

An Early History of Robertsville 1792-1879

Many Oak Ridgers are familiar with the established story of how, in 1804, the Robertsville 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 Emory Road split from the original 1797 Emory Road. Today, this would be the western end of Raleigh Road where it intersects with Robertsville Road.

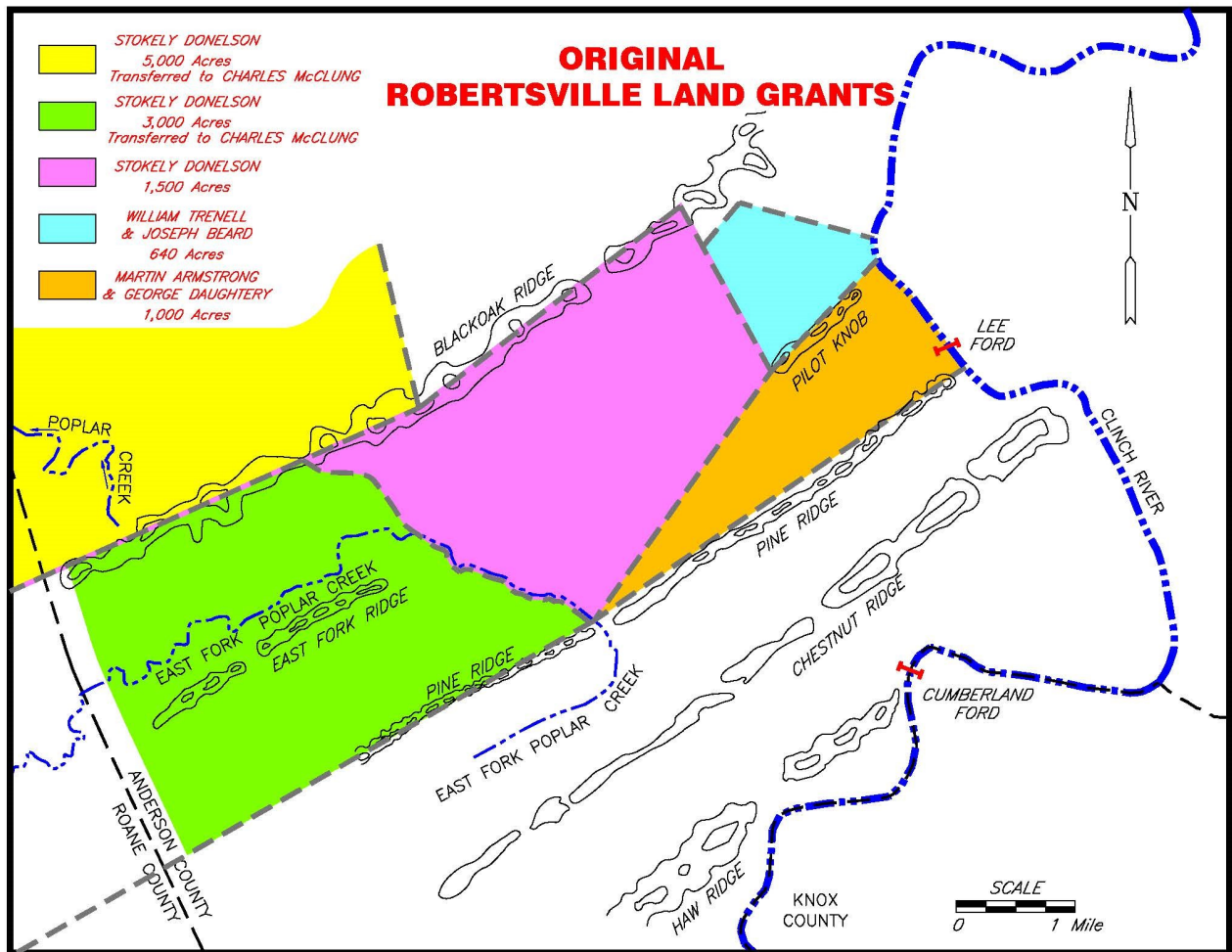
However, Robertsville was much larger. Thanks to the establishment of the Robertsville Post Office in 1832, expanded postal coverage included the entire area between Black Oak and Pine Ridges and from just below the beginning of East Fork Ridge to the Clinch River.

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.

1792-1829

After the Revolutionary War, the state of North Carolina, in order to pay debts to her soldiers, opened lands beyond the Appalachian Mountains for settlement. Approximately 200,000 acres of land in what is now East Tennessee were surveyed and then opened for settlement. However, some of this surveyed land in the southern part of this vast expanse was still owned by the Cherokee Nation. It wasn't until the Treaty of Tellico signed in 1798 that all the surveyed lands became part of the United States.

Within what would become Robertsville, four surveyed tracts of land were established: 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 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 who, at that time, were living just across the river.

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.

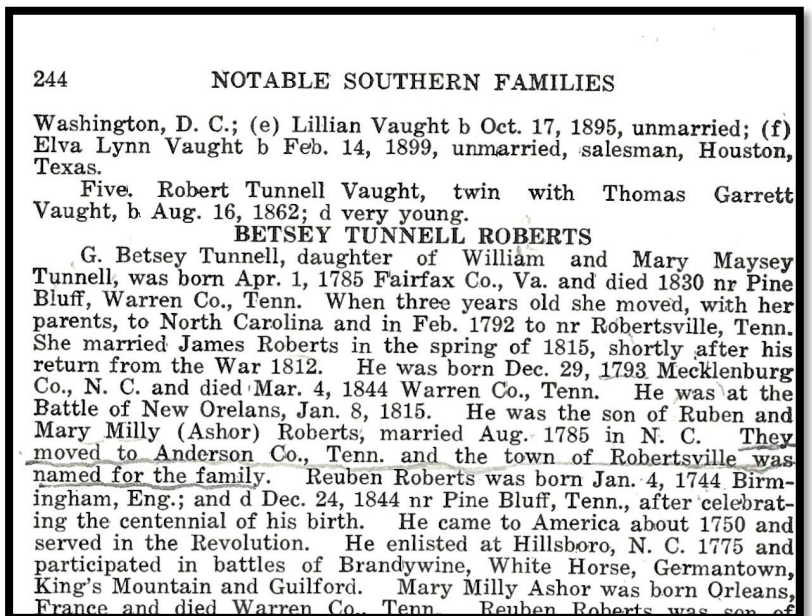
By 1795, other families began arriving here. Among them were the Thomas Jones and Jacob Peak families who, through an intermarriage, arrived here as an extended clan. Jacob Peak eventually went on to become one of the wealthiest land owners owning about 900 acres in Gamble Valley. His land was still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

Another early arrival was the Oliver family. Patriarch Douglas Oliver was a Revolutionary war veteran from Virginia who fought on the Kentucky frontier. The absence from his name on the Henry County tax records indicated that he had left Virginia and possibly resettled here in 1797. From two marriages he had 13 children and would ultimately become the largest land-owning baron in Robertsville.

By 1797, the Emory 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 Emory Road was in a strategic location. Prior to the Tellico Treaty in 1798, the Emory Road stayed clear of Cherokee lands. Passing through Robertsville, the Emory Road traversed up Black Oak Ridge to modern day Hilltop, continuing on to Wartburg. After the Treaty of Tellico in 1798, the Emory Road took a more southwesterly route towards Kingston. Where it branched off from the original Emory Road, a crossroads was realized that became Robertsville.

In 1799, this developing community 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 East Fork Baptist Church served the entire area. This small, nameless rural area began taking shape to become a vibrant community.

More families began putting down their roots in this valley between the Black Oak and Pine Ridges. Among those families was the Reuben Roberts clan who had left North Carolina and settled here in 1804. Roberts, a North Carolina Revolutionary War veteran, settled here to start a new life on the frontier. A few years after his arrival, his son James married Betsy Tunnell. As previously mentioned the Tunnells were descendents of both French and English aristocracy and within the Tunnell family history



documented in "Notable Southern Families", it was the Reuben Roberts family whom the community of Robertsville was named after. However, by the 1820s, the entire Reuben Roberts family left this area settling in Warren County in Middle Tennessee.

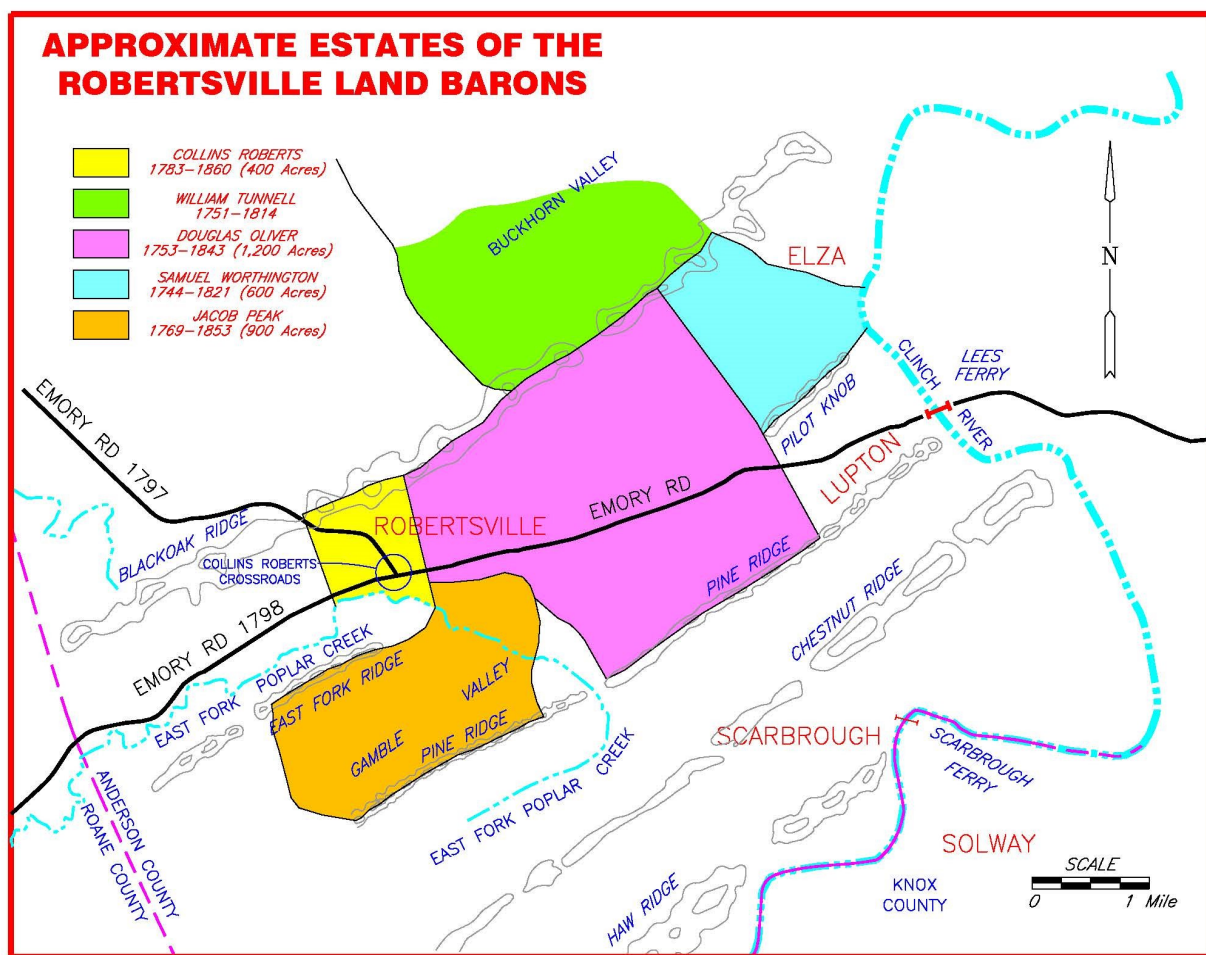
In 1809, another historical icon had settled in this community. Collins Roberts immediately established himself as a successful local merchant and continued to expand his wealth by farming. His marriage to Sarah Gallaher in 1813 also helped promote his status within the community. Sarah was from an influential family that settled in the Wheat Community. Collins Roberts was certainly one of the more colorful and controversial individuals who lived here. As we will see, he often had tumultuous relationships not only with his wife but also with some of his neighbors.

By the early decades of the 1800s, Robertsville became a self-sufficient community. It certainly benefitted from the nearby available resources.

There were four mills in the adjacent Scarbrough community that also served Robertsville residents. As a grad student, Charles Seebers in his 1929 thesis for the University of Tennessee History Department identified a grist mill, flour mill, saw mill, and a cording machine owned by the Scarbrough family. To the northwest of Robertsville, there was a salt well located in Winters Gap (now Oliver Springs) that provided salt to the community. In addition to being self sufficient, Robertsville was also becoming a prosperous community.

1830-1849

Throughout the 1830s, the landed elite had realized their massive estates. Jacob Peak, Douglas Oliver, and Collins Roberts became the wealthiest citizens in the community. By this time, Samuel Worthington had died and his 600-acre estate had been subdivided.



Douglas Oliver's original purchase of 140 acres in 1803 would expand to 1,268 acres. Just before his death in 1843, he owned land from the top of Black Oak Ridge to Pine Ridge. In addition to farming, Douglas owned one of the largest, if not the largest, legal moonshine stills in the county. The spring that fed his still is the same spring that feeds the huge municipal swimming pool today. Upon his death in 1843, one creditor owed his estate for 50 gallons of moonshine. After Douglas' death, his estate was subdivided into five sections; four were sold and one section retained by the family. Only daughter Amelia continued to live on a parcel that was once Douglas' vast estate.

In 1805, Jacob Peak made his first purchase of 50 acres along East Fork Poplar Creek. Like Douglas Oliver, he continually expanded his land over time. At the time of his death in 1853, Jacob Peak owned 900 acres located in Gamble Valley and a portion of what today is downtown Oak Ridge. After Douglas Oliver died in 1843, Jacob bought his distillery equipment and supplies to start his own distillery operation. Jacob's distillery was located at a spring at the foot of the hill of where the Peak Cemetery is located today. Jacob Peak is buried here in the Peak Cemetery; however, there is no grave marker to identify his exact interment.

The most recognized citizen of historic Robertsville that many Oak Ridgers may be aware of was Collins Roberts. Although Collins Roberts may not have been the original founding patriarch, he was certainly an influential citizen whom also may have played a role in naming this community. To create a named community in the old days, a person of influence would apply to have a post office created, and of course, naming it would be up to the discretion of the applicant. That is what Collins Roberts did. Using his clout, the "Robertsville" post office was created in 1832. It certainly helped his mercantile trade to have the post office in his store! Clark Crozier, Collins' son-in-law, was the first postmaster. As the years passed, the Robertsville postal area grew and grew incorporating Elza, Lupton Crossroads, and even Scarbrough.

Collins Roberts was both a merchant and a farmer who, over the years, amassed a fortune. As a merchant, many of his neighbors bought from him on credit. A list of notes carried by Collins Roberts from 1849 to 1852 revealed that he was owed approximately \$17,600 from his customers. Today that would be \$670,000! From Anderson County court documents involving nonpayment of credit, Collins often foreclosed on his non-paying customers. It's apparent that he sometimes had turbulent relationships with those around him.

An incident occurred in 1841 when Isaac Freels, feeling previously cheated by Collins Roberts, decided to take the matter into his own hands and recover the money he thought Collins stole from him.

Late one April night, after Collins returned home from Clinton, Isaac Freels, along with brothers Edward, William and a band of recruited confederates lay siege to the Roberts homestead. About 10 p.m., wife Sarah, daughter Abiah, guest Eliza Qualls, and two Negro boys heard a commotion outside. Looking out the window they saw the nearby fodder stack on fire illuminating the entire area. Then, this unruly mob began shooting, throwing rocks, and banging sticks against the house demanding everyone come out. Sarah immediately dispatched the two Negro boys to nearby neighbors to summon help.

As wife Sarah, daughter Abiah, and guest Eliza Qualls stood defiantly by the fastened door, Collins Roberts barricaded himself at the back of the room with a firearm vowing to "defend his money or die by it"! Court records indicated that he claimed he had \$10,000 in his home. The situation became tense when the ladies saw hands slip under the front door in an attempt to lift the door off of its hinges in order to gain entry. Thankfully the McCamy and Kilpatrick neighbors arrived and the assailants made a hasty retreat.

1850s

By the 1850s, Robertsville continued to grow and so did Collins Roberts wealth but not without issues. In 1851, Collins faced a legal dilemma challenging his mental competence. A Report of Jury of C. Roberts signed by 12 Anderson County jurors was presented to the Anderson County Court.

Report of Jury for C. Roberts

We the undersigned free holders of Anderson County being duly summoned and sworn to inquire into the mental condition of Collins Roberts having fully investigated the matter to find that he is a lunatic and incapable of managing his affairs with safety to himself and others. We also find that there is danger if he should go unrestrained of his committing violence on his wife and perhaps other members of his family and also upon his slaves. We further find that he possessed of a large amount of real and personal estate which we have not had time and opportunity to and with any exacting or certainty.

November 22nd 1851 James Hall

James Holliman William Davidson John Rutherford

John McAdoo John Courtney D. L. Bradley

Cheslay Jarnigan William Tunnell William Cross

Lazarus Moore Larken Hackworth

Apparently, no action was taken from this Jury report; the 1860 census indicated that Collins Roberts retained all of his personal real estate and assets.

The deteriorating relationship between Collins and his wife Sarah in the late 1850s ultimately ended in a divorce. In the 1800s divorces had to be granted by the state legislature. There appears to be no information substantiating that a divorce between Collins and Sarah occurred; however, local historians such as Snyder Roberts indicated that this divorce did indeed happen. What is known is that according to the 1860 Federal U.S. Census, Sarah and Collins were living separately. Sarah was enumerated as living with son James in the Ross Community in Dutch Valley.

1860s

Just before the Civil War in 1860, Robertsville was a vibrant community with a population of 840 citizens. However, the war would take a terrible toll on this community. Comparing the 1860 U.S. Federal Census to the 1870 census, there was a decrease of population from 840 to 720 citizens. Additionally, due to the Civil War, many Robertsville families' financial worth drastically decreased over this ten-year period.

Not only did the economy suffer, but also the divided political loyalties created hardships. One such tragic incident occurred in Robertsville just after the Civil War ended.

Confederate Pvt. Ethelbert Crozier's joyous return home to his parents Clark and Abiah would be short lived. Being the son of Abiah, Ethelbert was also the grandson of

Collins Roberts. Ethelbert had previously been properly paroled from his service with the 8th Confederate Tennessee Calvary after its surrender to Union forces.

On May 25th, while staying with his parents, Ethelbert was sequestered by three Union soldiers and then summarily executed in front of his mother, father, and his sister. The reasoning for this "execution" was unclear to his mother. Abiah documented in her grievance letter to the Provost Marshall that no charges were made by the Union soldiers before killing him. They shot him once, contemplated shooting him again but decided not to. Next, they tore his pardon up, threw it on the ground and then walked away.

Research by Theodore Urbanski revealed that these three Union soldiers were believed to be assigned to the 9th Tennessee Union Calvary. This unit was operating in the Robertsville area rounding up Confederate bushwackers and irregulars whom were attacking and sometimes killing local Union sympathizers. However, it appears that Pvt. Ethelbert Crozier's murder in Robertsville was more of a revenge killing. The three Union soldiers' hatred for the Confederate unit Ethelbert Crozier served in had, no doubt, influenced their actions. After the Battle of Saltville, Virginia, in 1864, this confederate unit was associated with the massacre of both White and Negro Union soldiers.

Abiah Crozier began her search for justice of her son's murder. On June 7th, she wrote a letter to the Provost Marshall in Knoxville, Tennessee, substantiating her son's innocence and asking that the three unknown perpetrators be identified and brought to justice. Three soldiers, Peter Driscoll, Ed Franklin, and James Holden, were identified and arrested by the Provost Marshall.

Sadly, the results of the Provost Marshall's investigation produced nothing for Abiah. The standing military orders stated that these soldiers were to capture outlaws and treat them as prisoners as they are entitled to a trial. However, the orders further stated that "*anyone found with arms without authority of federal officers will be treated as public enemy and as an outlaw and to be killed like a mad dog by anyone who meets them.*" After the investigation, there was apparently no conviction and the matter was forgotten. Abiah's plea for justice of the murder of her son went unheeded.

1870s

The 1870s saw profound changes in Robertsville. As more families relocated here, there was progress in education. Two schools, the Whittier School and the Robertsville Academy, provided the first opportunities for local children to receive a formal education.

Robertsville can boast of having the first African-American school in Anderson County. Named the Whittier School, it was located on the crest of Pine Ridge just east of where South Illinois Avenue crosses the ridge.

Research by Anderson County Historian Katherine Hoskins revealed that the land for this school was donated by Andrew Freeman, a freed slave. He unselfishly deeded this land to the Eighth District school directors for the construction of a Negro school and church. The deed stated in part that Freeman did this "as a token of his high regard for the religious interests of his county and his desire for the instruction and elevation of his race." Opened in 1870, the Whittier School was funded by subscription of one dollar per student per month. Initially, twenty one African-American students enrolled.

In 1875, the General Assembly of Tennessee passed the Charter Act that helped fund private schools in Tennessee. The applications for the charters stated that they were to educate the youth of the country in all the branches of learning. Ironically, this funding came from the collection of poll taxes that was used to marginalize African-Americans and poor Whites from voting.

Just after 1875, the Oak Grove Academy located in Robertsville was chartered. Shortly afterwards, it became known as the Robertsville Academy. The exact location of where the Robertsville Academy existed is unknown but there is tantalizing evidence of where it may have been. In 1883, the Robertsville Academy Board of Directors signed a contractual agreement with Dr. Henry Seinknecht for the use of a well on his property. Seinknecht's land consisted of over 100 acres that today is the site of the Oak Ridge High School. He bought this land from his father-in-law J. D. Tadlock, who previously bought the southwest section of the vast Douglas Oliver estate. This parcel of land also included the spring that today feeds the Oak Ridge Swimming Pool.

The agreement between the academy directors and Dr. Seinknecht identifies that in addition to the well located nearby the school, there was also an adjacent stone house on the property. This would strongly indicate that the well was at the spring that today feeds the Oak Ridge Swimming Pool. Perhaps the stone house was a storage facility that, in the past, stored grain for Oliver's massive distillery operation. If this is accurate, then the Robertsville Academy would have been located somewhere nearby present day Grove Center. It is ironic that many people today are not aware that this school existed.

Epilogue

After 1879, there would be more progress to come. The Robertsville High School would be built transferring education from private ownership to government ownership. Additionally, the Woods Chapel and School located near present day Cedar Hill Park would continue to educate African-American children. Thanks to the efforts of Elijah Woods, an African-American Union Civil War veteran who served in the U.S. Colored Heavy Artillery Regiment, African-American children in Robertsville could obtain an education.



Although the cultural landscape of Robertsville has virtually disappeared, a visit to the Oak Ridge historic cemeteries can take us back in time and reveal the names of those individuals who lived here and made this a vibrant community. Of all the original Robertsville land barons, Collins Roberts has the only identifiable grave. Concealed among the low hanging branches of a large Cedar tree located within the historic Robertsville Baptist Cemetery stands an impressive stone obelisk. Here, Collins Roberts mutely lies in repose reminding us of a bygone era.

The Legend of the Buried Robertsville Gold

An early history of Robertsville certainly would not be complete without addressing the legendary Collins Roberts buried gold hoard. This story has persisted through time and even been written about. In George Robinson's book *The Oak Ridge Story*, he reveals that just before the Civil War, Collins Roberts decided to quietly sell his slaves accepting only gold coins for payment. Being leary of thievery and banks, Collins buried his gold. Shortly afterwards in 1860, he died taking the location of his buried treasure with him to the grave.

This begs the question, how much wealth did Collins Roberts have in 1860 just before he died and what happened to it? According to the 1860 U.S. Federal Census, his real estate value was \$25,000 and his personal estate value was \$300,000. Today, \$300,000 is worth 10.4 million dollars.

From the 1860 U.S. Federal Slave Census, we know that Collins Roberts owned 40 slaves. No documentation exists revealing their fate. Additionally, no will for Collins Roberts has been found nor does it appear that his children received an inheritance.

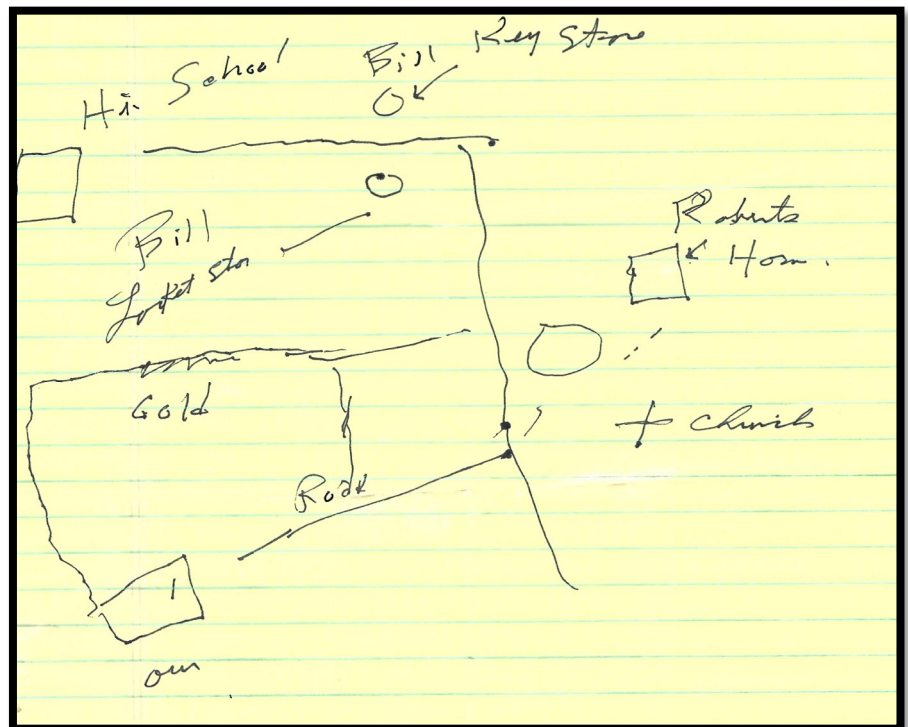
Son James died in 1862. In 1867, a nuncupative will witnessed by his sister Abiah indicated that James left his wife some land in Dutch Valley. He wished that she dispose of this land and buy more suitable land which would be more advantageous for the family. Neither does it appear that daughter Abiah received any significant wealth after Collins Roberts' death. The 1870 census revealed that his daughter, Abiah and husband Clark Crozier's wealth had significantly declined from 1860. Certainly, it appears that Collins Roberts' wealth is unaccounted for!

The whereabouts of Collins Roberts wealth became local legend. People came from all over the south searching for this elusive treasure. The stories of Collins Roberts' buried gold persisted even up to the time the government condemned the land in 1942. Local historian John Rice Irwin told me of a memory he had. As a young boy living here, he also heard stories of this buried gold. John remembered a meeting held by the government in which the local citizens were told of the impending

purchase and their need to immediately vacate. In desperation to keep his land, one concerned citizen asked the government official, what about the buried gold? Everyone knew that his question was futile and his concern was ignored.

Some time ago, I visited John Rice Irwin who, at the time, was living in assisted living. Although his body was frail, his mind was still as sharp as a tack. Our conversation ultimately turned to what John knew about the Collins Roberts' buried gold. John told me that as a kid living in this community he too had personally searched for it. At that point I questioned John where it could be. He stated that he was told by his neighbors of two likely places. The first place was on a dip atop East Fork Ridge. Standing at Robertsville High School, now Robertsville Middle School, it would be due south as the compass points to the East Fork Ridge location.

The second location John told me was near the site of the old Collins Roberts' homestead which today is at the western intersection of Robertsville and Raleigh Roads. At that point John drew a map for me giving greater detail. As he drew the map, his eyes lit up as though he was still living here in this bygone era. "Somewhere", he said as he pointed to an area of the map, "is where the gold was buried." He added "Standing in front of the Collins Roberts home you could throw a stone up a rise and within this stone's throw was where the gold was buried." "John," I said, "that would be somewhere behind present day Inca Circle!" He just smiled and said "That's what I was told."



John Rice Irwin's Treasure Map

My thanks to **Fred Eiler** for his assistance in the research of this article. Also, I wish to thank **Charles Manning** for sharing his research on early Anderson County land grants. Additionally, I wish to thank **Ron Raymond** for creating the land grant and land baron maps used for this article. Finally, words cannot express my gratitude to the late **John Rice Irwin** for sharing his time and memories with me.

Dennis Eggert