

Reclaiming the Emery Road and Connecting Us to Our Past

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of April 23, 2018)

The Rock Pillar Bridge with a historical marker near the corner of Robertsville Road and the Turnpike just east of the Midtown Community Center has been a concern of mine for several years. The historical marker resulted from a Boy Scout's eagle project and I helped him with the text on the marker.

A few years ago, one of the retaining walls began to be pushed into the creek by tree roots and the loss of the large foundation rock that was beneath it. I showed it to the Tennessee State Historic Preservation Officer and he agreed that it is certainly historically significant and repairs should be made to preserve it.

As you will see by David Hackett's input to Historically Speaking that follows, the area is now getting some attention to clean up the brush along the creek and pick up the trash that has collected there. I am pleased to bring your David's perception of this historical landmark.

Often billed as the first road in the state, the Emery Road, and its alternate routes, are part of a system of roads that connected the Nation with its capitol: first Philadelphia and later Washington. The Emery Road would become one of the most important settlement roads in our Nation's early history.

The path that became the Emery road was cut in 1788 under orders of the North Carolina Legislature authorized in 1787. It started at a road that was cut along the Great Warriors Path near Blaine, and ran through Halls, Powell, and Karnes before hopping the ridges and passing by the David Hall cabin in the Bull Run Valley.

It crosses the Clinch River where the Oak Ridge Marina is today and passed along Emory Valley Road, then cutting through to the Oak Ridge Turnpike at Manhattan Place. It crossed the Cross Creek where the Rock Pillar Bridge now stands and then proceeded up along present day Raleigh Road and Illinois Avenue and out through Oliver Springs (Winter's Gap).

Many of our ancestors traveled this road, some traveling on to Nashville and points south, others went on down the Natchez Trace to the Southwest. It was indeed the earliest road connecting this area with the western frontier.

However, this road is far more ancient than Colonial America. These roads were first laid down by the Pleistocene megafauna, mastodons and mammoths as they migrated season to season, and from saltlick to saltlick. Later humans would use these trails to hunt these great beasts, and later still to trade salt themselves.

Before the North Carolina legislature authorized Peter Avery to cut the Emery Road, it was known as Tahlonteskee's trail. Chief Tahlonteskee was brother of Chief John Jolly both leaders in the Chickamauga Tribe that was made up of remnants of several different tribes. Tahlonteskee contentiously charged tolls to pass down the Emery Road. He eventually negotiated a treaty with James Glasgow, John Hackett and Littlepage Sims for a change of path southward along an alternate path called the Walton Road (Kingston Pike).

The Emery Road continued to function up until the 1940s, but not as the main route that it had been. It continued to be one of two main roads in southern Anderson county, the other being the Hogoheegee Trail, or the Powell River Road, which became Highway 61 and later the Oak Ridge Turnpike.

The two roads crossed at the crossroads in Robertsville. It was here about 1900 that a rock pillar bridge was constructed over Cross Creek. Both of these roads used this new bridge instead of the more rugged creek fording that had been required up to then.

This rock pillar bridge still stands about sixty yards north of the Oak Ridge Turnpike bearing evidence of the ancient passing of the Emery Road through here. It has been overgrown with brush and thus was

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difficult to see except when you got right up to it. A planned cleanup will make the area much more appealing. The brush has already been removed along the creek bank.

The bridge was probably built by the Cross or Roberts families as they owned this section of land, and the large spring fed pond which served as waterhole for travelers on the road was known as Cross Pond. It is now the Oak Ridge Swimming Pool. The land was apparently a pension grant to one, William Cross, who was a drummer boy in the Revolutionary Army.

Much of the land in East Tennessee was doled out as pension payments. It is likely that Collins Roberts was related to the Cross family as he soon received or bought some of the Cross acreage. He would give his name to the Robertsville community. It is certainly possible that the name Crossroads that described this area came from the family name Cross and not from the fact that the roads crossed here.

When the Manhattan Project came here in late 1942, much changed in this area. While some roads like Robertsville remain, most others like the Emery Road were mostly erased from view.

However, Emory Valley Road and the Emory Road in Knox County still commemorate the old Emery Road in placement and name. Of course, there has been a change in spelling to replace an "e" with an "o." Why that happened is still a mystery.

There will be a cleanup of the Emery Road Bridge property on Saturday, April 28th 9AM-3PM – We will meet at the Midtown Community Center at Robertsville Road and the Oak Ridge Turnpike. Come down and lend a hand in cleaning it up and cutting invasive brush.

Thank you, David, for this detailed account of the Emery Road Rock Pillar Bridge history. The historic Emery Road route through Oak Ridge has been all but forgotten by time. We need to remember this long-standing artifact for its historic role in our Nation's history. Join those of us who admire the unique small bridge as we seek to get the Emery Road that ran through what is now Oak Ridge designated a National Historic Trail.

If you want more information about the cleanup planned for April 28th, call me at 865-482-4224.

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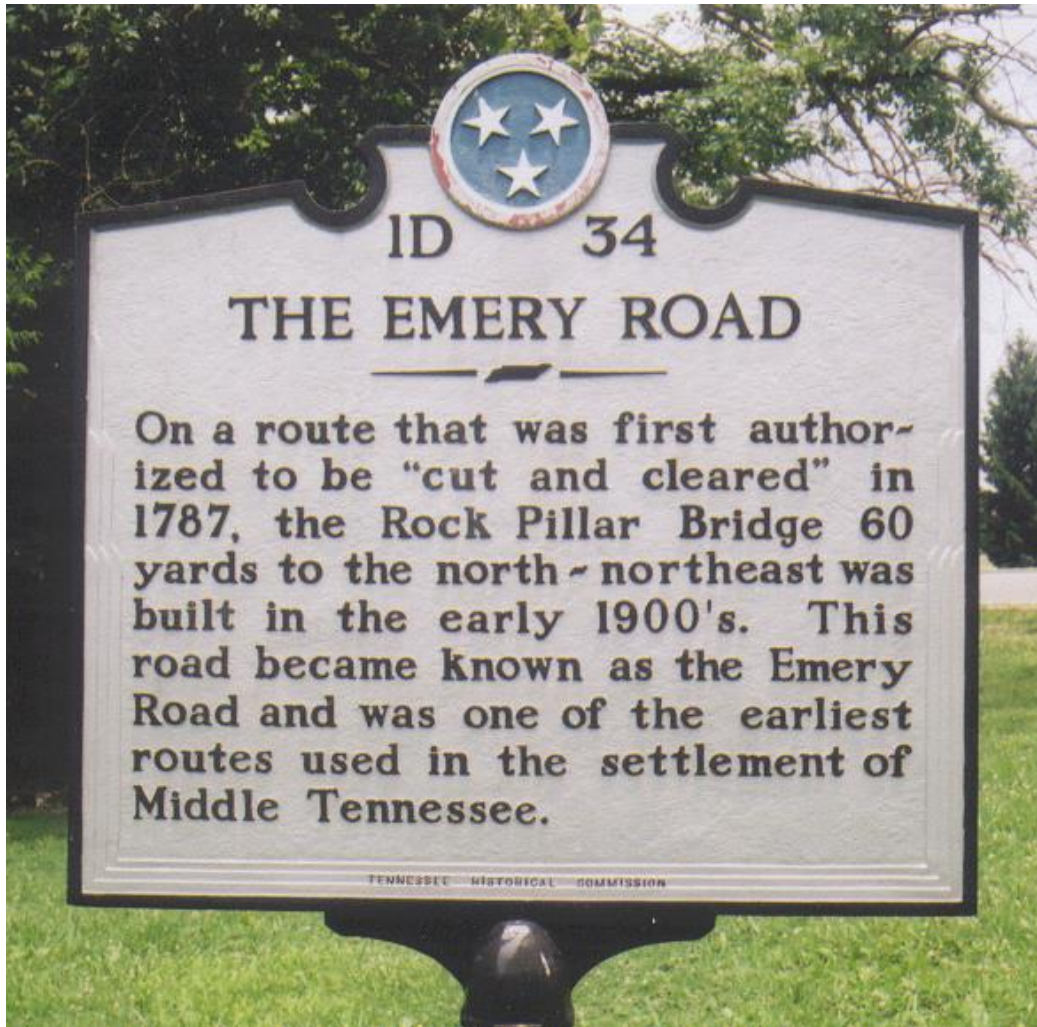
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A patch calling attention to the Historic Emery Road

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Historical Marker located just north of the Oak Ridge Turnpike

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The Rock Pillar Bridge built just after 1900