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Mid-South Memoirs— But Not Forgotten

Transcribed from *The Commercial Appeal (Memphis, Tennessee)*, Sunday, December 19, 1976, Section G, page 7. Written by Paul R. Coppock, transcribed by RaNae S. Vaughn.

Eastport used to be a lively town where a part of North Mississippi connected with the world. Roads leading to Eastport carried farm products, especially cotton, to the Tennessee River boats and the market. Boats brought to Eastport the salt, sugar, and shoes that were loaded on the wagons for return trips to country stores.

On the river charts it was 261 miles above Paducah. The Tennessee state line was at Mile 249. If there was water to go on above Eastport, the turnaround was made at Tuscumbia, Alabama, Mile 295, or Florence, Alabama, Mile 300. The rocky Muscle Shoals topped boats most of the time.

The Eastport name appeared on a large boat, 570 tons, built at New Albany, Indiana, in 1852 for the Louisville trade. The boat was serving the Confederate States of America when it was captured by the Federals in 1863.

The name of the river landing also appears in Civil War records because of three minor incidents.

Yet Eastport was all but erased from the records in 1857 when trains began to run on the Memphis & Charleston Railroad (now the Southern).

The trains ran every day, high water or low, muddy roads or dusty ruts. The cars were available at Iuka. Eastport moved to Iuka, almost literally overnight. In a few cases, Eastport buildings actually were moved to Iuka.

Disappearance was so nearly total that when the Works Progress Administration (WPA) guide to Mississippi was published in 1938, the entire Eastport information is that when M&C tracks were completed “the entire town of old East Port picked up business and belongings and moved . . .”

When two thick volumes of Mississippi History edited by Richard Aubrey McLemore came out in 1973, Eastport had shrunk entirely out of sight.

However, nearly 25 years ago, we came across a short account in *The Commercial Appeal* of March 1, 1931. On the occasion of the death of Mrs. John M. Stone, whose husband was governor, a feature story told of the old town. It tells of John Stone, who:

“ . . . became a clerk on a steamboat running from Eastport, Miss., to the Ohio River. Later he was a clerk in the mercantile establishment of Col. W. R. Price, the largest landowner and merchant of the prosperous village on the Tennessee River.

Eastport at that time was the home of wealth and culture, the head of all-year navigation on the Tennessee River, and freight from all points for East Mississippi and West Alabama came to this port, where it was loaded on wagons and carried to its destination.

When the Memphis & Charleston Railroad was first projected, an opportunity was given to Eastport to be on the railroad for a nominal sum, but the suggestion was refused, and when the railroad was completed and the new town of Iuka was established, the entire town of Eastport was moved to Iuka.

In the general exodus came John Stone, and he was chosen as the first depot agent.”

Several months ago our slim bundle of Eastport information was increased by a letter from Clifton B. Reid of Iuka. He says:

“There was an Eastport Female Institute in 1857; Mrs. J. B. Lindsey—teacher; 20 pupils.

A Mr. Noble P. Beall was a rich landowner, with many hundreds of acres around Eastport and 28 slaves.

I owned 90 acres just south of Coleman Park on the west side of the Indian Creek Embayment, on which was one-acre reserved for the Noble P. Beall Cemetery. He and some of his kin and others are buried there.

I have been told there was a Bell Creek Academy in this vicinity.”

The standard authority on Eastport is Irene Barnes, Clifton Reid says. She has written an account telling of an Eastport built at the water edge, which was washed away in a flood. A better town was built on a hill. It had brick sidewalks, a Methodist and a Baptist church, a Masonic lodge, the Mansion House hotel, and the girls' school. Miss J. B. Lindsey was the teacher in 1857.

There is a tradition of a population reaching as high as 2,000, with 15 or 20 stores, and with as many as six steamboats tied up at the landing at the same time.

Wagons from Tupelo used three days and three nights, camping along the way to get to Eastport. There is an old story of six days on the road with an ox wagon carrying six bales of cotton from Itawamba County, Mississippi, to Eastport.

A post office was established at Eastport, May 30, 1842, with John Buttrill as postmaster. It was discontinued in 1892, when Rufus Skinner was in charge. Skinner also was the last merchant to remain in Eastport.

The Barnes account of Eastport contains more than a score of names. It is short. But how could it be otherwise? The treaty in which the Chickasaws gave up that part of Mississippi was made in 1832, and the Indian departure date is usually given as 1837.

Even if the town was built promptly, the years were few until 1857 when the Memphis & Charleston rails came through Iuka. Full rail service from Memphis to the coast was begun early in 1857.

Water backed up by Pickwick Dam has covered the land on which Eastport stood and for many years there has been only tradition and folklore to tell of this temporary center of trade.

Note: The above-mentioned article written by Irene Barnes can be found in *The Tishomingo County News*, December 9, 1976.