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The Fort Pickering Heights

by James E. Roper

James Roper, professor of English at Southwestern, is currently working on a multi-volume history of Memphis. He has written this piece and kindly allowed CENTER CITY to print it on the occasion of the "Shall We Gather At The River" celebration to be held July 4th at DeSoto Park.

Standing on the high bluff where three spans entangle their steel lace against the sky, today's visitor, even the native Memphian, is not likely to realize the richness of the history enacted for more than four centuries here within the radius of a few hundred yards. The color and sweep of America's entire past is well represented: mound builder, Spanish conquistador, Jesuit missionary-explorer, Chickasaw hunter, French and Indian army, river pirate and Tory outlaw, Yankee general fleeing in his nightshirt. Here have stood primitive mud hut and log cabin, French fort and American stockade, pioneer railway terminal and vast Civil War fortifications. The view, one of the Mississippi's most magnificent, has been shared by Meriwether Lewis, Aaron Burr, Zachary Taylor, Andrew Jackson, and many others known to all Americans.

It used to be taken for granted that the two large Indian mounds were once the village where DeSoto discovered the Mississippi, mostly because he obviously would have had such a great view for the purpose. Nowadays such facts as can be put together do not support this theory very well, though there is a better chance that it was hereabouts that the first crossing of the river took place just after it had been discovered a little downriver. Chucalissa, the Indian town on the bluff to the south just

across Nonconnah Creek, was contemporary with DeSoto and is still in the running as the discovery site. The mounds near at hand, however, besides showing the good taste of their builders in choosing a living spot, have had quite a history of their own.

It could well be, for example, that the mounds mark the village of Aganatchi, which was at about the 35th parallel just south of Wolf River. Here Marquette and Jolliet stopped in 1673, to find the inhabitants lounging around on wood scaffolding through which rose the smoke of smudge fires to keep away mosquitoes. Father Marquette wrote a letter here and left it with the Indians to see where it would end up. Eventually it arrived in Virginia.

The mounds were probably part of the fortifications built here in 1739 by Sieur de Bienville, governor of Louisiana; they may have been inside his five-sided Fort Assumption itself. Here assembled the largest army ever called out on this continent by a European power up to that time;

Courtesy of the Memphis Public Library and Information Center



its 3500 men were French regulars and militia, Canadians from as far away as Detroit, and Indians from Illinois. Bienville came to wipe out the pesky Chickasaws, but after several months of frustration arising from flooded hinterland and ignorance of the tribe's actual location, he razed the fort and went back to New Orleans. During his stay two Chickasaws, an old man and woman, were tortured to death methodically by other Indians, probably about where the Rivermont parks its cars.

In 1755 some exiled Acadians, perhaps including Evangeline herself, stopped on the high bluffs en route to haven in Louisiana. A few years later when the Jesuit order was expelled by the French government from its American colonies, a wretched band of priests and servants struggled up the steep banks to build their campfire under the watchful eyes of the soldier escort whose prisoners they were.

From these heights during the Revolutionary War James Colbert, Scotsman and Tory who led the Chickasaw Nation, kept watch for Spanish boats on which to make private attacks. On the Arkansas shore, technically Spanish territory, were 300 Tories, deserters, and run-of-the-mill desperadoes who made up his gang. In the last year of the war John Rice, land speculator de luxe, managed to hack his initials on a white oak tree here, to mark the southwest corner of his 5000-acre tract that would become Memphis thirty-six years later. He didn't let any Chickasaw passerby see him doing it, since the tribe was very possessive about all of West Tennessee and especially the bluff area which gave them access to the Mississippi and to their western hunting grounds across it. Rice identified the location of his tree as "a mile south of the mouth of Wolf River," which confluence then was at the foot of Jefferson Avenue somewhat as it is today.

In 1795 the Spanish bought the area between Bayou Gayoso and Nonconnah Creek from the Chickasaws and built a fort to the north, at today's Auction Square. The commandant had a trail cut through the canebrake and rank underbrush so he could exercise his horse while watching the Carolina parakeets in the trees and the wild swans on the streams. In the clearing process the Rice mark seems to have disappeared, while the mouth of Wolf receded north. By 1819 when the city was laid out Rice's claim had moved north with it to Beale Street.

American Fort Adams replaced the Spanish fort in 1797; it, too, was in the Auction Square area. In 1798 a new fort to replace it began to rise here on the heights where it should have been all along. It was named Fort Pickering, after the contemporary Secretary of State. The precise location is not

known, but it is very likely that the Indian mounds were included within its stockade, because a traveler approaching the bluff from below described the stockade as being "on the brow" of the bluff while a watch tower was "on the summit." Since the bluff is rather level, the Indian mounds were probably the "summit" — and it makes sense to start from the top of a mound if you want height, anyway, not to mention the danger of allowing such a raised place to stand outside the walls of a stockade.

In a swale on the north side of the bridges stands the Unitarian Church of the River. More than a century ago this swale was a good-sized nick in the bluff, with a road leading up from it. This little harbor, safely out of the current, seems almost certainly to have been the landing place for Fort Pickering, and possibly Fort Assumption. We know that 150 log steps led up from landing to stockade. One visitor found a fully armed and painted Chickasaw at the landing, with blood dribbled up the steps. Fully prepared to be the final victim of a massacre, he learned from Lieutenant Zachary Taylor, the commandant, that the Indians were on hand to receive their annuity.

At Fort Pickering in 1801 General James Wilkinson, that "tarnished warrior" who was in the pay of Spain while acting as head of American ground forces, made a treaty with the Chickasaw. By its terms the Natchez Trace, heretofore just a horsepath, was widened to allow wagon traffic. After the Louisiana Purchase two years later the fort was no longer a border guardian, and became only a river post to give aid to travelers or regulate river traffic. It also protected a government trading post for Indians which had been set up in 1802 in the hope of inveigling the red men into debt so they could be legally evicted from their land. At the New Year of 1807 Aaron Burr touched at Fort Pickering overnight, long enough to involve the fort's commandant in the scheme for which he was arrested as a traitor a few days after leaving.

In 1809 Meriwether Lewis, famous explorer now governor of Louisiana Territory, arrived at the fort ill with fever and wrought up over the attacks of his political enemies. He was on the way to Washington to defend himself. He had once been commanding officer at Fort Adams, and Pickering's garrison gave him such a hearty welcome that he had a breakdown. For five days he had to be guarded against suicide while in delirium. Apparently recovered, he set out along the line of Crump and Lamar Boulevards and a few days later met death on the Natchez Trace in a manner which still leaves unsolved the question of suicide or murder.

In 1813 Andrew Jackson's ill-fated expedition to Natchez stopped overnight. His chaplain preach-

ed a sermon to about 40 shivering soldiers stationed in the fort, many without shoes or coats. This is the last glimpse we have of Fort Pickering as a military garrison; the demands of the War of 1812 elsewhere seem to have finished it off. The Indian trading post, however, went on until the whole system was abolished in 1822. The best known factor at the post was Ike Rawlings.

Visitors to Fort Pickering included not only French novelist Chateaubriand, who mused over the inspirations of nature while tied up here, but also John James Audubon, who spent the night at the fort and refused to have a look at the infant town two miles north. He reported seeing seagulls while here.

In the 1830's the Memphis waterfront began to fill up with mud, and the Fort Pickering area became the better landing place. A town began to develop. To induce the Memphis-LaGrange Railroad to make its terminal here the developers offered it a large share of the town lots. The terminal was duly built near Crump Park as an extension of the line from the Memphis depot, but this involvement in real estate speculation helped bankrupt Memphis' first railway enterprise in the 1840's when it had laid eight miles of track.

When war broke out in 1861 the Confederacy began to fortify the bluffs with siege guns protected by cotton bales. After Memphis fell to Union forces in June, 1862, General Sherman built a long fortification stretching from Vance Avenue to include the Indian mounds, a total length of a mile and a half. The inner "citadel" was at Georgia Street (entrance to the Rivermont), its flagstaff being at the bluff edge near the Rivermont's swimming pool. The two Indian mounds were dug into for gun emplacements, the one nearest the river guarding the waterway, the other looking inland. A powder magazine was tunneled into the western mound; its entrance, now bricked up, can still be seen. Troops stationed in the fort used the Arkansas bank for target practice, and hundreds of bullets have been dug up there. The area just south of the mounds, across the ravine, was a "contraband" camp where slaves freed by the advancing armies were kept. On August 21, 1864, sentries on duty in the pre-dawn were startled to see running toward them the commanding general of the Memphis area, his nightshirt flapping behind him. General C. C. Washburn had been surprised in his bedroom on Union Avenue by Bedford Forrest's raiders, and took off down the back alley to the river and down along under the bluffs to the fort gates.

In May, 1866, some four thousand black troops were hanging around the fort, discharged but waiting for their final pay. They got into an altercation

Youth Worth A Dime

A reduced 10 cent fare for persons 17 years and younger was unanimously approved by the Memphis Transit Authority Board of Commissioners at their regular weekly meeting May 30, 1975.

Tom Evans, General Manager, explained that the reduction from 40 cents to a dime for this age group during the summer "was proposed in order to attract more young people on the buses." Memphis Area Transit Authority presently offers a reduced 30 cent fare for students during the regular school year.

He said that there has been a low usage of the system by youth in recent years. "The space is available on the buses," Evans added, "and such a program will add no extra cost to the system."

The program will allow young people to ride any bus, anytime, anywhere in the city, for only a dime. Persons riding under this program will not be allowed to use transfers; a dime must be dropped in the fare box each time the youth boards an MATA bus.

The program started June 16 and will continue through August 31, 1975.

Evans told the Board that the program would also be conducted in cooperation with the City's Department of Youth Services. Gerald Crowder, Director of the Department of Youth Services, said that his staff is looking forward to working with the Memphis Area Transit Authority on the new youth project. "We feel that this program will be one of the most beneficial projects for young people conducted in the city this year. I also feel that with a rising crime rate among juveniles that such a program will allow young people a new form of mobility and recreational opportunity and help lower this crime rate."

Explaining the educational and economical values of the program, Evans said: "These young people are the adults of tomorrow, and we need to show them how public transportation can play a big part in their life. Also, with the public becoming more aware of the high cost and shortage of fuel, this program can supply a necessary transportation need for this age group and at the same time save their parents money."

with the police and shot a constable. The affair blew up into a two-day riot, or massacre. The soldiers took refuge inside the fort, but the roused mob killed any innocent black they came upon. A Congressional inquiry gave the totals as 46 killed, 2 of them white; 75 wounded, nearly all black; 91 houses, 4 churches, and 12 schools burned, all belonging to blacks.

In the later 19th century the mound area was called Andrew Jackson Park, and was a pleasure garden. A dance pavilion, where beer and other refreshments were served, was built atop the western mound. In 1884 the United States government established the Marine Hospital and built the oldest of the structures standing inside the fenced enclosure near Crump Park – the one which, at this time of writing, is painted white. The hospital complex and grounds is now in the hands of the Memphis Park Commission. “Marine” refers to the river, not the U. S. Marine Corps.

In 1892 the railway bridge, the middle of the present three structures, was opened. In order to soothe the public’s doubt of its strength, 27 locomotives were chuffed across as one train. The Harahan Bridge for autos, the northernmost structure, was opened in 1917 and closed off in 1949 when the Memphis-Arkansas Bridge was dedicated. The boarding of the Harahan’s two motorways was taken up and stored against some civil emergency.

For a century after the Civil War the Fort Pickering area was a jumble of railway tracks, warehouses, and slums. After World War II the impulse for urban renewal cleared a large area along the bluff edge. It is slowly beginning to fill in again. Let us hope that Memphians will come to realize the superb nature of this locality for scenery and history, and shape its use for the public good and for humane living.



166 Poplar
Memphis, Tenn. 38103

earthly delights

DOWNTOWN ACTIVITIES

Jefferson Davis Park

July 12 – River Raft Review—Otrabanda—
7:00 p.m. *

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Overton Park Shell

July 8 – “Encore”—Martha Scott Dancers
–8:15 p.m.*

July 10 – “Where The Rainbow Ends” *

*FREE

CIVIC CENTER COMMUNITY CULINARY CLUB

Serving from 11:30 to 1:00

First Presbyterian Church, 166 Poplar Avenue

PRICE: \$1.50 per serving, including drink

MENU FOR JULY 3–JULY 11

THURSDAY, JULY 3

Closed

FRIDAY, JULY 4

Closed

MONDAY, JULY 7

Salmon Croquettes, Hash Brown Potatoes, Tossed Salad, Rolls

TUESDAY, JULY 8

Roast Beef, Whipped Potatoes, English Peas, Rolls

WEDNESDAY, JULY 9

Spaghetti, Cole Slaw, Rolls

THURSDAY, JULY 10

Fried Chicken, Rice w/gravy, Squash or Green Beans, Rolls

FRIDAY, JULY 11

Barbecue Beef/Bun, Baked Beans, Pineapple/Cottage Cheese Salad

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