

Essay II: The Ridge Route & the Peters Colony Survey

Jim Barnes – 26 February 2009

The Ridge Route

Aboriginal natives and early Euro-American settlers generally moved freely across the vast open prairies of north Texas along any line of travel they wished to pursue; but certain routes were used repeatedly. I think I can safely predict where two ancient trails crossed the William Myers Section.

Following the crest-line between adjacent watersheds offered pioneers several distinct advantages for long journeys. In early Dallas County the ridges would have been free of trees and entangling brush, the terrain would have been relatively smooth and even. So, the physical labor required to move up and down would be minimized. Forging cold rivers and crossing slippery tree-tangled streams would be similarly minimized. Terrain along the ridges was typically a broad open prairie; a traveler could see enemies at a great distance, so ambushes could be avoided. If you spotted a hostile group approaching from one side of the ridge, you could retreat down the other side, disappear into the nearest timber and then turn either left or right to escape. If you were compelled to stand and fight, then the ridge would provide the higher ground from which to project your weaponry. Following a ridgeline path did not require a great deal of instruction or memorization. To travel long distances, the ridge-line “high ways” offered pre-historic people and early settlers easy and advantageous pathways.

Traveling in a north-south direction across Texas, one of the major ridge route trails crossed the William Myers Section. Coming north from the vicinity of modern Austin, there is an open ridge route between the Colorado and Brazos Rivers that arrived at the Brazos River near Waco. A large Indian village was already surrounding the springs at Waco when the first settlers arrived. North of the Brazos another ridge line then curves its way north between the Trinity and Brazos watersheds to modern Cedar Hill. The ridge then continues north, with Mountain Creek on its west and the Trinity River to its east. The ridge route in its purest form would have hooked eastward into the Trinity River Valley along a path roughly defined by modern Fort Worth Avenue; but a more popular short-cut version followed the crest along the south side of Coombes Creek.

The Fort Worth Avenue trail was also used by early settlers as the Fort Worth Pike, a road from Dallas to Fort Worth, roughly along today’s Texas Highway 180 and U.S. I-30.

The Coombes Creek short-cut of the Mountain Creek ridge route comes to the edge of the Trinity River valley at the top of a high escarpment where the “Rock Lodge” today stands in East Kessler, (just north of modern Cedar Hill Avenue and Evergreen Hill). From this high point, unless flooding prohibited crossing the Trinity, a traveler could descend either to the north or to the east. Traveling north across the Trinity River valley, the trail passed through Cedar Springs. The trail from Cedar Springs north to the Red River then followed a ridge with the Elm Fork of the Trinity River on its west side and the Turtle Creek/ White Rock Creek / East Fork waterways on its east. This portion was called “The Preston Road”. (The modern path of “Preston Road” has been shifted to align with later land grant “section lines”.) From the edge of the escarpment at the Rock Lodge in East Kessler another trail descended to the east, crossed Coombes Creek and the broad floodplain, and forded the Trinity River at the “rock-bottomed crossing” just slightly downstream from where the Commerce Street bridges were later built – just south of today’s Triple Underpass. Bryan built his first home nearby hoping that his new town would profit from trade with the natives using that Trinity crossing.

These and other ridge routes were important to Dallas County pioneer settlement. The Republic of Texas seems to have adopted the Dallas-Cedar Hill ridge route as its official Military Highway from Austin to the Red River, or at least one version of that Military Highway. A second version moved south along a slightly shorter route that eventually became “The Lancaster Wagon Road”.

When the region was sparsely populated, the ridge-route from Cedar Hill to Dallas was safer and easier, but as population increased, stream crossings were cleared or bridged, and general public safety was better assured, the shorter Lancaster Road prevailed. The ridge route “high way” between Cedar Hill and Dallas appears on maps until the late 1860s, and then disappears.

When I was growing up in the Kessler District during the 1960s there was still a frequently repeated legend that the “Rock Lodge” (now 1622 Cedar Hill Avenue) had formerly been a “stage coach inn”. Though undocumented, it seems unlikely that S.A. Rush’s limestone construction was started before 1870, a point in time when railroads had already arrived and the Cedar Hill/ Dallas ridge route had already closed. It is my conjecture that these old stories reflect that the Rock Lodge was built on, or near, the site of an earlier stage coach relay station, and that in such an earlier time, when this escarpment hilltop was a major intersection in the Texas Military road system, also nearby might perhaps have stood Aaron Overton’s horse-powered grist-mill.

The Peters Colony Survey Grid

Nothing has had greater impact on western Dallas County development than the superimposition of the square land survey grid system employed by the Peters Colony to situate initial pioneer claims. Modern streets such as Singleton, Beckley, Hampton, Davis, Illinois, Westmoreland, and Kiest, are all routed along Peters Colony survey boundaries (called “section lines”). Land ownership has typically been a series of smaller and smaller rectangular subdivisions of the original rectangular grants. The initial rectangles, such as William Myers’, were squares.

The Peters Colony adopted the United States government’s land grant survey system, but only in a general manner. There seems to have been none of the systematic offsets for the earth’s curvature that a strict adherence to the federal system dictated; and the Peters Colony permitted frequent irregularities. Eastern Dallas County contains numerous older parcels granted to individuals by the Republic of Texas, surveyed on a tilted grid alignment adopted from Spanish colonial practice; but in western Dallas County, except for the rich Trinity river-bottom lands, the Peters Colony’s grid system adheres to a strict north-south east-west alignment. The practice of calling a one-mile by one-mile square parcel “a Section” was adopted from the U.S. system.

The surveyors for the Peters Colony arrived shortly after the earliest pioneer settlers. They arbitrarily established a geometric “point of origin” at a marker set just west of the merger of the Elm Fork with the West Fork of the Trinity River. Most of Hampton Road today traces their north-south “prime meridian” and a western portion of Irving Boulevard is superimposed upon their east-west “base line”. Peters Colony surveyors had already staked the corners of the William Myers Section prior to May of 1846, when William Myers purchased the land from Caswell Overton.

The individual parcels of land were eventually given the names of the pioneers to whom the State of Texas granted first ownership, typically called “title patent”. So the one square mile whose title was eventually patented to William and Mary Myers was called “the William Myers Section”. Such a one square-mile area parcel was also referred to as “the William Myers Headright”, or “the William Myers Survey” – “Survey”, “Headright”, and “Section” being interchangeable terms. Before the individual pioneer names were used, the various square mile parcels were numbered using the U.S. land survey system’s nomenclature of Township, Range, and Section. The William Myers Section was originally designated as: Section 19 / Township 1-South / Range 1-East.

By modern standards, the original pioneer surveys were crude. I discovered that modern Dallas surveyors have no knowledge of the 1840s Peters Colony grid system, whose various “headright” corner markers were long ago incorporated into a superseding survey methodology.

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