

Wheat Historical Marker reinstalled - a hint of what was Wheat community

By: D. Ray Smith | Historically Speaking | The Oak Ridger | June 13, 2006

A few days ago Don Raby contacted me. You will recall that Don is the person who, through his personal initiative, has made available photographic images of the home places in this area that pre-date Oak Ridge and the Manhattan Project. These images are important to our history and have been well-received by those descendants who, until they saw Don's photographs scanned from the federal archives, had no idea what the homes where their parents or grandparents lived actually looked like. Don also has a keen appreciation for historical markers and becomes concerned when one goes missing.

He had just noticed the Wheat Historical Marker, previously located on Blair Road about 50 feet from the intersection with Highway 58, was no longer there. He had already called the Roane County archivist and they were not aware the sign was missing. He sent me a photograph that he took that showed tire marks very close to the signpost that remained after the sign had been removed or knocked down.

I asked the Oak Ridge Police Department if there had been a recent accident report on Blair Road and there had been none. As Bill Wilcox, our Oak Ridge historian, was out of town, I notified the mayor that the sign was missing and of what I was doing to attempt to locate it.

After about two days, I got a phone call from Steve Goodpasture who told me the sign had been missing from the Blair Road location for two years and that it had indeed been knocked down as a result of a truck hitting it. The sign was only slightly damaged and it had been stored until the Tennessee Department of Transportation could reinstall it. He further told me that the location for the sign had been moved to Highway 58. One could see the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church from the new location and that the sign had been erected that day.



Wheat Alumni Association and Oak Ridge Historical and Preservation Association members gather at the newly-installed Wheat Historical Marker

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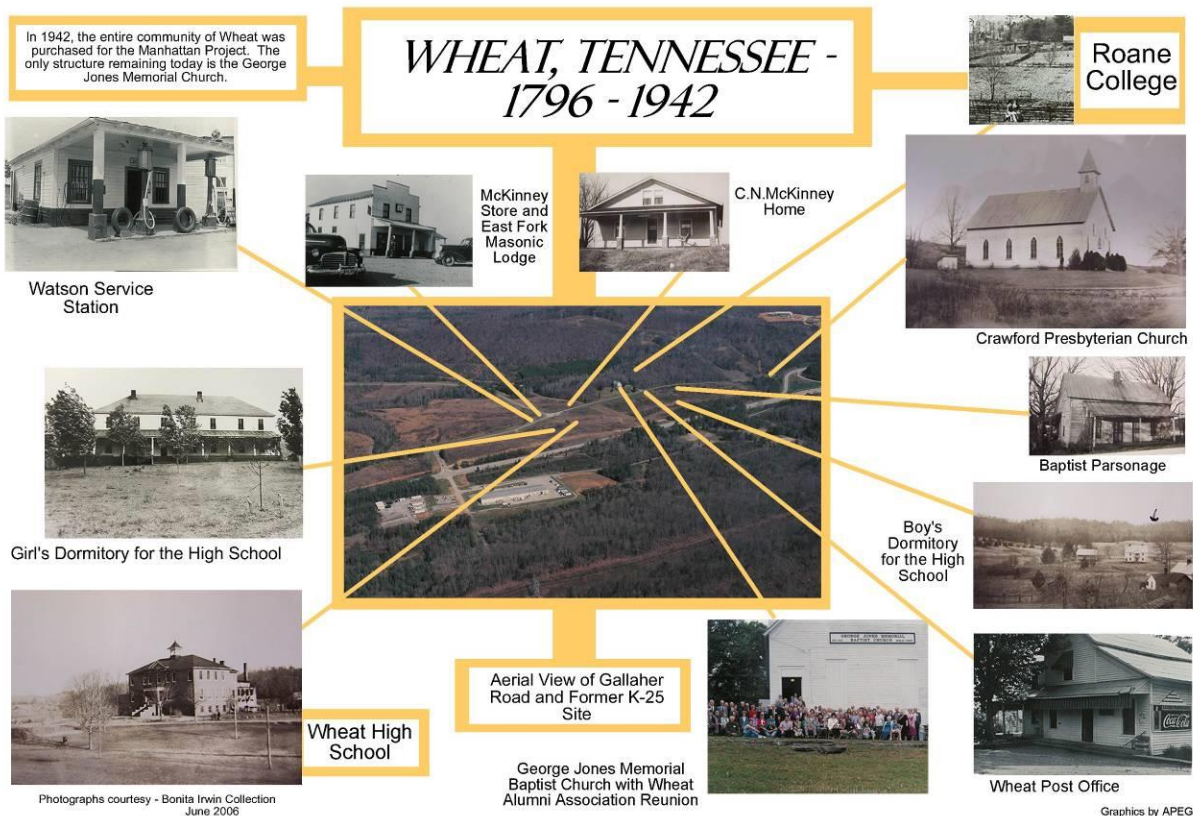
I went out to the sign and photographed it. At that time I did not know the details of the placement but was impressed with the view of the church. Little did I realize the extent of the accuracy of the location of the sign or the special person who had painstakingly studied just the right location for the historical marker.

On Thursday evening, at a special gathering of individuals interested in the history of Wheat which included members of the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association as well as members of the Wheat Alumni Association, I learned a whole lot more about the historic site that was Wheat. It was much more than just the church and cemetery visible today.

After meeting at the sign and taking several photographs of the view and the sign as well as those individuals instrumental in its relocation, we went to the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church. This was my first opportunity to see the inside of the church. Here I got to speak with Allen Murray, president of the Wheat Alumni Association, and Bonita Irwin, secretary and archivist for the organization. I was amazed by the collection of photographs that Bonita has provided that show a number of original Wheat community buildings such as stores, schools, churches and homes.

Most of us are aware that Wheat had a school, and of course we are aware of the white church still standing visible on the hillside as we travel Highway 58. Some of us may even be aware of the huge stone marker that was erected in 1950, northwest of the Highway 95 and Highway 58 intersection, by members of the Crawford Cumberland Presbyterian Church in memory of that church as well as the Poplar Creek Seminary, Roane College and Wheat High School. This impressive marker is very difficult to see because of the growth along the bank above the road.

However, until now I had never realized the full extent of the Wheat community.



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It dates back to 1796 when there is known to have been a gristmill in East Fork Valley on East Fork Poplar Creek. The millstones are now located on the east side of the church building. The community was known for growing peaches and other fruits at the same time that Harriman thrived on these crops. The school was an important element in the community and drew other businesses and churches to the immediate area. A cluster of homes, stores, other businesses and churches were located on both sides of what was the Robertsville Wheat road and is now an Oak Ridge greenway. This historic site is just northwest of Highway 58 and Blair Road, and for the first time I realized that there may well be signs of the foundations that still remain, as well as other indications that tell the story of the Wheat community buildings. Such is the case at the historic site of Happy Valley, as was learned during the filming of "Lost Worlds - The Manhattan Project" for the History Channel a few months ago.

Anne McBride has created a tremendous visual of the Wheat Community that will be on display during the Secret City Festival at the Oak Ridge Heritage and Preservation Association's area of the Civic Center in Rooms A and B. Be sure and come by and see for yourself the full extent of the Wheat community buildings and layout. She has allowed me to illustrate this article with one of the graphics she designed based on Steve Goodpasture's original idea to show the Wheat community layout through photographs linked to an aerial view of the terrain that was Wheat.

I can see this graphic becoming an outside sign placed at a pull-off on Highway 58 where tourists could stop and learn more about the community that was there before the Manhattan Project, and the school that has a strong history and was used as offices and training to support the Manhattan Project. It was demolished in 1950. There were also both men and women's boarding houses that were used as apartments.

Earlier I mentioned that the strategic placement of the Wheat historical marker dawned on me during this visit. This resulted from Bonita Irwin showing me why she decided to locate the sign exactly where she did. Her reason was primarily so the church would be visible from the sign, but I noted that it is also placed almost exactly where the foundation of the Wheat School is likely to be found underneath all that brush. I want to go see if that can be found, but think I will wait until the fall and the ticks, chiggers, and snakes are not so likely to attack me while traipsing through the heavy growth.

While thinking about bushes I might add that the pine trees that have been replanted since the southern pine beetle killed the pines there will soon again block the view of the picturesque church on the hillside. Surely, we can arrange to keep this beautiful historic view near the west entrance to our city free of growth and treat it as the special feature it can be if properly maintained. The pines may need to be cut.



Allen Murray and Bonita Irwin at the Wheat Historical Marker in its new location, with the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church in the

The Wheat Alumni Association holds a homecoming reunion on the first Sunday in October of each year and many of the original community citizens and their descendants still return. Each year there is displayed a special wall-hanging that contains 167 stars representing individuals from the Wheat

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community who either served or died in World War II. Eight of the stars are gold ones and represent those Wheat soldiers killed in action. Each soldier's name is written on a star. Remember this is a community which had their homes taken to help win the war; this memorial shows that they also gave the lives of some of their family members.

There were once seven peach orchards in the area that thrived until the blight in the late 1920s began to weaken the crops. However, Bonita says that even as late as 1935 they shipped 20,000 bushels of peaches.

Learn more about this special historic site and strong community that was known as Wheat by visiting the Secret City Festival's display featuring Wheat. One thing you won't want to miss at the display is the label for a can of corn from the East Fork Valley Farm Cannery.

By the way, the name "Wheat" comes from the first postmaster, Henry Franklin Wheat. However, Elias Roberts was the first settler in the immediate Wheat area when in 1798 he purchased 500 acres, most of which eventually became the K-25 Gaseous Diffusion Plant site.

I am glad Don Raby called me about that historical marker as that call has resulted in a significant increase in my knowledge and appreciation for one of the special communities that existed here before the Manhattan Project.

There are also stories about Scarboro, such as the spelling of the name and the brothers who came to settle there; Elza - was there ever really a community there?; and Robertsville - why are there no historical markers for Robertsville or New Hope? And what about Bethel Valley and Freels Bend? For more on Oak Ridge's historical markers see: <http://smithdray.angeltowns.net/or/hm.htm>.