

Emery Road - Historic Bridge needs help!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 28, 2006)

The above bridge stands in the midst of Oak Ridge and as a close look at the right side of the accompanying photograph shows, one of the concrete retaining walls is precariously close to falling into the creek. This bridge of mixed rock boulder and concrete construction may be the oldest man-made structure remaining in Oak Ridge other than tombstones. Records show that it was built on the main road through Robertsville soon after the turn of the 20th century. There are some indications of later "improvements" and it was surely in use when the Manhattan Project city was built on Black Oak Ridge that was to become our own Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The construction of the "Oak Ridge Turnpike" obviously changed the route of the main road. The Emery Road bridge is located just off the Oak Ridge Turnpike near the junction with Robertsville Road and between the Midtown Community Center and the Oak Ridge High School football practice field.

This road was likely the first route in the late 1700's for travel from East Tennessee (North Carolina at the time) to the Cumberland Settlements. It passed through present day Oak Ridge following the route of today's Emory Valley Road from the Clinch River west passing just south of the spring-fed pond that is now the Oak Ridge outdoor swimming pool.

The Emery Road historic bridge is marked by a Tennessee Historic Marker that was placed there by the efforts of Shasa Carathers, a Boy Scout of Troop 224 as an Eagle Scout project in July 1994. Tennessee State Representative at the time, David Coffey, wrote a supporting letter for Shasa that stated:

"After having lived in this area for many decades, I feel a sense of urgency in preserving our history and our historical sites for future generations. This young scout, in order to obtain his Eagle Award, has done extensive footwork, research and just plain old fashioned listening. The "old" Emery Road is a subject I am very familiar with and personally interested in. This road was nothing more than a horse trail at first (maybe even a buffalo trail); later it became a second gateway to Middle Tennessee. I believe I have even discovered the site of the Old Stage Coach Inn that was located on the Emery Road. This bridge, still intact today, is a window that looks into the past. If this site is not marked for what it is and preserved, it could vanish soon without a trace and a piece of history would be lost forever. I feel this is a worthwhile cause and urge you to give it every possible consideration, Sincerely, David L. Coffey"

I was pleased to be asked to provide the photographs that accompanied Shasa's Eagle Scout Project application and also to pen the actual words that are now on The Emery Road state historic marker.

Let's take a look at the history of this unique road that ran through what is now in the midst of our city. The Emery Road followed closely some sections of the path of an old Indian trail from the area now known as East Tennessee to what is now Middle Tennessee. This worn path was known as *Tollunteeskee's Trail*. Long Hunters used portions of this trail as early as 1766 when James Smith returned from a long hunt using the route. James Robertson's overland trip in 1779 to establish the Cumberland settlement at present-day Nashville used the more circuitous route of *The Wilderness Road* through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky and south to the Cumberland River. As this route did not cross Cherokee land, it was safer for travel than the more direct route, even if it was longer. Robertson's use of the more established route through Kentucky indicates that the route that came to be known as the Emery Road was not yet well established in 1779.

The Cherokee claimed the territory between the Clinch River and a treaty line west of Standing Stone – modern day Monterey. They disputed the right of the white settlers to use this trail through their country without permission. The use of trails, blazing of "traces," and cutting of roads through their land without payment was one of the reasons provoking a long and bloody war between the Cherokee and white settlers and was a constant subject included in all treaty negotiations. The Cherokee always insisted that the government build "one road" from Washington District to the Cumberland settlements, rather than many traces using various routes.

In 1786, when Captain James White built a station at the junction of the Holston and French Broad rivers that join together to form the Tennessee river, James Robertson and a handful of other men spent seventeen days clearing a more direct route than the Wilderness Road – a pack-horse trail across the plateau and mountains from Fort Nasborough (Nashville) to Captain James White's station (Knoxville). This clearing effort followed generally the route later blazed by Peter Avery in 1787 as a result of an act passed by the North Carolina legislature.

Emery Road - Historic Bridge needs help!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 28, 2006)

The first formal authorization to "cut and clear" a trace for a direct route to the Cumberland settlements occurred in 1785 when the North Carolina legislature provided for a force of 300 men to protect the Cumberland settlements. These soldiers were charged with cutting and clearing a road, by the most eligible route, from the lower end of the Clinch Mountain to Fort Nashborough (Nashville). More direct and shorter than the Wilderness Road, it would accommodate expected increases in immigration as Revolutionary War veterans claimed their land warrants. Probably little real progress was made on this road as James Robertson continued to request protection and improvements.

In 1787 North Carolina legislators approved a second road act, which again ordered a road cut and cleared from the south end of Clinch Mountain to Fort Nashborough (Nashville). Peter Avery blazed a trail beginning at the south end of the Clinch Mountain at present-day Blaine. The Avery Trace as it was later known marked the route that closely followed where the present route of Emory Road in Knox County is now located. The original route crossed the Clinch River at Lea's Ford near present-day Oak Ridge at the marina and continued through the middle of present-day Oak Ridge passing near the Oak Ridge High School where an existing rock bridge constructed just after 1900 was located on the old route. The road then passed through Winter's Gap (Oliver Springs) and crossed the Emory River near present-day Wartburg. It passed through present-day Lansing to Johnson's Stand, followed a ridge to Standing Stone (Monterey), and then went on to the Cumberland settlements (Nashville). Major George Walton directed the soldiers working on this earliest road. This route was known at various times as *Avery's Trace*, the old *North Carolina Road*, and *Emery Road*.

The Cherokee continued to resist white settlers crossing their land and demanded that tolls be paid. Those who refused risked losing their lives. A concern for safety caused individual travelers and families to avoid the northern route and form groups on the banks of the Clinch River to wait for an armed escort by a more southern route that joined the northern route near present-day Crossville. Both routes were still little more than traces, yet Harriette Arnow noted that a party of 100 under the protection of Kasper Mansker and other guards used the trace in 1787, a year before it officially opened.

In 1788 the North Carolina legislature passed a third act for a road to the Cumberland settlements and provided for two companies of militia of 50 men each to guard immigrants. When the road (southern route) was completed, Robertson gave notice in the State Gazette of North Carolina that soldiers had successfully escorted the first party of immigrants on September 25, 1788. During that year several families grouped together and made the escorted trip, including the widow of General Williams Davidson and Judge John McNairy and his family. Andrew Jackson also came to the Cumberland settlement during the period, having obtained an appointment as prosecuting attorney.

James Robertson continued to petition the North Carolina legislature for improvements to the trace. His pleading went unanswered until 1788 when an act was passed instructing that a road be cut and cleared. This "road" actually developed into a system of roads or paths that generally followed the driest route and might be changed frequently as attacks by the Cherokee made some sections unsafe and new routes were chosen. Stations were formed along the route that served to provide protection and shelter for the travelers. The system of roads continued to evolve until the summer of 1795 when a wagon road was opened from Knoxville to Nashville, direct, so that loaded wagons could pass. The more southern route was used for this improvement and become the route most travelers chose as it was the most protected and heavily traveled.

The system of roads came to be known as the Emery Road and served travelers exclusively for ten years (1785 – 1795) as the primary route of travel. The Emery Road continued to be a part of the network of early wagon roads. Later improvements to the route through the years kept it a main thoroughfare. The Emery Road was maintained as a main thoroughfare through the communities of Robertsville, Wheat, Scarborough and Elza until the Manhattan Project era. The historic early 1900's bridge is the most visible remaining evidence of this earliest road from east to west in North Carolina in the 1780's and was a main thoroughfare for westward migration in the part of the Southwest Territory that became Tennessee in 1796. The first trail may have been blazed by Peter Avery and was used as the main route to the Cumberland Settlements (Nashville) until the Walton Road was built from Kingston to Monterey (old Standing Stone).

Emery Road - Historic Bridge needs help!

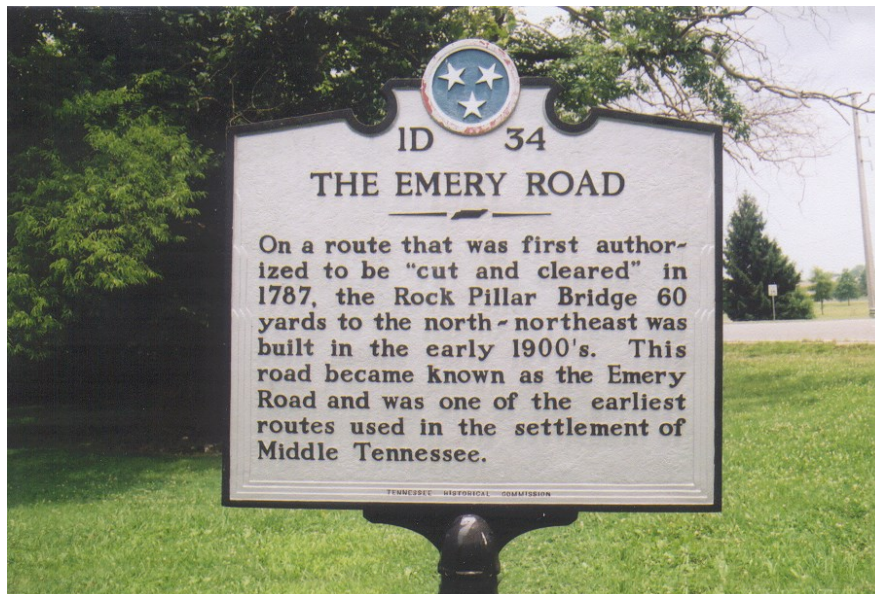
(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 28, 2006)

A much earlier structure, the David Hall Historic Cabin in Claxton, constructed prior to 1799 was also located on the early route that came to be the Emery Road. This cabin has an interesting history. The current owners are Harry and Libby Bumgardner (Libby is the grand daughter of the third owner of the David Hall cabin - Walter and Nannie Thomason). The cabin is located east of the Clinch River near present day Claxton, TN. In the early years, David Hall operated the two-cabin complex as an Inn and Tavern. It served this purpose through the Civil War. The last persons to live in the cabin were Rova, a daughter of Nannie Thomason and her three sons. They moved out of the cabin in 1976.

Libby has taken an intense interest in restoring and preserving the historic cabins. She has also found a large cache of paper documents in a large trunk kept in the upstairs of the two story main cabin. Evidence of Civil War activity is found there as are other 1800's era receipts, letters and other documents. She is doing a wonderful job maintaining the history of the cabins. These cabins are representative of many such Inns and Taverns that existed along the early Emery Road.

Let's now go back to the present situation with our bridge and look at what must be done to prevent further deterioration of this historic structure. Unless something is done soon, the retaining wall may plunge into the stream. As is shown in the accompanying photographs, the dirt is collapsing behind the wall and pushing it out. With the washout beneath the bottom of the wall there is nothing to hold it up. One solution would be to jack the wall up and place a large boulder beneath the wall. My concern is that unless the wall adjustment is done carefully and with full knowledge of such things, the wall may just tumble into the creek when anything is attempted. We need someone with experience dealing with such delicate situations to examine the bridge and evaluate what can be done to correct the damage done to the retaining wall, and it must be done quickly. One heavy rain could spell disaster to our bridge, our oldest structure (other than tombstones) in Oak Ridge history!

For more information on early roads in East Tennessee see: <http://www.smithdray1.net/history/emeryroad.htm> for more on the Emery Road; <http://smithdray.tripod.com/trails-index-11.html> for a article on the Walton and Emery Roads as published in the Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture – 1998; or <http://smithdray.tripod.com/trailsearly-index-11-1.html> for an article tracing the routes by which settlers came into the East Tennessee region.



Tennessee State Historic Marker placed near the junction of Robertsville Road and the Oak Ridge Turnpike commemorates the Emery Road and the nearby stone and concrete bridge

Emery Road - Historic Bridge needs help!

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on February 28, 2006)



Historic Emery Road Bridge located between Oak Ridge High School and Midtown Community Center