition Commission*, House Document 71, 76th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939).

²Thomas M. Owen, *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography* (Chicago: The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1921), I, 188, hereafter cited as Owen, *History of Alabama*.

³Pickett, *History of Alabama*, 81, and Verner W. Crane, *The Southern Frontier 1670-1732* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2d Printing, Ann Arbor Paper backs, 1959), 134-136, *passim*. Bogue Chitto Creek in western Dallas County is said to have been the eastern boundary of the Choctaw tribe. William A. Read, *Indian Place-Names in Alabama* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1957), xi.

Following the defeat of the "Red Sticks" at Horseshoe Bend in March 1814, the lands in the Alabama River Valley were at last substantially cleared to white settlement, but for a long time before this there was probably no Indian Village at the mouth of the Cahaba, and indeed, no community whatsoever.⁴

One James White reportedly settled at the location in 1816 and for a time it was called "White's Bluff." The second white settler in the vicinity is said to have been Lorenzo Roberts. Both were probably squatters.⁵

Upon the admission of Mississippi as a state, the eastern portion of the old Mississippi Territory was formed by the Congress into the Alabama Territory on March 3, 1817, with St. Stephens on the Tombigbee as its seat of government. The first Governor of the Alabama Territory appointed by President Madison was Dr. William Wyatt Bibb of Georgia, who besides having represented Georgia in the U. S. House of Representatives and Senate, was a close personal and political friend of William H. Crawford of Georgia, then the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States.⁶

By 1817, the Warrior-Tombigbee and Alabama-Cahaba river valleys were being entered by an increasing stream of new settlers, but Madison County in the Tennessee Valley still had by far the densest population in the Territory. Far to the southwest in Mobile County, Baldwin County, and in the Tombigbee settlements were the only other established white communities in the whole Territory.⁷

⁴William H. Brantley, *Three Capitals, A Book About the First Three Capitals of Alabama, St. Stephens, Huntsville and Cahawba*, (Boston: The Merrymont Press, 1947), 225, hereafter cited as *Three Capitals*.

⁵Walter M. Jackson, *The Story of Selma* (Birmingham, Ala.: The Birmingham Printing Company, 1954), 5, quoting Edgefield in *Dallas Gazette*, February 24, 1854, hereafter cited as *The Story of Selma*.

⁶Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 23.

⁷William Garrott Brown, *A History of Alabama* (New York and New Orleans: University Publishing Company, 1902), 125.

Dallas County (along with 12 other counties) was created by the first session of the Territorial Assembly which convened at St. Stephens January 19, 1818, and the "mouth of the Cahawba" was designated as the County seat.⁸ The first records of the Orphan's Court of the County show that the Worshipful Roderick McLeod, Chief Justice, met with the justices of the quorum on June 8, 1818 at the home of Capt. John Howard "near the mouth of the Cahawba." The Court's business at this session was to probate the will of one Reuben White, deceased. The fact that John Howard's house was "near the mouth of the Cahawba" tends to support the assertion that no settlers resided at the site at this time, doubtless because lands there had been withheld from sale by the Federal Government.⁹

The Territorial Assembly at the same session in St. Stephens enacted a law authorizing five named Commissioners of the Assembly under the chairmanship of Clement C. Clay of Madison County "to examine and report to the Governor the most eligible Scite for the Seat of Territorial Government." Brantley reports there were two contending factions which tried to control the selection of the capital site. Classified generally, they could be called the Alabama-Cahaba River basins group and the Warrior-Tombigbee River system group. The powerful Tennessee Valley section leaned towards an alliance with the Warrior-Tombigbee faction because of a somewhat closer community of interest and better natural conditions for communication and transportation. The Tennessee Valley although then the most populous area of the Territory was generally deemed by "the public men" to be too far from the geographic center of the Territory to press its claim for the permanent capital site, but its political power was courted by both contending factions. It appears that the commission appointed by the Assembly to recommend a capital site was dominated by Warrior-Tombigbee supporters and this fact apparently was not lost on Governor William Wyatt Bibb.¹⁰

⁸Harry Toulmin, *A Digest of the Laws of the State of Alabama* (Cahawba: Ginn and Curtis, 1823), 88; hereafter cited as *Digest*. The act was passed at the first session of the Territorial Assembly, February 9, 1818.

⁹Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 225.

¹⁰*ibid.*, 27, 31.

The first session of the Territorial Assembly at St. Stephens adjourned on February 18, 1818. The commission, as directed by the Assembly, must have viewed several sites during the ensuing spring months and it reported in due course to Governor Bibb that Tuscaloosa on the Warrior was its choice. Governor Bibb, however, had other plans. He now resided on a large plantation near Coosada in what was then Autauga County, on the Alabama river, and he had become a dedicated Alabama-Cahaba basin partisan. As we have already seen, William Wyatt Bibb, particularly through his old Georgia colleague William H. Crawford, now Secretary of the Treasury, had powerful connections in Washington, and having himself determined to locate the capital at "the mouth of the Cahawba," he arranged for a free grant from the federal government to the Territory of a section of land at the Cahaba location.¹¹ His decision in disregard of the Commission's report was apparently not known, nor communicated to the Assembly until he made a masterful report to this body when it convened again at St. Stephens for its second Session in November, 1818.¹² Undoubtedly the surprise of the Governor's maneuver, the prospect of the free land grant from the National Government, and the disinclination on the part of many Assemblymen to fight the able and powerful Governor who then held a veto power with respect to the capital site location, caused the Assembly to pass an act establishing the Seat of government "permanently" at the town of "Cahawba." As will be seen, however, the Tuscaloosa supporters although out-manuevered in this round, were numerous, were resourceful and were determined that Cahaba should not become the "permanent" capital of the territory or State.

With the hind-sight of 151 years, we pause to speculate as to why Governor Bibb should ever have selected Cahaba as the Capital site in preference to other locations.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 31-35.

¹²*Ibid.*, 31 ff. Brantley suggests that Governor Bibb ignored, and did what he could to suppress, the Commission's report which favored Tuscaloosa. This, says Brantley, probably accounts for Owen's error (*History of Alabama*, I, 186) in stating the Commissioners chose Cahawba.

Firstly, in Bibb's own language, it was on a river ". . . capable of being navigated by boats of great burthen."¹³ Steamboats had already been operating on the Hudson River in New York for over ten years;¹⁴ rivers were then the arteries of trade and commerce, and steam navigation, "the wave of the future."

Secondly, at the time, nearly a quarter of the whole Alabama Territory (in what could be loosely called east Alabama) comprised the Creek and Cherokee Lands, and thus Cahaba, though slightly south of the geographic center of the Territory, came reasonably close to meeting this qualification.¹⁵

Thirdly, as Bibb himself urged, the lands around Cahaba constituted ". . . an extensive and fertile back country on the Alabama and Cahawba and their tributary streams . . ." and this promised well for its future, permanent population, and from all known indications of the time, Bibb could reasonably speculate that it would some day be close to the population center of the Territory or State.¹⁶

Fourthly, Bibb with his keen political instinct probably knew that if "the mouth of the Cahawba" were selected, not only would the legislative delegates from Counties on the Alabama River support the site but the Counties up-river in the Cahaba Valley would tend also to fall in line. These Cahaba Valley Counties, some seven years later, included Perry, Bibb, Shelby, St. Clair and Jefferson. If Governor Bibb had picked a location up-river on the Alabama (from the mouth of the Cahawba), like Selma, Statesville or Montgomery, such locations might not attract the Cahaba Valley vote if the question of capital removal should later become an issue.

¹³*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁴By 1807 Robert Fulton had constructed the *Clermont* on the Hudson River.

¹⁵Among other things, the Act appointing the Commissioners provided that the most eligible site for the Territorial Government should be, ". . . as near the centre of the Territory as may be, having due regard to commercial advantages, and the nature and situation of the country; . . ." *Acts, 1818*, 94, and see Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 26 n.

¹⁶Bibb's written report to the Territorial Assembly made November 8, 1818, is set out *in extenso* in Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 32-35.

Fifthly, no land patents had yet been issued by the Federal Government at "the mouth of the Cahawba". This, of course, was not true at most other competing locations which already had settlements. The Cahaba location therefore offered the prospect of a free grant of land to the State for a capital site, and thus the chance to sell lots and enrich the State's Treasury.¹⁷

Finally, Bibb probably viewed the location at a time of low or normal water in both streams. At such times the bluff on the west bank of the Alabama appears high and virtually insurmountable by any conceivable high water. Bibb also probably did not appreciate the potential flood capability of the normally placid Cahaba river which virtually girdles half the town site. As lowland residents of this area now know, when the Alabama is close to flood crest, her tributary creeks and rivers cannot discharge their water burden, and the raging Alabama acts like a dam or wall in causing such streams as the Cahaba to overflow and flood for miles up-river from their mouths. This, we suspect was the town of Cahaba's peculiar misfortune. Her trouble from inundations in the capital period probably came not from direct over-flow of her bluff from the Alabama River but from Cahaba River back-water flowing in upon the town from several possible directions.¹⁸

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 170-71. Brantley suggests, *arguendo*, that during these years ". . . the floods at Cahawba were more powerful and effective politically than they were naturally." Brantley quotes Mr. Robbie D. Sturdivant of Dallas County as reporting about 1947 that only once in Mr. Sturdivant's long memory did the Alabama River itself cover the bluff at Cahaba where the capitol once stood, this being in the year 1916. Gaging-station records maintained for the Alabama River at Selma, some fifteen miles up-river from Cahaba show the gage height in feet of the 1916 river peak to have been 53.9 feet at Selma. Years in which this 1916 gage height have been exceeded at Selma include 1886, 1892, 1919, 1929, 1938, 1948, and 1961. Flood waters are, of course, unpredictable, but it can be reasonably argued that the Alabama River itself probably flooded the bluff at Cahaba where the State capitol once stood some eight times from 1886 to 1969, a period of some 83 years. U. S. Geological Survey, "Floods in Alabama—Magnitude and Frequency," Circular 342 (Washington D. C., United States Department of Interior, 1954), 71, as up-dated from records compiled and maintained by Lewie R. Crisman, Alabama Registered Land Surveyor, Selma, Alabama.

The Assembly at St. Stephens, after naming Huntsville as the temporary capital, then empowered the Governor to accept on behalf of the Territory the appropriate land grant at "the mouth of the Cahawba" from the United States and to serve as Commissioner with power to lay off on such plan as he deemed most suitable, a "Town at Cahawba." The Governor was also instructed to sell lots in the town to the highest bidders and from the proceeds thus obtained to cause to be erected a building suitable for "the temporary accomodation" of the General Assembly of the Territory or State. The Act expressly provided that the Governor could not spend in excess of \$10,000.00 to erect the State House building at Cahaba.¹⁹

The rather niggardly limitation on the cost of the State House coupled with the action of the Assembly in specifying that the new temporary capital should be Huntsville were, at the time, to Alabama basin people "clouds no bigger than a man's hand." Governor Bibb had got the capital at Cahaba and optimism and exhuberance in this section ran high.

Even before Cahaba's selection as the capital many of the best tracts of land near the Alabama River had been sold at public auction from the land office at Milledgeville, Georgia, the first auction covering some lands in this area having been held there in early August, 1817.²⁰ After the first Seminole war in May, 1818, in which General Jackson defied Spain and occupied Pensacola, the remnants of the Creek Indians not already on the Creek lands in East Alabama departed Central and South Alabama, finally removing lingering fear of hostile Indian attack in this area. Settlers now began to pour into the Territory.²¹

The population of the Alabama Territory now greatly exceeding the 60,000 specified in the Act as a pre-requisite for admission as a State, Congress on March 2, 1819, authorized the

¹⁹Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 38.

²⁰Frances C. Roberts, "Politics and Public Land Disposal in Alabama's Formative Period," *The Alabama Review* (July, 1969), 171 ff.

²¹Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 28.

Territory to draft a state Constitution, and the Constitutional Convention assembled in the temporary capital, Huntsville, from July 5th to August 2nd, 1819. There were 44 delegates to this Convention representing the then 22 counties. The work of drafting was entrusted to a "committee of fifteen."²² This "committee of fifteen" which included William Rufus King of Dallas County, was probably dominated by the pro-Tuskaloosa faction led by Clement C. Clay of Madison, who will be remembered as the chairman of the Assembly's old commission which selected Tuskaloosa in preference to Cahaba as the capital. Clay's designs upon Governor Bibb and Cahaba are apparent in Article III Section 29 of the Constitution as drafted and finally passed. It read:

The first session of the General Assembly shall commence on the fourth Monday in October next, to be held in the town of Huntsville, and all subsequent sessions of the General Assembly to be held in the year eighteen hundred and twenty-five; during that session the General Assembly shall have the power to designate by law (to which the executive concurrence shall not be required) the permanent Seat of Government, which shall not thereafter be changed; provided, however, that unless such designation be then made by law, the government shall continue permanently at the town of Cahawba.²³

No minutes or other records have survived concerning the deliberations of the "Committee of Fifteen," but the maneuvering and "in-fighting" between the pro-Cahaba and pro-Tuskaloosa factions must have been prolonged and the final committee vote, close, before the particular provision on the capital was reported out to the convention floor. North Alabama having a clear majority of the Convention delegates, the draft comfortably

²²See generally, A. B. Moore, *History of Alabama and Her People* (Chicago and New York; The American Historical Society, Inc. 1927), I, 137 ff, hereafter cited as Moore, *History of Alabama*; Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 44 ff.

²³Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 45, 46; Toulmin, *Digest*, 921.

passed when it reached the floor of the convention and thus became embedded in our first Constitution.²¹ Not only was this provision repugnant to the Act of the Territorial legislature which made Cahaba the permanent capital of the Territory or State, but it expressly took away from the Governor the power of veto on the question of removal of the capital.

If further evidence of the over-riding political importance of the "capital fight" is needed, we have only to look at the territory-wide vote held in the general election for governor of the prospective new state in September, 1819. Marmaduke Williams of Tuscaloosa, then relatively unknown in Alabama, ran against Governor Bibb as a protest candidate on account of Bibb's high-handed action in locating the Seat of Government at Cahaba. Williams polled some 7185 votes as opposed to William Wyatt Bibb's 8336, and significantly, an analysis of the County returns shows that Williams' strength closely followed the Tombigbee-Warrior River System, while Bibb carried the counties drained by the Alabama and Cahaba Rivers.²⁵ The polarization between the Dallas County and Tuscaloosa County vote on these two candidates is reported as follows:

	Bibb	Williams	Total
Dallas	647	115	760
Tuscaloosa	123	824	947 ²⁶

Bibb, despite the surprisingly close margin, was declared the elected Governor, and Alabama was duly admitted to the Union December 14, 1819.²⁷ Her two United States Senators chosen by the first Session of the General Assembly in Huntsville were John Williams Walker of Madison and William Rufus King of Dallas County.²⁸ Alabama's first and single United States

²⁴Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 45.

²⁵Moore, *History of Alabama*, I, 146.

²⁶Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 52-53. Perhaps because of his political connections through "the Georgia faction," Bibb did manage to win by a narrow margin in Madison County, and by a larger margin in Limestone, the home county of his brother, Thomas Bibb.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 53.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 50.

Representative was John Crowell formerly of St. Stephens, but who had removed to Cahaba, Dallas County before his election to Congress.²⁹

Even before the State Constitutional Convention assembled at Huntsville, Territorial Governor Bibb had worked unremittingly on Cahaba's behalf. He managed to get the federal land grant for the capital increased from the one section, or 640 acres, originally obtained, to 1620 acres, including some acreage on the east side of the Alabama River.³⁰ His survey for the Town of Cahaba was drawn by Messrs. Willis Roberts and Benjamin Clements and their handsome symmetrical town plan is said to have been influenced by the plan of Philadelphia.³¹ As early as March 3, 1819, we find the Congress passing an Act establishing a post road from St. Stephens to Cahaba and this too, we suspect, was a result of Governor Bibb's efforts on behalf of Cahaba.³²

In May 1819 the first town lots at Cahaba were thrown open for sale.³³ At about the same time the land office in Milledgeville, Georgia, had been removed to Cahaba. Walter M. Jackson, reporting on the auction sales of these town lots quotes an old settler as saying:

. . . It was a perfect harvest for the tavern keepers, merchants and liquor sellers . . . for as soon as it was known that the Seat of Government was to be located there, the inhabitants from the surrounding country poured in like bees setting on a limb where they found the queen had pitched her quarters³⁴

²⁹*Biographical Directory of American Congress 1774-1949* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950, 1038; Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 10, 11.)

³⁰Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 61.

³¹*Ibid.*, 63.

³²Owen, *History of Alabama*, II, 1136.

³³Brantley. *Three Capitals*, 63.

³⁴Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 6.

Governor Bibb himself attended these May auction sales and proudly reported to the Assembly in Huntsville in the fall of that year (1819) that the auctioneers had sold one hundred eighty-two lots in "the Town of Cahawba" for the sum of \$123,856.00 of which sum, \$30,964.00 was paid in cash. Auctioneers Willis Roberts and Benjamin Clements earned their fee of \$730.00 which the Governor paid them.³⁵

It must be remembered that the Territory's Treasury was without funds when the town lot sales began and the total sum bid at these first auction sales seemed to promise well for the future. The prices of certain individual lots undoubtedly reflected the spirited bidding, and at least two choice lots brought \$5000.00, or more, apiece.³⁶ Buyers at this and later auctions reflected names of people already prominent in the Territory's affairs including quite a few of Governor Bibb's well-placed friends of the so-called "Georgia faction" who had already obtained extensive land grants both in the Tennessee Valley and in the Alabama River area.³⁷

Even before these lot sales were held, the Governor had made plans for the building of the State House, and after advertising for bids in the *Halcyon and Tombeckbe Advertiser* printed in St. Stephens, April 15, 1819, the contract for the erection of the first capitol building was awarded to David and Nicholas Crocheron of Dallas County for the sum of \$9000.00. Although some confusion at one time existed as to the exact location of the old capitol building, research has definitely established that the building was located on Lot 125 at the southwest intersection of Capitol Avenue and Vine Street. The building itself faced Vine Street and the Alabama River.³⁸

³⁵Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 63.

³⁶Jackson, *The Story of Selma*, 6-7.

³⁷*Ibid.* Purchasers of Cahaba town lots listed by W. M. Jackson include such prominent names as Reuben Saffold, Uriah G. Mitchell, Samuel Dale, Jesse Beene, William Rufus King, John Crowell, Thomas Bibb, Israel Pickens, Gabriel Moore, Clement C. Clay, and Henry H. Hitchcock.

³⁸Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 35.

Contemporary records afford us no photographs or reproductions of the capitol building but from the published advertisement for bids, we are able to reconstruct an image of our first state capitol:

. . . The building to be two story, fifty-eight feet long and forty-three feet wide; each story to be twelve feet in the clear. The interior to be divided above and below stairs by a passage fourteen feet wide, on one side of which shall be one room the whole width of the house, and on the other, two rooms. Two chimnies and eight windows are to be provided at each end and twelve windows on each front of the building; each window to be twenty-four lights, 8 x 10. The outer walls to be commenced two feet below the surface of the earth, and to be two brick and half thick to the first floor (which must be three feet above the surface of the earth), and from thence two brick. The inner wall dividing the apartments to be one brick and a half thick, and each apartment to be plastered and white-washed. The shingles are to be of cypress or heart pine. Doors, stairs and the like to be included in the contract³⁹

Activity must have been frenzied at Cahaba during the years 1819-1820. The new town had been chartered by the Act of the Assembly at Huntsville on December 3, 1819, and an election was held at Cahaba January 1820 to choose seven Councilmen.⁴⁰ By May of 1820, the five Circuit Judges of the New State convened as required by law at Cahaba in the house of William Pye, and organized the Supreme Court which there held its first term⁴¹ As already seen, the federal land office had been transferred from Milledgeville, and as the Crocheron brothers pushed forward completion of the State House, Cahaba must have presented a bustling, if disorderly, appearance. Owen tells us, "It became at once a thriving business and an attractive social center".⁴²

³⁹*Ibid.*, 63-65.

⁴⁰Toulmin, *Digest*, 817-19.

⁴¹Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 70.

⁴²Owen, *History of Alabama*, I, 186.

A report by David Moore, State Comptroller, printed in the *Huntsville Republican* of March 2, 1821, tabulates statistics for the State on a county-by-county basis apparently for the year ending 1819. This quaint compilation from Tax Assessment records showed that Dallas County reported \$96,819.00 in sales of merchandise in 1819, already had 1225 taxable slaves, had "Pleasure Carriages" of an assessed value of \$5060.00, counted some eight attorneys and five physicians, and reportedly had 19 gold watches, 65 silver watches and 8 clocks among its populace. Dallas Countians acknowledged owning for tax purposes 23 saddle and carriage horses, but no race horses. The dollar amount of personal property assessed in the County came to \$3207.53. Since Alabamians in 1819 were probably as reluctant as Alabamians are now to declare to the Tax Assessor the true extent and value of their personal property, many of these entries are probably conservative. As modest as the figures are, they do reflect the surge forward of Dallas County, the location of the new State capital, as compared with other and some older counties. Only Madison of the 26 counties in the tabulation reflected a higher total amount assessed for the year, and the figures for Dallas County in most categories would seem to place her already among the front rank of Alabama counties.⁴³

The United States census of 1820 showed that by that time, Dallas County, the home of the new State Capital, had a population of some 6000 people composed of 3324 whites and 2679 negroes.⁴⁴ Only 15 miles upstream from Cahaba a land company under the leadership of the State's distinguished Senator, William Rufus King, was achieving success in promoting the new Town of Selma which was chartered by the Assembly as a Town in 1820, this being only a year after Cahaba itself was chartered.⁴⁵

⁴³*Huntsville Republican*, March 2, 1821.

⁴⁴John Hardy, *Selma: Her Institutions and Her Men* (Selma, Ala. Times Book and Job Office, 1879), 6, where tabulations are given of Dallas County population by race for the decennial censuses 1820-1870, inclusive; hereafter cited as Hardy, *Selma*.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 7-8. Date of passage of Act incorporating "Town of Selma" is reported as Dec. 4, 1820, Toulmin, *Digest*, 832.

In the midst of all the bustle and high hopes for the new capital city, it received a staggering blow when Governor William Wyatt Bibb fell from his horse and died suddenly in July, 1820. In his fortieth year at the time, he had been Cahaba's most effective promoter, planner, champion, and defender. Without his political power, industry, and skill a bright future for the new capital seemed considerably diminished. Bibb's sudden death, combining perhaps with a tight money situation, the earlier sales of the most desirable lots, and other factors, caused the sale of an additional 191 lots in November, 1820, to bring only \$21,727.00.⁴⁶

Activity at the new town continued however in preparation for the first meeting of the Assembly there on November 6, 1820. Indications are that a number of inns or taverns already existed; there were doubtless several boarding houses; a regular ferry across the Cahaba River and one across the Alabama River was already in operation;⁴⁷ a number of merchants had set up, or were building, rather commodious stores;⁴⁸ there were doubtless artisans, small tradesmen, several physicians, probably at least eight lawyers;⁴⁹ and two weekly newspapers had already begun publication.⁵⁰ Of course we surmise home-building was proceeding apace in the new community, but indications are that few of the pretentious mansions of the later period had yet been built.

⁴⁶Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 71.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 225 shows that the Commissioner's Court of Dallas County granted John Howard a license to keep a tavern, April, 1818, and at the same session established "rates for taverns."

⁴⁸Among earlier merchants whose firm names have been obtained from press notices, or other sources, were J. and I. Crocheron, later J. J. Crocheron, Henderson, Lowery and Company, Thos. H. Wiley and Co., and Trevis & McGimpsey.

⁴⁹Artisans included blacksmiths, carpenters, hostlers, hatters, etc.; the figures for physicians and lawyers is from the number for Dallas County, 1819, *Huntsville Republican*, March 2, 1821.

⁵⁰Jackson, *Story of Selma*, 9, reports the newspapers as the *Alabama Watchman* and the *Cahaba Press*. Probably the full title of the latter was *Cahawba Press and Alabama State Intelligencer*. See *Alabama, A Guide to the Deep South*, American Guide Series, (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1941), hereafter cited as *American Guide Series*.

The new Acting Governor, Thomas Bibb of Limestone County, a brother to William Wyatt Bibb, reported to the convened Assembly in November 1820 on the State House contract, and after considerable debate and reference to a Committee, the Crocherons were finally paid additional compensation for their work. This caused the State House, exclusive of the shutters, fence and furnishings, to cost \$13,500 instead of \$10,000 originally authorized.⁵¹ The 1820 session of the Assembly also created the Bank of the State of Alabama with a \$2,000,000.00 capital. By law the bank was located at Cahaba, subject to be removed from that place "whenever the Seat of Government shall be changed." Due to a failure of the public to subscribe the necessary capital, this first plan to put the state into the banking business failed,⁵² although later, at the regular session of the Assembly in 1823 the Bank of the State of Alabama was established, and it operated successfully from Cahaba until the Seat of Government was removed to Tuscaloosa.⁵³

At this same 1820 session a lottery was authorized by the Assembly for the purpose of raising a fund not in excess of \$20,000.00 for building and furnishing of the Masonic Hall of Halo Lodge in Cahaba.⁵⁴ The lottery must have been a success, for we are told the Masonic Hall was completed in time for General Lafayette's visit to Cahaba in 1825.⁵⁵ It probably was the most pretentious structure of early Cahaba, and was located at the south-west corner of Vine and 1st North Street. Years later following Cahaba's final decline, the brick and other materials from Halo Lodge were carted to Selma, and in one of history's mild ironies, were used in the construction of the Roman Catholic parish hall there about 1883.⁵⁶

⁵¹Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 82.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 80.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 130.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 81.

⁵⁵Thomas McAdory Owen, *Annals of Alabama, 1819-1900*, printed as supplement to Pickett, *History of Alabama*, 678.

⁵⁶Selma and Dallas County Sesquicentennial Committee, *150 Years, Selma and Dallas County* (Selma: Selma Printing Service, 1969), 8.

There was great and fierce acrimony between the two river basin factions in 1820 and 1821 over new reappointment of the Senate demanded by Acting Governor Bibb, but Cahaba supporters were able to frustrate these efforts in order to buy time.⁵⁷ One near contemporary account from a Montgomery newspaper acknowledges that Cahaba had in 1821, one thousand people, while early in the same year Montgomery's population was said to be "about 600."⁵⁸ Only Huntsville among the State's communities probably decidedly exceeded Cahaba in population and the urban amenities. Mobile by now was enjoying a renaissance, but was not much larger than the State capital. The only other communities in the State approaching Cahaba in size and importance were Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, Claiborne and Florence.⁵⁹ At a somewhat later period Selma and Demopolis might be added.

When Governor William Wyatt Bibb recommended to the Territorial Assembly at St. Stephens in November, 1818, the location of the capital at "the mouth of the Cahawba," he specifically stated that he had examined the location. In his message, he had reported, among other things ". . . The bluff on the west side of those rivers presents a beautiful scite, with springs of good water and the prospect of health."⁶⁰ Nothing but the usual health problems apparently confronted the growing community until the summers of 1821 and 1822. There had been heavy rains in the Spring of each of these years, ". . . with the rivers swollen in an unprecedented manner," and apparently in each of these successive years, there followed in July further heavy rains and consequent flooding. The town itself was probably not completely inundated by the waters, but as a consequence of the high waters in the area there was in each summer an out-break of what Dr. Jabez Heustiss, a Cahaba physician, has described as "the bilious remitting fever."

⁵⁷Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 83-88.

⁵⁸Thomas H. Clark, "Montgomery," *Northern Alabama Illustrated* (Chicago, 1888), 579, 584, hereafter cited as *Northern Alabama*.

⁵⁹*American Guide Series*, 47.

⁶⁰Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 32-35.

Although Dr. Heustiss connected the fevers with heat and moisture rather than with mosquitos, he concluded the sickness was the dread yellow fever. William H. Brantley tells us that many citizens left the town and remained away until frost.⁶¹

Governor William Wyatt Bibb in urging Cahaba's selection as the capital, after lauding its other attractions, remarked its situation ". . . on a river capable of being navigated by boats of great burthen" ⁶² At that time only canoes and an occasional flat boat or keel boat had tested the great river's capability. Most Alabama historians leave the impression that the *Harriet*, in October, 1821, was the first steam-boat to navigate the Alabama up-river from Mobile.⁶³ She may indeed have been the first steam vessel to make the trip from Mobile to Montgomery and return, but Doy L. McCall of Monroeville has in his valuable collection a bill of lading date the 25th of day of May, 1820, which discloses that Bob Mattocks, Master of the Steam-boat *Tensas* took aboard at Claiborne "3 chairs" to be delivered at the port of Cahaba, "unto Sam'l Pickens." The freight bill was 75¢ per chair.⁶⁴ This evidence indicates rather clearly that Cahaba saw her first steam boat some seventeen months before the arrival of the *Harriet* at the foot of Arch Street, and the *Tensas* may thus have been the first steam vessel to navigate on the Alabama River. Certainly, the widely publicized trip of the *Harriet* from Mobile via Claiborne, Cahaba, and Selma to Montgomery, and her safe return down-river to Mobile, signalled the dawn of a new era in the fast-developing state.⁶⁵

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 89.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 34.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 89, and see Owen, *History of Alabama*, II, 1270; Moore, *History of Alabama*, I, 365.

⁶⁴Bert Neville, *A Glance at Old Cahawba* (Selma, Ala.: Selma Printing Service, 1961), where a reproduction of the bill of lading is set out; also, personally corroborated by Doy L. McCall with the author of this paper.

⁶⁵Moore, *History of Alabama*, I, 364-66.

Times were hard in the State and money was tight as the end of 1821 approached. Very little money was in the State Treasury, the new State had not yet established any credit, and the three private banks were weak, and had been mismanaged. Since these banks, particularly the one at Huntsville, were identified with the "Georgia faction," the voters rejected its candidate, Dr. Henry Chambers of Madison County, and elected Israel Pickens of Washington County as the new Governor. Pickens was sworn into office before both houses of the Assembly in the new State House on November 9, 1821. Although it later became clear that Pickens was against removal of the capital from Cahaba, "capital removal" had not been an issue in the campaign.⁶⁶

Economic conditions slowly improved in the State in 1822 and Cahaba was cheered during August by the arrival of two new steamers up from Mobile. A good cotton crop on the newly-cleared lands around Cahaba also proved encouraging, and Governor Pickens reported to the Assembly that "the Twenty lots advertised to be sold on the east side of the Alabama, within the limits of Cahawba, have been laid off and sold accordingly."⁶⁷

A notable achievement in Cahaba and State annals was the publication in 1822 of *The Alabama Justice of the Peace*, a text book and form book on Alabama law compiled by Henry Hitchcock, Esq., Attorney General. The law book consists of 495 pages and the fly-leaf announces proudly:

Cahawba: Published by William B. Allen and for sale at the Book-Store of Ginn & Curtis. 1822.⁶⁸

Judge Harry Toulmin's famous *Digest of the Laws of Alabama* was compiled in part by that eminent judge in Cahaba, and though printed in New York, was published at Cahaba, a year after Judge Toulmin's death in 1823.⁶⁹

⁶⁶Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 122.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 108, 111.

⁶⁸Hitchcock's compilation is in the personal library of B. V. Hain, Selma, Ala., attorney, and has been examined by the author. See also, Jackson, *Story of Selma*, 11.

⁶⁹Brantley, *Three Capitals*, 120.

During this period in the State's early history Cahaba was a frontier town sharing many of the crudities common to this brawling era. It was, however, a frontier town with a difference. It was the state capital, the focus of the political and of most of the social life of the entire state. Though an inland town, it had not only access to the world through increasing river traffic, but post roads and regular stages had begun to run not only to St. Stephens and thence westward to Natchez, but also to Claiborne, and to Tuskalooosa.⁷⁰ Moreover, the seemingly insatiable demand for American cotton from the mills of Lancashire and New England, plus the introduction of the improved Mexican variety of cotton, made it profitable to open up the rich bottom-lands and the rolling prairie near Cahaba for extensive cotton culture.⁷¹ Well-to-do planters with their slaves from the seaboard states settled on both sides of the Alabama and the Cahaba rivers, and Cahaba became their entrepot and market town. Here the mail came by stage and steamer, from here cotton was shipped, and here were located the warehouses, the merchants, slave traders, factors, and artisans, as well as the doctors, the lawyers, and the federal and state courts. Here were published at least two newspapers, here was the land office, here for a time was the State bank, here, or near here, were held the camp meetings and earliest religious services of the area, and, to and through Cahaba came many of the restless migrants bent upon making their fame and fortune in the old southwest.

To Cahaba also came America's most distinguished visitor of the period, General Lafayette. LeVasseur, who accompanied the General on his triumphal visit to the Southwest, reports on the voyage down-stream from Montgomery as follows:

. . . It is difficult to imagine anything more romantic than the elevated, gravelly and, often times wooded shores of the Alabama We stopped one day at Cahawba where the officers of the government of the State of Alabama, had

⁷⁰Owen, *History of Alabama*, II, 1136 ff.

⁷¹*American Guide Series*, 75-76; *The South in the Building of the Nation*, James C. Ballagh, ed. (Richmond: 1909) V, 203-209, *passim*.

in concert with the citizens, prepared entertainments for General Lafayette, as remarkable for their elegance and good taste, as touching by their cordiality and the feelings of which they were the expression. Among the guests with whom we sat down to dinner we found some countrymen whom political events had driven from France They now lived in a small town they had founded in Alabama to which they had given the name Gallopolis [Demopolis] I would judge they were not in a state of great prosperity. I believe their European prejudices and their inexperience in commerce and agriculture will prevent them from being formidable rivals of the Americans for a length of time.

Cahawba, the seat of government, is a flourishing town whose population, although as yet small, promises to increase rapidly from its admirable situation at the confluence of the Cahawba and Alabama

Separating fact from fiction is next to impossible in a matter so momentous as Lafayette's visit, but A. B. Moore reports:⁷³

Lafayette spent a week in Alabama and traveled five hundred miles within its borders. His presence appealed powerfully to the people's imagination. Some persons traveled two to four hundred miles to see him and to have a part in his entertainment, and everywhere by speech and deed the people exhibited tender emotions toward him. New-born babes were named for him, and distinguished speakers and hearers, . . . ordinarily dry-faced, wept like so many children. His sojourn was very stimulating to the people of the young State, calling to mind memories of the sacred past and giving them a keener appreciation of the importance of their new State. With not a regret the State spent more than \$17,000 upon his entertainment, and, besides, personal expenses were incurred by admiring and generous citizens. It was enough that he had come and that he had left his benediction upon their young State.⁷²

⁷²Lucille Griffith, *History of Alabama, 1540-1900 as Recorded in Diaries, Letters and Papers of the Times* (Northport, Ala.: Colonial Press, 1962), 162-164, being an excerpt from Auguste Levasseur's *Lafayette in America in 1824 and 1825 etc.*, (Phila., 1829), II, 75 ff.