

The Forgotten Revolutionary War Heroes of the Oak Ridge Reservation

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column during the week of 1/11/2021)

My friends Fred Eiler and Dennis Eggert have shared their research into the Revolutionary soldiers who are known to be buried in cemeteries located within the city limits of Oak Ridge. Dennis has compiled the below information for Historically Speaking. I am pleased to bring this information to you readers. I also hope we can properly recognize these Revolutionary War veterans with at least one historical marker.

I have long been interested in recognizing these individuals but did not have the needed information to confirm the location of the burials. Thanks to Dennis for compiling the results of much research. Enjoy first half of Dennis' report on these soldiers and their resting places.

At the beginning of World War II, about 59,000 acres of Anderson and Roane County lands in East Tennessee were purposefully condemned and purchased by the government for the Army to use in the top-secret Manhattan Project for the development of the atomic bomb. Within weeks of the purchase, residents were forced off of their ancestral lands.

By early 1943, the small rural communities of Elza, Lupton Crossroads, Scarboro, Robertsville, and Wheat no longer existed. The massive Oak Ridge Reservation that would ultimately house up to 75,000 people was then established and placed off limits to the public.

After eviction, residents left behind more than just their homes and farms. They left behind their ancestral roots and some of these roots extended back to the Revolutionary War.

Mutely resting in peace somewhere within the Oak Ridge Reservation are at least ten Revolutionary War veterans who were surely patriots. Three of them established farms along the nutrient rich flood plains of the East Fork Poplar Creek that today is in downtown Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Three other individuals established nearby farms along the fertile bottom lands of the Clinch River.

Another Revolutionary War veteran settled along the banks of Poplar Creek further down in Roane County.

One owned a massive plantation that is now downtown Oak Ridge and one, who was interred on the reservation, lived just outside the reservation boundary. It is not known where, within the reservation, the last individual lived.

Patriotic organizations today differentiate as to who should be honored as Revolutionary War veterans.

The Sons of the Revolution accept military service along with signers of the Declaration of Independence, members of the Continental and Colonial Congresses, and those charged with treason against the British Crown. The Sons of the American Revolution and also the Daughters of the American Revolution identify those same individuals along with others that provided patriotic services to the United States.

Patriots were those who rejected British rule and provided goods or services for the cause of independence.

In our known list of Revolutionary War heroes, we have seven who served in the military, two patriots, and one who served in the Virginia Militia during Lord Dunmore's War. Those individuals are:

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I Lieutenant Thomas Jones (1740-1815)

Although little is known of Thomas Jones' service to his country, it is known that he was from Virginia. When the Revolutionary War erupted, he served as a supply officer in the Henry County Virginia Militia, furnishing supplies to his unit.

As an original pioneer settler, Thomas Jones arrived here around 1795 and owned well over 100 acres along the East Fork Poplar Creek that today is in downtown Oak Ridge. Prior to arriving in East Tennessee, Thomas' youngest daughter Mary married Jacob Peak in Virginia, and the Jones and Peaks probably traveled to East Tennessee as a family group. Jacob Peak went on to become an influential and wealthy individual in the community who owned over 400 acres in Gamble Valley that adjoined Thomas Jones' land.

In 1815, Thomas Jones died. Due to the proximity of his land to Jacob Peak's land and the marriage of daughter, Mary to Jacob, it is very probable that Thomas Jones is buried in the Peak Family Cemetery located in Gamble Valley. This cemetery is one of the most pristine, historic cemeteries still in existence in Oak Ridge. Only two tombstones can be found here; other graves can only be recognized by primitive fieldstones or depressions in the earth.

II Private William C. Griffith, Jr. (1758-1834)

William Griffith, Jr. was another Virginian who settled here. Originally from Blackwater Creek in Franklin County, Virginia, he volunteered and served three tours for a total of nine months as a soldier in the Virginia Militia. While serving, he participated in three separate engagements pursuing Tory and British troops.

Although William qualified for a Revolutionary War pension, he unselfishly refused to apply. In 1852, his son William C. Griffith III documented in an affidavit that his father said, "he could live well without a pension and he would rather that his government would have his services so that in any future war she might be better able to feed and clothe her army." Although William Griffith, Jr. refused a pension, his wife Susannah did apply for a widow's pension. And thankfully so, because without her sworn testimony we would not have William's military service details.

William settled here about 1796 ultimately purchasing 1,100 acres. Most of his land was located just outside the Oak Ridge Reservation between Oak Ridge and Oliver Springs. Although he lived outside the reservation, he was buried in the cemetery where his father-in-law, Thomas Jones, may also be buried (William married Jones' daughter Susannah).

William Griffith, Jr.'s burial is the best example of a documented burial of a Revolutionary War soldier in Oak Ridge. William's son stated that his father was buried in the Peak Cemetery.

III Private Douglas Oliver (1753-1843)

Douglas Oliver's extensive military service as a private in the Virginia Militia spanned six tours serving from the Virginia Tidewater to the Kentucky frontier. His service included marching against the British at the Potomac, James, and York Rivers. He was also in Williamsburg, Petersburg, and Norfolk. On Douglas' final tour, he marched to the western Virginia frontier where he participated in campaigns

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against Native Americans at Chillicothe and the Pickwick towns. Here, according to Douglas, "there was a hard fight."

Douglas was an original settler on what was to become the Oak Ridge Reservation. The absence of his name from the Henry County, Virginia, tax records reveals that he left Virginia in 1795; and by 1797, he was in East Tennessee and had purchased 350 acres in what is now the City of Oak Ridge. Here, with his wife Mary, they had ten children.

Douglas Oliver became one of the wealthiest and most prominent citizens that lived here. Just prior to his death in 1843, he owned 1,268 acres of what today includes the municipal swimming pool, the Oak Ridge High School, a portion of the Oak Ridge municipal complex, and the downtown shopping district. In addition to farming, Oliver owned one of the largest, if not the largest, legal moonshine still in the county. The spring that fed his still is the same spring that feeds the huge municipal swimming pool today. Upon his death, one creditor owed his estate for 50 gallons of moonshine.

Douglas Oliver died in 1843, and, in all likelihood, was buried nearby his house on a small knoll on land that he owned. Only one daughter, Amelia, who was a widow of Noah Peck, continued to live on the 1,200-plus acre property. Eventually, a tract of land containing this small knoll where Douglas is believed to be buried was sold to the Peck family. Over the years, this small knoll continued to be used by the Pecks as a family burial site, hence the Peck Family Cemetery. It is known that Douglas' daughter Amelia Oliver Peck was also interred here. This history of the Oliver-Peck relationship leads one to believe that Douglas Oliver may very well be buried here.

IV Private Henry Nunnley (abt 1761-1838)

Henry Nunnley was drafted into the services of the Virginia troops where, in addition to being a participant at the Battle of Guilford's Courthouse, he fought at Petersburg. He also served at the Siege of Yorktown where British General Lord Cornwallis surrendered, which effectively brought an end to the Revolutionary War.

Henry is an enigma; we know very little about him only that in 1803 he owned 100 acres along the East Fork Poplar Creek. In 1809, he sold this land and no other land titles have since been found in his name. To further this conundrum, he was not enumerated on the 1810, 1820, and 1830 U.S. Federal Censuses for Anderson County, Tennessee. He remains missing from the historical record! However, he did apply for a Revolutionary War pension in 1832 while living here.

We do know that in 1807, Henry's wife died leaving him with one son who moved to Arkansas, and two daughters who remained. Where he lived from 1810 to 1830 is unknown but speculation is that he and his children may have resided within another household. Before 1840, the U.S. Federal Census only recorded the name of each head of household and the number of individuals living within that household by age bracket. This helps explain why Henry Nunnley is missing from the records.

Meanwhile, Henry Nunnley's two daughters married local men. Elizabeth married John Scarbrough (son of patriot William Scarbrough) and Sophia married Charles Oliver (son of Revolutionary War soldier Douglas Oliver). Ironically, the 1830 enumeration of the Charles (and Sophia Nunnley) Oliver household identifies an individual age 70 to 80 living there. This could very well be Henry Nunnley.

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Henry Nunnley died in 1838 with no information on his final resting place. At the time of his death, Henry may have lived with his daughter Sophia and son-in-law Charles Oliver. If so, then there may be a possibility that he could be buried in the Peck Cemetery which was also used by Henry Nunnley's in-laws, the Oliver family.

V Patriot Samuel Worthington (1746-1821)

During the Revolutionary War, Patriot Samuel Worthington provided beef to the Continental Army in Botetourt County, Virginia to feed the Army. In 1792, he was one of the first pioneers to settle on the Oak Ridge Reservation. Later, in 1795 Samuel purchased 640 acres from a land grant owned by William Russell. Territorial Governor and land speculator William Blount signed the land deed title as a witness. This tract of land was located on the northern most area of the future Oak Ridge and followed the northern bank of the Clinch River from Pilot Knob to beyond Elza. It was possible that Samuel Worthington was already living on this land long before the purchase. Just across the river from Samuel's property was a Cherokee Indian settlement and in 1797 he was given a license to trade with them for six months. Ironically, the land on the side of Clinch River where Samuel Worthington settled was not formally ceded to the U.S. government until 1798. This suggests that Russell and Blount were selling land without clear titles!

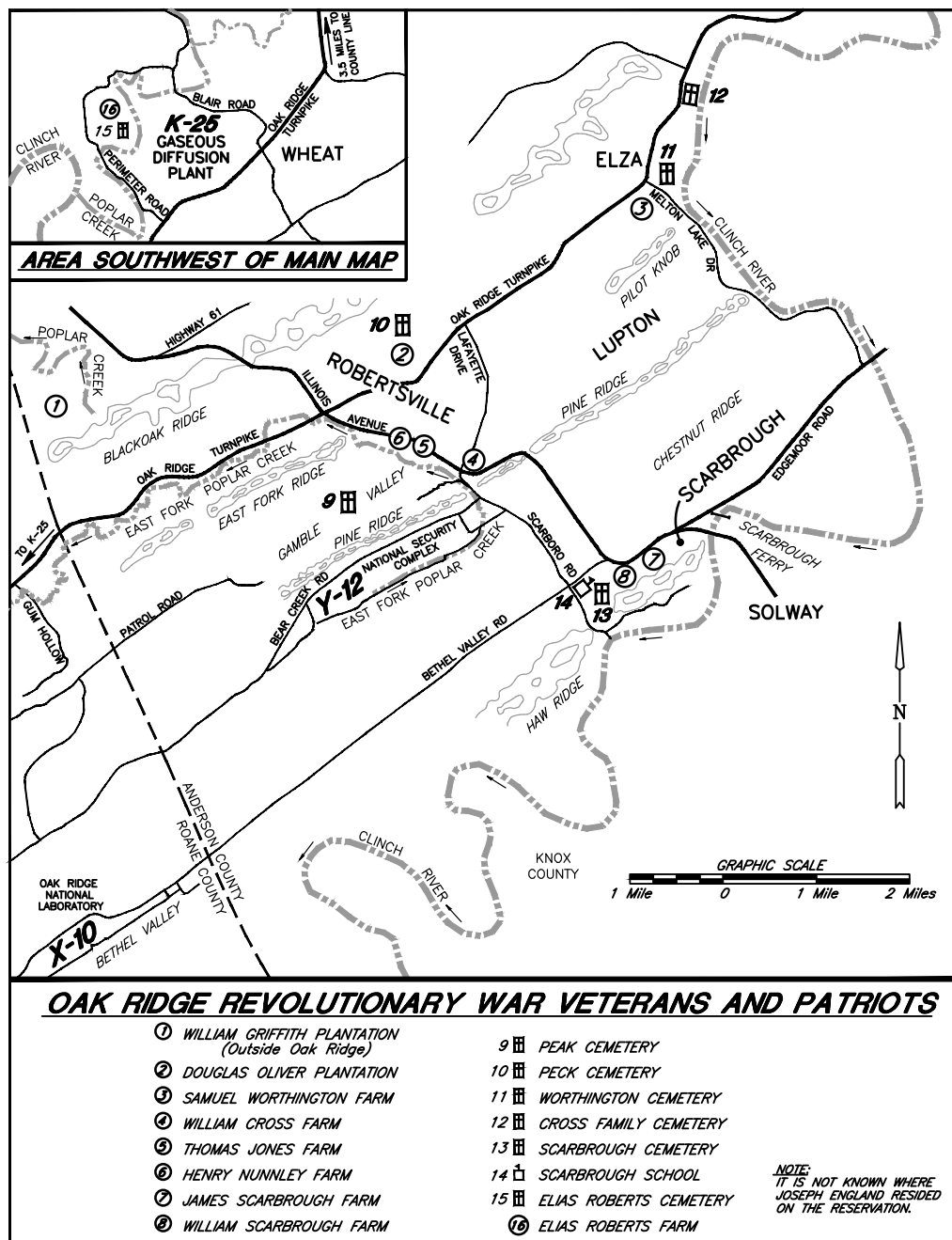
Samuel died in 1821 and is probably buried in the Worthington Family Cemetery in the old Elza community. His exact burial plot is unknown because no tombstone was erected at his gravesite. However, the Worthington Cemetery still exists as a historic cemetery on Tennessee Valley Authority property within the City of Oak Ridge.

Thanks Dennis Eggert, for this excellent report of Revolutionary War veterans and where they are buried in Oak Ridge. As a commissioner for the Tennessee Historical Commission, I think it is appropriate that a historical marker be placed in Oak Ridge honoring these Revolutionary War veterans and plan to work toward that end. Anyone who desires to assist in an effort to provide such a historical marker, please contact me at draysmith@comcast.net.

Next, we will conclude this exceptional report compiled by Dennis Eggert with help from his friends.

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Map of Revolutionary War soldiers buried in cemeteries in Oak Ridge

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Original WWII U.S. Army sign marking the Peak Cemetery

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Peck Cemetery behind St. Stephens Episcopal Church