History of Clarke County’s Seat of Government, Quitman, Mississippi

Quitman: is a City that in 1916 was described in Frank McDonalds 1916 Tiny Booklet labeled Queenly Quitman with Sub Title, Clarke County’s Charming Capital City, Repletey Resourceful, Plentifully Prosperous, and Alluringly Attractive as a Place of Residence. Nothing has changed from that description in the 175 years since 1839, the beginning legal date for Clarke County’s County Seat. Quitman was named after John A. Quitman, who gained fame as a General in the Mexican War and later served as Mississippi’s tenth and sixteenth Governor. The General was a devout secessionist, but died prior to the Civil War.

Location, Location, Location: The site for the future City of Quitman had more to do with water and logistics than any other issue. Archusa Springs, a Chickasawhay Indian name meaning “Little River”, but for the people of Clarke County it meant “Sweet Water” as the two streams flowed into the Chickasawhay River just south of the City. The river was a highway for commerce plying steamboats, flatboats, and keelboats to and from the Gulf. According to tradition, the Chickasawhay Indians, part of the Choctaw Nation, believed the waters from the Archusa Springs had healing powers. Indians would camp by Archusa Springs for long periods of times and arrowheads and other artifacts are routinely found along the creek bed. When white settlers started settling the area, people would come from miles away to enjoy the mineral waters. Eventually a gazebo was built over the springs and the site became a social gathering place on Sunday afternoons from 1836 to 1969 when the springs became the site for Archusa Lake and one of the Pat Harrison Water Parks.

Civil War & Railroads: Walter Q. Gresham, Union Commander of the Third Brigade, Fourth Division, and 17th Army Corps. Gresham was a young General of 31 years of age when he destroyed the City of Quitman during the Civil War. General Gresham would later become Secretary of State in the Administration of President Grover Cleveland. The good news for Citizens of Clarke County was that remarkably all of the records from the original Courthouse were saved by burying them prior to Gresham’s entre in Quitman, and can be viewed in the Chancery Court Clerk’s Office.

Before 1900, Quitman was just a country town, the shopping center for the surrounding agricultural area. Cotton was the main source of income, and industrious farm families supplemented their income with hand drawn heart pine shingles, hewn crossties, and turpentine. There were two turpentine stills in town located in town. It was several years
before rail service was restored after the Civil War, but rail service increased the business opportunities and Quitman continued to grow.

**Turn of the Century:** In 1900 the Mississippi Lumber Company located in Quitman with their main plant capable of producing 25 million board feet of lumber annually. The Lumber Company employed around 300 people at the facility and numerous in the peripheral operation of cutting saw logs for the facility. In 1901 Governor Longino signed a Charter for the City of Quitman and C.B. Weir was elected as Mayor of a town of 860 residents.

In 1902 the Bank of Quitman opened its doors to a growing Town and quickly expanded into neighboring communities. Two of the first officers in the bank, S. H. Terral, Jr. and C.C. Ferrill have either a street or subdivision named after them. Mr. Terral was elected President and remained so until his death in 1930, at which time Ben H. Carter became President. One of the most interesting stories is how at that early time in its history, Quitman received phone service. In 1907 Mr. J. L. Peavy came to town with a wagon load of wire, a packing case of telephones made by Kellogg Switchboard Supply Co., and a couple of wet batteries. Mr. Peavy was attributed to have an inexhaustible patience and shining courage. Quitman became one of the first Towns in Mississippi to have phone service which cost $1.75 per month for a private line and $2.75 for business phones.

**War Years:** In 1911 a monument dedicated to the Men and Women who either fought or participated in the Civil was dedicated and given to the survivors of the war, who in turn gave it to the County. Eleven young ladies, representing the Southern States, gathered around the Monument for the dedication. A monument for WWI Service Members was erected shortly after that war.

Progress continued into 1923, a year that street lights were added and a sidewalk, but the remaining rural element was evident as an ordinance prohibiting bulls from running at large made the Tribune Paper. Census figures showed the population had grown to 1,855 from its 1,375 population of 1920. Quitman celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1939 and Dr. H. C. Watkins talked of a Hospital that most people discounted as being impossible. The H. C. Watkins Hospital opened in 1940 followed by a Coca-Cola Bottling Company started by Hal N. Dabbs. The Tribune covered a story about drilling for oil. The City continued to grow with the addition of a Knitting Mill and Clarke County reigned as the number one producer of oil and timber in the State of Mississippi.

**Development:** Quitman started with a 42 acre purchase of land in 1834 by John Watts at the picey rate of $1.25 per acre. It has grown to encompass 5.9 square miles within City limits. Growth was consistent as the Town moved from an agricultural community to an industrial center for timber, oil, and textiles. During the housing crisis the City lost the timber business and after N.A.F.T.A. lost the textile industry. Quitman was faced with a bleak future, and were it not for the natural assets and community spirit would be in a crisis mode today. Timber became important again, but for a different application. A $90 million dollar investment to produce terrified pellets opened in Quitman. We became a “Green Producer” of energy by providing Europe, Japan, and other Countries with an alternative fuel more environmentally friendly. Oil fields were activated again through new extraction methods and a new Industry opened to provide storage tanks used in the oil fields. The Manufacturing base in Quitman has grown with the addition
of Dart Container’s Plant that ranks in the top two of 19 locations in quality of production.

**Technology Breakthrough:** The internet or Web will have 3 billion people using it within the next three years. The challenge is building the infrastructure to move large amounts of data quickly. Businesses, Doctors, Lawyers, Industry require an ever growing amount of broadband speed as does anyone designing games or working from home. Quitman and the coalition of Churches, Schools, Government, and Industry were successful in meeting the C-Spire Challenge and we became the first City in the State of Mississippi to have 1 Gigabyte of data speed and width. Our future is bright!

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