The History of Jackson County

Settlement of this area began in 1784 with a small group of Revolutionary War veterans and other pioneers who ventured into the newly ceded lands of Franklin County. The first permanent communities were on Sandy Creek at Groaning Rock, Yamacutah (near present-day Commerce), Hurricane Shoals, and in 1786 on the Middle Oconee River near the Tallassee Shoals. The population had swelled to 350 by the time the county was formed by legislative act to February 1796.

Named for Revolutionary patriot and Georgia statesman James Jackson, the county originally covered 1800 square miles. However, from 1801 until 1914 portions were taken to form parts of the present counties of Clarke, Oconee, Madison, Gwinnett, Hall, Walton, Banks, and Barrow. Jackson County today contains only 337 square miles.

Jackson County experienced steady growth throughout the 19th century, largely due to the railroads that intersected the area. Of the ten municipalities incorporated by 1920, seven defined their boundaries from the depot. Of these, Harmony Grove became one of the leading distribution centers of northeast Georgia due to the railroad. The town was prospering so well that in 1904, the citizens changed the name to Commerce, "to better reflect the commercial air of a city."

Rail service began for Jackson County in the 1870s with the construction of the Northeast Railroad through Commerce, Nicholson, and Center. By 1883 the forerunner of the Gainesville Midland line was moving passengers and freight from Jefferson to Gainesville, Georgia. These steam-driven locomotives, and passenger services in the county were phased out by 1960. Within a decade, the opening of Interstate 85 signaled an accessibility for new industry and homes.

By 1801, the settlement at Hurricane Shoals included homes, a church, a grist mill, a small iron foundry, and the first school in Jackson County. Records exist for as many as 247 schools in the county's history. Perhaps the most well-known was Jefferson's Martin Institute, begun in 1818 as Jackson County Academy. Renowned for the quality education it provided. Martin Institute was possibly the nation's first privately endowed school, having received a legacy from William Duncan Martin in 1854.

Jackson County can boast of being the home of the University of Georgia, as the site chosen was on county land and classes began before Clarke County was officially created in 1801. Another notable education first was Harmony Grove Female Academy, the first school for girls chartered in the state in 1824.

Poultry production in Georgia began in 1924 when M. E. Murphy of Talmo, in Jackson County, started growing broilers on a large scale basis. Jackson Countians have moved to the forefront in this enterprise, continually ranking in the top five counties in broiler and egg production. The county also ranks near the top in beef cattle numbers and livestock income in the state. Georgia's oldest registered Angus cattle herd was begun in the 1930's by Jackson Countian Jimmy Johnson.

Among the many county residents who have made a substantial contribution to state government, three names stand out: Dr. Lamartine C. Hardman, John N. Holder, and Lauren "Bubba" McDonald. Dr. Lamartine C. Hardman of Commerce, who began the areas first clinic in 1899, served as Governor for two terms from 1927 to 1931. To win the office Hardman defeated another prominent Jackson County citizen, John N. Holder of Jefferson. Twice Speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives and for many years chairman of the State Highway Board, Holder was also editor and publisher of The Jackson Herald for almost seventy years. A graduate of Commerce High School and the University of Georgia, Bubba McDonald served 20 years in the Georgia legislature representing parts of Barrow and Banks counties and all of Jackson County.
One of the most notable people for the County is Crawford W. Long. He is the first doctor that used ether as an anesthetic. He was studying medicine in Jefferson when this discovery of anesthesia was discovered. Today, off the square in Jefferson, is the Crawford W. Long Museum which personal artifacts and documents highlighting the life of Dr. Long, as well as early anesthesia equipment are displayed. The museum is housed in the building known as the Pendergrass Store Building. At the museum you will see a recreated 1840s doctor’s office and apothecary shop. Exhibits on making medicine focus on the obstacles the early country doctor was forced to overcome. A statue of Crawford Long can be found in the nation’s Capitol in Washington, D.C.

The Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm is another historical museum that serves as an educational and interpretative facility in Jackson County. The Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm Foundation, Inc. was created in 1994 as a non-profit organization established to preserve the existing buildings on the 152 acres. The Foundation's Board of Directors is represented by members of the Ethridge family. It is unusual to find such a collection of intact historic buildings that exist in their original location. The mission of the Shields-Ethridge Farm is: "To provide and operate an educational and interpretative outdoor museum that uses historic preservation to increase awareness and understanding of Georgia's agricultural and natural history."

Hurricane Shoals is now a county park with a heritage village maintained by the non-profit Tumbling Waters Society, Sells Mill Park has a beautiful grist mill that provides visitors with another glimpse of the past.

So come visit us in Jackson County -- spacious, gracious, vibrant!

Commerce Mainstreet (www.commercega.org)
Jackson County Historical Society
Commerce Library 706/335-5946
Jefferson Better Hometowns (www.crawfordlong.com)
Shields Etheridge Farms (www.shieldsethridgefarm.org)