

Elisha Baker: The Founder of Knoxville?

by Paula Gammell

Most of us know – or soon learn – that James White founded Knoxville.

And that's true.

And let's remember how it happened, so rapidly back in the summer of 1791: at the end of May Gov. Blount began Holston Treaty talks on the bank of the Holston (now Tennessee) River at the mouth of First Creek. The treaty wrapped up on 02 Jul 1791 and three weeks later Blount wrote to a friend, "I have determined to make the Place where the Treaty was held the place of my future Residence and shall honor it with the name Knoxville." And thus the seat of the government of the Territory South of the River Ohio was selected.

Hey, wouldn't that be a nice place for a town?

But it was James White – not Blount – who owned the land. So, if anyone was poised to take advantage of the site chosen for the new seat of government, it was James White.

White's new town would contain 64 lots. Within a short three months after the treaty ended those lots were distributed via a supposed 'lottery' (see our Info Sheet #14); by next February all the surveying was finished and the first sales were soon made. And thus was the start of Knoxville.

But back to Elisha Baker.

Um...who?

Elisha Baker owned the land upon which the Holston Treaty would be held. *Elisha Baker* owned the land upon which Knoxville's original 64 lots would sit. *Elisha Baker*, in fact, owned *all* the land on the north bank of the river at First Creek, upriver almost to Dickinson Island and downriver almost to the University of Tennessee, and to the northwest beyond the present Summit Hill.

That is, Elisha Baker owned it until 02 May 1791.

Yes, after having owned the property for several years, Elisha Baker sold it to James White *less than a month* before the Holston Treaty began, and *less than three months* before it became the seat of government of the Territory South of the River Ohio.

Did James White know of Gov. Blount's plans to hold the Holston Treaty there? Well, perhaps, even probably, he did. Blount had chosen that site for the treaty several months earlier and it is easy to imagine that James White knew it.

So did James White purchase the property purposely, speculating that the location, after the treaty concluded, might become as important as it ultimately did? Did he have such foresight? Or was his purchase just an incredibly fortunate and timely coincidence?

But did Elisha Baker know of Blount's plans? Did he know the Holston Treaty would be held on his land within a month? It is difficult to imagine he did; would he have sold his property if he had known of its pending importance?

No, Elisha Baker wasn't the 'founder of Knoxville.' But he came *very* close.

If he had kept his property for just another couple of months, would we know Elisha Baker, not James White, as the 'founder of Knoxville'?

For that matter, would there *be* a Knoxville?

This is another piece in the founding of Knoxville – one of my favorite areas of research.

We'll talk about the beginnings of Knoxville soon in "East Tennessee Roots." Don't miss it!