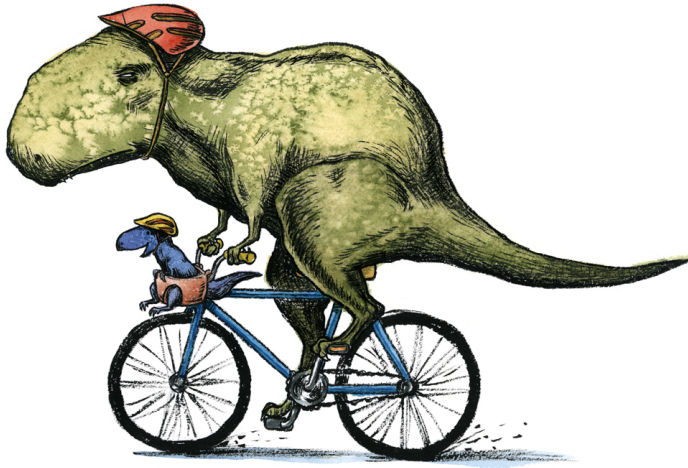


Wetumpka Yesterday and Today



The name *Wetumpka* is a historic Creek place word meaning "rumbling waters", supposedly a description of the sound of the nearby Coosa River as the water falls over the rapids of the Devil's Staircase. It could be heard for miles before the construction of dams. The Creek named Wetumpka, Oklahoma after their historic village after being forced west to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma), by United States soldiers by the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

French and British Colonization: The area around Wetumpka was the heart of the Upper Creek lands, whose largest towns were located on the banks of the Tallapoosa River and Coosa River at Wetumpka and *Talisi* (now Tallassee). After moving the 1702 settlement of Mobile to Mobile Bay in 1711, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, Sieur de Bienville sent an expedition up the Alabama River to establish a fort in the interior of New France, both to stop the encroachment of the British and to foster trade and goodwill with the Creek. He had Fort Toulouse constructed in 1714, 4 miles (6.4 km) above the Coosa-Tallapoosa rivers' confluence at the Creek village of *Taskigi*. Bienville selected this area as a strategic locale for a fortification. The French traded at Wetumpka and garrisoned Fort Toulouse until 1763, when they ceded the territory to the British following defeat in the Seven Years' War (known as the French and Indian War in North America).

American Rule: After the British defeat in the American Revolutionary War, it ceded the territory east of the Mississippi River to the United States in 1783. In 1798 the US made this area part of the Mississippi Territory, after cessions from the states of Georgia and South Carolina. Between 1800 and 1812, pioneers began to arrive and caused unrest among the Southeast Indian populations. Some Scots and Irish, like McGillivray and Weatherford, were able to marry into the Creek matrilineal aristocracy and claim vast land grants. At the same time, there were tensions among the Creek, with young men of the Upper Creek promoting a revival of religion and culture, and the Lower Creek, more influenced by settlement and trade in Georgia, becoming more assimilated. In addition, in 1811, the Shawnee chief Tecumseh appealed to the Creek to join his Western Confederacy to try to drive out and exterminate the settlers. When the U.S. declared war on Britain in June 1812 the Upper Creek lost the assistance of the British, but they persisted with war against American settlers in the area. Upon receiving the news of the massacre at Fort Mims, whose refugees included many Lower Creek, settlers appealed for government help. General Andrew Jackson led a militia from Tennessee, Mississippi, and Georgia and attacked the Creek in Alabama. The path they traveled became known as "Jackson's Trace." 1814: Chief Red Eagle (William Weatherford) surrenders to General Andrew Jackson at Fort Jackson in Wetumpka. Jackson's forces won a decisive victory at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. He moved on to Fort Toulouse, where he directed its repair. During his absence, the site was renamed Fort Jackson in his honor. Jackson made the fort his headquarters during the War of 1812, and the newly created Montgomery County held its courts there. The defeated Creek were forced to sign the Treaty of Fort Jackson (1814), which ceded to the United States 23,000,000 acres (36,000 sq mi; 93,000 km²) of Creek lands: the remainder of their territory in Georgia and most of central Alabama. After the war, many of Jackson's Tennessee militia returned home, collected their families and belongings, and brought them back to settle near the fort.

Land incorporation: Settlers, mostly from Georgia and the Carolinas, flooded into the fertile land that the Creeks had been forced to abandon. With its strategic location at the conflux of three rivers, Wetumpka quickly became an important center of agricultural trade. The city was formally incorporated in 1834. Cotton was the commodity crop of the new state of Alabama. From the scattered fields and large farms of the interior, it was carted overland to Wetumpka. Located at the fall line, the port shipped out cotton bales by steamboats which went downriver to the markets at Mobile for sale. The west bank looking across the Coosa River toward two Wetumpka landmarks, the Bibb Graves Bridge (1936) and First Presbyterian Church (1856).

Growth and incorporation: Settlers, mostly from Georgia and the Carolinas, flooded into the fertile land that the Creeks had been forced to abandon. With its strategic location at the conflux of three rivers, Wetumpka quickly became an important center of agricultural trade. The city was formally incorporated in 1834. Cotton was the commodity crop of the new state of Alabama. From the scattered fields and large farms of the interior, it was carted overland to Wetumpka. Located at the fall line, the port shipped out cotton bales by steamboats which went downriver to the markets at Mobile for sale.



The west bank looking across the Coosa River toward two Wetumpka landmarks, the Bibb Graves Bridge (1936) and First Presbyterian Church (1856).

Wetumpka became a cotton-made boom town. The new city was divided in half. The part of the city on the eastern bank of the river was commercial, with banks, stores, and hotels, and was located in Coosa County. The western section, in Autauga County was residential, with houses and churches laid out on a grid pattern of streets.

By 1836, the city's population was 1,200. A New York newspaper (Harper's) declared that "Wetumpka, Alabama and Chicago, Illinois are the most promising two cities of the West." The city commissioned a steamboat, *The Coosa Belle*, to ferry passengers and cotton between Wetumpka and Mobile.

The same forces fueling Wetumpka's growth were shifting the balance of power within Alabama. A standoff between the farmers of the Tennessee Valley, centered in the former capital of Huntsville, and the old mercantile wealth of Mobile, had resulted in the capital being located for many years at Tuscaloosa. By 1845, the cotton growers in the interior Black Belt had become some of the wealthiest in the country, and power was shifting toward the southern and central part of the state. Both the Black Belt cotton barons and the Mobilians wanted the capital moved. Compromise indicated a new, centrally located capital, accessible by river and by steamboat. The lead contenders were Wetumpka and the newer city of Montgomery, a few miles south. Neither city had a majority of support; representatives from north Alabama, enraged that the capital was being moved from Tuscaloosa, were indifferent to either site. Just before the vote, Montgomery lured an expensive French chef to the new hotel they had built to house the state's representatives if Montgomery were selected. The city distributed elegant menus to the statesmen. The promise of luxury swayed the vote, and Montgomery won. That same year, a fire broke out in Wetumpka, burning warehouses and many commercial buildings. The charred bricks were carried downriver to Montgomery to supply the building boom in Alabama's new capital.

War and Flood: Though its civic pride was wounded by losing the capital to Montgomery, the planters and merchants of the region continued to flourish throughout the antebellum period. A plan was promoted to build a lock and dam so that boats would be able to pass over the Fall Line and travel up the Coosa as far as Rome, Georgia. One famous resident was William Lowndes Yancey, a firebrand newspaper editor and statesman who was an influential advocate of States' rights and Southern secession. In February 1861, representatives from seven Southern states met in nearby Montgomery to form the Confederate government, inaugurating Jefferson Davis as their president on the steps of the Alabama state capitol. The same year saw the majority of the male population of Wetumpka going off to war. Wetumpka was never harmed by Federal troops, who did not arrive in the area until early 1865 and were determined to push quickly on to Montgomery to punish the former Confederate capital before the war ended. Those men who returned after the war came home to a city and a region whose economy had been completely destroyed. In 1866, a Reconstruction government drew up a new plan of counties for the state, and Elmore County was created out of parts of Coosa, Autauga, and Montgomery counties, with Wetumpka as its county seat (Rockford was chosen as seat of the "new" Coosa County). Despite this, the future of the city seemed grim. Before the war, the population had reached more than 3,000. By 1879, it had declined to a scant 619. In 1886, the worst flood in the history of the city inundated the west bank and most of downtown. The bridge connecting the city's two halves was washed away, and more than a year passed before unfortunate Wetumpka was able to fuse itself back together.

Progress: The first paved road linking Wetumpka with Montgomery was completed in 1924. Montgomery continued to grow during the two World Wars because of military spending and the growth of the state government. By the 1950s, the ubiquity of the automobile allowed Wetumpka's residents to commute daily to Montgomery for work.