

# Oak Ridge Gates – More than seven; Pre-Manhattan Project Communities – more than four

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on July 18, 2006)

As is usually the case when *Historically Speaking* runs each week, I get feedback almost immediately. Often it comes politely and earnestly from someone who knows more about some particular aspect of our history than I do. They are kind when they tell me there is more to the story than I included and proceed to give me their personal perspective of the current article's subject matter. I sincerely appreciate these conversations as I always learn more about our Oak Ridge history from individuals who lived it rather than just attempt to capture it second hand and put it in writing.

However, on occasion the feedback is sometimes more direct and precise. When the feedback starts out with "Your story had this or that wrong!" I prepare to listen keenly and get a pencil and paper ready. This is when I truly learn the most about our history and I never fail to get good material for a future article. These conversations are greatly appreciated as well.

One such instance of feedback came recently regarding the article on how Oak Ridge was selected. Bill Sergeant called to tell me that the story of Wednesday, July 5, 2006, in which I had included a comment by Robert Dunbar where he stated that the Blair Gate was named for a Colonel Blair, was just absolutely wrong. Bill can express himself succinctly and without hesitation, as you surely realize if you know Bill. He is a wonderful friend and I respect his knowledge and experience, so as soon as I heard his message on the answering machine, I got my pen and paper ready and called him immediately. I knew a story was forthcoming!

Bill had already checked the military records to determine exactly when Colonel Blair was in Oak Ridge and when he left. It seems Colonel Blair was only here a very short time. He came in January 1943 and stayed only until August 1943. So he was gone well before the "Blair Road Gate" was named likely in early 1949 when the primary road gates to the city were opened. So, Bill expressed wonder at why Robert Dunbar would have thought that Colonel Blair had anything to do with one of the gates. Additionally, Bill described the changes that occurred at the Poplar Creek Gate when its location was moved and its name was changed to the Blair Gate.

As Bill continued to tell me the story in more exact detail, I found the story expanding to include other interesting facts about the original seven gates as well as the one in question (there were actually at least two more gates). But first let's complete the story about Poplar Creek Gate – one of the original seven – and its transition to Blair Gate.

According to Bill, it was during the transition period in late 1948 and early 1949 when the decision was made to open the primary routes into the city that the Poplar Creek Gate was moved from the above location (on Blair Road where it crosses Poplar Creek) to a more distant location at the Blair junction with the Harriman and Oliver Springs highway at the railroad stop known as Blair. He does not recall exactly when this move was made as it could easily have been made anytime prior to the March 19, 1949 gate opening, but he is sure it was in place by the time the main routes to the city were opened. Bill states the facts regarding the naming of the Blair Gate for the community as his personal recollection because of his intimate involvement in assuring the gates were secure and knowing which gates were being used and which were not.

This Blair Gate continued to be used even after 1949 and was in use until 1953 when the three plant sites were again fenced closer to the actual sites and protected entrances placed at each location rather than on roads leading to the locations. Gallaher Gate, White Wing Gate and Blair Gate were active as were the three existing checking stations (Oak Ridge Turnpike, Scarboro Road and Bethel Valley Road) making a total of six active gates until 1953.

This brings us to the details of just how many gates there were originally. The seven original gates normally mentioned as giving access to the World War II Secret City of Oak Ridge until March 19, 1949, were located as follows. 1. Elza Gate was on Oak Ridge Turnpike (Highway 95) just east of Melton Lake Drive (then River Road). 2. Oliver Springs Gate was on Highway 62 (now Illinois Avenue) just north of West Outer Drive. 3. Poplar Creek Gate was on Blair Road where it crosses Poplar Creek. 4. Gallaher Gate was located on the Oak Ridge Turnpike at the junction with the southwest end of Bear Creek Road at the Clinch River. 5. White Wing Gate was located

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on the White Wing Bridge Road (Highway 95) at the Clinch River. 6. Solway Gate was located on Highway 62 at the Clinch River. 7. Edgemoor Gate was located on the Edgemoor Road at the Clinch River.

Bill Sergeant and I talked about these “original seven” gates and he stated that there were at least two other gates that were opened and closed and thus guarded on a regular basis but were not open at all hours. These gates were the Marlow Gate located at the foot of Black Oak Ridge on “G” Road or Key Springs Road. This gate also may have been referred to as the Dossett Gate or the Marlow/Dossett Gate. It was only opened for a couple of hours each morning and evening to allow traffic flow during the time people were coming to work or going home.

In addition to the Marlow Gate there was at least one other gate. Bill says it was located on the road to the Baker's Mill community. This community is located just north of what is now Horizon Center. The road where the Baker's Mill Gate was located leaves the Oak Ridge Turnpike just northeast of the intersection of Highway 95 and Highway 58. Joe Lenhard took me to the location of Baker's Mill and we saw evidence of several homes in that community. When I began to learn the history of Wheat this community of Baker's Mill was cited as a heavily populated area with fine homes and where there were once large peach orchards. There is a huge rock quarry there now and one greatly deteriorated wooden bridge remains over the East Fork Poplar Creek. The foundations for a larger bridge over Poplar Creek can still be seen. Bear Creek also joins East Fork Poplar Creek in this area.

Steve Goodpasture provided the following information about Baker's Mill. “Baker's Mill was original built around 1830. It was located on East Fork Poplar Creek, about 100 feet upstream from the mouth. It was a 2-story frame structure. It burned around 1918 and was rebuilt as a 2-story structure with metal siding and updated equipment. The dam for the mill was across the mouth of East Fork Poplar Creek and backed up the creek for a mile and a half. The dam was approximately 10 feet high and constructed of large limestone blocks that were quarried from a site not far from the dam site. The mill had numerous owners through the years and its last owner was Charles Baker. Mr. Baker had been displaced by the construction of Norris Dam and Lake. When Watts Bar Dam was built, he moved the mill across Poplar Creek and installed a caterpillar gasoline engine to operate the mill. Mr. Baker relinquished the mill in 1942 to the Federal Government.”

Mention of Baker's Mill community and the Blair community causes me to think of the New Hope community and the Bethel community and likely several other small “railroad stop” or crossroads communities that likely were here in this area. Like the original “seven gates” we have historically spoken of four communities, Robertsville, Scarboro, Wheat and Elza. I believe Blair was likely much like Elza – that is a railroad stop and not much more. However, Elza gained fame through the Manhattan Project using it as a delivery point. Bethel and New Hope had churches and were thriving communities but neither as large as Robertsville, Wheat and Scarboro all of which had schools.

There are other small communities that were here and have been lost to the common memory and are being lost to the history - Baker's Mill being one example. The millstones from that community gristmill are now located at the George Jones Memorial Baptist Church. Yet there is time to capture these small communities in more meaningful ways. The New Hope community name is getting a new lease on life through the naming of the Y-12 public interface facility the New Hope Center. That name is a huge source of pride for me as I was permitted to be the one to select that name for the new facility...quite an honor, in my mind.

Do you know the names of other small communities that are being overlooked when the history of the area prior to the Manhattan Project and Oak Ridge is discussed in history? As with the little-known gates, only because Bill Sergeant took the time and effort to call me and talk to me about what he recalled about the Marlow/Dossett Gate and the Baker's Mill Gate do we now have a chance to capture what would likely have been lost to our history. These details are fast fading from our collective memory and that should not be.

Let me know if you recall other communities that were on the Oak Ridge Reservation that may be of interest to our readers. Send an e-mail to [draysmith@comcast.net](mailto:draysmith@comcast.net) or call me at 482-4224.

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Bill Sergeant cites the history of the origin of Blair Gate and recalls even more gates and communities