

Notes and Documents

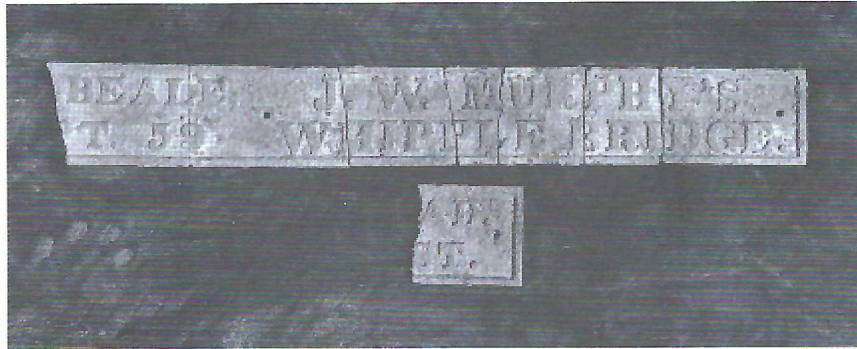
Beale's Wagon Bridge Artifact Uncovered

By *Susan Penn Dragoo**

A historic artifact was recently discovered in eastern Oklahoma confirming the location of one of Lieutenant Edward F. Beale's iron bridges built before the Civil War between Fort Smith and Edwards Trading Post on the Little River near present-day Holdenville (not to be confused with the Edwards Store on the Butterfield Overland Mail Route near Red Oak).

In 1859, under the auspices of Lieutenant Beale's directive to survey a westward route from Fort Smith along the Canadian River for a national wagon road to the Colorado River, six iron bridges were built in eastern Indian Territory over the Poteau River and several flood-prone streams. The iron bridges were of an arched truss design by Squire Whipple and John W. Murphy and manufactured in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. From east to west, the bridges crossed first, the Poteau River near present-day Pocola; second, Redbank Creek near Skullyville (in the Spiro vicinity); then Otter Creek; Sans Bois Creek; Emachaya Creek; and Little River at Edwards Trading Post. All six bridges were destroyed during the Civil War.¹

In 1934 Grant Foreman published in *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* excerpts from Lieutenant Beale's report of his 1857-58 survey expedition. He noted, "The remains of large bridges crossing the Sans Bois and Little River near their junction with the Canadian have suggested a historical mystery that has baffled much research." The report of Lieutenant Beale resolved that mystery, according to Foreman, who



Sign discovered confirming the location of one of Edward F. Beale's iron bridges (image courtesy of the author).

apparently visited (or had eyewitness reports) of three of the bridge sites: Redbank Creek, Sans Bois Creek, and Little River. Of the bridge on Redbank Creek, he wrote, “Here are to be seen the abutments [sic] of the bridge built pursuant to Beale’s survey. The crossing is about seven miles northwest of Spiro, Oklahoma.”²

Since Foreman’s article, little has been written on the subject. Recently, a property owner in the Spiro area discovered on his land the masonry bridge abutments on Redbank Creek mentioned by Foreman as well as an iron sign that had been attached to the fifty-foot span. There is no indication that this sign has been seen by anyone since the bridge’s destruction.

In early 2020, after finding the Redbank Creek abutments on his property, Kyle Burch of Spiro and his wife, April, began to survey the area using metal detectors, finding numerous artifacts. Expanding their search along the likely wagon road approaches to the bridge site, they began to discover—under about six inches of soil—multiple segments of iron bar about three-eighths of an inch in thickness. Seven segments were found over a distance of about twenty feet. These segments, with embossed lettering on one side, were assembled into a whole measuring thirty-one inches long by four inches wide. The sign’s inscription reads “BEALE, ___ T. [probably SUPT.] 59 J. W. MURPHY’S WHIPPLE BRIDGE.” A separate bar segment was located nearby, belonging to another sign, with the letters “AD.” on the top line and “ST.” on the bottom line, possibly the last letters of “WAGON ROAD” and

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“PACIFIC COAST.” The back side of each bar is smooth, without any markings. Mounting holes are present on the bars.

Burch contacted Dr. Carroll Messer, who had been researching the iron bridges of Indian Territory for many years. Messer subsequently published a paper on Beale’s Wagon Road to the Pacific Coast, including these findings, in October, 2021.³

According to Messer, the historic nameplate found by Kyle Burch confirms the location of the Redbank Creek Bridge as well as the source for the six iron bridges of the Beale Wagon Road. This was the design patented by Squire Whipple, built in 1859 by Pencoyd Iron Works of Philadelphia and supervised by the company’s bridge designer, John W. Murphy.

Messer notes that further field survey of the remaining five iron bridges involves numerous challenges. “Whipple’s bowstring iron bridges were modular and would easily break up, unlike rigid iron through-trusses on old highways of today,” said Messer. “The masonry stone abutments are much more likely to be seen around the sites.”⁴ Two sites are submerged in the backwaters of the Arkansas River navigation system, one being the Poteau River bridge, located near Pocola. The other, the bridge over the Sans Bois, was also the site of a Civil War skirmish on June 16, 1864, and is now inundated by the waters of the Robert S. Kerr Reservoir.⁵

The community of Iron Bridge, Oklahoma, named for the Sans Bois bridge, still exists and is located about three miles southwest of Keota in Haskell County.⁶

Endnotes

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¹ Carroll Messer, "Beale's Wagon Road to the Pacific Coast, Western Camel Road and Eastern Iron Bridge Road," 2021, Texas A&M University, College Station, oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/bitstream/handle/1969.1/194898/Beale%20Wagon%20Road%20by%20Dr.%20Messer.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

² Grant Foreman, ed., "Survey of a Wagon Road from Fort Smith to the Colorado River," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 12, no. 1 (March 1934): 74-96, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1827231.

³ Messer, "Beale's Wagon Road."

⁴ C. J. Messer, interview by the author, August 10, 2023.

⁵ Jessie R. Moore. "The Five Great Indian Nations," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 29, no. 3 (Autumn 1951): 331, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc1827485.

⁶ Henry B. Bass, Alice Runyan, Muriel H. Wright, Ben G. Oneal, Emma Estill-Harbour, and Edith Mitchell, "Notes and Documents," *The Chronicles of Oklahoma* 33, no. 3 (Fall 1955): 392, gateway.okhistory.org/ark:/67531/metadc2123595.