Hill's Ferry [1]

Hill's Ferry

by Whitmel M. Joyner, 2006

Hill's Ferry, from before the Revolutionary War [2] and into the early twentieth century, was a crossing point on the Roanoke River [3] along the road from the Rocky Mount and Tarboro area northeast to Suffolk and Tidewater Virginia. The 1733 Moseley map [4] shows the road from "Tarburg" crossing the Roanoke at this location, as do the 1770 Collet [5] and 1775 Mouzon [6] maps. Most later maps of this area give the name Hill's Ferry (even into the 1920s), although Solomon Cherry's 1877 map incorrectly locates it several miles upriver.

The ferry was built and operated by wealthy revolutionary Patriot and legislator Whitmel Hill [7] (1743-97) on his lands in what were then Martin [8] and Bertie [9] Counties. It was located at the tip of a large western bend of the Roanoke, about a half mile east of the present-day town of Palmyra [10] and about seven miles from Scotland Neck near the modern boundary between Martin and Halifax [11] Counties. Hill's grandson, Whitmel Hill Anthony (1810-51), owned a large warehouse and shipping business in the area, and for a few years it was called Anthony's Ferry (remains of the warehouse were still visible in the 1930s). There is a written record of army movements at Hill's Ferry during both the Revolution [2] and the Civil War [12].

The Roanoke River at the site of Hill's Ferry is deep enough for commercial boat traffic. Hill operated a commercial fleet between the coastal plain fall line upstream at Weldon and the Albemarle Sound, and some vessels could even sail on to the West Indies. In 1785 the General Assembly [13] acted to establish the town of Blountville with a public wharf on land east of the Roanoke donated by Hill. The town was named to honor the family of his wife, Winifred Blount, whose roots led back to the Anglo-Saxon King Alfred the Great (871-99). But the settlement never had more than a few structures, and its name is rarely found in written records. Today, the community of Palmyra, named for Hill's plantation there, sits on or near where Blountville was laid out.

There are likely two major reasons why Hill's Ferry and Blountville did not prosper beyond their immediate area. There is no evidence of mail routes crossing the Roanoke there, and no sizable towns arose anywhere to the east of the ferry in Bertie. Most commerce with the Tidewater areas of North Carolina and Virginia passed north of the region, while commerce with Edenton [14] and other North Carolina ports went farther south. With these patterns set by the end of the eighteenth century, the railroad lines that later followed passed the area by. The state's highway system has never found the need to maintain a bridge or road at the site, which today is accessible only by walking through planters' fields.

Additional Resources:

Whitmel Hill, NC Highway Historical Marker E-48: https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program/Markers.aspx?ct=ddl&sp=search&k=Markers&sv=E-48%20-%20WHITMEL%20HILL [7]

Subjects:
American Revolution (1763-1789) [15]
Transportation [16]
Authors:
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Origin - location:
Bertie County [18]
Halifax County [19]
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