

Kingsport History

MANY towns experience, at some time in their existence, a change of name. There are few, however, which have had such a wide variety of appellations to choose from as Kingsport. The Indians probably knew it by the synonym, in their dialect, of Peace Island, or Big Island. The early white explorers also referred to it as Peace Island, Big Island, and Long Island, and the historic, three-mile-long island in the Holston still bears the latter name.

In the early days Kingsport also bore the name of Island Flats, and the Indian battle fought on the site of the present city has gone down in history by that name.

About the same time the place was called Fort Robinson and Fort Patrick Henry for the forts, bearing successively these two names, which were located there. Be it understood, of course, that in those days it was not a town-not even a village -though it has always occupied a position of historical significance.

Later, for brief successive periods, it bore the name of Christiansville and Rossville in compliment, respectively, to Gilbert Christian, who purchased a large tract of land there and plotted it for a town, and Dr. Frederick A. Ross, who established Rotherwood. Each of these men holds an important position in the town's history. In the early part of the nineteenth century there was considerable growth and business activity in the village which is now known as Old Kingsport, and is one of the suburbs of the city of today. Shipping down the river from this point in flatboats assumed proportions of importance, and many boats were made and launched there. It was then, quite naturally, given the name of Boat Yard-a name which it bore until its present name of Kingsport was finally adopted.

The name "Kingsport" was accepted late in the eighteenth century, probably about 1774 or a few years later, and since its adoption all of the other names have become simply a matter of history. The town was named, not for King George of England, as many have supposed, but for Col. James King, who established a mill at the mouth of Reedy Creek in 1774, and who later used the port of Boat Yard extensively for the shipping of iron, bacon, salt, and other commodities to towns down the Holston and Tennessee rivers. In consequence of this the port became known as "King's Port," later contracted to "Kingsport."

"Dunmore's War," by Twaite and Kellogg, says briefly, "King's Mill Station was at the mouth of Reedy Creek, near the present site of Kingsport, Sullivan County, Tennessee, in the year 1774.

Thomas W. Preston, in his "Historical Sketches of the Holston Valleys," amplifies this statement with a brief sketch of the activities of Col. James King, in which he says: "James King, after whom Kingsport was named, the first of the name to seek his fortune in America, was born in London in 1752. He first settled in Montgomery County, Virginia, but was attracted by accounts of the beautiful and fertile valleys of the Holston. He moved to Sullivan County, Tennessee, probably prior to 1774, and built a mill at the mouth of Reedy Creek, which was known as King's Mill. He served in the Point Pleasant campaign in Captain Pauling's company of Botetourt troops. He also served in a number of battles during the Revolutionary War and was wounded at Guilford Courthouse. He recovered from his wound and was present at the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. He was an ardent patriot, a man of considerable initiative, and rendered valiant service to the colonies. In 1784 he built an iron furnace at the mouth of Steele's Creek in Sullivan County. This was the first iron furnace erected in the state of Tennessee."

Associated with Col. King in the operation of this iron furnace was William Blount, first territorial governor of Tennessee and the man for whom Blountville, the county seat of Sullivan County, was named. A great part of the products of this furnace, iron and castings, found a market down-state. They were hauled to Kingsport in wagons and from there were shipped down the river in boats.

Some historians, while agreeing that Kingsport was named for a Mr. King, are inclined to think this man was William King, of Abingdon, owner of the salt works north of that town, rather than Col. James King. Chancellor John Allison, in a brief historical sketch of the town, says: "The change of name from 'Boat Yard' to 'King's Port' was not in honor of King George, but because of the heavy shipments of salt from there by Mr. King, who at that period owned and operated the 'Salt Works' over in Virginia, north of Abingdon, the salt being hauled from the works in the old fashioned four and six horse road wagons, down the Reedy Creek road, and this method of transportation of salt continued until the construction of the 'Virginia and Tennessee' (now Norfolk and Western) railroad."

The "Mr. King" here referred to was probably William King, and it is possible that his activities at the little river port may have been combined with those of Col. James King in giving Kingsport its name.

...[In 1795, William King, an Irish immigrant, moved into the Saltville Valley, purchased 150 acres, built a log house (the King Stuart House) and began to manufacture salt. The first salt mine in the United States was sunk by him in 1799 on a site 200 yards northwest of his house. This endeavor soon failed due to seepage of water into the mine. King then resorted to the evaporation of salt water in a series of large kettles. Brine from this shaft supplied the Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Carolina, Virginia and Scott Furnaces during the War Between the States. King's name and memory are perpetuated today in the William King Arts Center in Abingdon and the City of Kingsport, which was originally spelled King's Port. In 1802, King purchased a landing there where salt from Saltville was unloaded from rafts onto flatboats to

be sent on down the Tennessee River.

The manner in which the Holston River received its name is also a matter of historic interest. This river was called "Cherokee," and "Coot-cla" or "Cootelaw," by the Cherokee Indians, down as far as its junction with the French Broad. Late in the eighteenth century, however, probably about 1761, an adventurous pioneer by the name of Stephen Holston paddled his canoe down the stream, and it later was named for him. When Sullivan County was established by the erection of the boundary lines in 1779, the first county seat was located at Heaton's Station, on the lower slope of Eden's Ridge, or what is now more commonly called Chestnut Ridge, and about four miles from the present site of Kingsport. The official organization of the county took place February 7, 1780. The county seat remained at Heaton's Station for six years, or until 1786. Blountville, the second oldest town in the state of Tennessee, was made the county seat of Sullivan in 1795.

For several generations the people of Long Island, the present site of Kingsport, hardly knew to what state they belonged. First the territory was regarded as a part of Virginia, then a part of North Carolina. When the ill fated State of Franklin was organized the section was, of course, a part of it. It was not until 1802 that a compromise line was definitely established between Southwest Virginia and East Tennessee. This line, definitely and for all time, placed Kingsport in the state of Tennessee.