

Oak Ridge area once crossroads of America

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on May 16, 2016)

Recently my friend David Hackett, whom I have come to know through the Oak Ridge Heritage & Preservation Association, the Manhattan Project National Historical Park (he is a volunteer) and our shared common interest in the early trails and roads of East Tennessee, spoke here in Oak Ridge. I was not able to attend as I was scheduled to give a talk on the history of Oak Ridge at the same time.

I asked Carolyn Krause to capture his talk for Historically Speaking. Here is her report on David's presentation.

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"Long before Oak Ridge became a secret city, the area was the crossroads of America, one of the best kept secrets," declared David Hackett, an Oak Ridge ethnohistorian, founder of the Yuchi National Archive (www.yuchi.org) and volunteer with the National Park Service.

Speaking to the Oak Ridge chapter of the American Association of University Women last month, Hackett said that the focus of the Manhattan Project National Historic Park, of which Oak Ridge is a part, is the Manhattan Project (1942-45) that successfully built two atomic bombs that helped end World War II.

"I think we should mine our deeper history," he added. "What we learn would help us connect much better with the communities around us. People want to see where their ancestors came from.

"Heritage tourism is growing. I would like to see the Emery Trace recognized as a Heritage Trail."

What is the Emery Trace? It includes Lea's Ford at the Clinch River, the Oak Ridge Marina, Emory Valley Road, Woodland, the sign in front of the Midtown Community Center (Wildcat Den) near where Oak Ridge Turnpike intersects with Robertsville Road, Raleigh Road, Hickory Lane, North Illinois Avenue. The sign, titled "The Emery Road," states:

"On a route that was first authorized to be 'cut and cleared' in 1787, the Rock Pillar Bridge 60 yards to the north-northeast was built in the 1900s. This road became known as the Emery Road and was one of the earliest routes used in the settlement of Middle Tennessee."

After leaving what is now Oak Ridge, the road then passed through Winter's Gap (Oliver Springs) and crossed the Emory River near present-day Wartburg. It was the direct route west toward the Cumberland settlements on the Cumberland River, now known as Nashville. But it was not originally a safe route because the Cherokees threatened to kill white travelers if they refused to pay a toll.

"The Emery Trace is an important heritage trail in part because the celebrated Natchez Trace could not exist without its connection to the Emery Trace," Hackett said. "One trail feeds into the other."

The Natchez Trace, now known as the Natchez Trace Parkway, connects Nashville to Natchez, Miss. It has been highly promoted, has been designated as an All-American Road and is maintained by the National Park Service.

"But the Emery Trail has been completely ignored," Hackett said. "Now that Oak Ridge is part of a national park, recognizing the Emery Trace as a heritage trail would promote deeper understanding of the peoples and cultures of this region."

Hackett, who has a Yuchi heritage, started his history of the early people in the area for the AAUW audience with a surprising fact. "Tennessee" is not a Cherokee "Indian" word. It's a combination of two Yuchi words.

"Tenn" (Tana) means "brother" and "see" (Tse) means "waters," or a confluence of streams. For example, the Holston and French Broad rivers join together to form the Tennessee River.

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The Yuchi are people of a Native American tribe who lived in the eastern Tennessee River Valley during the 13th to 17th centuries and built temple mounds, two of which can be found at the Presbytery of East Tennessee's John Knox Center.

In the 16th century many Yuchis died from deadly epidemics after contact with Spanish explorers. The Yuchis were not immune against disease-causing microbes from Europe.

In the 17th century most of Yuchis migrated south to Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina. They were described as one of the most industrious and orderly of American tribes.

The Yuchi population declined dramatically again in the 18th century as they were absorbed into other tribes. The Cherokees became more powerful as a result of absorbing Yuchis and other tribes. Eventually, the Cherokees became the dominant indigenous tribe in Tennessee, Georgia and the Carolinas until the mid-19th century.

Today many Yuchis are enrolled in other federally recognized tribes, such as the Seminoles in Florida and the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma. But the Yuchi tribe continues its 20-year demand for federal and state recognition.

As for the origin of routes in the Southeast, Hackett explained that some 11,000 to 20,000 years ago, the Pleistocene Megafauna – mastodons, bison and other “great beasts” – made the first beaten paths in East Tennessee forests. These indigenous hunters and later Native Americans ate plants and, therefore, needed the essential nutrient salt to survive.

“They had the innate wisdom to carve out the paths of least resistance between salt sources, such as salt licks and springs—the nodes of trails,” Hackett said. Salt also became a premier item of trade among Native American tribes, starting in the 10th century.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, European settlers used Native American trails to take over the land. “These trails,” Hackett said, “have become our highways today.”

The Appalachian Valley and Cumberland Mountains “contained north-to-south traffic,” Hackett explained. East-to-west movements were constrained by Walden's Ridge and the Appalachian Mountains with access through gaps and rivers: Cumberland Gap, Winter's Gap and DeArmond Gap and the Hiwassee and French Road rivers (“Road” was later changed to “Broad” for unknown reasons).

In 1779 a group of men led by James Robertson made an overland trip to establish the Cumberland settlement at present-day Nashville. They avoided using the direct east-to-west route because the “Emery Trace” crossed Cherokee land. Instead, they took the longer, safer, more circuitous Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky and then south to the Cumberland River.

In 1786, when Captain James White built a station at the junction where the Holston and French Broad rivers form the Tennessee River, Robertson and a handful of other men cleared a more direct route than the Wilderness Road. They created a packhorse trail across the plateau and mountains from Fort Nashborough (Nashville) to 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. The act provided the first formal authorization to “cut and clear” a trace for a direct route to the Cumberland settlements in Middle Tennessee.

That same year, in a delayed response to Robertson's pleas, North Carolina legislators approved a second road act, which again ordered the cutting and clearing of a road from the south end of Clinch Mountain to Fort Nashborough (Nashville).

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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 Emery Road.

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. Finally, the issue was settled when a militia escorted the white settlers traveling along the new road and paid a toll to the Cherokees to keep the peace.

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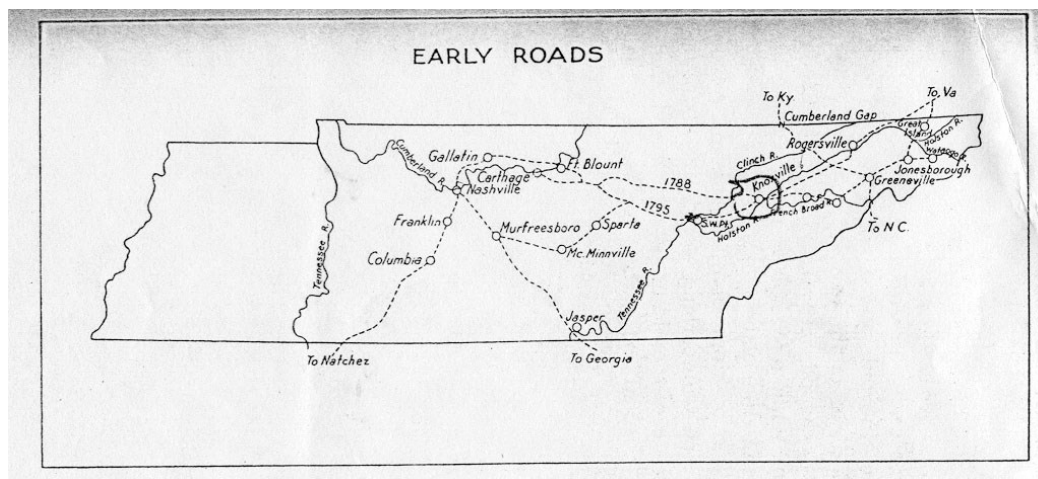
Thanks Carolyn. An addendum to the information presented by David, there is often confusion between the Emery Road and the Walton Road. The toll was paid and the armed escort provided from Fort Southwest Point in Kingston over the Walton Road from there to Standing Stone (Monterey) and by the northern route to the French Lick (Nashville). The Emery Road ran north of the Walton Road. The Walton Road was started in 1795 and completed in 1801.

Here are some references for additional reading on the early roads of East Tennessee.

Reference: <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1460>

Reference: <http://smithdray1.net/history/emeryroad.htm> for the history of the Emery Road.

Reference: <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entry.php?rec=1395>



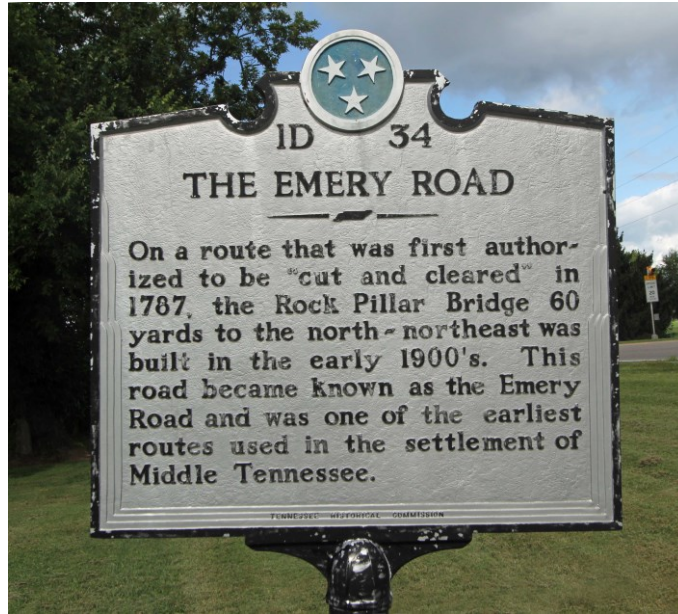
Map of early roads in Tennessee



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Historical Marker for the Emery Road highlighting the "Rock Pillar Bridge"



Historic Rock Pillar Bridge built on the route of the original Emery Road is now in dire need of preservation efforts to prevent the southeast concrete retaining wall from falling in the creek