

Along The Road Less Traveled and the Well-Trodden Path

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Despite its Secret City status, Oak Ridge has never been far off the beaten path, and has a long history before the Manhattan Project. While Oak Ridge is a relatively young city it sits astride what has often been billed as the oldest or first road in the State. While sections of the Old Emory Trace have been pirated by Illinois Avenue, Hickory Lanes, Raleigh Road, the Oak Ridge Turnpike and Emory Valley Road, traces of it can be seen to parallel some of these routes as well. An old road bed runs along side of Emory Valley Road. First on the South side where it now hosts the new Emory Valley Greenway for half its length, and then along the north side where a faint trace still forms a visible terrace through residential landscaping. Aerial photography visibly suggests an old roadbed paralleling Illinois Avenue. And of course, the Old Emory Bridge, now in need of repair aligns the old trace with sections pirated by Raleigh Road and the Turnpike.

So what, an old road ran here once. Yet this old road tells an interesting story, and it ties our community to what otherwise is too often viewed as a dull and dry history. This is not just an old road but the Great Wagon Road. It has been often written about by Carson Brewer, and featured in the Heartland Series on local TV. David Ray Smith has written a brief history of it for the State History which may be found up on the Web. And perhaps it strikes a bit deeper accord with me since one, John Hackett, had a Way Station near where the road began in Corryton, and later sought compensation for use of his land in building Fort Southwest Point along the newer Kingston Pike route. Emory Road, known by many names, is how the State was settled. Many people traversed it and not a few died along it in a long battle of cultures.

Trails have always played a big role in the landscape of our area. As the Oak Ridge Trail system continues to grow, it seemed a nice place to stop and rest and look back on the path that led us here. Such trails were here before humans came along to use them. As any avid hiker knows, the woods are full of tracks and trails. Animals are constantly on the move. Both wild and domestic animals tend to frequent the same paths of least resistance. That is to say their intimate familiarity with the landscape leads them to carve a path that avoids as many obstacles as possible, and thus to find an optimal path.

Major trails were carved out over the ages and maintained by mammoth and bison in their continual migrations. The combined wisdom of generations of many species have optimized these byways. While fallen trees and changing river beds have caused them to braid with new twists, the paths have still become deeply tread into both the land and the consciousness. These migration paths became a highway system long before they were incorporated into our modern highway system.

North south migrations followed along what first became known as the Great Warriors Path. This trail had many feeder routes and ran from the Great Lakes to the Gulf Coast. While it originally served the great beasts as a seasonal migration route, it later was utilized by Indigenous Americans for hunting, trade, warfare, and migration. It became Broadway of America (U.S. 11) or the Lee Highway which follows closely along the original path, but since has been largely replaced by nearby Interstates 75 & 81 for such North-South travel. Yuchi and Creek villages occupied key points where this trail forded the Little Tennessee (Tellico) and Hiawassee Rivers. Later these became Cherokee towns. Later still Vonore and Cleveland were sited near these old towns.

Many branch roads fed into this trail along its length. Over mountain trails followed through river gaps such as the French Road along the French Broad (originally French Road River a.k.a Catawba Trail), and the Charlestown Road (a.k.a. Unicoi Pike or Overhill Trade Route) along the Hiawassee from the East, and Westward went Tollunteskee's trail. This ancient trail was to become the first settlement road to Nashville — the Avery or Emory Trace.

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These ancient and well trodden trails have played a major role in transforming the landscape. The Tennessee River Valley forms a natural passageway North and South between the mountains and ridges. The movement westward brought the need to find and improve westward roads. These ancient trails made East Tennessee a early national crossroads, a tradition that still continues in Interstate 40 & 75. While the routes have changed with technology that can move mountains and bridge fords so as to straighten winding paths into broad super highways, the early trails are not always obliterated in the process.

The historic evidence suggests that Tollunteeskee's trail, the original trail westward, came through Oak Ridge, and became the route of Avery's Trace (also known as the Emory Road). This early trail left the Great Warriors path in a westward direction at Blaine. This path is essentially that preserved in Emory Road through Halls and Powell to Karns where it crossed the ridges following Henderson Road through where the Bull Run Steam Plant is today and along the Old Emory Road and then crossing the Clinch River at Lea's Ford where the Oak Ridge Marina is today. It then followed along Emory Valley Road on in to Oak Ridge as already noted. The best preserved if but later day remnant may be seen in an old bridge over the spring creek that feeds the Oak Ridge Swimming Pool next to the old Wildcat Den. From here it turned up along the path, essentially that of Highway 62 through Oliver Springs, Wartburg, Monterey and on to Nashville.

Beside the existing roads still bearing the name Emory, and the old bridge with its historic marker downtown, another interesting portion of this first road west still exists in Oak Ridge. The New Emory Valley Greenway follows an old abandoned portion of the path. An old graded right-of-way parallels the existing bed of Emory Valley Road for a quarter of a mile. The new greenway uses about half of this stretch as its roadbed. While it cannot be verified to date back to the latter Eighteenth Century, odds are good that it does. The one hundred and hundred fifty year old trees that grow on the verge embankments certainly take it back before the turn of last century. The difficulty in clearing new routes before this time would have likely kept it true to the original path.

It is a pleasant and flat stretch of the new greenway that ought to take ones thoughts back to that earlier time when passage through here was arduous and not leisurely as today. If one ignores the invasive undergrowth of privet, honeysuckle and olive, as well as the smooth pavement, you just might let your imagination take you back to a time when life was truly hard. Coming up along this section still wet from fording the Clinch River. Eyes scanning the forest for the ever present danger of Indian attack. It is late in the day, and you have traveled far from your stopover last night at Hackett's Station where you crossed Flat Creek the evening before as you started westward along the Emory Road. You should not now be far from the Freels Cabin and a warm meal... Of course, a large truck on Emory Valley usually noisily brings one out of such reveries at this point, but still it is pleasant walkway which leads one down to the beautiful vista of Melton Hill Lake and the Cumberland Front.

There is also a number of deer trails and older hiking trails crisscrossing this little greenbelt if one wants to get a bit closer to nature. Back in the thickets one can see beaver, coyote, deer, wild turkey, owls, raccoon, mink and other creatures, but must step carefully over the mudpuppy holes. Above on the crest of Pine Ridge is a ridge-runner animal trail which runs the ridge from the knob over the lake to the overlook on Illinois Avenue. One of the charms that Oak Ridge offers is this mix of old and new, wild and tame — still preserving the clash of cultures. The Emory Valley Greenway will also serve as a wonderful passage for the many runners and visiting rowers that so oft dangerously skirted the busy Emory Valley Road in the past.



Newly paved section of Old Emory Road / Emory Valley Greenway
The Old Road runs for 1/4 mile along side of Emory Valley Road and about half (1/8 mile) of it is paved as part of the new Emory Valley Trail.