

A history of Oliver Springs – Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 29, 2025)

Carolyn Krause presents more 19th-century Oliver Springs history based on "Circling Windrock Mountain: Two Hundred Years in Appalachia," the 1998 book written by Augusta Grove Bell. In the 1960s, she was a reporter for The Oak Ridger, for which she covered Anderson County Courthouse activities. In this article in the three-part series, the focus is on several wealthy men who lived in what became known as Oak Ridge and Oliver Springs – Douglas and Richard Oliver, Henry Wiley, and Joseph Richards. The first two were slave owners, and the second two were millionaires because of the coal mining boom.

Douglas Oliver (1753-1843) fought in the American Revolutionary War. He moved from Virginia to East Tennessee and purchased about 1,000 acres in the fertile valley where downtown Oak Ridge is. A slave owner, he accumulated wealth and served as a member of the Anderson County Court. An educated man, he ensured that his 13 children received schooling from either private tutors or the private Union Academy in Clinton. One of those children was Richard Oliver.

In 1822, Richard got married and "moved north over Black Oak Ridge to the flat land around Poplar Creek," Augusta Bell wrote. "Today, this is Oliver Springs' newer Norwood section, which reaches the bottom of the ridge nearly to the Oak Ridge city limits." Like his father, Richard bought land and became rich as the Black people he enslaved worked his hundreds of acres of farmland.

Also like his father, Richard became interested in politics; he served on the county court and later assumed the role of the high sheriff of Anderson County. The Olivers apparently had political connections with the administration of President John Quincy Adams that led to the granting to Richard in 1826 of the first U.S. post office to serve Winters Gap, the town he renamed Olivers after his family (and that 58 years later received its final name of Oliver Springs).

In the 1830s, Richard Oliver and his wife built a 35-room mansion and inn that survived the Civil War but was burned down by miners in 1892 during the Coal Creek War. Those people who stayed at the Oliver Inn were given buggy rides to the mineral springs owned by the Winters family. The future president from Tennessee, James K. Polk, once remained at the inn a week or so to drink the medicinal waters, according to Bell. She added that Richard helped "Young Hickory," as Polk was called, in his successful campaign to win the presidency in 1845.

After the Civil War started, Richard died with no male heirs to take over the plantation. His son, Andrew Jackson Oliver, had traveled to western states for adventure before the Civil War. He did not return to live in Olivers because his father's "plantation with 3559 acres and many slaves went to ruin, as did the mansion, which both Union and Confederate troops occupied," Bell stated. "It became a hospital and also a base for soldiers foraging the countryside for food."

According to Bell, Richard's adventurous son known as Jack Oliver, was attracted to various opportunities out west such as fighting in the Mexican War, checking out the gold rush in Salt Lake City, and starting the Oliver and Company stage line in wild gold mining towns. The stage line, she wrote, "suffered its share of holdups and murders by the Plummer Gang and scalping of stage drivers by the Indians. Years later, Oliver actually became the hero of a number of western adventure stories, facts all mixed up with fiction."

Several opportunists who moved to Oliver Springs became coal millionaires. The first was Henry Wiley, son of Alexander Wiley (who was born at sea as his parents immigrated to America from Edinburgh, Scotland). Henry was known as a coal operator pioneer in Anderson County. Born in 1799, he grew up in Kingston, Tenn., and served there as a merchant, Roane County register of deeds, and then county court clerk from 1833 to 1840.

In his courthouse positions, Wiley was able to identify land worth acquiring, so he partnered with lawyer William McEwen to purchase "and clear titles of mountain land for future coal mining in Anderson and Morgan counties," Bell wrote. Wiley moved to Olivers in 1846, the year in which Major Moses Winters died.

According to Bell, Wiley turned out to be "the man of the future, an ambitious, intelligent businessman, part of the explosion of American capitalism after the Civil War. The land companies he was instrumental in setting up controlled much of Anderson County's coal deposits by the time he died in 1881." The two land companies held numerous 5000-acre parcels, including small tracts owned by farmers.

A history of Oliver Springs – Part 2

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of September 29, 2025)

Bell quoted her uncle, who recalled that Wiley “opened up a mine before the Civil War and was the first man to ship coal out of Tennessee. He hauled it by wagon four miles down thar to Poplar Creek. Then he'd float it down to the Clinch (River by flatboats) and the Tennessee River all the way to Georgia and Alabama.”

Wiley and his sons fought in the Civil War. Except for one son, who died fighting for the Confederate army, the father and four sons were Union sympathizers. One of those sons was killed in the war. The four Wiley men returned to Olivers and became millionaires as coal mines opened on their land. The postwar coal boom gave them a net worth of \$5 million in 1998 dollars, Bell reported.

“By 1869, the same year the golden spike of the first transcontinental railroad was driven in Utah, a Knoxville & Kentucky locomotive steamed into the just-born town of Coal Creek north of Clinton,” she wrote. “More than 30 miles of track from Knoxville had been completed in record time as the line headed for Kentucky. It would be another 14 years, however, before Olivers would get a railroad, so the county's coal boom arrived first in the northeast between the Walden Ridge and the Cumberlands.”

So, in 1869, Wiley left Olivers to live in Coal Creek (later renamed Lake City and now called Rocky Top). There he and McEwen ran into legal problems after several of their mines began operating. As a result of a lawsuit by a New York financier, the Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing Company was formed. Wiley quit mining operations and engaged in the more profitable leasing of his land to other mine operators.

The Knoxville & Kentucky railroad line finally reached Olivers in 1883, two years after Wiley died. In 1881 Wiley's heirs formed the Poplar Creek Coal and Iron Company (which was later absorbed by the Coal Creek Mining and Manufacturing Company, whose address is now 101 Edmonds Dr. in Oliver Springs). “Little wonder the U.S. post office at Olivers found itself renamed Poplar Creek, though only for two years until 1884, when the town got its fourth and final name of Oliver Springs,” stated Bell.

In 1881, Joseph C. Richards, a northern Yankee originally from Wales, moved from Knoxville with his wife, four grown sons, and three daughters to the village of Olivers. According to Bell, Richards, who arrived in America as a young man in 1848, had worked in the iron industry in Pennsylvania, Maine, and Knoxville. One company he worked for made munitions for the Union army.

Convinced that the South would recover from the Civil War and prosper, he scouted Knoxville, which had nearly 10,000 residents, and moved there with his family in 1869. Richards' initial financial venture had been reorganized into what was called the Knoxville Iron Company, which Bell stated had a capital stock value close to \$2 million in 1998 dollars.

The Knoxville Iron Company, which Richards helped found, received the first coal it desperately needed for its rolling mill and foundry from Coal Creek. While living in Knoxville, Bell wrote, Richards “knew about the coal seams around Olivers, but there was no rail transportation.

“Knowing that would change, he started buying up the so-called Mineral Springs tract, Moses Winters' original land holding. Not only did these 1,314 acres include the springs made popular by Richard Oliver before the Civil War, but this tract also had coal, timber, and some low-grade iron ore.”

In 1883, two years after the Richards family settled in Olivers, the Walden Ridge Railroad arrived, so the family opened a half dozen mines in the Big Mountain area of the Cumberlands. In 1884, John Richards, Joseph's oldest son, became the Oliver Springs postmaster and managed the Joseph Richards and Sons store. A second son served as the family's mining supervisor, and another son as the manager of the Richards House, a popular and successful 30-room hotel located at the mineral springs.

Before he died, Joseph Richards, in 1888, “organized the Oliver Coal Company to exploit more efficiently his Big Mountain coal resources as well as those in Shoat Lick Hollow out near Frost Bottom,” Bell wrote. “He sold to the Walden Ridge Railroad for one dollar the right of way through town east to Donovan, where a station would be built for coal shipments and later timber. The train would, of course, stop at Richards House.”

A history of Oliver Springs – Part 2

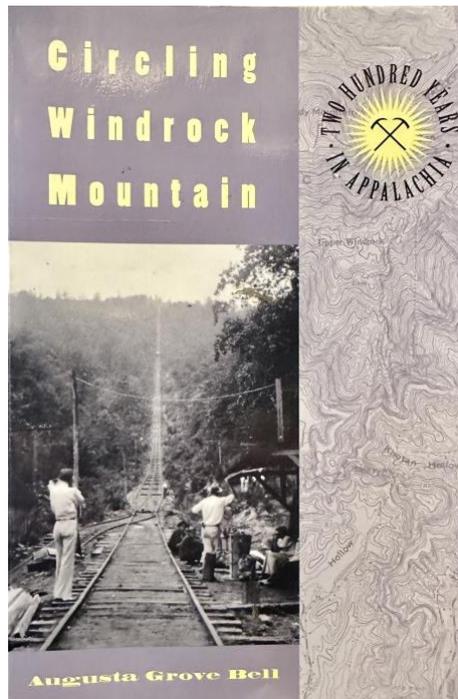
(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the wee of September 29, 2025)

Despite the success of the Richards House, Joseph Richards' sons had a big idea: build the grand 150-room Oliver Springs Hotel near the mineral springs. "With a group of Cleveland speculators, they raised what today would be well over \$2 million," Bell stated. "A new five-story structure of Georgia pine was built in 1895 on 500 acres, including part of Walden Ridge." In 1894, the railroad was taken over by Southern Railway just before the grand Oliver Springs Hotel with 150 rooms opened.

The Richards family had turned Oliver Springs into a coal mining boom town in the late 19th century and built the elegant Oliver Springs Hotel, which became a nationally known resort and spa until the hotel burned down in 1905.

Next: The famous Oliver Springs Hotel, the Richards House, Oliver Springs landmarks, and other Oliver Springs families.

Thanks, Carolyn, for bringing us some of the history of the people who lived in Oliver Springs in its early years.



Much of this research is taken from the book, by Augusta Grove Bell, *Circling Windrock Mountain*. (Courtesy of Ray Smith)