

# **West Carroll Parish Chamber of Commerce**

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*"To promote the advancement of commercial, industrial, civic and general interest and welfare of West Carroll Parish, the town of Oak Grove and the surrounding area."*

## **A Brief History of West Carroll Parish**

### *Preface:*

*The area that is now known as West Carroll Parish has a long and rich history that pre-dates the formation of the United States of America and even the birth of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. On this site we would like to offer you a brief look into our history. For a complete history of West Carroll Parish a recommended read is **Between the Rivers** by Florence McKoin that is available at the parish library or from Claitor's Publishing in Baton Rouge, La.*

Since before the birth of Christ, people have called the area now known as West Carroll Parish home. This is evident by the largest Native American earthworks in North America that are located on the south end of the parish. In the course of their study of the site, archeologists have come to the conclusion that the site now known as Poverty Point was the central trading grounds for the entire culture of people that called the lower Mississippi River Valley home. It has been referred to as the New York City of 2,000 years ago.

Though the area was explored by many French and Spanish explorers in the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was no real settlement of the area.

In the early days of Louisiana's history as part of the United States, all of Northeast Louisiana was considered part of Ouachita Parish including West Carroll.

In 1807 a Methodist Minister by the name of Moses Floyd settled on the west bank of the Bayou Macon in the south end of the parish. Later as a trading post developed and the

village began to grow, less than a mile from the Poverty Point site, it was named Floyd after its prominent citizen.

As the population of Ouachita Parish continued to grow it began to be split into smaller parishes and in 1832 Carroll Parish was carved out of Ouachita by the state legislature, with the parish seat in Lake Providence, which is located on the banks of the Mississippi River.

Throughout the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the population of the western portion of Carroll Parish continued to grow with its economy based mainly on cotton and timber. By 1855 the population had grown to the point where there were enough votes to move the parish seat west of the Macon to Floyd, an area that had developed into a thriving trading post due to steam traffic on the Macon. In 1856 construction began on the new courthouse that was finished in late 1857.

With the move of the parish seat came more professionals and tradesmen to Floyd, and the town grew exponentially. It was to become the typical frontier town with a hotel, post office, general store and saloons. It is said that the infamous James brothers spent a lot of time in the area during this period.

The good times were short lived and change was about to engulf the parish and a divide emerged that would last until this very day. In January of 1861 the Louisiana Legislature voted to succeed from the Union and declare itself a free and sovereign state. Less than two months later Louisiana joined the confederacy and down came the Louisiana flag and up went the bars and stars of the new south.

According the book, *Between the Rivers*, this was the divide that would eventually lead to the creation of West Carroll Parish:

When the Confederate Flag flew over the court house in Floyd, it was saluted by nearly everyone, but not so with our neighbors across the river. Planters to the east, either out of conviction to their consciences or to save their property signed an oath of allegiance to the United States thus bringing a rift among neighbors who were willing to lose everything including their lives, for the cause of the South; and, they felt very bitter toward any neighbor signing such and oath.

There was very little fighting in the area. Some attribute this to the Quantrell Gang that included the James brothers and the isolation and vast swamps that surrounded Floyd.

During Reconstruction, corruption and mistrust developed between local leaders, and those appointed by the federally appointed state government that lasted until the federal troops were withdrawn in March of 1877.

With the people on the East and West side of the Bayou Macon no longer having much in common a bill was passed by the state legislature in special session to divide Carroll

Parish and thus shortly after home-rule was restored, West Carroll Parish was born with a population of 800 people, 200 families, both white and black.

Cotton and timber continued to be the life-blood of the new parish that was home to ten cotton gins and three sawmills, and boats continued to run Bayou Macon as the main hub of transportation.

As steam boat traffic on the Beouf and Macon dwindled and the "Iron Horse" railroad came to the parish towns began to develop along the north-south road (La. 17). Among these were Pioneer, Forest, Oak Grove and Kilbourne.

Pioneer being closest to the parish seat, grew rapidly, due to the Pioneer Sawmill being located there.

In January of 1909, Oak Grove was incorporated, and many of the parish's prominent citizens such as Leopold Lipp, saw its location where the North-South and East-West (La. 2) roads crossed. It was to become the economic center of the parish in the near future.

In 1915 an election was held to move the parish seat from Floyd to a town located on the railroad. The two towns competing for the honor were Oak Grove and Pioneer. With the largest population living in the south end of the parish, the people of Pioneer felt confident they would get the seat; however the people of the north end of the parish bonded together and Oak Grove won the election by a small margin, thus spelling the beginning of the decline for the bustling town of Pioneer.

In 1916 construction began on the new courthouse, and before it was completed a hail storm and tornado devastated the town in late 1916, destroying the original theater, a large majority of the new courthouse, and many other buildings in town. In January of 1917 the new courthouse was opened and so began of the modern era of Oak Grove.

Now as the parish seat Oak Grove began to grow rapidly, soon Main Street was packed with businesses varying from general stores, drug stores, a modern theater, cafes, two banks and more.

The economy of the parish continued to be dominated by the timber and cotton industry. In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Donald B. Fiske opened a state of the art cotton gin and compress to compliment his sawmill which would become one of the largest employers of the parish.

After World War II, the town and parish continued to prosper with new industry and business.

In 1950 the most modern and state of the art movie theatre in the south was opened by Donald B. Fiske, and it is still in operation today.

With the economy becoming more dominated by agriculture and the rise of the sweet potato industry a cannery was built along the railroad, and the cannery operated until near the end of the century.

In the 1960's and 1970's the growth continued with the construction of a modern hospital, nursing home and the Wells Lamont garment factory.

In 1969 a local entrepreneur by the name of Shelton Ruffin built a pre-manufactured pole barn for personal use. Its style and construction quickly gained in popularity around the region thus spurring the formation of Ruffin Building Systems which is now one of the largest manufacturers of metal buildings in the South which ships buildings internationally.

With the coming of the 1980's and the rise of the large department stores, business on Main Street began to decline; however this historic district continues to remain vibrant with over 50 percent of its buildings occupied.

With the coming of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century entertainment and retail shopping has become a major part of the economy in West Carroll. In 2004 the Thomas Jason Lingo Community Center which houses a 1,000 seat auditorium, opened and is home to many live events each year, and the Fiske Theatre returned to regular operation as a first run movie theatre. Both of these venues bring families from all over Northeast Louisiana and Southeast Arkansas to our parish for entertainment on a regular basis. A Super Wal-Mart also opened its doors in 2006 and has transformed West Carroll into the retail hub for the region.

Education and religion have always played a major part in the lives of the citizens of West Carroll. The public school system consist of four high schools and five elementary schools that consistently rank at the top of the state in test scores and on the athletic field. West Carroll is also served by over 30 churches of all dominations.

Today agriculture is still king in West Carroll with her main crops being corn, rice, cotton and sweet potatoes, but the largest employers are West Carroll Health Systems, West Carroll School Board, Ruffin Building Systems and Wal-Mart. West Carroll is also the home to five banking institutions to serve people's financial needs.

***Editors note:** This brief history have been proof read by long time West Carroll Historian John Wesley Smith and to the best of his knowledge is completely factual. The facts contained within were taken from the book **Between the Rivers**.*

