

Early history of Robertsville: 1792-1800

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of July 4, 2022)

Dennis Eggert and Fred Eiler have been resources for many of the details I have learned about the area that is now Oak Ridge. Among others who have studied our early history, they have added immensely to the accurate knowledge of what was here before the Manhattan Project changed everything for the small rural communities. Some of the families living here in 1942 were directly descended from the settlers who had arrived in this ridge and valley section west and north of the Clinch River.

Dennis has taken the time to do the needed documentation of the early history of Robertsville. You will learn things I am sure you did not know about this area. Enjoy your education by Dennis. This is part one of a four-part series on the early history of Robertsville.

Many Oak Ridgers are familiar with the established story of how, in 1804, this community was settled by Collins Roberts, a Connecticut transplant who received a massive 4,000-acre land grant. However, there are significant issues with this narrative.

First, early land records revealed there never was a single 4,000-acre land grant within the Robertsville area. Second, Collins Roberts never received any type of land grant here. His first recorded land purchase was in 1809 when he bought 400 acres of land from William Standifer. Third, Collins Roberts may not have been the only Roberts clan to settle here and claim its family name on the geography. Shortly before Collins Roberts was documented as being here, the Reuben Roberts clan also appeared. We will see there is evidence that perhaps the Reuben Roberts clan may have the distinction of initially founding Robertsville.

Just how much area Robertsville encompassed is speculation. The oldest maps show Robertsville to be a mere crossroad where the 1798 Emery Road split from the original 1787 Emery Road. Today, this would be the western end of Raleigh Road where it intersects with Robertsville Road.

However, Robertsville was much larger. Thanks to the establishment of the Robertsville Post Office in 1832, expanded postal coverage included the entire area between Black Oak and Pine Ridges and from just below the beginning of East Fork Ridge to the Clinch River.

Yet, there was a much larger component to this unique rural community. In addition to Robertsville's historic significance, it had a drama of personal interactions that should be explored. It is my intention to provide a better understanding of early Robertsville history and also to reveal some of the personal conflicts and hardships that were endured.

1792-1799

In the Treaty of the Holston signed on July 1, 1791, the Cherokee Nation retained the lands from the Powell Valley southward including what would become Robertsville. The Yuchi tribe lived along the Clinch River. At that time what is now Tennessee was a part of the Southwest Territory. Yet white settlers were settling land in violation of the treaty.

After the Revolutionary War the state of North Carolina, to pay debts to her soldiers, opened lands beyond the Appalachian Mountains for settlement. Approximately 200,000 acres of land in East Tennessee were surveyed and then opened for settlement. Some of this land was in violation of the treaties.

Within what would become Robertsville, four tracts of land were surveyed: the Trenell-Beard 640-acre tract, the Armstrong and Daughtery 1,000-acre tract, the Donnelson 3,000-acre tract, and a portion of the

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McClung 3,000- acre tract. From these tracts, the grantors sold their land to incoming settlers. Ironically, this surveyed land was still in Cherokee territory and those early Robertsville settlers who arrived here before 1798 bought land without cleared land titles!

The first settlers who arrived here in 1792 were probably the William Tunnell and Samuel Worthington families. Worthington purchased 600 acres of land that stretched along the Clinch River from Pilot Knob to past Elza. In 1797, he was given a six-month license to trade with the Cherokee.

William Tunnell owned a massive estate located in Buckhorn Valley just outside Robertsville that today lies beyond the north side of Black Oak Ridge. Born of both French and British aristocracy, the Tunnells were certainly influential on the early history of Robertsville.

By 1795, other families began arriving here. Among them were the Thomas Jones and Jacob Peak families who, through an intermarriage, arrived here as an extended clan. Jacob Peak eventually went on to become one of the wealthiest landowners owning about 900 acres in Gamble Valley. His land was still family owned when the U.S. government condemned the land in 1942.

Another early arrival was the Oliver family. Patriarch Richard Oliver brought his family into this area about 1795. Whereas Richard settled in what today is Oliver Springs, his father Douglas settled in the nearby Robertsville area and would become the largest land baron in Robertsville.

By 1797, the Emery Road traversed through what would later become Robertsville. This road connected East Tennessee to Nashville. For locals living in this small rural vicinity, it became their connection to the outside world. Here, the Emery Road was in a strategic location.

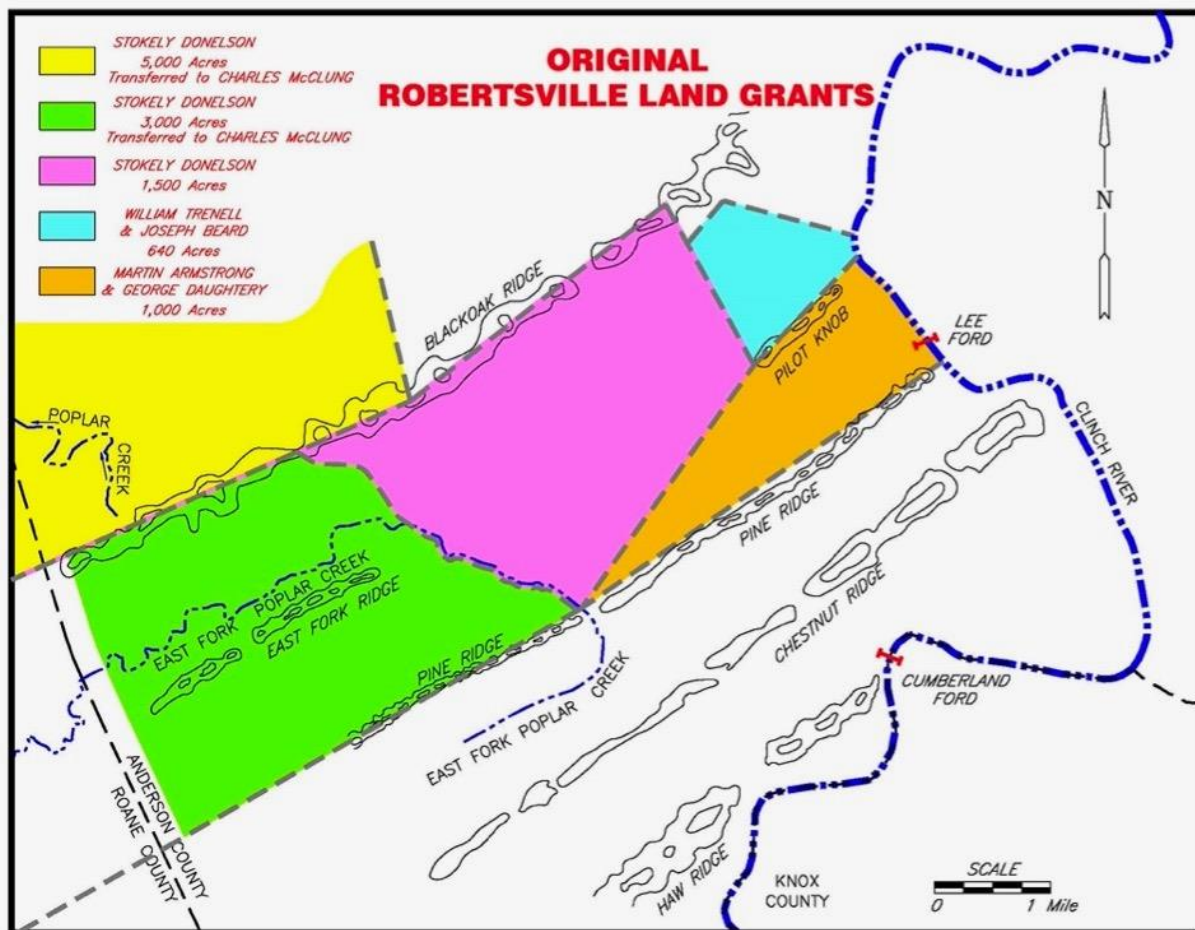
Prior to the Tellico Treaty in 1798, the Emery Road stayed clear of Cherokee lands. Passing through Robertsville, the Emery Road traversed up Black Oak Ridge to modern day Hilltop, continuing on to Wartburg. After the Treaty of Tellico in 1798, the Emery Road took a more southwesterly route towards Kingston. Where it branched off from the original Emery Road, a crossroads was realized that became Robertsville.

In 1799, this developing community also saw another milestone. The East Fork Baptist Church formed. Although this church was located outside of Robertsville, it served the Robertsville community. We know that the church was in existence in 1799 because representatives were sent to the Holston Baptist Conference that year. Originally located off Newport Drive in west Oak Ridge, the Holston Baptist Church served the entire area. This small, nameless rural area began taking shape to become a vibrant community.

Thank you, Dennis, for your amazingly detailed research. Next Dennis will bring us forward a few more years and you will continue to learn the early history of Robertsville.

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Early map of the Robertsville area showing the land grants