

The Founding of Henderson and Rusk County

Henderson was created for the purpose of being the county seat of Rusk County. The area now known as Rusk County was originally part of Nacogdoches County. Settlement in the area began as early as 1832 with the establishment of Mount Enterprise, and in 1838, Captain W.A. Miller, from Georgia, settled near the present site of Henderson in a community then known as Gibsontown. After the defeat of the Cherokee Indians in the battle of the Neches, the population in the area boomed, and by 1842, had grown sufficiently to form its own county. On January 16, 1843, the Congress of the Republic of Texas enacted a bill creating Rusk County and decreeing that an election be held to select five commissioners to select a site for the county seat to be named 'Henderson.'

The new county was named for Thomas Jefferson Rusk, Secretary of War for the Texas Republic, and elevated to the rank of General during the Texas Revolution. Rusk helped develop the court system in Texas during the Republic, and later became Texas Senator in the U.S. Congress.

Henderson was named for J. Pinckney Henderson, the first Attorney General of the Republic of Texas and later Secretary of State and on to be the first Governor of the State in February 1846

President Sam Houston appointed him Ambassador to France and Great Britain. In the 1840s, he was a law partner of Thomas J. Rusk. He was elected the first Governor of the State of Texas in February 1846 and later was appointed to the United States Senate.

The five county commissioners elected were: Robert L. Lane, Taylor Brown, John C. Miller, Gen. James Smith and John Walling. The commissioners were charged with purchasing or receiving by donation land to erect public buildings to serve the county's needs. The town site was to be located within five miles of the center of the county.

The site selected for Henderson is within one mile of the geographical center of Rusk County. Gen. James Smith is known as the founder of Henderson because of his gift of 69 acres to establish the city. He later sold additional land to the city. Another city founder was William B. Ochiltree, who gave approximately 10 acres with the stipulation that the name of 'Henderson' never be changed.

The first town meeting is said to have been held under an oak tree at a location which is now the intersection of South Main and Ragley Streets. The first act of the founding fathers was to lay out a town site around a public square with four main thoroughfares leading north, south, east and west, to be wide enough that two wagons "might pass with ease." Lots and blocks were surveyed and sold at public auctions, and later, lots were given to establish churches and schools. A public

well was dug in the center of the square and a jail was built. Henderson's first governing body was a town commission, comprised of Gen. James Smith, Richard Magee and William Caldwell.

Cotton was the main cash crop and was even considered as legal tender in those days. Cotton mortgages were on growing crops. Many plantations were located in Rusk County. They had large main houses and used slaves to harvest the cotton crops. Most of the plantation owners migrated here from Tennessee, Georgia, North and South Carolina and the plantations were built along the same line as the ones they had left behind. They were self sufficient growing and producing everything they needed. Many had their own potteries cotton gins, grist mills and saw mills. The Census of 1850 has some 17 plantations that had 10,000 or more acres. General James Smith's place was by far the biggest with over 53,000 acres.

Even as late as 1940, two of the larger cotton gins were still going--the Turner gin and the Yandle gin. These two gins started operating around August and by September would be going full blast day and night. The sound of whistles and busy activity around the gins were welcome because that meant cooler weather would soon be here.

As the population increased, the city of Henderson prospered. In 1878, a fire destroyed the first courthouse, and many records were lost. After a series of township re-organizations prior, during and after the Civil War, a final reorganization was effected in 1911, with E.B. Alford, Sr. as Henderson's first officially recorded mayor.

In 1986, restoration began on the historic downtown buildings, and in 1988, Henderson became a Main Street City. In 1996, Henderson's downtown area was designated a National Register Historic District.

In November 2010, Henderson was designated as a Certified Retirement Community by the Texas Department of Agriculture Go-Texan Certified Retirement Community Program.

The 2020 census lists Henderson's population at 13,145 and Rusk County's population at 53,988.