

The History of Chunky, Mississippi

by
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The town of Chunky, in Newton County, Mississippi, is located along the east/west railroad that crosses the county near its southern border in the eastern part of the county. U. S. Highway 80 passes through the city limits, and Interstate 20 is located about a mile north of the city limits.

The population of Chunky at the 2000 Census was 344. The median income for a household in the town was \$34,864. Fifteen percent of the population was age 65 or older.

The town, tucked into a loop of the Chunky River, has a post office, a town hall and a volunteer fire department. It is served by the Newton County School District. Businesses in the town are a convenience store and a hair salon. It has both Baptist and Methodist Churches.

The Kansas City Southern Railroad passes through Chunky. Approximately 25 freight trains per day pass through the town. The railroad crosses the Chunky River west of town on a trestle known locally as “break down”. It was on this site that the trestle collapsed under a troop train of Confederate soldiers during the Civil War in 1863.

The Chunky River is the premier attraction to most people who visit Chunky. The river forms from the confluence of two creeks a few miles west of the town. The river is a hidden treasure with very little development along its shores, making it an attractive wilderness recreation adventure to those who canoe and kayak. In 1924, Charlie Flake caught a catfish weighing 56 pounds, one of the largest ever taken from the Chunky River.

Chunky Settled¹

Chunky has roots in the village of Chunkyville, located a few miles south of the town of Chunky. Chunkyville was established prior to 1848 on the grounds of a large Choctaw village called Chanki Chitto, once located on the west bank of the Chunky River. Chanki Chitto was home of the most prominent Indian “sports field” in East Mississippi. Here the Choctaws played Tchungkee, a game played with spears and perfectly round, polished stones.

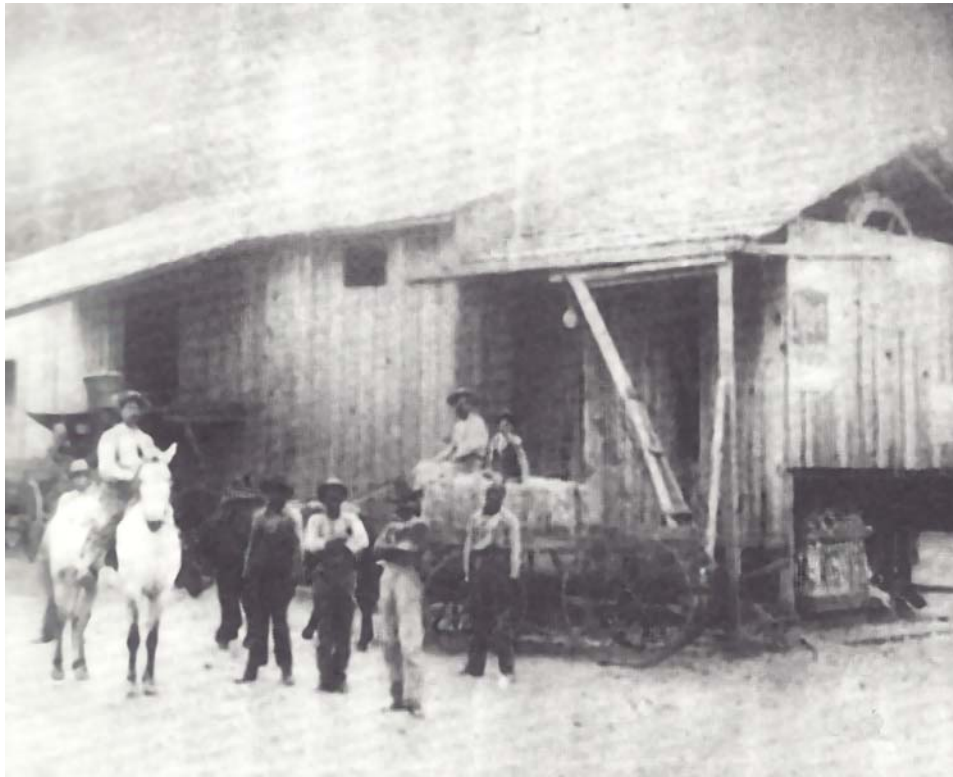
When news reached Chunkyville of the east/west railroad to be built through Newton County it seemed advantageous to locate near the rails, so most of the village of Chunkyville moved north to its present location in 1861 and became the town of Chunky. The railroad was completed through the county on the east side of Chunky in June of 1861.

The land on which the town was built was owned by Benjamin Murphy, **W. G. Bartlett** and Levi Jones. Brown’s history states that some of the homes were built before the railroad was finished. There was a train station at Chunky, and **John Ira Cook** was the first agent. After the Civil War Levi Jones was agent.

¹ Information for this section was derived from History of Newton County from 1834 to 1894 by A. J. Brown.

Some of the earliest settlers were the Benjamin Murphy family, the Dyess family, the Warren family, the **W. G. Bartlett** family, the Clark family, the Hughes family, the Mayberry family, and “the Misses Kidd”.

Chunky was a mill town. There was lots of timber nearby, and Chunky had a mill to process it, and, being located on the railroad, shipment of the lumber was easy. There was a barrel factory, owned and operated by Mr. Collier, which turned out cypress barrels for molasses. The cypress for the barrels was harvested from the Chunky River and hooped with hickory. The barrels were in great demand locally and further abroad. Chunky was also home of the county’s only turpentine distillery, which was owned and operated by McDonald & Company. The town once boasted a cotton gin, but it was soon relocated to the town of Hickory.



Cotton Gin at Chunky, Mississippi

While not mentioned specifically by Mr. Brown in his history of the county, it is probable that the town also boasted a gristmill, as most places with a stream would have had one for the grinding of meal for the locals.

A number of merchants and other businesses located in the new town, among them Levi Jones, Dr. Hughes, John F. May, George Armstrong, **Mrs. Zue Belew**, Frank Buckley and Mr. Collier. Dr. Spivey, a physician, located in the town and served its residents and the surrounding county. W. G. Bartlett was a Methodist minister.

² Photo from [Newton County, Mississippi, a Pictorial History](#)



John F. and Mary Frances May

John Franklin May and wife Mary Frances (Reeves) May moved to Chunky from Cuba, Alabama. John was a merchant and a logger. John and Mary Frances were charter members of Chunky Baptist Church.

Early resident families were Jones, Buckley, Clark, Murphy, Kidd, McDonald, Mays, **Belew**, Collier, Spivey and Hughes. Other families living nearby were Castle, Dyess, Armstrong, Pennington, Graham and Jones.

The town had two churches, Methodist and Baptist, and there was a free school⁴. It once had a school, a hotel, and as many as three livery stables. In the early 1900s, there was a **Reynold's** General Merchandise store.

Though considered a quiet and sober town, on 13 May 1861, John Warren and a Mr. Mayberry engaged in a fight, which resulted in the death of both men. Warren was known to be a merchant, and Mayberry was thought to be a merchant. The reason for the fight has long been forgotten. Mayberry may have been new to Newton County, as the 1860 Federal Census does not show a Mayberry living there.

The Civil War

During the Civil War, a group of Chunky residents gathered to form a unit known as the "Chunky Heroes". Records indicate that about 81 of the Chunky soldiers helped guard the Mississippi Coast against a possible Yankee invasion in 1861.

In February of 1864, Chunky Station fell to General William T. Sherman's forces after a battle was fought near the river.⁵ A report by Brigadier General Manning F. Force, U S Army, commanding the First Brigade, states:

Captain, I have the honor to report that in obedience to orders received last night I marched to Chunky's Station this morning, arriving a little after 9 o'clock.

³ Photo from Newton County, Mississippi, a Pictorial History

⁴ Prior to the Civil War there were no free schools in Mississippi.

⁵ Article in THE MERIDIAN STAR by Nan Fairley; date of publication unknown

Learning that General S. D. Lee was at the station with two brigades, I pushed on rapidly and quietly, surprised their rear guard at breakfast, captured and burned seven loaded army wagons, burned a fine trestle railroad bridge, destroyed several hundred yards of road and two small trestles, bending the rails, and burned a warehouse filled with Confederate cotton.

Commerce

Products shipped by rail from Newton County's railroad towns included cotton, lumber (both rough and dressed) white oak staves, oak spoke timber, hickory for spokes and felloes, crossties, cattle and sheep, hides, wool, furs, butter, eggs, chickens, geese, turkeys and ducks.

In the early 1890s, the lumber industry moved into town, bringing several large sawmills and the McDonald and Company turpentine distillery.

Mr. C. L. Cahoon, Chunky history buff, stated that his father owned one of Chunky's general stores. "Every Wednesday, people who worked in the Meehan Mill would ride the train into town for 'mill day'. They would spend the day shopping and visiting and leave late in the evening. The depot was the center of attention. Every Sunday, people dressed up to go meet the train. Two livery stables that rented horses and buggies were located behind the train depot. This used to be a real busy little town."

Lyndon Reynolds, a Chunky resident who died in 1987, once said, "I have seen the time on a Sunday afternoon at the Chunky depot when they would have to put on an extra coach at Meridian just to pick up the railroad employees here."

In April 1900, a disastrous flood overflowed Chunky River and adjacent creeks. The flood washed out the railroad bridge and complete sections of track, leaving Chunky without communication with the outside world for ten days.⁶

The town of Chunky was incorporated in 1901, and Thomas J. Reynolds, a Confederate veteran, was elected the first mayor. The spelling of the town name has changed from Chunkey to Chunky with the passage of time.

The first car owned by a resident of Newton County was a Hupmobile, owned by D. L. Ragland of Chunky in 1906. He had located in Chunky to establish a planing mill. Ragland's Hupmobile was eventually bought by J. R. Rowzee of Newton, and the engine of the car finally ended up in Willis Norman's barn, where it was used to saw wood. Ragland went on to establish Ragland's Lumber and Manufacturing Company, which became the largest lumber company in the county.

1912 Train Wreck⁷

What came near to being one of the most disastrous wrecks recorded in Mississippi railroad history occurred yesterday morning at about 6 a.m. near Chunkey.

⁶ Hometown, Mississippi, by James Brieger.

⁷ THE NEWTON RECORD, January 18, 1912

Fast train No. 1 of the A&V, westbound, left the rails and three cars plunged through the trestle. The mail, baggage and express cars went through the trestle, and the day coach was left with one-half of the car suspended over the creek.

Killed in the wreck was J. W. Story, express messenger.

Injured: F. E. Wilkerson, mail clerk; A.E. Saums, mail clerk; L. A. Walker, fireman.

A relief train was sent out from Meridian with physicians and friends of some of the passengers. A large part of Meridianites was on the train headed for Jackson to attend the inauguration of Gov. Earl Brewer. There were 80 passengers on the train.

The wheels of the engine tender apparently jumped the track, and the wheels of the mail car, express car and negro coach followed. The locomotive cleared the trestle, but the cars tore up trackage for several hundred yards and then went down the embankment and into the creek. The express car caught fire, and even though the passengers and citizens of Chunky made an effort to save it, the car was completely destroyed.

In the debris the charred remains of J. W. Story were found.

The fire which destroyed the express car did little damage to the mail and negro coaches, though both cars were smashed in the creek. The mail was saved, so far as is known.

Last night, by 8 p.m., the trestle had been temporarily repaired and the track cleared. Rail traffic has resumed.

Chunky Memories

In 1928 my father, Thomas Andrew Jordan, lived on a place two miles west of Chunky of Tonecannie Hill, better known as Bob Adams' place. When I was around eleven years of age, Old Highway 80 ran from Chunky over Tonecannie Hill to Hickory. It ran across Chunky River and by Wall's Crossing, and when the rainy season came, Chunky River would rise three to five feet over the road, and the T-Model cars couldn't cross over. I would take a team of mules and a chain and go down to Chunky Swamp and wait. When a car wanted to cross over, I would hook a chain to his car and the mules would tow him across. If someone was waiting on the other side, I would tow him on the trip back. It would take about one hour to make the round trip. I didn't charge a fee, but they would pay me anywhere from 50 cents to \$5. I would do this every day until the water would go down.

About 1928 or 1929, a dirt contractor, Mr. Blanch, came in to build a highway dump for the new Highway 80. He had twenty pair of mules to pull the dirt slips. The workers set up tents to live in and they also had a mule lot in Tonecannie Bottom. Most of the workers were colored people and they were called mule skimmers. Their camp had a cook, and I would take vegetables from my father's garden and sell them for what I could get.

In the early 1930s, Cob Brothers' Construction Company came in and put down a strip of concrete six feet wide and called it a highway. It went from the Lauderdale County line to the town of Newton. When they started paving between Hickory and Newton, I got a job as night watchman for 40 cents an hour. I very well recall one morning about 4:00 a.m. I had a barricade up at Potochitto Swamp where they had just paved, and I saw a car coming toward me. I had a coal oil lantern that I started waving to make the car stop, but I soon realized the car had no intention of stopping. I jumped off the road and let him go. The car ran over the barricade and onto the fresh concrete, cutting tracks through the concrete. When the car got to the mixer, it went off the road, around the mixer, and kept going toward Newton. About a half hour later, the night watchman from Newton came by with Mr. Cob, the contractor, and told me who the car belonged to. Lord have mercy! It was John Dillinger and his gang, armed with tommy guns. They told me he had just held up a service station in Meridian, one at Newton, and had gone on toward Jackson. If I had known it was Dillinger, Potochitto Swamp would never have held me! I was so scared that I told the contractor he would have to hire another watchman. I was finished as of that minute.⁸

The small depot in Chunky is now gone. Freight trains still rumble through Chunky, but they never stop.

⁸ Recollections of Truman Jordan