

# Davidson County Bicentennial 1822-2022

By Dewey L. Snider

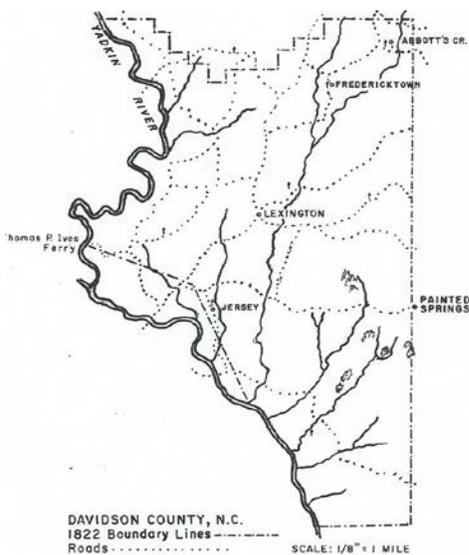
## Part I, The County Begins

Although we are celebrating the bicentennial of Davidson County, it is important to remember that the county that we are so familiar with today is not the first Davidson County, North Carolina, that has existed, nor is the form of the county today the same as it was created in 1822. In the year 1783, two years after the end of the Revolutionary War when North Carolina still went west to the Mississippi, the State Legislature created Davidson County in what is now Tennessee from Washington County in what is now Tennessee. When the territory now comprising the State of Tennessee was ceded to the Federal Government in 1790, There was no longer a Davidson County in the State of North Carolina.

Our present Davidson County, North Carolina, was created by act of the Legislature on November 29, 1822 out of Rowan County, but not with the same boundaries that we know today. The bill to create the county went through the Senate and passed on November 27; it went to the House and passed on November 29, and Davidson County was created. The act reads in part..., That all that part of the county of Rowan lying north of the following line, to wit: beginning on the east bank of the Yadkin river, where the same is crossed by the Surry (now Forsyth/Yadkin) line; thence down the said river to the ferry of Thomas P. Ives, thence a straight line to a point at the end of ten miles, in a line running north, forty-five degrees east from the Court House, in Salisbury; thence to the mouth of Abbot's creek; and thence down the river, to the Montgomery line, be, and the same is hereby erected into a separate and distinct county, by the name of Davidson, with all the rights, privileges and immunities of the other counties of this State." Davidson County, like its predecessor in Tennessee and the Town of Davidson in Mecklenburg County, was named for General William Lea Davidson who was killed at the Battle of Cowan's Ford on the Catawba River during the Revolutionary War. One local historian several years ago asserted that the reason that Rowan County kept a parcel of land on the east side of the river was so that it could control access to the river. While that may

be true, the major reason for keeping this elongated triangle of land was that the Rowan County poor house was on the east side of the river and it would not look very good for a county to maintain its facility for caring for the indigent in a neighboring county.

The act establishing Davidson County was amended in 1834 and further amended in 1836 resulting in the establishment of the Yadkin River as the dividing line between Davidson and Rowan Counties, thus ceding the elongated triangle of Rowan County on the east side of the river to Davidson County. The county's boundaries were further changed on two subsequent occasions. In 1889 the northwest corner was annexed to Forsyth County. This is the Clemmons ville area which today



comprises some of the most valuable real estate in Forsyth County. Of course, annexing this area of the county to Forsyth was a tremendous convenience for the citizens who lived there as they were much closer to the seat of Forsyth County government in Winston-Salem than they were to that of Davidson County in Lexington. It also appears from early maps that, in some instances, it was necessary for citizens of this area to travel through the neighboring county to get to the county seat in their own county. Also, in 1921 a triangular slice of the northeast part of the county was ceded to Forsyth County. Money and roads appear to have played a role in this move as well. At the time there was a huge road-building effort afoot in the state and counties were expected to contribute to the expenses in building these roads and highways. Davidson County was already paying a good deal for the construction of the "Central Highway" (Highway 29-70) through the middle part of the county and didn't want to pay for the construction of what is now Highway 311 from Winston-Salem to High Point from which it would derive little economic benefit.

On the fourth Monday in January 1823 (January 27), the county leaders met in Lexington to establish the new government for the county and elected its leaders. These included John Clemmons, Woodson Daniel, Jonathan Charles, Joseph Conrad, Alexander Shamwell, George Smith, James Burkhead, Solomon Davis, Amos Wright, Alexander Stephens, James Lowe, Alexander Caldcleugh, Henry Monroe, John Monroe, Peter Tice, Solomon Farington, Absalom Williams, Isaac Kenny, David Mock, William W. Wiseman, Thomas Hampton, Zebulon Hunt, Ezekiel Teague, Joshua Lee, Andrew Swicegood, Joseph Spurgin, Joshua Wilson, Ransom Harris, Benjamin Sherewood, William Piggott, Jonathan Manlove, Silas Peace, Ezekiel Brown, Jacob Brummel, John Ward, and Jesse Hargrave. These gentlemen appointed John Giles to keep the minutes of the proceedings until a clerk could be appointed, and they chose Charles Fisher, a justice of the peace for Rowan County, to administer the oaths and qualify justices of the peace for Davidson County. The above gentlemen, having qualified and taken the oaths as justices for Davidson County, proceeded to choose John Monroe as chairman of the court and elected David Mock as clerk of the court. James Wiseman was elected the first sheriff of Davidson County.

On the following day the justices elected James R. Dodge to be the county attorney. Joseph Spurgin was elected county trustee (treasurer), and Ransom Harris was elected public register (now register of deeds). Other offices filled at this time were entry taker, Joshua Wilson; coroner, Samuel Farington; county surveyor, Ezekiel Brown; and rangers, Andrew Swicegood, Alexander Stephens, and Solomon Davis. Other items of business dispatched at this time were the establishment of the tax rate, appointment of constables and setting February 15 as a date to elect wardens of the poor.

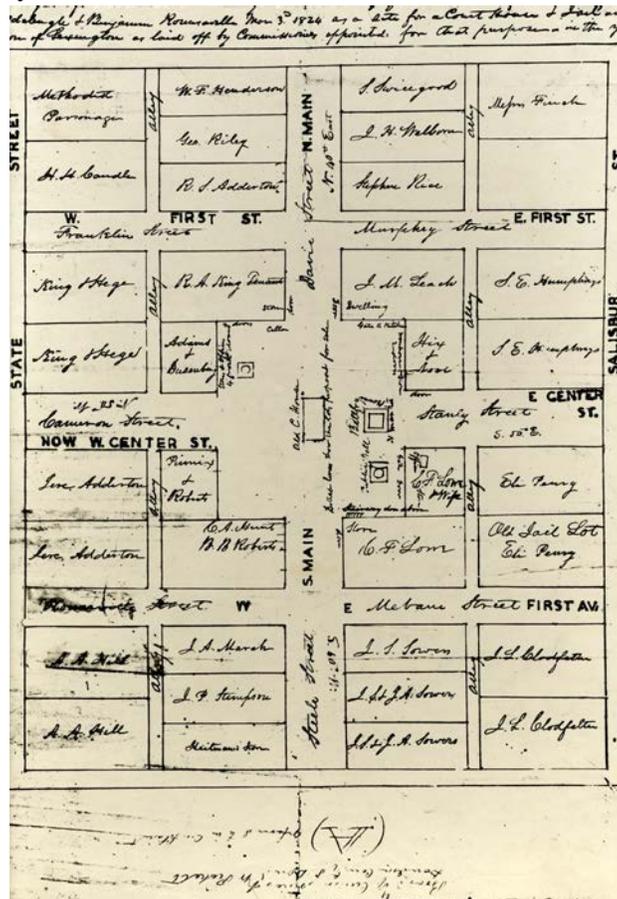
Initially Lexington was supposed to be only a temporary meeting location for the fledgling county government because it was the only established municipality in the new county, although not an incorporated one at this point. There would be no Thomasville for thirty more years and Denton was several decades away from even being imagined. The intended county seat was to be a new town called Marion located in the geographic center of the county. The General Assembly consequently appointed Joseph Spurgin, Ransom Harris, Thomas Hampton, Nathan Riley, and William Bodenhamer to ascertain the center of the county, purchase land for the proposed town, lay off lots and attend to the sale thereof. They located the center of the county on the lands of Martin Owens near the location of the current offices of Davidson County

Schools (former County Home) and Sheriff's office. James Monroe, chairman of the county court purchased 108 acres from Mr. Owens and another small parcel from Christian Everhart. Many lots were sold in the proposed Town of Marion, but it was never to come to fruition.

The citizens of Lexington were apparently not happy with this turn of events. Through a series of political maneuverings, the case for establishing the county seat was reopened. John Monroe, John Clemmons and David Cox were appointed by the Legislature to settle the matter. As a result, Lexington became the county seat of the new county.

The deed records show that on March 24, 1824, Alexander Caldcleugh, Benjamin D. Rounsaville, and Jesse Hargrave deeded to John Monroe 25 acres of land each receiving fifty cents from the sale. From the sale of lots from this land, funds were to be raised to build a courthouse and jail without taxing the citizens of the county for the purpose. This area of Lexington was referred to in later court records as the "new Town of Lexington" around the present court square. It was still very much a wooded, rural area as there is reference in later court records to building a wooden fence around the square to keep out wild animals.

Thus, Marion's prospects faded into history, and money for the purchase of lots there was refunded to those who had bought them. The county retained some of the lots in Marion and later built the county home or "poor house" there to serve the indigent citizens of the county which was voted on unanimously by the county court in 1827. It was to be built of brick, and John M. Smith, William R. Holt and Henry R. Dusenberry were appointed to oversee the construction of the facility.



Other amenities necessary for the efficient operation of county government were soon taken care of. A jail, built of wood, was constructed at the corner of Salisbury Street and Mebane Street (now East First Avenue). Nearby were the whipping post and pillory. A gallows was erected close to the entrance of the Lexington City Cemetery on State Street. James Wiseman and William R. Holt were instructed by the court in December 1825 to purchase one-half acre of ground not less than half mile from the courthouse and not on any public road (Apparently the County Fathers didn't want people to see this ugly business.) to build the gallows and contract for its construction. Yes, in those days, counties could legally carry out executions, and Davidson County was not remiss in this aspect of civil duty.

Meanwhile, over in Salisbury the creation of a new county out of the territory likely came as a surprise to no one. An article in *The Western Carolinian*, dated October 14, 1822, reported "Application will be made at the next General Assembly for a law to lay off a new county in that part of the county commonly designated *The Forks*. Should this be refused, application will be made for the establishment of separate Courts of Pleas and Quarter Sessions – one in the Forks of the Yadkin and another on the Lexington side of the River." Another article appeared on November 5 stating that a bill would be laid before the next General Assembly for a Division of Rowan County to be laid off on the north side of the River (South Yadkin). Also, it was reported that lots were being sold in a new town of Clinton in the Forks of the Yadkin. Of course, we know that a county in the Forks of the Yadkin did not occur until 1836 when Davie County was formed from Rowan. In the December 10 issue of *The Western Carolinian* under the headline – Rowan Divided, the article read: "The division of Rowan has at length been effected, and a new county is formed out of it, to bear the name DAVIDSON." The article included a description of the boundaries of the new county as previously stated. It continued, "Old Rowan is now divided; and we trust all the benefits and conveniences will result from it, which our friends in the new county have anticipated. But although the population and territory of Rowan are now considerably diminished, yet we doubt not she will still hold a respectable and influential standing among her sister counties. What she had lost in territory and population, she must make up in public spirit and intelligence, in the improvement of the territory which remains and in the industry and enterprise of her citizens."

In the annals of the public records of Rowan County, the creation of a new county passed with not a single mention. It was business as usual in the minutes of the Rowan County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. In February 1823, Wilson McCrary was appointed to act as overseer of the road from Beard's Bridger to the Davidson County line on the Lexington Road and that the hands of Jesse Haden and John March be added to those already allotted to work said road. Wilson McCrary would later play an active role in Davidson County government after the area of Rowan County east of the Yadkin River became part of Davidson County. Also at the same session of the court, John P. Hudgens was appointed to act as overseer of the road from Beard's Bridge to the county line on the road to Thompson's and that all the hands in the county that formerly worked said road be under the direction of said Hudgens.

As we can surmise from these entries, one of the essential duties facing all counties, including the new County of Davidson, was the maintenance of public roads, no matter how rugged, as an important means of trade and communication within the county and with neighboring counties. Among the many acts of early Davidson County justices was the appointment of overseers of the

roads. There was no State Department of Transportation, or as I knew it in my youth SH&PWC (State Highway and Public Works Commission). Roads were built and maintained by the citizens themselves, and all able-bodied men were expected to work the roads or provide a suitable substitute if they had the means to do so. It was not until much later that “being sent to the roads” was viewed as a punishment for transgressing the law.

Among the reasons for the creation of Davidson County two centuries ago was the growing population east of the river and the difficulty of citizens getting to Salisbury to transact official business. One wonders if those founding fathers from so long ago could ever have envisioned what Davidson County has become.

Sources: Minutes of the Davidson County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, 1823-1868; *The Formation of North Carolina Counties 1663-1943* by David Leroy Corbitt; *Centennial History of Davidson County* by J. C. Leonard; North Carolina Government and Heritage Library; *The Western Carolinian*, printed in Salisbury, November and December 1822, Minutes of the Rowan County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions.