

A history of Oliver Springs – Part 1

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 22, 2025)

Carolyn Krause has long been curious about the people who lived in the past few centuries in the valley next to the ridge on which her family has lived for 35 years. So, she has delved into several sources of information on the history of Oliver Springs, originally called Winters Gap, and presents what she has learned in three articles for this Historically Speaking readers.

After we moved to West Outer Drive on Black Oak Ridge in 1989, my husband, our two children, and I were intrigued by the mooing of cows and the rumbling and tooting of nighttime trains. The sounds were coming from Oliver Springs down in the next valley. Sometimes we would hear overhead the loud buzzing of small planes from the Oliver Springs airport. As we looked through our backyard forest toward the Cumberland Mountains at night, Oliver Springs' buildings and streetlights sparkled.

I learned from David Hackett, an expert on Native Americans in the region, that before the Spanish arrived in North America in the 1500s, the Oak Ridge and Oliver Springs area was occupied by the native Yuchi people. He wrote that the Yuchis "were the priests and peace chiefs among all the tribes, as well as the traders of salt and other commodities.

"For this reason, many Yuchi villages were scattered up and down the system of trade trails, but their main seat was in the Tennessee River Valley, where they had salt-making operations at Saltville, Oliver Springs, and Rhea Springs, among others. The salt trade made them quite wealthy, and the priesthood gave them political power."

Humans and animals need salt to regulate water in the body and to help transmit nerve impulses and contract and relax muscles. The Indigenous people used salt to enhance flavor in vegetables, preserve meat and fish, heal the injured and ill, and purify the body and spirit through ceremonial cleansing rituals.

In the 1530s, the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto led an expedition through Tennessee and other southeastern states in the search for gold and a passage to China or the Pacific coast. Hackett wrote that "the Spanish found not only the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Koasati here, but the Chiaha, Chisca, Tuskegee, Natchez, Catoosa, Taliwa... all practicing the Green Corn Rite peaceably together in the Tennessee River Valley. This all came to a crashing halt with the Contact holocaust that wiped out 90% of the Indigenous population."

As the Spaniards penetrated the Southeast, most of the Yuchis and members of many other Native American tribes became ill and died from several European diseases to which they had no immunity. Smallpox was the most devastating disease, but many Indigenous peoples succumbed to measles, influenza, typhus, and tuberculosis.

"Genocidal wars were followed by slavery, starvation, and waves of deadly disease," Hackett continued. "The few survivors collapsed into amalgamations of the former peoples. While some of these tribes maintained the names of previous peoples, they became the agglomerative peoples now known as Cherokee, Creek, Seminole, Chickamauga, etc."

In the 1700s and 1800s, White European immigrants, including some who had fought in the Revolutionary War, settled in Anderson and Roane counties (both created in 1801) and lived by subsistence farming. They grew wheat, corn, and beans, harvested the fruit of peach and apple orchards, milked cows, and raised and slaughtered chickens, cattle, and hogs.

How Oliver Springs originated as a town is described in "Circling Windrock Mountain: Two Hundred Years in Appalachia." This 1998 book was written by Augusta Grove Bell, a reporter for The Oak Ridger in the 1960s who covered Anderson County Courthouse activities. She obtained much of her information from stories told by her Uncle John Smith, town residents, and Snyder E. Roberts, Oliver Springs historian.

According to Bell, "In 1799, an Indian fighter from Virginia obtained the right from Knox County to build a gristmill 'where the Indian Fork of Poplar Creek breaks through Walden Ridge.' His name was Moses Winters. Because he could readily grow wheat on the land, he built a gristmill run by the power of spring water coming from Walden Ridge to grind his grain into flour. He acquired 249 acres of land in the center of what became Oliver Springs. He named the land he occupied Winters Gap after the gap that provided the only convenient route through Walden Ridge.

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Moses Winters “located his 1799 grist mill near a valuable salt well used by the Cherokees on land that was still legally theirs,” Bell wrote. “Archaeological finds, including weapons and pottery, show that more than one Indian battle was fought over the salt. It was not until Major Thomas Butler negotiated the Third Treaty of Tellico in 1805 that all of Major Winters’s tract got official blessing, though he had been there six years.

“His land had something else the Cherokees valued – the mineral springs they called Tah-hah-lehah or ‘healing waters.’ These springs eventually gave the town its name.”

Commenting on the local treaty, Hackett wrote in an email message: “Treaties here were obtained under duress of terrorism by the frontier militia and so were in no way fair or equitable. Furthermore, they were made with the Cherokee leaders who lived over in the Carolinas, not with the Chickamauga leaders who lived in East Tennessee. They papered over the theft of the land from the Indigenous peoples, giving a ‘legal’ title to the land claim of the invading settlers.”

Before Moses Winters died in 1846, “he had acquired still more land, some of it rich with coal he was the first to work, though on a small scale,” Bell stated. He had seven daughters and a son, his youngest child. That son, Moses Charlton Winters, acquired still more land and built a sawmill using the waterpower of his father’s gristmill. Wood was needed for small farms, coal mines, flatboats, and railroad ties, and it was readily available from Walden Ridge, which was covered with huge pine, oak, hickory, poplar, maple, walnut, cherry, and gum trees. What Winters and his son, Bell, added “saw their settlement change from an outpost in the virgin forest into a town on the verge of a coal boom after the Civil War.”

Bell pointed out that the gristmill and mill dam, which operated for 54 years, withstood “the tremendous surge of floodwaters that could come down from the mountains.” The gristmill washed away in 1853.

In her book, she noted that the people of Oliver Springs have endured many flash floods. She cited the terrible flood of July 12, 1967, that caused half a million dollars’ worth of damage.

“Houses were washed off their foundations along with the one-room Church of God jammed up against the Esterbrook Street bridge,” she wrote. “The National Guard patrolled the streets while prisoners from nearby Brushy Mountain State Penitentiary cleared sticky brown ooze from the roadways.”

The Tennessee Valley Authority responded to that local disaster, Bell stated, “by planning a flood control channel to tame Indian Creek (Indian Fork of Poplar Creek). Two summers later, bulldozers were about to start moving earth for the channel, the first step in an ambitious plan to turn depressed Oliver Springs into a small ‘model city.’ New public housing would be built in the floodplain along with an elevated highway to eliminate the traffic bottleneck in the old part of town.”

The part of the gap where Winters lived was later occupied by a whisky distillery and then the Oliver Springs Bottling Works at the turn of the century. As a result of TVA’s flood-control work in 1969, Winters’ homestead is covered over, as is part of Back Street nearby.

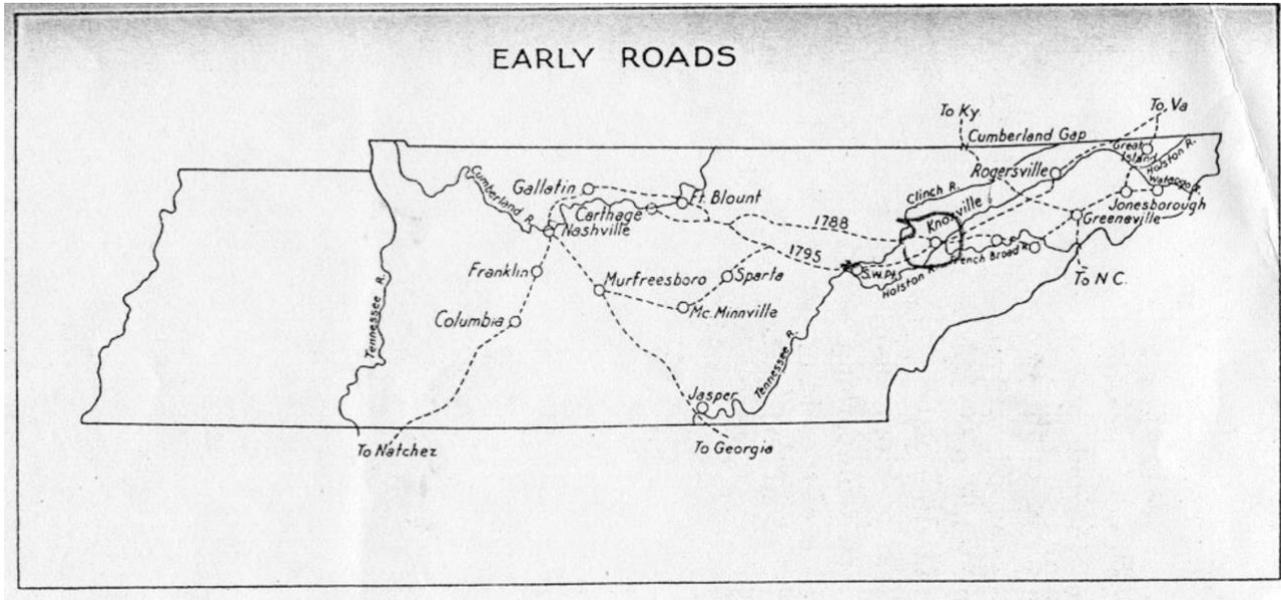
Because of developments in early 20th-century East Tennessee, such as the interstate highway system, Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TVA’s Norris Dam, and the Manhattan Project, numerous white landowners complained about federal government evictions of their families from their homes to make space for these government projects (two of which were in Anderson County). It is unclear whether Native Americans in the region were sympathetic to white families’ plight, knowing that these expelled residents had been living on land stolen from the native peoples.

Next: How Winters Gap became Oliver Springs and how it became a booming coal mining town with a fashionable resort hotel built by one of the town’s coal millionaires.

Thank you, Carolyn. I also have been interested in the history of Oliver Springs. I first found the Emery Road going through Winter’s Gap on its way to the French Lick (now Nashville), in 1788. For more information about the Emery Road: <https://www.smithdray1.net/history/emeryroad.htm> and, <https://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/historic-trails/>

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The 1788 Emery Road went through what is now Oak Ridge and Oliver Springs (Courtesy of Ray Smith)