

History of Fayette County Tennessee



Marquis DeLaFayette

The Tennessee General Assembly established Fayette County on September 29, 1824, and named it in honor of the [Marquis de Lafayette](#), French general and statesman. The county seat, Somerville, was named to honor Lieutenant Robert Somerville, hero of the battle of Tohopeka in Alabama. The first court proceedings took place at the home of Robert G. Thornton on the banks of the North Fork of the Wolf River on December 6, 1824.

Settlement began in the area as early as 1820, and by 1826 there were enough residents for the incorporation of the two oldest towns, Somerville and LaGrange. In both towns restored antebellum homes symbolize the wealth and culture of the plantation

period. The entire town of LaGrange, named for Lafayette's ancestral home, is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Today there are nine incorporated towns in the county: Braden, Gallaway, LaGrange, Moscow, Oakland, Piperton, Rossville, Somerville, and Williston.

Religious zeal soon prompted the organization of the county's churches. Somerville's First Presbyterian Church dates to 1829. Immanuel Parish in LaGrange, established in 1832, is the oldest Episcopal church in West Tennessee. Nineteenth-century camp meetings live on at Joyner's Campground, where annual services are held each July in the open-air tabernacle built in 1893.

Historically, the economy of Fayette County has been based on agricultural production, principally cotton and corn. Large plantations and small [farms](#) supported the gins that were located in every town and many of the smaller crossroads communities. However, recent years have witnessed agricultural diversification, with soybeans becoming an important cash crop, followed by beef cattle, dairying, and egg production. Slaves worked pre-Civil War plantations. Following the war, many former slaves remained in the county, with most employed as tenant farmers and sharecroppers. The county's African Americans constituted a majority of the population until the 1980 census. During the 1960s and 1970s, civil rights activists worked for voter registration and school integration. They established two "tent cities" to accommodate black residents who sought refuge following their eviction from their tenant farms after attempting to register to vote. Today, Fayette County public schools and faculties are fully integrated in seven elementary schools, a comprehensive high school, and a vocational school. J. B. Summers and Joseph Martin each served long terms as county superintendent of schools. The only African American to serve in this role was Dr. Warner Dickerson, who ably guided the schools in the late 1980s. Three private academies also hold classes in the county.

The fields of Fayette County have favored the activities of sports enthusiasts and environmentalists. Wolf River, which meanders across the southern part of the county, is widely recognized by outdoor enthusiasts as a unique natural treasure. In 1995 conservationists aided the State of Tennessee in acquiring a vast forest area filled with cypress-studded swamps bordering the river near LaGrange. As a result of their efforts, visitors now enjoy the beauty of the Wolf River Wildlife Management Area and the Ghost River State Natural Area. Herb Parsons Lake was named in honor of Herb Parsons, a world champion Winchester rifle exhibition shooter. The best-known outdoors event of the county is the National Field Trials for bird dogs, which has been held annually since 1903 on the historic Ames Plantation in southeast Fayette County.

In the 1960s Troxel Manufacturing Company located a factory at Moscow, and most towns have developed one or more industrial parks to lure new companies. Historically, manufacturers have had excellent transportation facilities in Fayette County. The first railroad chartered by the State of Tennessee, the LaGrange-Memphis Railroad, was to be built in Fayette County in 1835. The LaGrange-Memphis Railroad later became the Memphis and Charleston Railroad before being incorporated into the Southern Railway system. Today, the Norfolk-Southern Railway traverses the southern portion of the county. In addition, the modern Fayette County Airport is equipped with a 3,500-foot runway with NBD approach and an automated weather observation system.

Politically, the county traditionally voted Democratic until recent years, when votes shifted to the Republican Party in statewide and national elections while retaining a Democratic majority in local county offices. During the 1940s the county was embroiled in the States' Rights (Dixiecrat) movement. Charles Stainback, veteran Somerville lawyer, served as state chairman; Somerville was the host to the statewide convention in 1948. The best-known Fayette politician is John Shelton Wilder, Democrat from Longtown, who was first elected to the state Senate in 1959 and has served continuously in that office since 1966. He has established a record-breaking tenure, acting as Speaker of the Senate and lieutenant governor for fourteen consecutive terms.

Although Fayette County remains a rural, agricultural area, it is now in a period of transition as it faces the suburban sprawl from nearby Memphis. Its population in 2000 stood at 28,806.