

Emery Road: Historic bridge needs help, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 7, 2006)

In the 1780's, the Cherokee continued to resist white settlers crossing their land as they made their way west from what is now Knoxville to Fort Nasborough (now Nashville), 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 became 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).

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.

Emery Road: Historic bridge needs help, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 7, 2006)

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.



The historic bridge has a portion of the retaining wall on the southeast corner of the bridge that is in danger of collapse into the stream

Emery Road: Historic bridge needs help, part 2

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 7, 2006)



Retaining wall is leaning precariously and may soon fall into the stream



David Hall Cabin is the oldest structure in Anderson County located on the route of the early Emery Road in the Claxton TN area near Bull Run Steam Plant