

## TRAVEL TALES

# Finding where Alabama began – Part 1

By Llewellyn Toulmin  
Special to The Sentinel

Did you ever think that the thriving town you live in could just – disappear? It happens more often than you might think. My great-ggg-grandfather lived for a time in St. Stephens, Alabama, the thriving “place where Alabama began,” and that town is now just a quiet pine forest, with no sign of human habitation.

Recently I traveled down south to help excavate and document the lost ghost town that served as the capital of the Alabama Territory from 1817 to 1819, 200 years ago.

St. Stephens, Alabama was originally a Spanish-speaking town, founded by the Kingdom of Spain in 1789 as Fort San Esteban, 90 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico, at the head of navigation of the Tombigbee River. But under the 1795 Treaty of San Lorenzo, Spain ceded the fort to the Americans, and in 1799 a United States Army lieutenant raised the fifteen-star United States flag for the first time, over what would eventually become the state of Alabama.

The fort and town languished for a while as part of the Mississippi Territory and welcomed its first active federal judge, my ancestor Judge Harry Toulmin, in 1805.

He was appointed by President Thomas Jefferson and was the only federal civil presence in the area. As such he served as judge, public works official, postmaster, doctor, Unitarian minister and peacekeeper.

He rode 1,600 miles per year on horseback, using the branches of live oak trees as his bench and bar, and other, higher branches for hanging numerous criminals.

He issued the arrest warrant for ex-Vice President Aaron Burr, who was trying to create an empire in the West, and held Burr prisoner until a large posse could be assembled to escort Burr to Richmond for trial.

Judge Toulmin was so active that his enemies had him impeached, one of the first in United States history.

But the impeachment trial collapsed when President Jefferson sent a letter saying that Toulmin was doing an excellent job in carrying out the president's orders in preventing war with Spain.



PHOTO BY LLEWELLYN TOULMIN

Author Lew Toulmin (left) and lead archaeologist George Shorter (right) at the site of one of Judge Toulmin's properties in Old St. Stephens.

The town's fortunes improved in 1817 when it became the first capital of the Alabama Territory. The building of the Federal Road from Georgia to St. Stephens and Natchez had brought in a flood of settlers, and a building boom began.

Within a few years, the town had Alabama's first bank, brick house, public school and first county, Washington County. About 500 structures were built, many of stone, and St. Stephens was compared to Charleston and Savannah in terms of culture and architecture. At its peak, about 3,000 residents proudly resided in St. Stephens, and could not imagine living anywhere else.

But very quickly, by the mid-1820s, the town started to decline, hurt by yellow fever, the rise of the port of Mobile and the move of the capital in 1819 to Cahaba, in a corrupt land deal. By the end of the Civil War, the town was completely dead, and now it is just a home to ghosts, deer hunters and archaeologists.

I got involved with St. Stephens while trying to trace the movements of my famous ancestor, Judge Toulmin. I learned that archaeologists at the University of South Alabama (USA) in Mobile were working on the site, and volunteered to assist in excavating the settlement, in working in the archaeology lab, and in researching the history of the town's residents.

To bring more publicity to the

effort, I applied for an Explorers Club expedition flag to carry down to Alabama. The club was founded in 1904, and members have carried its flag to the Moon, the deepest ocean trenches, the north and south Poles and the top of Mt. Everest.

My flag, number 25, had been on numerous expeditions since 1929, including an effort to find the winter camp of Henry Hudson, an expedition to the South Pole, a tomb exploration in Egypt's Valley of the Kings and an underwater effort to trace Roman trade routes led by Bob Ballard (the finder of Titanic and Bismark).

My first task was to review the St. Stephens Estrayed Book – this had never been done before.

The book was saved by a young girl when it was tossed out the back of the new Washington County courthouse in 1900, and it ended up in the U-SA vault. It listed all the lost and found horses, cattle and pigs that strayed in Washington County from 1822 to 1866, who found them and their estimated value.

It was interesting to see that “two hogs” were worth only \$5.50, and that “two steers” were “valued at \$30 for the pair.” But the most astounding find was the large, forceful writing in the middle of the page in April 1861 saying, “If anyone attempts to haul down the American flag, shoot him on the spot. (Signed) John A. Dix, Sec'y of the Treasury and Major General, US Army!!”

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