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Early Roads of Greene County



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EARLY ROADSⁱ OF GREENE COUNTY, VIRGINIA

by Donald Covey

Throughout Virginia, rivers and Indian trails were the first means of transportation. When the early Colonists ventured beyond the fall line of the rivers, they found Monacan Indians occupying the Piedmont from the James River up to the northern parts of Virginia; but, by time of Spotswood's exploration over the Blue Ridge, no Indians were to be found in central Virginia. However, since we believe that Indians had occupied this territory for centuries before, it is likely that Indian trails were traveled by earlier residents of the area.

The main crop, tobacco, required only a "rowing road" to get it to a river. Otherwise land travel - mainly on horseback - could use sometimes-improved Indian trails; and, since Indians tended to live on bottomland along rivers, this is where early settlers' roads developed. So far as the Blue Ridge was concerned, gaps were important; and Indian trails would surely relate to rivers and/or mountain gaps.

The Swift Run River flows down from the Swift Run Gap through Mutton Hollow and is closely followed by S.R. 634 (Mutton Hollow Road). As it flows around the north side of Parker Mountain it is followed by S.R. 624 (Pea Ridge Road). It can be no accident that the James Beazley family, which originally made its home on Goose Pond Mountain, found its way down stream to about 1000 acres of bottom land east of Parker Mountain and that the eastern end of S.R. 624 is now called Beazley Road. An Indian trail had become a road.

Farther north, South River flows down from the mountains eventually turning north into the Rapidan River. An Indian hunting camp near its banks is sufficient evidence that there was a trail along the river. Archaeological finds at this site indicate that it was occupied (probably seasonally) by several nearby groups of Indians some of whom came from the western side of the Blue Ridge.ⁱⁱ The trail has long since been obscured by S.R. 621 (South River Road) and S.R. 637 (Pocosan Mountain Road). We can be sure that early settlers developed this trail into a road. In 1761, Thomas Walker, who lived just above McMullen, petitioned for an extension of the Dundee Road about a mile and a half to the foot of Powell Mountain. (The result was probably S.R. 634 - Bull Yearling Run Road.) We cannot easily see how this part of the road connected with the Dundee Road (S.R. 619) that we know; but apparently it did. In 1752 there was court orderⁱⁱⁱ for the Dundee Road to be extended to the Swift Run Road. It took some years for this to happen; and, when it did, the road went out to S.R. 609 (Fredericksburg Road).

The Conway River, forming a boundary with Madison County, is so subject to extreme flooding - as we have seen in recent years - that we cannot expect much evidence of a village, a camp or burial mound along its banks. However, the ceramic bowl (an Indian artifact) now in the Greene County Historical Museum was found in the Pocosan area; and the Pocosan Creek flows into the Conway River. It is reasonable to believe that Indians also lived and walked a path along that river; and we are not surprised that S.R. 667 (Middle River Road) goes along this way. Though we cannot document the earliest use of a road here, it is reasonable to suppose that some sort of road was needed after Francis Conway and Anthony Thornton patented 5000 acres along the Conway River in 1732^{iv}

To the south of the county is the Roach River starting up near Powell Gap and running down through Bacon Hollow; and, as might be expected it is followed through the hollow by S.R. 627 (Bacon Hollow Road). The Lynch River, which wanders along not quite knowing if it belongs to Albemarle County or Greene County, not surprisingly is accompanied for some distance by S.R. 810 (Dyke Road)

and S.R. 628 (Simmons Gap Road). Again we cannot document the earliest use of a road here; but we know that several Shifflett families,^{iv} John Ogg and Martin Hackett^v owned land on and near Lynch River in this time period.

We should expect that the Indians made a trail down across several of these rivers as they hunted game or visited other bands along them. S.R. 810 (Dyke Road) does wind along at the foot of the Blue Ridge in just such a fashion.^{vi} We should be careful with our use of the word "roads." The common court order throughout the first half of the 18th century was that a road be "cleared." In most cases this simply meant that a way should be made passable for walking or horseback riding.

Several roads led into the Greene County area. In the early days the heaviest traffic was undoubtedly on what was called the Swift Run Gap Road, coming from the Fredericksburg area.^{vii} This, of course, is what Greene County residents, looking eastward, have for years called the Fredericksburg Road (S.R. 609). In the early road orders there are scattered references to a road to or from the Blue Ridge, Swift Run or the Great Mountains; and we can be sure that James Beazley, Honorius Powell and others, who lived back against the mountains, used part of such a road when they went to court. However, it is not until 1748 and a reference to a road from "Red Oak Leavel" (apparently a general location somewhat east of the present county line) and the "Great Mountains" that we are on solid ground.^{viii} Apparently it soon developed into a rather heavily used road. For better maintenance it was divided into several sections; and "the Boxing Camp," Blue Run and Powell's Mountain were used as dividing points. (Unfortunately we do not know where to locate the "Boxing Camp". The intersection of State Road 209 and U.S. 33, which existed from early days, might seem a likely site; but currently we don't know.) This road from "Red Oak Level" indicates that there was traffic from the southern part of Orange County up into Greene County. There are also good indications that there was a road to the south of Greene County approximating our present S.R. 670 (Preddy Creek Road) and S.R. 743 (Advance Mills Road).^{ix} This road could have carried people down into the upper part of Albemarle County as well as into southern Greene County.

In 1757 there was a petition to alter the road from Camm's Mountain (now Bingham's Mountain) to Bell's Plantation.^x Bell's plantation apparently was near the eastern end of the present S.R. 648 (Chapman Road). Since this was a petition to alter the road, it must have been in existence for some time. The purpose of this road may have been to allow Bell and other nearby settlers access to the Roach River.

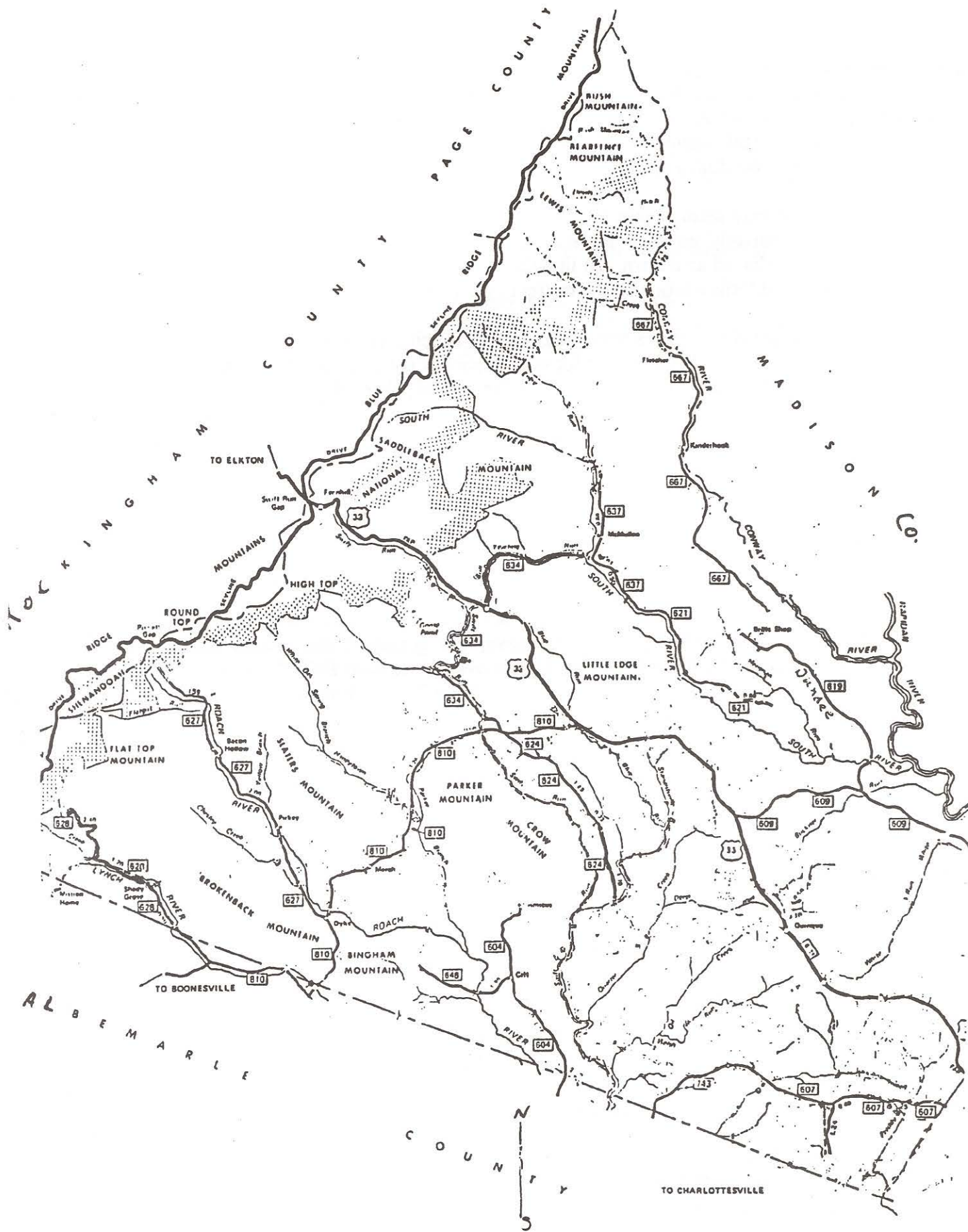
In 1739 a road was ordered from the county line to Buffalo Meadows into the county road, the nearest way to Braxton's Quarter. The low land along the Roach River (formerly the Buffalo River) was apparently called Buffalo Meadows. Braxton's Quarter lay to the north. This order seems to indicate a road similar to S.R. 604 (Celt Road); but, if so, there is no indication that it extended to its present length.^x

Of course there must have been some other roads - open trails - perhaps between two homes. This part of the county was sparsely occupied at this time; and a lengthy trail often might have been required. Road orders indicate an interest in other roads but the information given is often too enigmatic for us to interpret. There are, for instance, two Blue (or Blew) Runs; a number of men had land holdings in both Orange County and the present Greene County and road orders regarding them might apply to either area. We can no longer locate such sites as Barbee's Ford, etc. Is Pretty Run a different spelling for Preddy Run? In this case we know that there was a man named Pretty; but that doesn't answer the question. To illustrate the problem, simply refer back to the previous paragraph regarding a road to

Buffalo Meadows. Two miles south of Amicus on the present Celt Road a lane leads off to the southwest. The lane is still included on current topographical maps.^{xi} It passed a historic house known as "Buffalo," crossed the Roach River, extended to the county line and probably on into Albemarle County. To older residents it is still known as the Old Stage Road. Was this the original road ordered by the Orange County court? We don't know.

Incidentally, it may seem strange to some that Madison Road (U.S. 230) is not included among the early roads. Apparently no need for such a road was expressed until 1797, three years after Stanardsville was established as a town. At that time the court ordered a survey to the Madison line,^{xii} but there is no record of further action on the matter in the 1700's.

On the accompanying map we trace today's roads which approximate early roads; but we know that year by year roads are still being altered for convenience or out of necessity. It is still possible to see evidence of where some roads used to run; but we can scarcely determine that what we see shows an original early road.



End Notes: Early Roads of Greene County, Virginia

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- ⁱ The Roads of Virginia 1607-1840 by Graham Roberts. A dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Virginia, 1950. While this work is not very helpful in detailing the roads in Greene County, it is the ultimate source for an understanding of early Virginia roads.
- ⁱⁱ Holland, C.G. and O'Ryan, William D., "The Octonia Rockshelter, Greene County, Virginia," Quarterly Bulletin, Archaeological Society of Virginia, Vol. 18 No.4 Part I (June 1964).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Miller, Ann Brush, Orange County Road Orders 1750-1800, Virginia Transportation Research Council, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1989. p. 19; May 28, 1752.
- iv. Patent Book 14, p. 450.
- v. Shifflett, L.F. and Hensley, Barbara Shifflett. "Early Shiflet Families = 1700 to 1750," Greene County Magazine Vol. 12, 1996, p. 8-21.
- vi. Miller, Ann Brush, Orange County Road Orders 1734 - 1750, Virginia Transportation Research Council, Charlottesville, Virginia, 1984, p. 77. November 26, 1742.
- vii. Ibid., p. 77
Thomas Calloway had purchased 100 acres presumably near the northern terminus of the present S.R. 810; and Martin Hackett's land would have been near the present day Bingham's Church. We can never be sure that present day roads run exactly where their predecessors ran.
- viii. Joyner, Ulysses S., The First Settlers, Orange County Historical Society, Inc. Gateway Press, Inc., Baltimore, MD. p. 106.
- ix. Orange County Road Orders 1750 - 1800, p. 7; July 26, 1750.
- x. Orders for this road - and many others - are not explicit as to location. Of course the orders were written for people who knew the roads and not for us. One needs to read several road orders, to check deeds and use a map. Having said this, one might start with Orange County Road Orders - 1734-1750, p. 116. "Francis Williams is appointed Overseer of the Road...." and Orange County Road Orders - 1750-1800, p. 84. "Persons appointed to View the Way...."
- xi. Miller, Ann Brush, Orange County Road Orders 1750 - 1800, Virginia Transportation Research Council, Charlottesville, VA 1989. p. 50, August 25, 1757.
- xii. Orange County Road Orders - 1734-1750, p. 41, October 25, 1739.
- xiii. U.S. Department of Interior, Geological Survey Map.
- xiv. Orange County Road Orders 1750 - 1800, p. 213; April 25, 1797.