

The Origins of the Lands, now Henry Horton State Park:

This story is about the history of the site where the CRC will meet this Oct 15-16. In the old days it was called Fishing Ford then Wilhoite and now Henry Horton State Park. The site was simply a shallow place used in crossing the Duck River. Written by Anna Adaline Wilhoite Horton, 1st lady of Tennessee, and wife of Henry Horton the former Governor of Tennessee. Published in the Nashville Tennessean Magazine, 5 Jun 1949. She was a cousin of Wayne Austin.

Who it was that first crossed Fishing Ford, historic forerunner of the present village of Wilhoite on the Duck River in Marshall County, can never be determined, but a white man carved the date 1794 on a gnarled oak tree still standing, and its known history is a saga of the settling of Middle Tennessee.

The names they carved beneath the date 155 years ago have crumbled away with the weather-beaten bark, and the deeds that marked the Indian's twilight, the white man's dawn in the neighborhood have left as little trace as the ripples that blur green tree reflections along the edge of the dammed river on a summer's afternoon.

Before the knives of these white men cut away the undergrowth of the Indian canebrake, long before the Indian made his home and his burial ground upon the banks, the waters of Duck River, tumbling against the solid mass of limestone, had worn a channel between the two white stone cliffs.

On these opposite banks the Indians built their homes, held their tribal meetings. The caves and crevices were their abode while the flat fields and rolling slopes became the site of multitudes of graves. The Creeks, most common tribe in this section, left remnants of their crude civilization in field and cove.

As early as 1780, when young Andrew Jackson scouted before harassing Indians as a member of Captain Williams' party, an Indian camp was sighted near Fishing Ford.

For hours the 21 white men had followed the braves at a distance, and finally, under a starry sky, they stealthily edged along the riverbank, climbed up its soft mud and looked up and across to the other side.

There before them, separated from them only by the mirroring surface of Duck river, was a vast barbaric scene never to be forgotten. The clearing was filled with dancing, frenzied Indians and the whole ceremony was lighted by immense campfires. Forty-two eyes watched, and silently turned, disappeared into the night. When the tired little band of men gave their report in Nashville two days later, they placed the scene approximately on the south shore of the bend west of Fishing Ford. There was no way then that young Jackson could know that he would be the one to fell the forest trees and push the first road to Fishing Ford, and on through the Indian meeting grounds. But before a road was built, and almost as soon as the Indians began their slow retreat southward from the white man's approach, a pioneer named Hazelette cleared the cane away and built the first cabin to stand at Fishing Ford. By 1808 he had neighbors only three miles away at Chapel Hill, but there was no road connecting the settlements until General Jackson carved out the Fishing Ford road on his famous march south in the War of 1812, on his way to battle at Horseshoe Bend and New Orleans.

The stagecoach followed Jackson's new road. Progressing travel brought on the building of a covered bridge in 1838. The stage stop was a three-story log inn which had grown out of one of the first log cabins at Fishing Ford. Numerous notables were said to have crowded the rambling old lodge. The inn, along with surrounding land, was bought by a widow, Mrs. William Wilhoite, nee Adeline Warner, in 1845. She bought the land on the north bank, too, and made it the site of Wilhoite Mills. Her 20-year-old son, John Wilhoite, took charge of construction of the mill, and slave labor began the building in 1846. Massive cedar logs were used in construction of the dam, which supplied power for both grist and sawmills. Since its construction the grist mill has remained in operation continuously, even during the difficult years of the Civil War.

UNION forces swarmed over the slopes and forests of Middle Tennessee and in 1863 marched through the village of Chapel Hill and on to the river. As was the custom at Wilhoite Mill, wheat was placed on deposit and sacks were the property of the customers. Such were the conditions when the blue coats were sighted and the beat of horses' hoofs heard. Suddenly the mill was overrun. Every Union soldier grasped two sacks of flour, slashed the sacks to threads with flashing sabers, and trampled the precious food beneath their horses' feet in the dusty road while the hungry citizens looked on. Shortly afterward, when young John Wilhoite returned home for his brother's (Col Jacob Richard Wilhoite) funeral, he made monetary reparations to the customers for all property destroyed in the Yankee raid. But one unreasonable merchant demanded complete replacement. Cotton sacks could be found nowhere outside Yankee-besieged Nashville. There was nothing for the tall, dark Confederate soldier to do but cross the river, and disappear into the forest of cane.

Riding in his proud gray uniform, mounted on his favorite steed and seated in his new saddle to gift from Gen. Nathan Forrest, John Wilhoite was obviously a Rebel, but luck protected him on his approach to Nashville. Taking back roads, finding refreshment at farmhouses along the way, he finally journeyed far enough to leave saddle and horse "Star" with a farmer near Nashville. Now under cover of night he began the perilous portion of his journey. Alert eyes and ears and Indian-like stealth gave him safe crossing of the first, second, third and fourth Yankee picket line into Nashville. Gray dawn found him inside Rebel territory.

WHEN he had accomplished his errand and tucked the cotton sacks in a bundle over his shoulder, he made his way out of the city again that night, fortified with his new knowledge of Union positions. Confident that he had by passed all pickets unseen, he tramped on back to "Star" and General Forrest's saddle. But while he strapped the hard-earned sacks on his horse, Wilhoite glanced down to the foot of the hill to distinguish flashes of blue between the trees.

Wheeling his horse, he led a merry chase over the hill, over fence and into a cornfield, with an occasional bullet trimming his haircut. Suddenly the flooded, swirling Cumberland river loomed ahead. He spurred his horse and down they plunged. The water covered them over the ears, over the head.

When they came to the surface, the current kept whipping them down and, fortunately, toward the opposite shore. Horse and horseman clutched desperately at bush and bough, finally climbed to the dry of the bank while puzzled Yankees still covered the water's surface with whizzing bullets. A sudden piercing Rebel yell raised their gaze to see horseman and horse disappear into the distance. Prized saddle, priceless sacks and John Wilhoite slipped in home before sleeping Fishing Ford could rouse itself to the morning chores.

The paths of the great and the small have crossed at the shallow Fishing Ford, long since known as Wilhoite, during the unfolding drama of the last 155 years, and General Forrest forded it repeatedly during the stormy war days when his raiders appeared mysteriously at widely separated grounds to harass the enemy. But it was not a spot for the heroic alone. Many plain, every-day people centered their lives about the mill site.

Some of them came to drink and draw water from the fathomless spring that flows into the river down near the mill. One fair spring day an old black woman with bucket in one hand and baby in the other climbed the hill, chanting as she went about her work. She leaned down to draw the bucket up from the spring and down fell the child. The baby, never recovered from the depths, has been immortalized in tales that made the spring the talk of the countryside. Known today as Haunted Spring and the surest place to see an honest-to-goodness apparition the spring has kept its ghost tales thru the war times and reconstruction.

But few other things have remained as they were. During reconstruction days houses went up for workers and the mill settlement became a community center with a general store, a blacksmith's shop, a post office gathered around. But the peaceful scene was torn apart one stormy spring day in 1902 when the raging river hurled bridge and mill down the boiling stream past the houses, banks, rocks by which they had stood so long. By the time spring flowers had blossomed up and down the river bank a new mill had gone up at Wilhoite and a new bridge spanned the stream.

All of old Fishing Ford was gone but the ghostly columns of the 64-year-old bridge, the sturdy slave-built dam, the old log stagecoach inn disguised in white weatherboarding, with the original millstone lying idle at the door. These doorsteps were the stones that ground the harvests of his sires," Whittier wrote, and so at Wilhoite each generation brought change and adaptation to the quickening times. When the broad new highway, Horton Highway, came by Wilhoite's Mill, the old inn and the hill beyond, Fishing Ford had a particular pride in it. For it was named for Fishing Ford's own son, the late Gov. Henry Horton, who had married John Wilhoite's daughter. The new Horton highway took the traffic from the old Fishing Ford turnpike where stagecoaches used to rumble by to the inn's gate and left the pike a shady lover's lane that meanders through pleasant pastures of grazing Jerseys today. The covered bridge that sheltered the stagecoaches crossing the shallow stream long ago disappeared, victim of the river it conquered for a while. But the stream flows on as undisturbed as when Indians stalked their prey and buried their dead, as quietly as if a white man's civilization had never grown up and fought and passed on from its shores.