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TAZEWELL COUNTY, VIRGINIA
Our African American Heritage

WAGON ROAD WEST "REVISITED"

Written and submitted by James Russell Barnes

I submitted an article to the Tazewell County Historical Society for publication in September 1995 called "Wagon Road West". The article involved two individuals from Tazewell County who participated in the survey and construction of a U.S. wagon road sponsored by the War Department. This road would extend from Ft. Smith, Arkansas to the Colorado River on the Arizona and California borders.

This monumental task was accomplished under the leadership of Edward Fitzgerald Beale, noted explorer of the southwestern territories. The participants from Tazewell were; Dr. William P. Floyd, who served as camp physician and William Johnston Warren (my wife's great-great grandfather). It has not been determined in what capacity he served on this trip. Johnston was a tanner by trade and could have possibly taken care of the leather goods for the horses and the many mules involved.

The group departed Ft. Smith, Arkansas in the fall of 1858 and arrived at the Colorado River, in California the following summer. During this time, they endured the hardships of extreme weather conditions, hostile indigenous people and a harsh unforgiving land.

As I noted in my last article, the purpose of my research was to verify the existence of a "Johnston's Canyon" that was supposedly named after Johnston Warren.

I examined many maps of the area, read several personal journals and books with descriptions of the journey but, much to my dismay, was never able to ascertain the location of "Johnston's Canyon".

Enter 20th century technology. While surfing the internet for information on Beale, I found the web page of the University of Northern Arizona. They had a collection of information in their library concerning Beale. It was also noted that in 1974, a graduate student named Jack Smith wrote about the Beale Wagon Roads as his thesis.

I was fortunate enough to talk to and correspond with Jack Beale Smith (distantly related to E. F. Beale). He is a very knowledgeable historian who has written several books and pamphlets for the Arizona State Parks service. He and his associates were delighted with the additional information that I provided to them. They are preservationist of the Beale Wagon Road and the old Route 66, which generally follows the old wagon road.

I received a call from Jack who had delightful news. He found "Johnston's Canyon". It is located on what is now a dairy farm near the town of Kingman, Arizona. The local populace has been referring to the area as "Johnson" canyon because the owner of the property is named Johnson. They have owned the

land since the 1880's. The owner told Jack that during his childhood, he remembers seeing a rock inscribed with "Johnston" carved in it but thought that it was just a misspelling of Johnson. Further investigation shows that U.S. Government topographical maps indicate the name "Johnston" as the proper name.

Jack and some of his fellow historians took a trip up to the site and searched for the rock formation with the inscription. They were unable to find it and surmised that it has been obliterated when a modern pipeline was constructed across the canyon in the 1950's. even without this definitive proof, Jack feels absolutely confident that this is the correct location of the canyon . Maps of the period and first hand journals of the participants indicate that Beale and his party camped at that area on July 4, 1859.

Photos indicated that the area was extremely rocky and barren and the "canyon" looks as if it is a dip in the surrounding terrain with a flow of water coming forth from it. Jack explained that, early on, this was a major source of water for the town of Kingman.



Looking up the creek toward Johnston Spring

Jack Smith and his organization have discussed placing a brass historical marker at the site to commemorate the events. The marker would read:

WILLIAM JOHNSTON WARREN
"Water 1/4 mile above"
Born a slave in Virginia in 1808,
Purchased his freedom in 1858.
Joined Lt. Beale's road building party
in 1858. Found Johnston's Springs on
July 4, 1859. Beale named the spring
and canyon after him on July 4, 1859.

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Source of information: Welcome to the Beale Wagon Road, by Jack B. Smith
Published by: Kingman Parks and Recreation Department.

Note: Mr. Smith is a great source of information concerning early Americana in general. He has studied wagon train, native American history, and is currently exploring railroad construction campsites.

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