

The McMinnville to Chattanooga Stage Road

Richard Savage, Jr.

On 2 August 1846 a resolution was passed at a public meeting in McMinnville to build a good road from that town to Chattanooga.¹ It was a time of big changes brought about by the coming of the railroads. At the time of the McMinnville meeting the South Carolina and Georgia Railroad was building towards Chattanooga and was expected to arrive there in a year. When completed this would give Chattanooga a rail connection with the coast at Charleston, South Carolina. Certainly there were economic incentives in having a good road to connect Nashville with the railroad at Chattanooga – it was argued that such a road would be the most important in the state. And the shortest proposed route for this road was through McMinnville.² So the resolution was passed and work began immediately.

First the route of the road had to be planned. At this time finding a route that was as short as possible was the primary consideration. It was claimed that the route that was chosen did not vary at any point more than a half mile from a straight line between McMinnville and Chattanooga. It seems that the need for a road had been anticipated as William L. Cain had surveyed a route at least as far south as the Sequatchie Valley some years before.³ Soon a route was chosen going south along the Collins River, crossing the Cumberland Plateau into Sequatchie Valley, then ascending Walden's Ridge before descending into the Tennessee River Valley and going on to Chattanooga.

Progress was rapid. By 1 October 1847 the road had been completed from McMinnville to the top of the mountain above Sequatchie Valley.⁴ However, progress was slower on some other sections so that the road wasn't completed until 1850.⁵

Certainly there were roads along at least part of the route chosen which predate the McMinnville to Chattanooga Road. For example, the Collins River Valley from McMinnville to the base of the mountains had been settled for many years and so there were already roads in this area. Also, in 1833 the Tennessee General Assembly had passed an act authorizing Isaac Easterly to open a turnpike road from near the present site of Altamont to near Ephraim Thurman's residence (the present site of Daus) in Sequatchie Valley.⁶ Finally, in 1840 the General Assembly had authorized Josiah Anderson and George Williams to open a turnpike road from the Sequatchie Valley across Walden's Ridge to the north bank of the Tennessee River opposite Chattanooga.⁷

However, the new road was to be a first class road. From an 1821 act of the General Assembly first class roads embraced the stage roads and other roads of equal importance that were to be causewayed, bridged, milemarked, and indexed.⁸ More specifically, an act passed 5 February 1848 incorporating the McMinnville and Chattanooga Turnpike Company states that "Said road shall be opened at least twenty feet wide, with sixteen feet in the centre clear of stumps, trees and other obstructions, and when necessary shall be causewayed, in a safe and substantial manner, at least twelve feet wide, and good and substantial bridges of the same width at least, shall be built over all streams requiring bridges on said road, and on the east and west sides of the mountain it shall in no part have a greater ascent than

one foot in the distance of ten feet, and on top of the mountain not more than fifteen inches in a distance of ten feet, or such rise not exceeding eighteen inches in ten feet, as the commissioners may allow.”⁹ In some places where there were already roads one would expect that the older route was used but likely needed improvement to meet the first class standard. Surely in other places a completely new road had to be constructed.

The road south of McMinnville in the Collins River Valley through Warren County and northern Grundy County to the base of the mountains was constructed as a public road. The route of the Grundy County portion of the road is preserved in the County Court minutes of 4 January 1847 that detail a route sometimes on new road and sometimes using an older road from the Warren County line to intersect the turnpike road at the foot of the mountain.

At this point the McMinnville Chattanooga Turnpike climbed Peak Mountain and crossed the plateau by way of Barkertown before descending to the Sequatchie Valley at Ephraim Thurman’s. Perhaps this road had been planned a few years back as in the 1848 act incorporating the turnpike company the beginning point is said to be in Warren County. Actually, the base of Peak Mountain where the turnpike began is in Grundy County that had been formed in 1844. The 1848 act set the tolls for the road. These were “wagon and six horse team eighty cents; each wagon and four horse team forty cents; each four wheel pleasure carriage drawn by two or more horses, sixty cents; each pleasure carriage drawn by one horse, forty cents; each cart and driver, thirty cents; each dearborne, carryall, or jersey wagon, thirty cents; each man and horse, ten cents; each led or loose horse, or horse in drove, five cents; each head of neat cattle, two and a half cents; each head of hogs and sheep, one cent.”¹⁰

After reaching Thurman’s the road used public roads to cross Sequatchie Valley to near the residence of Josiah Anderson. There the Marion and Hamilton Turnpike ascended Walden’s Ridge, crossed the plateau, and descended to the Tennessee River near Chattanooga. This turnpike was authorized in the same legislation that created the McMinnville and Chattanooga Turnpike. This road was to have the same tolls and be built to the same standard.¹¹

The longest well-preserved section of the McMinnville to Chattanooga Road in Grundy County is an about three mile long section of the road beginning to the northwest of the base of Peak Mountain and continuing until it reaches the plateau. Much of this section of the road has been incorporated into the trail system for Savage Gulf State Natural Area and so is maintained by park personnel.

Once the plateau is achieved there is a road continuing to the east and southeast that has been identified on topographic maps since the 1950s as the McMinnville Stage Road. However, in the Grundy County Court Minutes of December 1851 there is recorded “... the Jury of View appointed by the court at its September Term last to mark out and lay off a road Beginning about a mile from the Top of the Mountain on the Peak and on the McMinnville and Chattanooga Turnpike road ... report that they have in compliance of the order of said Court layed off and marked out a rout(e) which is as follows to wit. Beginning at Jackson Tate’s running thence to Sterling Savage’s Thence to Martha Night’s – Thence to the McMinnville and Chattanooga Turnpike road at the first Bridge after said road assends the mountain ...” But the

road identified as the Stage Road on topographic maps has no bridges and never could have had one as there are no drainages. Something was wrong!

It wasn't hard to work out where the road really was in this area. As a part of my research on the history of the Savage family I had worked out quite accurately the location of the properties of Sterling Savage, his daughter Martha Knight, and other family members on the Cumberland Plateau. Some of this land joined land of Hugh Lawson White Hill. When Hill died in 1892 the division of his estate among the heirs was recorded in some wonderfully detailed deeds and by a valuable map. In the deed made to his son Virgil Hill¹² a location for a crossing of the McMinnville and Chattanooga Road in the area of interest was given. It was a simple matter to plot out the Virgil Hill inheritance starting from a known corner with the Savage family land. The point given by the Hill deed wasn't on what was identified as the McMinnville Stage Road on the topographic maps at all! Instead it landed squarely on a roughly parallel road further to the west and closer to the gulf of Savage Creek.

Soon after determining which road was the actual route of the Stage Road I walked a portion of this old road looking for a place where there might have been a bridge. It was easy to find. Roughly a mile from the top of the mountain there is a small creek known as Anderson Spring Branch that flows from a natural pond. Although a very small creek, the channel is deep in the present day so would definitely require a bridge. A short distance south of the creek crossing there is a road intersection. Checking out this road on the ground and comparing it with an 1895 topographic map that shows both roads, it was soon clear that this road (known as the Dunlap Road) was the road from the 1851 court minutes.

Having found the actual route for the Stage Road after it reached the plateau my project soon expanded. I knew that there were other places that the route for the road indicated on the topographic maps was not in fact the historical route. For example, I had a deed for the Brown's Chapel Cemetery that placed the road beside that cemetery¹³ – which again didn't agree with the topographic maps. I took on the project of trying to determine the route of the road across Grundy County. This has been the larger part of my research. Detailed maps are available on the Grundy County History and Heritage website.

But what about stagecoach service along the road? Sources here are limited, as few issues still exist from the newspapers that would be the most helpful. However, the *Chattanooga Gazette* of 14 June 1850 reported that it was expected that after the beginning of July stagecoaches would be running three days a week over the road carrying mail and passengers between Chattanooga and Nashville. An article originally published in the *Murfreesborough Telegraph* and reprinted in the *Nashville Tennessean* on 11 February 1851 perhaps indicates that the beginning of this service was delayed. The article reads, "On Wednesday morning last the stage left this city crowded with passengers for Chattanooga via McMinnville, many of whom, we presume, never before saw the 'elephant' in the shape of a 'coach and four.'"

The glory days for the road had arrived. Advertisements for the various stage lines regularly appeared in the *Tennessean*. The stage left Nashville on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at 8:00pm for Murfreesboro, McMinnville, and Chattanooga to meet the train for Charleston. The advertised travel time for the approximately 135 mile road to Chattanooga was 32 hours with it requiring 62

hours to get to Charleston.¹⁴ Guilford H. Slaughter, at one time the station agent in Nashville, gives more details in his booklet *Stage Coaches and Railroads*. Apparently 32 hours between Nashville and Chattanooga was the goal but Slaughter says that it might take up to 36. The fare was \$10 with a fare of \$25 for a passenger going all the way from Nashville to Charleston. The stages used four horses except on the mountain grades where six were needed. It certainly wasn't luxury travel as on the steep part of the road before reaching the summit of Peak Mountain (and on other steep slopes) passengers would get out and walk.¹⁵ And on the initial part of the descent down Peak Mountain there are stories of pulleys being used to aid in lowering the coaches.¹⁶

Many thought that the Cumberland Mountains would prove to be an impenetrable barrier for the railroads so did not anticipate the changes that were coming. By April of 1851 the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad had been completed between Nashville and Antioch.¹⁷ When the rails reached Tullahoma it was possible for the Nashville passenger to take the train to Tullahoma followed by a stage on to Chattanooga. The travel time was cut to 22 hours and the fare to \$8. This change, which marks the end of the Nashville to Chattanooga stagecoach run, took place 1 March 1852.¹⁸ The Nashville-Chattanooga stages had perhaps only run for about 13 months. The 2228-foot Cowan Tunnel, considered an engineering marvel at the time and still in use today, was completed through the mountains in 1852 with the rails laid in 1853. This allowed the railroad to reach the Tennessee River in May of 1853.¹⁹ The Nashville passenger could then meet the train at 5:00am and get to the river at noon. Passengers, mail, and freight were then transferred to steamboats that travelled upstream to Chattanooga. The passengers would arrive in Chattanooga that evening.²⁰ The stagecoach service between McMinnville and Chattanooga could not have survived past May of 1853 as it would have been much faster to take a stage from McMinnville to Tullahoma, take the train to the Tennessee River, and then the steamboats on to Chattanooga. A few months later the railroad was completed to Chattanooga further reducing the travel time.

Due to the fact that no McMinnville or Chattanooga papers survive between March of 1852 and May of 1853 it is hard to know whether the McMinnville-Chattanooga stage continued to run in this time period. There is some evidence to suggest that it did. Beersheba Springs was a resort town so that from time to time advertisements for the Springs would appear in the Nashville newspapers. An advertisement in the *Tennessean* of 11 August 1851 gives the transportation details from Nashville. One could go to Murfreesboro on the evening train then take the stage through McMinnville getting off at the foot of the mountain below Beersheba Springs where they would be met by transportation up the mountain. An advertisement of 28 March 1853 says that a passenger leaving Nashville by the morning train can reach Beersheba Springs by stages and hacks the same day. Perhaps the transportation arrangements were the same as in 1851?? However, by 22 June 1853 in an advertisement dated 31 May 1853 passengers are advised that a stage line had been set up from Murfreesboro to Beersheba Springs. Perhaps the change had been prompted by the railroad reaching the Tennessee River earlier in the month and the abandonment of the McMinnville-Chattanooga route.

Even after the end of the stage service on the McMinnville to Chattanooga Road, stagecoaches still ran on a part of the road. The railroad was soon extended to McMinnville, but as it never reached Beersheba Springs there was a stage service at least part of the time between McMinnville and Beersheba Springs into the 1900s.²¹ Also, at some point in the 1850s there was a stage service from McMinnville to Dunlap that made its way from Peak Mountain to Dunlap via the Dunlap and Hill Roads. This service was probably of short duration.

Being a passenger in a stagecoach had its difficulties. One had to be prepared to get some exercise. Besides being called upon to walk on steep slopes, if the coach got stuck in a rut or mud hole the passengers would be expected to help in freeing the stage. A fence rail might be carried along just for such a purpose.²² Sometimes the driver would call on passengers to lean one way or the other in negotiating rough roads. And one would expect that if a tree fell across the road then the passengers would have been expected to help in clearing it away. Overturned coaches sometimes happened, including one such incident near Beersheba Springs,²³ and there might be injuries. The coaches had three seats with the first seat facing to the rear, each of which could seat three passengers. Other passengers could ride on top. One would expect that the ride was often rough with sleep likely being impossible. The stage could usually travel at about six miles per hour, but for the entire trip from Nashville to Chattanooga progress was slower.

Despite the difficulties, it seems that those who lived through the stagecoach era often looked back on it with fondness. Slaughter and others write about the temporary social equality between passengers who might have been from very different backgrounds. There was an intimacy that developed between passengers on these long rides that was lost when the railroad era arrived. Certainly there were cases of life long friendships that formed between passengers who shared close quarters, hardships, and adventures on rides that might take many hours.

I don't know of any first hand accounts of travel on the McMinnville to Chattanooga Road, but there are surviving stories from those who rode the McMinnville to Beersheba Springs stage. One is preserved in a letter written in 1922 by Alfred E. Howell. He writes, "I remember we went by McMinnville ... there were four horses to the big stage that carried the trunks in the boot behind. And what a load it was. Seven or eight inside, four to six on the outside, a railing round the top holding the lighter bags and packages, and six or eight trunks in the boot. I remember reaching the foot of the mountain at dark in a storm and making three or four hours to make the pull up that terrible road. I can hear the crack of the long whip when we started again after the very numerous pauses to let the horses blow. And such a rolling and pitching inside of bundles and children and you dear ladies ..."²⁴

With the coming of the railroads, traffic on the McMinnville to Chattanooga Road was reduced. In February of 1856 the charter of the McMinnville and Chattanooga Turnpike Company was amended so that the turnpike company was not required to keep the road up in charter order and would not be required to spend more in road maintenance than it took in in tolls.²⁵ It appears that there were financial troubles. By the end of the 1850s part, and perhaps all, of the road had been abandoned by the turnpike company and had become a public road.²⁶

Until the end of the 1920s maintenance on public roads was done by the able bodied men in the county who were required to work a certain number of days per year on the roads. Each road would have an overseer and have some hands appointed to work. Records of these roads, the overseer appointed, and sometimes the lists of assigned hands appear frequently through the years in the minute books of the county court. For example, in 1866 the Peak Mountain Road (as the portion of the road up and on Peak Mountain was now known) had an overseer appointed who was to maintain it as a second class road.²⁷ Similar assignments were made for other parts of the road.

As the years went by the importance of the road declined. For example, in 1879 the overseer, Elias Tate, was ordered by the court to open up the Peak Mountain Road to the top of the mountain.²⁸ Perhaps it had been closed by fallen trees or a rockslide. In 1889 the overseer, Cater Savage, was now ordered to maintain the Peak Mountain Road as a third class road.²⁹ Other sections of the road were abandoned altogether. When a survey was done of the boundary line for Grundy and Sequatchie Counties in 1892 intersections with the old turnpike road were noted, but it was said that it was abandoned.³⁰

Moving into the 1900s the various parts of the road met different fates. Some sections were used as the route of more modern roads. Other sections were simply abandoned. But the road from the base of the mountain below Beersheba Springs through the valley, up Peak Mountain, and on the plateau was still of local importance. However, in April of 1905 a committee consisting of Virgil Hill, Gilliam Barker, and J.C. Morton reported on the condition of the road saying, "we ... found it in a very bad condition, a portion of the rock wall that once supported the lower side of the road has fallen down, thus leaving the road in an almost impassable condition for a distance of about 40 feet, and we do not think it advisable to rebuild this wall as the water seeps in winter time causes so much ice that it will eventually push the wall down again, therefore we would suggest that the Court make a liberal appropriation to be used in blasting away enough of the bluff so as to make a solid road bed ..."³¹ By March of 1906 this work had been completed and the committee reported, "that the road is greatly improved and that section which has heretofore been considered dangerous to the traveling public is now a safe and splendid road which can be traveled at night without the fear of falling from the cliff that attended the traveler on the old and dangerous route."³²

Walking up the mountain along the road one gets to the old route described above first. It ascends up the mountain along a natural slope using two switchbacks. It is an impressive road with retaining walls up to seven feet high or more. The collapsed retaining wall addressed in the county court minutes is easily seen – it is just past the first switchback although today the length of the collapse is something more than 40 feet. On my first walk on the Stage Road about 1970 with my grandfather and brother as we passed the old route he waved up to it and said, "That's the old stagecoach road." How I wished I had asked him questions, but I didn't. Continuing on the current route one soon gets to the road built in 1905-6. I find it hard to imagine what the lay of the land was before the road as the retaining walls are huge – up to 15 feet high – and have made a considerable alteration of the mountainside. Building this road was a impressive accomplishment as the route

certainly wasn't as natural as the original route. In the 1960s one could still see cables and a log that had been used for bracing one of the retaining walls during its construction.³³ Apparently the old route was not totally abandoned for some time as George Joslin in the paper *Old Roads in the Mountain District of Warren County, Tennessee* (and others) tell of the old route being used for moving livestock.

The Peak Mountain Road seems to have retained its importance as a local route between the valley and the plateau as one story illustrates. About 1909 when my grandfather was four he got sick and needed to see a doctor. The family at that time lived in the Cagle community very close to what is now the intersection of highways 111 and 399. The nearest doctor was in Beersheba Springs. For transportation his parents had a mule so one of them led the mule while the other rode and held him. He said that they went down the stage road and were able to make it as far as Uncle Cater's the first day. This would be the Cater Savage cabin in the gulf. The kitchen of the cabin still exists today and is maintained by the park. The next day they went on up to Beersheba Springs, no doubt by way of Grassy Ridge Road, and made it to the doctor.

Through the 1920s the Peak Mountain Road had an overseer with assigned hands who maintained the road. About 1930 the maintenance of the roads was turned over to the Grundy County Highway Commission. In the 1934 County Court minutes it is recorded "graded by hand 5 miles on old Peak Mountain Road"³⁴ and in 1936 "worked two miles of old Peak Mountain Road."³⁵ As far as I have found, that was the last county maintenance on the road. The road had lost its importance. One factor was that the population of the Gulf had declined. A second factor was with there being more motor vehicles and much better roads to take them on, a direct road like the Peak Mountain Road was no longer needed. It would appear that the road came to be rarely used. One occasion when it was used was in the 1943-44 school year. To go to high school my dad went to Baxter Seminary, which was a boarding school. In order for Dad to go to high school it was necessary for him to leave home as with the rationing of gasoline and tires in the war years he was unable to get to the public high school in Grundy County in Tracy City. One Friday he and his cousin, James Savage, decided to make a trip home. They managed to hitch rides as far as Tarlton where they camped for the night. The next day they walked up the Stage Road and made it home. Dad says that the road was in good shape, but he recalls no evidence of recent maintenance and there was no one else on the road.

At one time there stood a beech tree along the road at the base of Peak Mountain in which there was a carving of a stagecoach and driver together with the message "Hell is one mile from here." It is something over a mile from this point to the steepest part of the road where the final ascent is made. When that tree died George Joslin saved the carving and took it to the Savage Gulf Ranger Station where it is now on display. There are other beech trees in the same general area in which initials were carved long ago.

At the present time the condition of the McMinnville to Chattanooga Road varies greatly across Grundy County. Some parts of it are now modern roads such as a section from the Brown's Chapel Cemetery along the Brown's Chapel Cemetery Road and the Barker Road. In places where it crosses into areas that are now cleared fields it may have disappeared completely. In other areas clear cutting of timber has

left only a few traces of the road. On the other hand, there are sections of it where the route is clear and is easily walked. A considerable section of the Peak Mountain Road in Savage Gulf State Natural Area has been maintained since the formation of the park in 1973. There are also sections of the road on private land where the route is easy to walk. Then too, there are parts of the road where the route is clear but not easy to walk because of downed trees or dense vegetation.

The route that I have found for the road across Grundy County has been composed from various sources. I have walked through much of the county, parts of it many times, looking for and revising my maps of the road. Aerial photos, some of them from the 1930s and some from the 1950s have been very useful. Satellite imagery was helpful in one section. Surveys, land grants, and deeds have aided in finding points along the road. In places where the road has disappeared the route is my best estimate.

I have been helped by several county residents who have shared their knowledge of the area and who made valuable contributions towards locating the road. Going roughly from north to south these people are William Wanamaker, Jim Wanamaker, David Hillis, Clifford Cordell, Lonnie Stockwell, Wes Hampton, and Rayford Long. I have also been helped by the historical research of the late Ralph Thompson, the research of Lillian Ey, and by many discussions with the late Russell Stocker. My frequent hiking partner, Vicki Williams, has often helped with the explorations on the ground.

There is more that I would like to know about this road. In particular, I would like to have a more detailed history of the stagecoach service along the road. There is limited information about the experience of the passengers. Also, there seems to be little known about the way stations in the county although it seems that there was one at the Barker place in Barkertown near Blanchett Creek and one near a pond just before the last climb before reaching the Sequatchie County line. Perhaps there was also one near the junction with the road to Beersheba Springs and one somewhere on the plateau on Peak Mountain. And concerning the road itself it remains a puzzle how certain roads (sometimes incorrectly) were labeled as the Stage Road on maps in the 1950s. Anyone who can address any of these questions or add to this history is invited to contact the author.

¹ "Public Meeting." *Central Gazette* (McMinnville), August 7, 1846.

² "To the People of Warren County." *Central Gazette* (McMinnville), July 24, 1846.

³ "McMinnville and Chattanooga Turnpike Road." *Central Gazette* (McMinnville), August 28, 1846.

⁴ "Turnpike Across the Mountain." *Central Gazette* (McMinnville), October 1, 1847.

⁵ Acts of Tennessee 1849-50, Chapter 249, 479.

⁶ Private Acts of Tennessee 1833, Chapter 57, 31.

⁷ Acts of Tennessee 1840, Chapter 94, 180-2.

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- ⁸ Acts of the Fourteenth General Assembly of Tennessee, Chapter 6, 10.
- ⁹ Acts of Tennessee 1847-8, Chapter 150, 234.
- ¹⁰ Acts of Tennessee 1847-8, Chapter 150, 234-5.
- ¹¹ Acts of Tennessee 1847-8, Chapter 150, 235.
- ¹² Grundy County Deed Book L, 38-43.
- ¹³ Grundy County Deed Book H, 103.
- ¹⁴ e.g. "U. S. Mail Stages and Accommodation Coaches." *Nashville Tennessean*, October 4, 1851.
- ¹⁵ Slaughter, G. H., *Stage Coaches and Railroads*. Nashville: Hasslock and Ambrose Publishers, 1894.
- ¹⁶ Tate, Dennis A., *Rebels Saints and Sinners*, Missoula, 2000.
- ¹⁷ Prince, Richard E., *Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- ¹⁸ "Important Connection of Stage and Railroad between Nashville and Chattanooga. Fare Reduced." *Nashville Tennessean*, May 4, 1852.
- ¹⁹ Prince, *Nashville, Chattanooga & St. Louis Railway*.
- ²⁰ "Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad." *Nashville Union and American*, June 23, 1853.
- ²¹ Interview with Jim Wanamaker, 2018.
- ²² University of Northern Iowa. "Tips to Stagecoach Travelers." https://iowahist.uni.edu/Frontier_Life/Stagecoach/Stagecoach.htm (accessed October 16, 2018).
- ²³ "Stage Upset." *Nashville Tennessean*, August 26, 1857.
- ²⁴ Almon, Clopper, ed., *Beersheba Springs, A History*, vol. 2, Beersheba Springs Historical Society, 2010, 44-46.
- ²⁵ Acts of Tennessee 1855-6, Chapter 186, 331.
- ²⁶ Grundy County Court Minute Book B, July term 1859, 115.
- ²⁷ Grundy County Court Minute Book D, September term 1866, 2.
- ²⁸ Grundy County Court Minute Book F, October term 1879, 42.
- ²⁹ Grundy County Court Minute Book G, April term 1889, 435.
- ³⁰ Grundy County Court Minute Book H, October term 1891, 156-166.
- ³¹ Grundy County Court Minute Book L, April term 1905, 98-100.
- ³² Grundy County Court Minute Book L, March term 1906, 308-310.
- ³³ Interview with Russell Stocker, 2017.
- ³⁴ Grundy County Court Minute Book U, January term 1934, 246.
- ³⁵ Grundy County Court Minute Book U, January term 1936, 417.