Early History of Roane County, West Virginia

History

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Some of the first families to come to the area of what is now called southeastern Roane County were John Kelly, Ware Long and Francis Garner. They with their families settled along Big Sandy Creek in 1809 about three miles below the mouth of Left Hand Creek. John Ashley and his family followed the next year and the area became known as Ashley's Settlement. These families probably came westward by the Kanawha and Elk Rivers and then up the Big Sandy.

William King and William Noe were the first settlers in Newton arriving 1833 and 1835 respectively. The name of this community was in honor of Isaac Newton Ross, son of Reverend Davidson Ross, who had moved here from Kentucky in 1850 and established a post office in 1857. A gristmill and blacksmith shop were the center of activity in the village. Reedyville had a gristmill, a carding mill, blacksmith shops and two general stores when the post office was established in 1854. By 1892 there were a total of 10 post offices within the county to establish a public communications network. A church and school would closely follow the establishment of the post office in each community with the Flat Fork Baptist Church being one of the oldest churches in the county that is still in operation. It was founded in 1850 and located near Looneyville in Smithfield District. My great-grandfather, Caleb Nida, was reprimanded by the members of his church for "playing the fiddle for others and having frolicks at his house."

Areas described as Island Communities developed at the present sites of Spencer, Walton, Reedy, Newton, Harper and Reedyville. Original settlers at Spencer were the families of Samuel Tanner and Jonathan Wolfe in 1812. Few other families would follow before the early 1830's. Population of the county would continue to be slow until the late 1840's.

By 1850 the original land grants had been dissolved and land ownership was passing into local hands. It was about this time that plans for a new county were being discussed. Reasons were dissatisfaction with the tax system and a belief that local government would enhance development of the area. Looneyville, Arnoldsburg and New California (later to become Spencer) were considered as county seats with majority favoring New California. This resulted in two new counties being formed with Arnoldsburg becoming the county seat of Calhoun County on March 5, 1856 and New California becoming the county seat of Roane County on March 11, 1856. Roane County was named in honor of Judge Spencer Roane and would remain a part of Virginia until the formation of the state of West Virginia on June 20, 1863.

The church played an important part in the social and moral control of the people in each little community and its members agreed to abide by the Rules of Decorum, a list of prohibition against a variety of acts. Foremost among these were immoral acts and adultery but also included dancing, swearing, drunkenness, fighting, gambling, lying, horse racing and a host of things not to do on the Sabbath. William Bishop in his History of Roane County, remarked that the early settlers of the county were ".... fully conscious of the value of the Christian faith as a stabilizer among them and its preachment a best measure of self-control ...." Church meetings were held in the homes of the most

prominent citizens prior to the building of a church house.

Principal centers of trade with the new county were New California, Walton, Newton, Reedy, Osborne's Mills and Reedyville. The first post office to be established in the new county was named Walton on July 1, 1856 at the mouth of McKown's Creek. A water wheel gristmill, carding machinery, sawmill, and tannery were soon built in the village. Geary District, the southeastern section of the new county, had two major business centers which were known then as Geary's Mills and Newton which was originally called the Three Forks of Sandy. Geary's Mills, originally called Ashley's Settlement, was named for Matthew Geary who had a sawmill built on his property. The area also had a tub mill and the community grew around these businesses. A general store was built in the early 1850's and a post office was established there July 3, 1855. The name of the settlement was then changed to Osborne's Mills in honor of Archibald Osborne who had built the first store. The first commercial enterprise was hardwood timber for lumber used for building long boats and barrels for the Kanawha Salt Works. The coal industry would first begin its' development in the 1850's with oil and gas to follow near the turn of the century.

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