

EARLY SETTLERS
JOSEPH ROBERTS: PIONEER OF MINE LICK CREEK

By Angela Roberts Stout
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This year the descendants of Joseph Roberts are celebrating the 200th anniversary of Roberts filing for a land grant in the Mine Lick Creek area at their home-coming and family reunion June 2. At this event they also decorate the Joseph Roberts Cemetery with flowers. From the time Joseph and Rachel pioneered Mine Lick Creek, we have documented over 9,000 Joseph Roberts descendants (that includes spouses) all of which are invited to the descendants of Joseph Roberts Reunion.

The story is told that Joseph Roberts fore-parents arrived in Charleston, South Carolina, from England in 1742. At that time, English settlers were colonizing South Carolina and Charleston had a population of about 6,800. The English colonists had pushed inward from Charleston to establish Camden by 1732. We believe Joseph's fore-fathers took the path through Camden and followed the Catawba River up to York, South Carolina, as one of our DNA-proven relatives was married there in 1788. From York the fore-fathers turned west and came into what is today Buncombe County, North Carolina. Deed records of Buncombe County indicate the Roberts' were living north of present day Asheville on the creeks emptying into the French Broad River. Joseph was likely born on these creeks.

Joseph Roberts left Buncombe County and married Rachel Carter in Greeneville in 1814. They left Greeneville and arrived on Mine Lick Creek sometime between 1814 and 1818.

Joseph and Rachel wanted their own land (as did most pioneers). Men or their heirs from North Carolina who served in the Revolutionary War were issued military warrants which were redeemed in land with-in the Military Reservation of Middle Tennessee. The first fifteen acres Joseph Roberts filed for were from the heirs of John Augustus who fought in the Revolutionary War.

The heirs of John Augustus were issued their warrant in 1797. This passed to land speculators. James Davis purchased a portion of the warrant and filed a claim entry in March, 1815. This was sold to Joseph, who recorded this land in October 1818.

With few possessions, Joseph and Rachel built their home on Mine Lick Creek and continued their family of ten children (Sarah, William, Benjamin, Henry, Marinda, John, Malissa, Violet, Francis Marion and Joseph Denton).

Joseph, Rachel, baby Sarah and new-born William picked a spot to build their home adjacent to Mine Lick Creek, with a spring nearby for water and some "bottom land" to raise their food. They brought few belongings with them. While Joseph and Rachel cleared land for crops and building their home, they most likely had to camp out in the open.

In those earliest days, wild game would have provided their primary source of meat. Later, Joseph had a blacksmith shop which was useful as the road followed Mine Lick Creek and went by his home. Their home was simple. Pioneers at that time used the bathroom in the woods (predating out-houses). Rachel didn't have a woodstove; at that time women cooked over an open fire. You can still see hints of the road that went along the creek. Their neighbors up the creek were Richardsons and Lees. Down the creek were Herrens and Martins. Joseph and Rachel were not slave owners. They did their own work and swapped help from neighbors on the creek.

Rachel had ten children (probably more that died as infants). As soon as the children could walk, there were chores for them to do. School education was too far for their children to walk to and boarding school was too expensive.

Their education came from the parents and life skills. Some of the historical documents we have on Joseph and Rachel's children show they signed the document by making their mark; suggesting they couldn't read or write.

During Joseph Roberts life, there were no churches or law enforcement near his homestead. Religion was encouraged by visiting preachers. Law on Mine Lick Creek was maintained by the pioneers in their own way – working together to punish wrong doers. There is a story that is told of a woman on Mine Lick Creek who was raped. Her father was going to kill the man but was convinced by Frances Marion Roberts (Joseph's son) to wait. Later, Marion and father took the law into their own hands. They found the man, castrated him and gave him two weeks to leave the county. He left.

One of Joseph and Rachel's children was Frances Marion Roberts. He, like his father, was an entrepreneur. He farmed, raised cattle, hogs and horses. Learned the railroad would be coming through and had the foresight to know that would change life on the creek. Instead of cash, he sold a right-of-way to the railroad in exchanged for one share of stock and an agreement that the railroad would build a switch and siding on the property. From this decision, "Roberts Switch" was established.

Marion built and operated a general store, gristmill and sawmill near the railroad switch. It became the area that local farmers brought their wood products, mostly cross-ties, to the switch to sell and be loaded onto the railcars that were parked on the siding. Passenger trains also stopped at Roberts Switch, through there was never a depot there. Because of the railroad, people migrated up off the creeks and rivers onto higher land nearer to the railroad and communities like Roberts Switch. Today Frances Marion Roberts' store and sawmill are gone but Roberts Switch is till an active community which sits between Boma and Hickey, off of I-40 Exit 276.

Pioneer Joseph Roberts started off with fifteen acres of land. When he died in 1854, he passed onto his children and wife an inheritance of 1,000 acres of land. Both Joseph Roberts, his son, Frances Marion Roberts, and their wives are buried near the homestead of Mine Lick Creek.

*Read more about Roberts Switch in the Forgotten Crossroads file at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

*Read more about Putnam Co., TN & surrounding areas at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>