

Driving Forces: Did Cherokee chief run ferry at nuclear plant site?

By Rebekah Davis
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Note: This is the fifth in a series of articles sharing the stories behind the names of some local streets.

It's one of the best-known locations in Limestone County, and where a ferry operated well before the county was established, cotton shipped out of at one time the county's largest port, a planned town failed, blue-ribbon tobacco was grown, and what was once the world's largest nuclear power plant was built. Multiple roads lead to Browns Ferry and bear its name, but in spite of the location's fame, one question remains to be definitively answered: Who was Brown, anyway?

Some say he was a Cherokee chief. According to the Tennessee Valley Authority website, www.tva.gov:

“Browns Ferry Nuclear Power Plant was named after a ferry in Lawrence County, Ala., at the crossing of the Browns Ferry Road from Huntsville to Courtland, Ala. The North Alabama ferry was originally operated by the Cherokee family of John Brown and historically recorded as being used as early as November 1813 by local Cherokee Cuttyatoy. John Brown's daughter Patsy married Captain John D. Chisholm who acted as an attorney for Chickamauga Chief Doublehead who lived at Doublehead's Town at Browns Ferry. Betsy, another daughter of John Brown, married a Cox and for a short period the ferry was called Cox's Ferry, but it later reverted back to Browns Ferry.”

However, John Brown is also noted as operating Brown's Ferry in Chattanooga, so it is not certain if this was the same John Brown or perhaps one of his Brown relatives operating the ferry that crossed the Tennessee River between Limestone and Lawrence counties. And so far I haven't found any Limestone County government record that names the operator of Brown's Ferry.

Regardless, this site has always been an important one in the development of Limestone County, and roads leading to the ferry were some of the first to be named in the county. It appears to have already been in operation by 1810, when Gen. Wade Hampton cut a wagon road from Huntsville to the ferry. Joshua Cox homesteaded the land when Limestone County was established in 1818 – hence Cox's Ferry – and by 1819, it was the county's largest cotton shipping port.

Robert Beaty Mason later purchased and farmed the land at Brown's Ferry, and barges stopped at “Mason Place” landing to pick up cotton. Around 1890, Mason decided to establish a new town at Brown's Ferry and name it Bismark. He laid out town lots and was ready to sell, but his timing was terrible: Recession struck and not a single lot was sold. However, he did end up with a bit of a consolation prize: Tobacco he had grown at Brown's Ferry won the blue ribbon at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

In 1966, TVA began construction on the Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant on the site. When it began operation in 1974, it was the largest nuclear plant in the world. It was also the first nuclear plant in the world to generate more than 1 billion watts of power. As of 2014, the plant was still the second-largest power producer in the United States, employing 1,400 full-time employees onsite.

Roads leading to Browns Ferry that were first cut during pioneer days are still important arteries connecting the southwestern section of Limestone County to Athens and Huntsville. Brownsferry Road goes from Browns Ferry to an end at a five-way stop in downtown Athens, as Browns Ferry Street north

of Highway 72. Browns Ferry Street was home to many prominent African-American owned businesses during the days of segregation. Nuclear Plant Road connects the plant to Highway 31, and Huntsville-Brownsferry Road provides a direct route from Brownsferry Road to growing communities in East Limestone and Madison, and to the newest Interstate 65 exit in Limestone County, Exit 347, site of a \$4.8-million sale of 280 acres in June, 2016.

Note: Sources for this article include Mary Mason's Scrapbook, www.tva.gov, and www.al.com.

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