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Suggested Citation:

Jordan, Rene. "The Evolution of Early East Tennessee County Boundaries: Alterations in the Grainger/Hawkins Line." *Tennessee Ancestors* 13, no. 2: August 1997.

THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY EAST TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES: ALTERATIONS IN THE GRAINGER/HAWKINS LINE (1797)

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[NOTE: This is the tenth in a series of articles which began in the April 1994 issue.]

Over the years, many minor alterations in Tennessee county boundary lines have occurred. As stated earlier, this series of articles will ignore such variations, but will address significant changes in existing lines, such as the one treated here.

In 1797 the state legislature passed an act to alter the line between Grainger and Hawkins:

*Be it enacted, etc., That the line dividing the aforesaid counties shall be extended as follows, viz: Beginning at a marked tree, near the dwelling house of James Blair, senior, on the line from Felps Reed's to Thomas Henderson's, thence to the said Henderson's and Joel Dyer's southwest corner, thence a north course with said Henderson and Dyer's line so as to leave the house of Robert Patterson ten poles in Grainger County, thence a direct line to the upper end of the first island below the mouth of Big War Creek, thence to the Black Lick, leaving the house of William Hord in Hawkins County, thence with the last mentioned course to the top of Powell's Mountain, thence north thirty west to the Virginia line.*¹

¹ Henry D. Whitney, The Land Laws of Tennessee (Chattanooga, Tenn.: Deardorff & Sons, 1891), p. 690.

This line is very difficult to trace because it is based largely on the residences of several individuals, most of whom owned property in more than one location during this general time frame. In addition, many of the metes and bounds descriptions in early Tennessee deeds are too vague to locate a piece of property very precisely.

James Blair is a case in point. Though he was involved in several property transactions in this area, most of them contain no more useful geographic references than "on the north side of the Holston River."² Even this is an important clue, however, if my construction of the original Grainger County line is accurate (see the August 1996 issue of Tennessee Ancestors). This alteration indicates Blair lived on the line between Felps Reed and Thomas Henderson. It is only a short distance from the Holston River to the head of German Creek (near Bean Station), where I determined Thomas Henderson lived. This would suggest Blair lived just south of Bean Station, an idea

² See, for example, Grainger Co., TN, Deed Book A, p. 91.

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reinforced by one Blair deed which refers to "the big gap of the knob."³

Just south of Bean Station, on the north side of the river and on the line between Reed and Henderson, is a gap between Big Ridge and Prophet Ridge, through which present-day U.S. Highway 25E passes. Furthermore, the current Grainger County line makes a jog precisely at this point.

Joel Dyer is a bigger problem: I have found only a vague reference to land on the waters of Poor Valley Creek (east of German Creek). The boundary alteration, of course, implies that he had land adjacent to Thomas Henderson, who lived at the head of German Creek.

Robert Patterson had tracts in several locations, but surely the one of interest here is his land "between Poor Valley Creek and the head of German Creek."⁴

Again, the current Grainger boundary passes through this area, and I am comfortable with using it as an approximation of the 1798 alteration.

The next portion of the boundary alludes to the first island below the mouth of Big War Creek. The first such island shown on current topographic maps is a small island just above the more prominent Grissom Island, some five miles below the mouth of Big War Creek. It is probably coincidence, but the original Grainger line as I constructed it crosses the Clinch River at this same point.

The next portion of the boundary refers to Black Lick and the house of

William Hord. Here I must admit defeat. I can't find Black Lick on any old or modern map, and I can't locate Hord in this area. I found deeds for him in a dozen other areas, but none that would match this boundary description. The Biographical Directory of the Tennessee General Assembly states that he lived in New Canton from 1796 to 1802, but that is too far northeast to be a viable boundary between Grainger and Hawkins.

Because of these uncertainties, I am simply drawing this segment due north from Clinch River to Powell Mountain. Please take this as a very rough approximation!

At any rate this line was valid for only four years. In 1801 the formation of Claiborne County made the line obsolete.

The last segment of the new boundary between Grainger and Hawkins ("north thirty west") is precise, but since the previous segment is uncertain, so must be the location of this one (though not the direction).

Figure 1 shows my approximation of the 1797 altered line. ❖

Next: The First Treaty of Tellico (1798) cedes additional Cherokee land to Tennessee.

³ Grainger Co., TN, Deed Book B, p. 419.

⁴ Grainger Co., TN, Deed Book A, p. 121.

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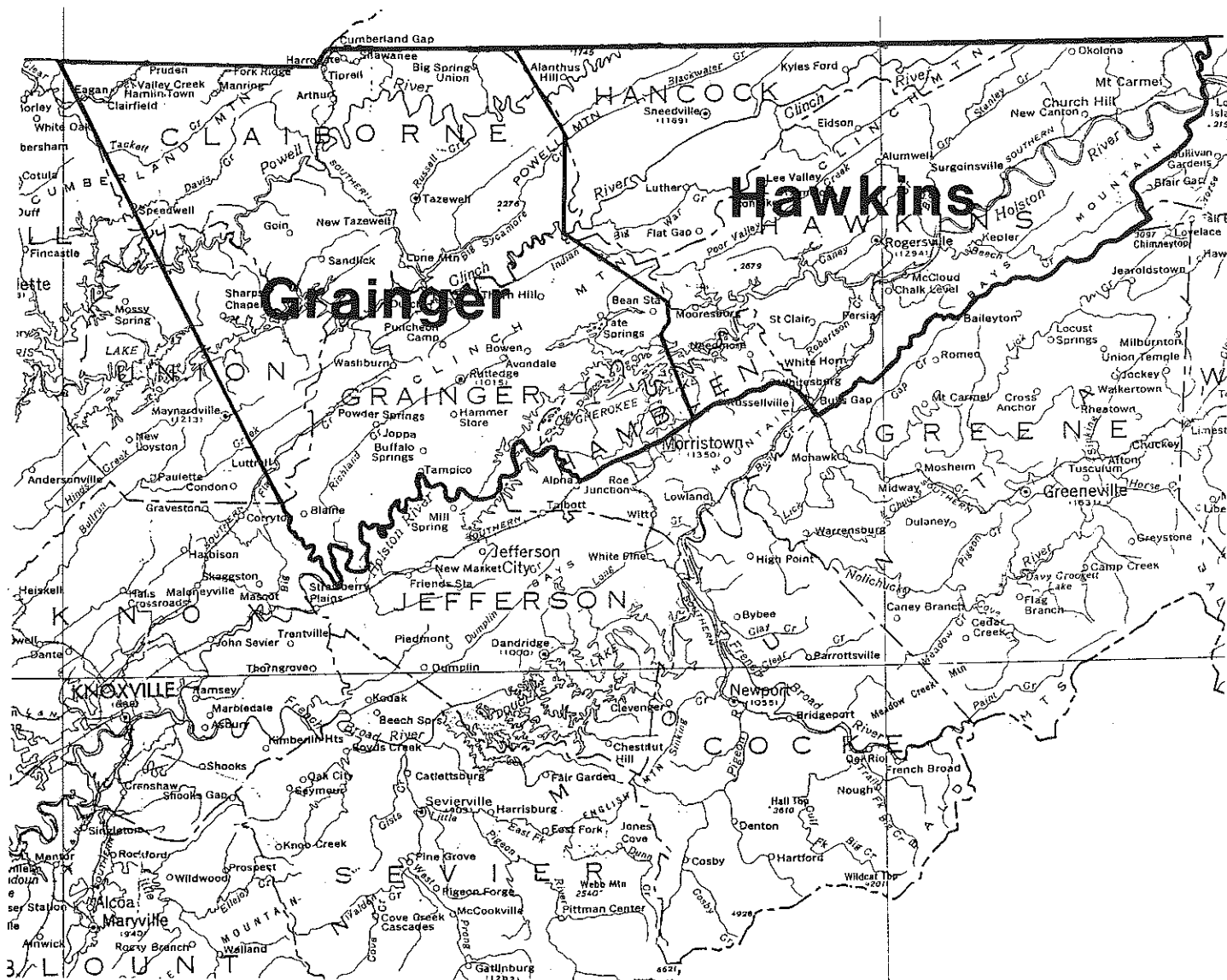


Figure 1. Altered line between Grainger and Hawkins counties, 1797