

Forgotten Footsteps

The Cherokee Trail of Tears National Historic Trail at Old Jefferson - Rutherford County, Tennessee

By: Pat Cummins - President, Native History Association - August, 2014



Please let me begin by explaining the discovery of a previously unknown segment of the Trail of Tears by the Native History Association in September of 2012. I will then also explain the importance of the former historic town of Jefferson and why this property is such an extremely significant part of the history of Middle Tennessee.

The Native History Association discovered an existing 1 3/4 mile segment of the Cherokee Trail of Tears, at the former location of the historic town of Jefferson at the forks of the Stones River in Rutherford County in September of 2012, while attempting to determine the precise location of a lesser known alternate northern land route through northern Rutherford County, TN. It was a long known fact that the primary northern route of the Trail of Tears passed directly through Murfreesboro, TN, and thus the route turned north there on the Old Nashville Pike toward Nashville. However, what is much less known is that of the 11,000 Cherokee to travel through Middle Tennessee, 4 detachments of approximately 4000 Cherokee men, women, and children, followed an alternate Trail of Tears route from Readyville, TN, northwest along the East Fork of the Stones River at the former town of Jefferson and thus they bypassed Murfreesboro completely, to avoid the costly toll gates at the Nashville Pike at Murfreesboro.

In researching this little known route through rural Rutherford County, Native History Association vice president, Toye Heape, determined the presence of this relatively small, but extremely significant section of the Trail of Tears at Jefferson by using Google Earth to virtually drive mapped segments associated with this route that were previously recorded by the National Park Service in the early 1990's. The segment at Jefferson was however thought to have been completely destroyed in the 1960's with the construction of J. Percy Priest Lake by the U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers and now thought to be under 60 feet of water. As it turns out, that never happened!



A Google Earth view of Old Jefferson that illustrates how the Trail of Tears passed through town in 1838.

Toye could see the unmistakable tell tale indications of the old road through the tree tops at Old Jefferson where the route through town was known to have existed. We were of course so excited to realize that this "old road" was in fact, the Trail of Tears, and that no one had ever realized that we had a federally owned and protected Trail of Tears National Historic Trail segment remaining in this part of Rutherford County, let alone at such a historic location as Jefferson. Our discovery has since prompted the National Park Service in conjunction with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to install official NPS Trail of Tears signage that should be in place by October 2014. Along with the new signs, an official ribbon cutting ceremony is being planned to commemorate the new Twin Forks Trail of Tears Pedestrian Trail at the East Fork Recreation Area Trail Head (Old Jefferson) in late October as well.

Stepping Back In Time:

At the junction of the east & west forks of the Stones River near Smyrna, TN in northern Rutherford County, the former town of Jefferson was recognized as the first official county seat of the newly formed county beginning as early as 1804. Jefferson is located on what was originally a land grant issued by the State of North Carolina consisting of approximately 3,800 acres issued to Revolutionary War Veteran, James Pearl. Pearl sold his rights to the property to Col. Robert Weakley and Thomas Bedford. Both Weakley and Bedford were two of Middle Tennessee's very early land surveyors and both were very wealthy speculators. The two envisioned the future of Jefferson as a thriving river port town due to its location on the Stones River with it's easy access to the Cumberland River and the ports of trade far beyond the borders of Tennessee. A formal plan for the proposed



A partial copy of Col. Robert Weakley's original 1804 hand-drawn map of the town of Jefferson at the Forks of the Stones River in Rutherford County, TN.

town was created which consisted initially of a 40 acre site with approximately 160 individual lots arranged along its streets. A Public Square and formal Court House were soon laid off and constructed in the center of town near the main wharf and the future looked very bright for Jefferson.

As early as 1803, the first business was operating on what would become the Public Square. The first store was opened by William Nash and it wasn't long before a number of taverns or (necessary's) as they were called, were plentiful at Old Jefferson and very popular among the many travelers and river boatmen of the day. These early Taverns were also used as hotels for the large number of people traveling through. Various craftsmen and other businesses were also soon established and thriving at Jefferson and crudely constructed shops and warehouses lined the main streets around the Public Square and near the Wharf. Crops such as cotton, corn, tobacco, and

other commodities such as Red Cedar were shipped on the Stones River by raft, flatboat, and barge, from Jefferson by the thousands of tons to ports as far away as New Orleans, Pittsburg, and beyond. Unfortunately, the dream envisioned by its founders was short lived. Within 10 years, a major shift in the population center toward the area of Murfree's Spring much further south of Jefferson, would develop better roads linking the county together, and making Old Jefferson simply out of practical reach of most citizens in the county by this time. Old Jefferson was abandoned as the first county seat of government by 1811, and the formation of a new county seat (Murfreesboro) was approved by the General Assembly by 1813.

Jefferson Square,
late 1800s

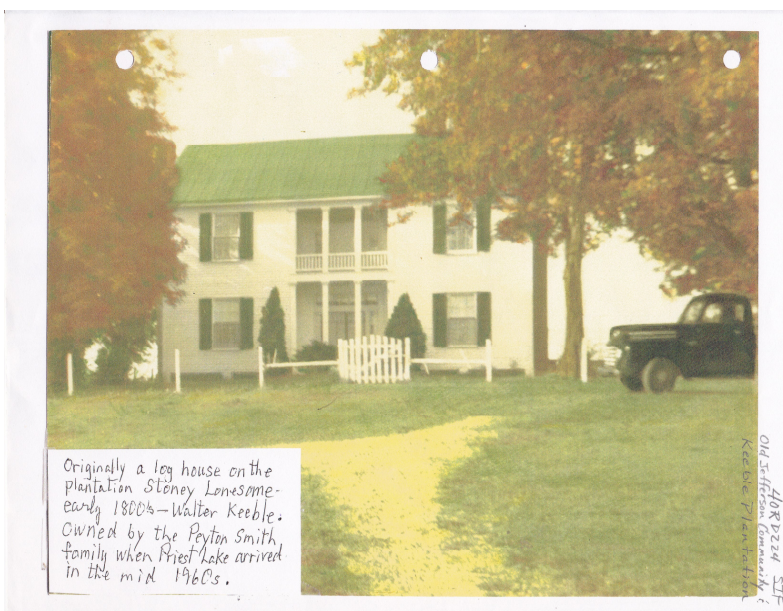


The John Nash
Read Tavern on the
Public Square at
Old Jefferson - Built
in 1806 &
demolished in 1901.

Jefferson would always hold the distinction of many first's in Rutherford County however. The first official court was called to order at the Jefferson Courthouse in 1804, and prominent Tennessee Attorney's Andrew Jackson, Thomas Hart Benton, and Felix Grundy, were all arguing the first cases of their distinguished careers at Jefferson. Sam Houston

was said to have visited Old Jefferson on several occasions as did David Crockett who had relatives in the area of Old Jefferson. The primary east to west road through town was said to be a part of the early Federal-Georgia Road and stagecoaches made frequent stops traveling to and from Nashville from points to the southeast. The fertile fields and vast tracts of timber attracted the attention of numerous families and individuals from the Carolina's and Virginia, and by 1810, massive land holdings of 3000 acres, such as Shelton Crosthwaite's "Fairmont" plantation, and the Walter Keeble plantation also known as "Stoney Lonesome", began to take a firm hold on the land around Jefferson. Both of these planters each owned at least 100 enslaved persons who worked their individual plantations by the time of the Civil War.

Tennessee's first African American State Legislator, Sampson W. Keeble, who's bronze bust adorns a prominent location in the main hall of the State Capital building in Nashville, was born a slave at the Keeble plantation at Jefferson in 1833. Very few persons even realize this location is where this extremely important political pioneer was raised and that he would overcome so much to build a life filled with amazing accomplishments following his emancipation.



Early 1960's photo of The Walter Keeble Plantation House at Old Jefferson (now destroyed). The boyhood home of Tennessee's first African American Legislator, Sampson W. Keeble. (1833 -1887).

With the impending civil war battle of Stones River, the conflict came to the streets of Jefferson in the early 1860's and here again, so little of this information has made its way into the mainstream knowledge of the general public of the region. Yet, the war left an indelible mark on the landscape which can still be seen today if you know where to look. Both Union and Confederate troops were frequent visitors to the streets of Jefferson beginning in the days and weeks leading up to the Battle of Stones River, and through the end of the Federal occupation of Middle Tennessee. Confederate General's Joe Wheeler, & John Hunt Morgan were frequently seen traveling through Jefferson while engaged in well documented area skirmishes. We are so fortunate to have the numerous diary entries and other historic documentation left by those who endured this difficult time in the history in and around the area at Old Jefferson.

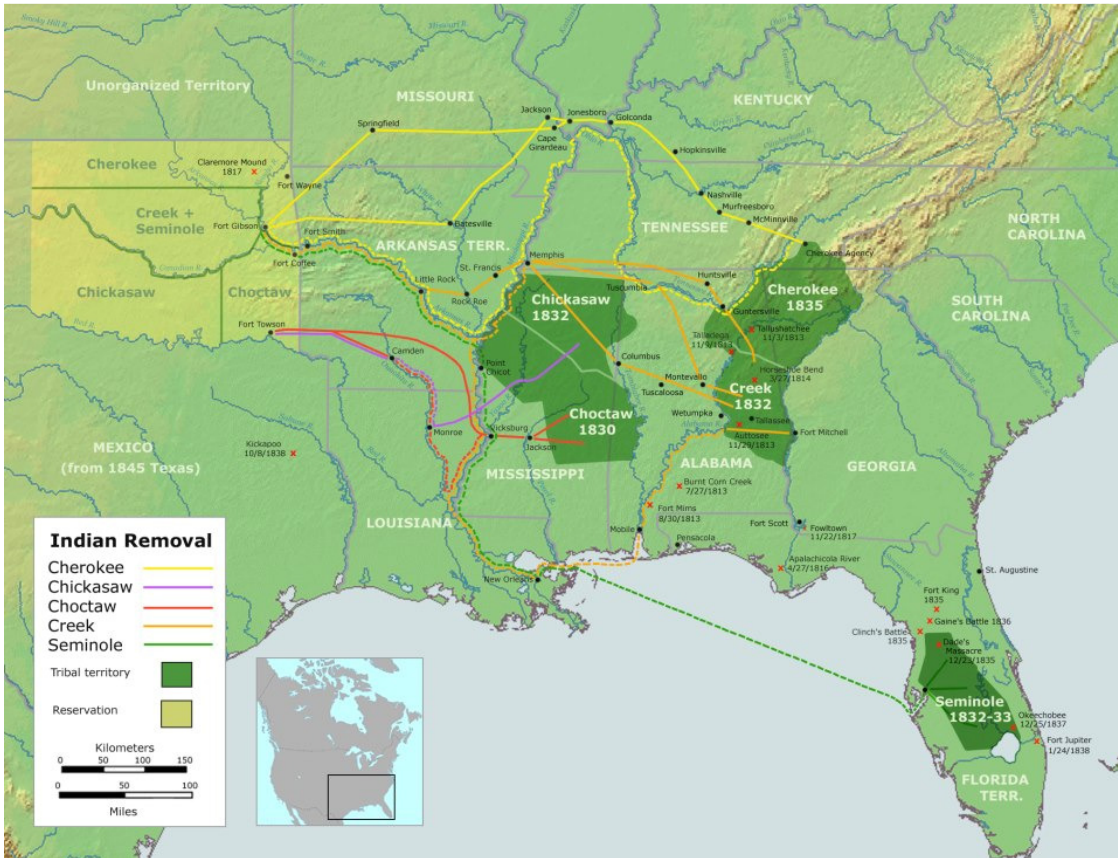


An early 19th century dry stacked stone wall near the west ford, on the Stones River, Rutherford County, TN. This wall is reported to have been built by slave labor. The Cherokee forded the west fork of the Stones River at this location in October of 1838 on the Trail of Tears.

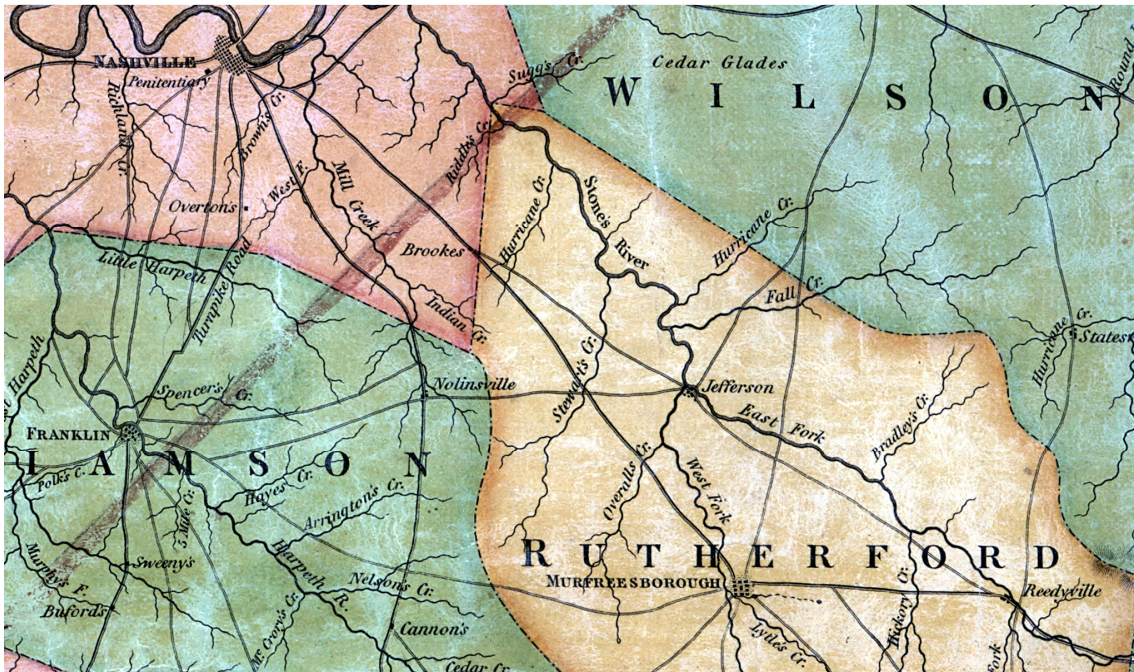
By the turn of the 20th century, there was little left that would have been recognized by the earliest residents of Old Jefferson. From its birth in the frontier wilderness of Tennessee a century before, to the early economic explosion of the early 1800's, to its evolution into a quiet farming village of the 1960's, it had given rise to so much history. Many of the descendants of those early settlers who remained in the area retained a very strong sense of identity and a pride in knowing that their ancestors had endured so much in carving out a close knit community on the banks of the Stones River. It was with overwhelming heartbreak that by the mid 1960's, their lives and all they had known was about to come to a permanent close with the condemnation of the entire community, and its destruction by the U.S. Army Corps. of Engineers. Its extraordinary that the history of all that once happened here survives in such detail. It's truly an honor to tell these stories and to help keep this history and the legacy of our ancestors alive. For those of you who plan on attending the Historic Nashville Inc. tour in September, we will visit all these locations that I've mentioned and the individual histories of each location will be shared on site as well!!! We are truly excited and look forward to seeing everyone in a few weeks!!

Sincerely,

Pat Cummins, President
Native History Association - August, 2014.



A Trail of Tears Native American Removal Map of the Southeast.



An enlarged view of Matthew Rhea's 1832 Survey Map of the State of Tennessee, showing Rutherford county and the town of Jefferson on the Stones River.