

**An Historical Overview
of the
Development of Oktibbeha County**

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The area known today as Oktibbeha county was originally part of lands belonging to the Choctaw Indians. The county and its seat, Starkville, have evolved into one of Mississippi's more prosperous areas. This paper examines the history of Oktibbeha county and provides insights as to how that came to be.

Oktibbeha County gets its name from the creek in the northern part of the county which formed part of the boundary between the Choctaw and Chickasaw Nations. This creek was formerly known as the Oktibbeha River but today is called Tibbee Creek. The most widely accepted translation of the word "Oktibbeha" comes from the Choctaw language and means "icy water". However, another translation, "bloody water", seems to capture the result of the battles fought in and around the creek between these two neighboring tribes.

It is estimated that in 1820 nearly 1,500 Choctaws lived in the county's present boundaries in approximately six settlements. The first white settlers were Presbyterian missionaries, led by Cyrus Kingsbury, who developed Mayhew Mission in the northeastern part of the county in 1820. Three years later, Calvin Cushman established a mission called Hebron. The missionaries are credited with improving traffic accessibility to the county from the Tombigbee River. Robinson Road was the county's first public thoroughfare built in the early 1820's. It connected Nashville, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, entering Oktibbeha county near Artesia and extending southeastward to the Noxubee River. The only other trail improved enough to be called a road extended from Oktibbeha (Tibbee) Creek to present day Sturgis and was called White's Road.

White settlers began pouring into the county when the Choctaws surrendered their lands in the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek (signed September 27, 1830). As the Choctaws moved to lands in present day Oklahoma, newcomers flocked to an area of the county that had two large

springs and several sweet gum trees. The Choctaw used to gather to make baskets at this site and called it “Hickashebeha”, which means “sweet gum grove”. A mill southwest of there provided clapboards for the settlement’s original buildings. The settlement came to be known as Boardtown.

Oktibbeha County was formally organized on December 23, 1833, and the first court meeting was held the following year. By 1835, the county seat was established in Boardtown, which changed its name to Starkville to honor General John C. Stark of Revolutionary War fame. Meantime, around this same time approximately 15 miles to the southwest of Starkville, two South Carolina men established large plantations and a settlement named Whitefield (pronounced “Whit field”). Starkville and Whitefield began to grow.

Starkville constructed a one-room log structure as its first courthouse and a jail. The Presbyterians and Methodists built the first churches around 1835 and the Baptists were not far behind. Though in its nascent stages, infrastructure was being built that would later allow Starkville to clearly establish itself as Oktibbeha County’s center of trade and commerce.

Three water mills near Whitefield were constructed on the Noxubee River. One mill, which was actually just across the Winston county line and was called “White Mill”, ground most of the farmers wheat and corn.

During the pre-Civil War years, small farms and a few large plantations used slaves to grow mostly cotton and livestock, but also corn, wheat, and other agricultural products. The 1860 census revealed that out of 12,977 county residents, 7,631 were slaves. Although Starkville proper only had about 150 residents at that time, it had become the place where most farmers and plantation owners went to trade.

Farms suffered when the Civil War broke out as many white men volunteered to serve in the Confederate Army. Starkville was looted by Union Colonel Benjamin H. Grierson's raiders in the spring of 1863 but General Nathan Bedford Forrest turned back union raiders a year later in the northeastern part of Oktibbeha County south of West Point.

After the war, many farmers had trouble paying off their debts. During Reconstruction, lands were lost and many white landowners moved on. Fortunately, Oktibbeha County opened up new trade territory when a branch line of the Gulf, Mobile, & Ohio was built from Artesia to Starkville in 1874. Colonel W. B. Montgomery imported Jersey cattle by rail and thus was instrumental in diversifying the agricultural base here by developing the dairy farming business in the 1870's. There were many reasons for this, but some accounts report the coming of the boll-weevil, as one of the main drivers in the diversification away from large scale cotton crops. Later, in 1878, Colonel Montgomery also helped secure a new state agricultural and mechanical college in Starkville that would later come to be called Mississippi State University.

In 1884, Canton, Aberdeen & Nashville built a railroad through Starkville that further enhanced trade for Oktibbeha County. During this process rights were obtained to operate near Whitefield. One of the stockholders, a wealthy Mrs. Sturgis from Kentucky, asked that the town be named in her honor, thus the town of Sturgis was born. New businesses were established closer to the depot and the Whitefield business center and post office disappeared. The Aberdeen-Durant branch of the Illinois Central Railroad was born.

The need for a railroad also played a big role in the development of Maben. Mr. H.H. "Harve" Turner anticipated this and acquired large tracts of land in the northwest corner of the county. In 1886, Mr. Turner provided crossties for 25 cents each to the Columbus & Greenville Railroad, sold lots which he had a surveyor named Tom Maben plat out, and was able to dig the

first water well for the town which they called “Goodwater”. The town changed its name to Maben in 1889 as the C&G and another railroad (the GM&O) allowed for an economic boom that year. Two nearby communities (Double Springs and Cumberland) dried up as their businesses moved to Maben. The town was chartered February 13, 1890.

Interestingly, Maben residents still debate how the town got its new name. Some say it was named after the C&G railroad company’s doctor, Dr. Maben, from Birmingham. Others say the town was renamed from Goodwater to Maben after the town’s first surveyor, Tom Maben. A third competing story asserts the town was named after a beautiful Southern belle, a redhead that “filled the town with gayety”.

In the late 1890’s, the university began to expand and by 1900, more Oktibbeha County residents left the countryside to live in Starkville, which had grown to nearly 2,700 people. Mississippi State University became the cornerstone of the local economy. Those that remained in the county during the early 1900’s continued to concentrate on cotton and grains, but also dairy products. Milk, for instance, was trucked twice daily from Sturgis (which officially incorporated in 1902) to Borden’s Plant and the Cooperative Creamery in Starkville.

One of Oktibbeha County’s (and town of Maben’s) most notable factoids is the emergency landing of the famous U.S. aviator, Charles Lindbergh, in 1923, behind what was then known as Moody Manufacturing Company just south of town on the west side of present day Highway 15. Mr. Lindbergh had purchased a World War I vintage airplane, a “Jenny”, at government auction near Americus, Georgia, for \$500. He intended to fly to Texas but got lost trying to dodge a bad storm after refueling in Meridian. Everyone in Maben that could run did so to get a look at the airplane since they were quite uncommon at that time. Unfortunately, although this was not a “crash landing”, Lindbergh damaged his wood propeller during taxi from

the open field to some nearby tree cover when he ran into a ditch. He ordered a replacement propeller and it was two weeks before it was to arrive. It's said Lindbergh cleared \$250 after expenses by selling airplane rides to around 60 townsfolk who were interested and could pay \$5 per ride each.

Today, Starkville has grown to nearly 25,000 of Oktibbeha County's 41,247 residents (2005 census). Approximately 19,720 people are employed in Oktibbeha County and although its unemployment rate of 5.8% is higher than the U.S. average of 4.4% (as of September 2006), it is well below the 6.8% unemployment rate for the state of Mississippi.

Oktibbeha County's high school graduation rate of 80.0% is just under the national average of 80.4% but much higher than the state of Mississippi's 72.9% graduation rate (year 2000 data). The presence of a top-notch university helps the county report 34.8% of residents as college graduates versus the Mississippi average of 16.9% and U.S. average of 24.4% (year 2000 data). Since higher per capita income is normally associated with higher levels of education, some economists are surprised that (as of 2004) Oktibbeha County's per capita income of \$23,492 ranks slightly below the Mississippi average of \$24,518. However, that represents impressive growth in just the past two decades and is poised for further growth going forward.

The keys to the development of Okbitbbeha County have been the growth of Mississippi State University and an existing strong base of manufacturing and small businesses, as well as some state-of-the-art research and technology companies. The keys to further development here may very well lie in its resident's willingness to accept and meet the needs of "new southerners" while retaining the old Southern charm and contributions of native southerners.

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