The Hub of a Wheel: A Brief Guide to Murfreesboro’s Past
Introduction
Murfreesboro, the seat of government for Rutherford County, stands at Tennessee’s geographic center. Once the state capital, then a town torn apart by the Civil War, and later a place of agricultural trade, education innovation, and highway crossroads, the city now numbers more than 110,000 residents.

Its story begins in the deep past, where Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Creeks, and Shawnees lived off the area’s natural resources centuries before the first white settlers arrived. Native Americans hunted and fished seasonally, and identified waterways for nourishment and travel. Significant prehistoric archaeology properties are located throughout the county. Toward the latter part of the 18th century, eager settlers found these resources and included them in their vision of expansion.

Tennessee, Rutherford County, and Murfreesboro played an increasingly important role in developing the country farther west. Late-18th-century settlers transformed Stones River, a major Cumberland River tributary, into a transportation route and a power source for their mills, ruins of which can be seen along the Stones River Greenway.

The pioneer expansion pushed away Native American groups, especially after the 1792 war against the Chickamaugans in southern Middle Tennessee. Rutherford County was established in 1803; the creation of Murfreesboro and its first settlement came in 1811–1812. The Cherokee story, however, was far from over. The federal Indian Removal Act passed in 1830. By the end of that decade, thousands of Cherokees had passed through Rutherford County on their forced march—the Trail of Tears—to Indian Territory (now Oklahoma).

Rutherford County marks a unique spot on the Trail of Tears, where the trail split into two routes. One of the detachments went through present-day, downtown Murfreesboro, while the second trekked through Old Jefferson near what is now Smyrna, Tennessee. Evan Jones, one of the assistant conductors traveling with the Situwakee detachment, noted in his journal that they “paid Forty Dollars at the Walderns Ridge [toll] gate,” but would “avoid several [toll] gates on the road to Nashville.”

The Center for Historic Preservation, the Native History Association, the Rutherford County Archaeological Society, and the National Park Service have all done work to document the Trail of Tears and raise awareness of the Native American presence and its significance to the town and county.
Murfreesboro grew quickly from 1820 to 1860. The town was not only an agricultural center surrounded by prosperous farms and plantations, it also developed its own first industries. Peter Jennings, a free black resident, was a local baker and craftsman who helped to build the town’s first waterworks. Turnpikes connecting the town square to Nashville, Shelbyville, Lebanon, Woodbury, and Franklin came in the late 1830s and early 1840s. A decade later, the tracks of the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad not only led to new industries and increased cotton production but also created new towns such as LaVergne, Smyrna, and Christiana. By 1860, fine brick stores selling the best of goods surrounded the magnificent Greek Revival-style Rutherford County Courthouse and architecturally imposing brick homes and plantation houses could be found throughout the county.

Murfreesboro, like most of the South, built its early economy on the backs of slaves. 1860 marked the height of slavery in Rutherford County with 1,316 slave owners and 12,984 enslaved people. Black people would not gain freedom and the hope of full citizenship until after the Civil War, with the passage of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments to the United States Constitution. Even after the government abolished the institution of slavery, the imposition of “Jim Crow” segregation allowed for similar, but often unwritten, discriminatory practices to persist and thrive. Still, black residents invested in and established strong neighborhoods and rural communities. Spirituality, education, and a sustained message of racial uplift all served as social and cultural pillars of the community. During Reconstruction, four churches emerged as the leading institutions in black Murfreesboro: North Methodist Episcopal Church (Key United), African Methodist (Allen Chapel), Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and the Missionary Baptist Church (First Baptist). In addition to offering a platform for outward expressions and communal faith, black churches gave congregants quality social time and covert space for organizing around black initiatives.

Community members embraced education as an essential tool for progress. Many schools were held inside the churches. While the black community was primarily responsible for funding and teaching in these schools, white benevolent organizations like the American Missionary Association aided through giving funds and providing northern teachers. The most important school in Murfreesboro was Bradley Academy; its c. 1917 two-story brick school stands at Academy Street and is a museum today. Entrepreneurship also funded African Americans’ institutions and aspirations. Blacks used land to establish financial sustainability for future generations. Anthony King of the rural Cemetery community, next to Stones River National Battlefield, remarked, “the farm was passed down to me… I took over the farm at 14 years old.” King would eventually have enough funds to open a gas station and participate in other economic development ventures. Entrepreneurship, the black church, and schools all aligned with racial uplift, a collective effort to black citizenship, identity, and prosperity. The annual Juneteenth Celebration at Bradley Academy acknowledges and commemorates this important chapter in local history, a story once ignored in the promotional literature of the County’s heritage sites.

The Civil War wreaked havoc on the social infrastructure and landscape of Rutherford County. Significant battles took place at Murfreesboro (July 13, 1862), Stones River (December 31, 1862–January 2, 1863), Hoover’s Gap (June 24, 1863), Milton (March 20, 1863), and the Battle of the Cedars (December 5–7, 1864). Union forces occupied most of the county from 1862–1865. Once the armies left, citizens began the difficult, decades-long process of rebuilding. Notable improvements in Murfreesboro came through education, public health, and transportation.

Aerial view of Murfreesboro

“*This city may be likened to the hub of a wheel for there are eleven important highways from all directions leading into the city.*” –Facts about Murfreesboro, 1928 (Image courtesy Rutherford County Archives)
Murfreesboro, the Geographic Center of Tennessee
An obelisk stands on Old Lascassas Pike, marking the geographic center of Tennessee. Between 1818 and 1826, Murfreesboro served as the capital of Tennessee. (Image courtesy Rutherford County Archives)

Education
A town almost always in flux from 1870–1940, Murfreesboro attracted people with diverse views and experiences. Education emerged as a shared priority. For some it was a continued legacy, while others embraced it as the best tool for advancement.

By the 1920s, new public schools for white children had been built in Murfreesboro, Smyrna, Eagleville, Rockvale, Kittrell, Milton, Lascassas, and Christiana. African American schools served students in several locations, including Murfreesboro, Smyrna, Cemetery, and Webb’s Chapel. The Tennessee College for Women and the Middle Tennessee State Teachers College operated on Murfreesboro’s East Main Street. In addition to traditional schools, technical colleges and seminaries surfaced to meet the demands for specialized fields and technology in the New South. In “Facts about Murfreesboro and Rutherford County,” the Chamber of Commerce in 1928 boasted that local education was “proportionately the best in the South. Murfreesboro has nine school and college buildings.”

Soule College for Young Ladies
Established in 1825 as “The Female Academy,” it was eventually named for Bishop Joshua Soule of the Methodist Episcopal Church. During the Civil War, Federals used the school as a hospital. Reopened and operated as a college, the institution educated regional women until 1917, when it closed.

Martha A. Hopkins served as one of the last principals for Soule College for Young Ladies. Committed to preparing young women to contribute positively to society at large, she exclaimed, “Class of 1917, I would not wish you all sunshine and brightness, for that would lessen your appreciation for the fullness of joy. Shun not the struggle.” –May 18, 1917, Soule College Commencement (“Soule College,” Eugene H. Sloan; image courtesy Rutherford County Archives)
Cemetery School
African Americans founded Cemetery during Reconstruction. The community established schools, businesses, and a collective goal to thrive as free people. In 1962, Cemetery Elementary School closed and consolidated with the Smyrna Rosenwald School.

Leonora “Boe” Washington, a Rutherford County resident and alumni of Cemetery School recounts, “Our educational foundation was laid by using second-hand books thrown away by schools of Caucasian students. . . . I am extremely grateful for the love, patience, endurance, intelligence, and quality time I received from my two elementary teachers. . . .” (“Saving an African American Schoolhouse, Saving Fond Memories” from PreservationNation Blog)

As part of the county’s Child Health Development program in the 1920s, children at Cemetery School learned about dental hygiene. Here, they follow the chart for clean teeth. (Image courtesy Tennessee State Library and Archives)

Bradley Academy
Erected on property the Murfree family donated in 1811, the Bradley Academy served as a school for white children. Some of its famous attendees include John Bell and James K. Polk. The present building dates to 1917, when the school served African Americans. It is now a community museum and cultural center. (Image courtesy Rutherford County Archives)

Middle Tennessee State University
Opening its doors in 1911, Middle Tennessee State Normal School evolved into Middle Tennessee State College and became Middle Tennessee State University in 1965. Notable alumni include Senator Albert Gore Sr. (1932), Nobel Prize economist James M. Buchanan (1941), and U.S. Congressman Bart Gordon (1971). (Image courtesy the Historic Murfreesboro Postcard Collection, donated by Ridley Wills II)
Public Health

Rutherford County was initially a rural area with few facilities dedicated to public health, but it eventually led the nation in public health initiatives. In the 1920s, the Commonwealth Fund of New York searched for rural communities in need, and ultimately chose Rutherford County as one of four rural public initiatives across the nation in 1924. Director of the Murfreesboro Red Cross Simeon B. Christy submitted a comprehensive report to the Commonwealth Fund describing the county’s current public health initiatives and needs, which helped secure the Commonwealth Fund’s support.

The Commonwealth Fund project director was Dr. Harry S. Mustard, a nationally recognized public health expert. The program pushed immunization to eradicate small pox, diphtheria, and typhoid fever and worked with the county to pass regulations on the quality of milk and water imported into town. One of Dr. Mustard’s key employees was Mary Ellen Vaughan, the nurse who served the county’s African American communities.

Due to local support, the Commonwealth Fund built the Rutherford Hospital and the Rutherford Health Department facilities, making a lasting contribution to the county.

By 1940, the federal government added the huge Veterans Administration hospital on the northern outskirts of Murfreesboro. This complex of brick buildings provided mental and physical rehabilitation to veterans. It was later renamed to the Alvin C. York VA Medical Center, acknowledging Tennessee’s World War I hero Sgt. Alvin C. York. In 2000, it joined the Tennessee Valley Healthcare System.

Transportation

Transportation is the third major contributor to the history of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County. At the beginning, Stones River was a major transportation system since it connected to the larger Cumberland River. Named after Uriah Stone, one of the legendary late-18th-century “long hunters,” the river had long been important to Native Americans. But Stones River was far too shallow to accommodate major river traffic. Constant Hardeman built a massive steamboat in 1824 to transport his goods. To his dismay, the 100-ton vessel was far too deep and heavy to move down the stream. Settlers and tradesmen soon looked to other means of transportation.

Public Health in the Classroom

Routine medical check-ups became common sights in Rutherford County’s schools after the Rutherford Health Department opened its doors. Here children are examined by Dr. Black. (Image courtesy Rutherford County Archives)

Rutherford Hospital

The Rutherford Hospital opened its doors on May 2, 1927. It remained in this location until 2010, when a new hospital was opened on Medical Center Parkway. (Image courtesy the Historic Murfreesboro Postcard Collection, donated by Ridley Wills II)
The late 1830s turnpike movement in Tennessee placed Murfreesboro at the center of regional transportation. All of these turnpikes charged a toll that the Tennessee General Assembly established, making the roads primarily accessible to tradesmen. After the Civil War, the county developed new roads and turnpikes that did not require tolls. An 1887 history remarked, “It is doubtful if any county in the State can boast of as many and good pikes or more efficient and accommodating officials.”

Rail transportation came to Rutherford County in the early 1850s. These steam-powered engines ushered Rutherford County into the Industrial Age, creating new towns, employment, and profit. The railroad and its accompaniments drastically changed the landscape.

Initial talks for railroads started in 1824, projecting a railroad line that covered Mississippi, East Tennessee, and Middle Tennessee. City planners and gentry landowners nixed that idea in favor of the Nashville & Chattanooga (N&C) Railroad. Completed in 1854, the N&C served as the first complete line in Tennessee. In February 1862, N&C fell to Union forces, securing their ability to easily transport supplies. After the Civil War, the railroad expanded into the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis (NC&St.L).

Then came the automobile. The Dixie Highway (1915–1927), which extended from Ontario, Canada, to Miami, Florida, passed through the Murfreesboro town square as well as Christiana, Smyrna, and LaVergne.

Transportation progress was not only relegated to the ground. After the Industrial Age, Rutherford County entrepreneurs looked to the sky. Sky Harbor Airport operated between Murfreesboro and Smyrna in the 1920s and 1930s. From 1941 to 1971, Sewart Air Force Base operated out of Smyrna. During World War II, it served as a Bombardment Air Base and Army-Air Force Training Command Base. After deactivateing, the base became available for civilian use. The land tract is now a joint operation between the Smyrna Airport and the Tennessee Army National Guard Helicopter unit.

Middle Tennessee State University’s Department of Aerospace bears witness to Rutherford County’s commitment to innovative forms of transportation. One of the most prominent departments at the University, Aerospace provides students with the opportunity to work at Murfreesboro’s Airport and decommissioned planes.

Education, health, and transportation are merely three of several possible themes that tie together the modern era of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County. Agriculture remains a key industry but now such international corporations as Nissan operate in the county. Middle Tennessee State University is one of the most important public universities in Tennessee, but its reach now carries MTSU graduates across the globe. LaVergne and Smyrna have joined Murfreesboro as major Tennessee towns and commercial centers.

Through all of the rapid change in the last 40 years, Rutherford County retains pride in its heritage and its role in state and national history. Visit the many landmarks of the county, from historic homes such as the Sam Davis Home in Smyrna and the Oaklands Mansion in Murfreesboro to the Stones River National Battlefield to the hundreds of historic cemeteries and churches across the county. The county’s natural history can be past is celebrated at the historic Bradley Academy Cultural Center. Walk the landscape across the many public parks and the Stones River Greenway. Our past has shaped our present and will continue to give us opportunities into the future.

Civil War Roads

*This Civil War-era Map shows that many of the roads leading into downtown Murfreesboro charged tolls. (Image courtesy Library of Congress)*
This Murfreesboro Coach Company Bus Line Schedule indicates that residents had the opportunity to ride public transportation. (Image courtesy Rutherford County Archives)

Sewart Air Force Base was located in Smyrna and operated from 1941–1971. The site is now home to the Smyrna Airport. (Image courtesy Tennessee State Library and Archives)

This brochure is a project of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation and the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, a partnership unit of the National Park Service administered by the Center for Historic Preservation. Text by Dr. Carroll Van West and Aleia Brown, Graduate Research Assistant. Special thanks to John Lodl and the staff at the Rutherford County Archives for assistance in locating images.