

Old Deeds Tell A New Story

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Two maps depict the Town of Blacksburg, Virginia, as it was when it was established in 1798. One map tilts to the right; the other to the left. Both have errors.

The map that leans to the right (of north) is the older of the two and purports to be a duplicate of the original. Today, a copy of that map resides in the Montgomery County courthouse at Christiansburg, on page 313 of Deed Book 98 (Figure 1).

The other map, the left-leaning one, was drawn by the late J. R. Hildebrand of Roanoke, and is based on information provided by historian Mary B. Kegley,¹ of Wytheville, who simply changed the orientation of the courthouse map by 90 degrees — from the northeast to the northwest. One effect of her change was to put the block with the first four building lots at the map's upper left-hand corner, where a reader's eye ordinarily falls, instead of in the lower left-hand corner, where it appears on the other map. The Kegley map has spawned other copies,² and all reflect the same errors in block numbering that were copied from the courthouse map.

I spent much of the summer of 2004 reading old Montgomery County deeds in an attempt to learn more about Blacksburg and its early streets. That is how I found the maps and the differences between what they show and what the early deed writers described.

The map in the courthouse is entitled "Plat of Blacksburg Town"; it appears to show the lots and streets as they were laid off sometime before January 1798, when the General Assembly approved William Black's petition for the establishment of Blacksburg. The map also bears other names and dates, which indicate that it has been passed from hand-to-hand over the years without a clear chain of possession. The information on the face of the map may well raise more questions than it answers.

The first name on the map is that of James R. Kent, who in the middle part of the 19th century was probably the richest, most powerful man in Montgomery County.³ He owned the Kentland plantation along the New River at Whitethorne, where he ran a lucrative business raising beef cattle. In addition to his agricultural interests, he had served as sheriff of Montgomery County and as a local judge. During his lifetime, he was a banker, resort hotel developer (Montgomery White Sulphur Springs), and railroad promoter. When his name was added to the map, he was also a puzzled man.

On July 5, 1849, Kent declared that he had a true copy of the town map; he wrote: "The above plan of Blacksburg came into my hands. I don't know how, and I wish to retain the original until I know for what it was given me, and by whom."

The presence of such a message on the map suggests that Kent may never have relinquished possession of the original. If his questions had been answered, it is reasonable to expect he would have returned the original to the town trustees, making it unnecessary to file his unusual note in the records of the county's circuit court. If he kept the original, however, it may have been destroyed when Union soldiers raided Kentland in 1864 and burned the office Kent maintained apart from his house.

Regardless of what happened to the original, a copy of the map with Kent's note lasted through the years and emerged in the 1930s in the new and enhanced form that exists today. Other lettering on the current map says it was traced on August 8, 1925, by A. Murrill, who is not otherwise identified. Murrill's name is accompanied by a reference to the deed⁴ whereby William Black gave land for the town that would bear his name. And, finally, the map shows that on October 31, 1934, Blacksburg's then-Mayor F. W. Eheart and Town Clerk J. P. Hurd declared that they were filing a true copy of something that obviously had been evolving since that July day in 1849 when J. R. Kent first saw it.

Representing Blacksburg in its beginning, the Eheart-Hurd map and its successors show the early town's 10 streets, 16 blocks, and 64 numbered lots. However, the streets, with a few exceptions, bear 21st century names that would be more familiar to citizens of contemporary Blacksburg than they would have been to either William Black or James R. Kent. Sometime, over the years, the map was changed.

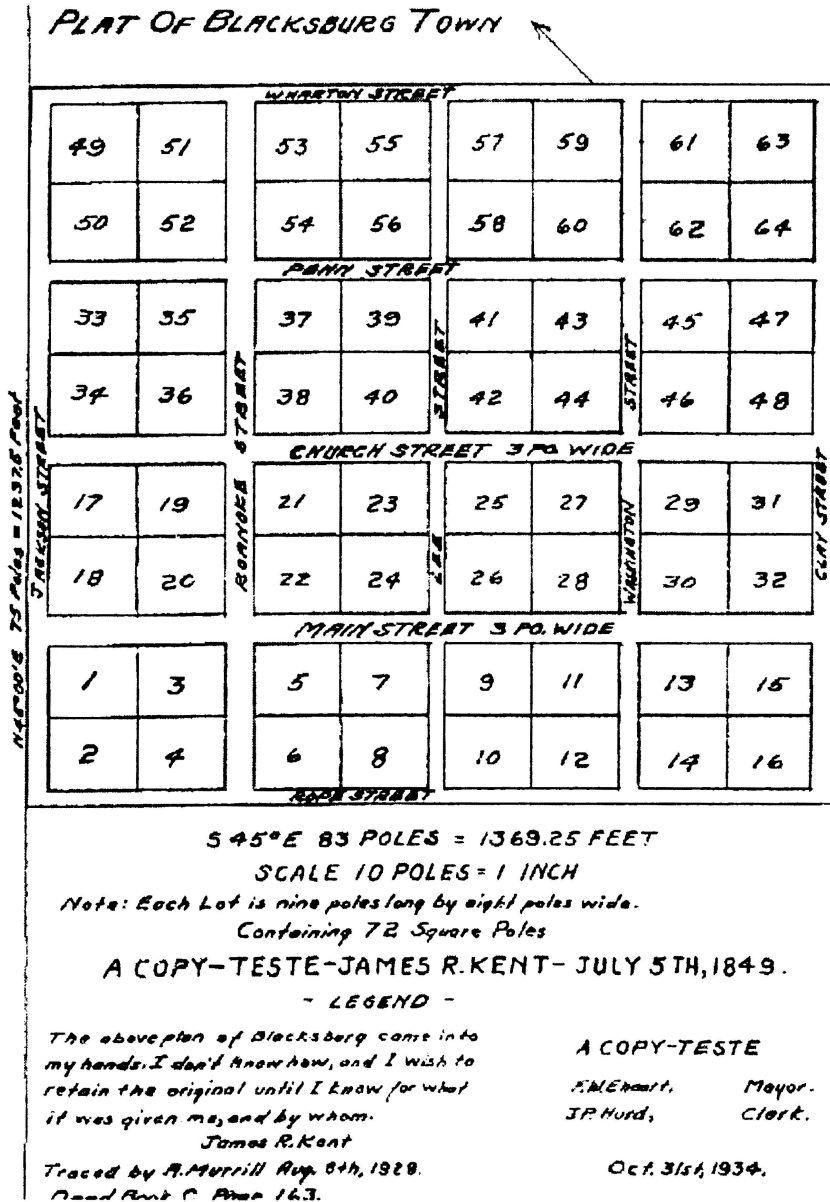


Figure 1. Map of early Blacksburg on file in the county courthouse.

The path to learning what might have been on the original town map leads, oddly enough, back to Kentland. It was there in the attic that Montgomery County court officials hid their historic records in the spring of 1864 to protect them from an advancing Union army, fresh from the battle at nearby Cloyd's Mountain near Dublin and the burning of the railroad bridge across the New River near what is now the City of Radford. By that time, other courthouses in Virginia had been burned, and Montgomery County authorities believed their courthouse was a likely target.

Contrary to local fears, the federal troops who reached Christiansburg did not damage the courthouse, but those who turned toward Blacksburg⁵ threatened to burn Kentland. As soldiers prepared to torch the house, Kent defied their order to vacate his home, and the building, with the hidden court papers inside, was spared.

The old records were returned to their rightful place in the courthouse and have now been microfilmed. As I began to read them in search of information about Blacksburg's earliest street names, I wondered, among other things, if the citizens of the new little town in the Mississippi basin had felt western enough to name one of their streets in honor of the first U.S. president from the west. Was Jackson Street named for Andrew or for Stonewall, the Confederate general who led many Montgomery County men in battle in the early 1860s? Since Jackson Street did not appear in a deed before the Civil War, it can be assumed that the honoree of that street name is not "Old Hickory."

Other writers⁶ of Blacksburg history have said the first streets were named "Smithfield, Roanoke, Main, Water, Tom's Creek, and the lower street," but that list provides neither sources nor dates, and contains two apparent duplications. A previously published map⁷ shows Tom's Creek and Main Streets in the same corridor, while Water Street occupies space where the first deed places "the lower street." Since all 64 of the original lots were corner lots bounded by streets on two sides, it seems reasonable to believe that the deeds would tell with more exactitude which streets were called what and when they were so named. I found that and more.

The deeds show that Blacksburg's streets during the town's first 10 to 20 years were just as reported. Main Street, however, was not a proper name in the beginning but a description, as in "the main street called Toms Creek Street" (from an 1803 deed⁸). Also, Water Street,⁹

which ran parallel to Main Street during much of the 20th century, ran, in the earliest days, southwest and northeast along what is now Lee Street. That made it possible for “the lower street” on the southwest border of the town to co-exist with Water Street.

The deeds also show that Lots No. 1 through 16 in four of the town’s original 16 blocks were numbered in a clockwise fashion, contrary to what is shown on traditional maps. The remaining 48 lots, however, were unchanged (Figure 2).

Also, the records demonstrate that the early deed writers were uncomfortable with Blacksburg’s unconventional, off-center orientation to the north.¹⁰ They sometimes wrote “north” when they meant “northwest,” confirming Mary Kegley’s judgment that the proper orientation of the town’s map is toward the northwest. The deed writers also wrote “east” for “northeast”; “south” for “southeast”; and “west” for “southwest.” Occasionally, they used both directions, such as “east” and “northeast” to describe two sides of the same lot. And every once in a while they seemed to write whatever popped first into their heads. With patience, however, the significance of a deed usually can be determined.

One of the major differences between the old deeds and the traditional maps is the original location of Water Street. That it ran southwest and northeast is shown by an 1806 deed¹¹ transferring Lot No. 24 to Samuel Black. That property was described as being “bounded by Thoms Creek Street [now Main Street] on the southwest, by Lot No. 22 on the northwest, by Lot No. 23 on the northeast, and by the Watter Street on the southeast.” Water Street was also used as a boundary for Lots No. 26,¹² 42,¹³ 55,¹⁴ and 56 when they were sold and resold, confirming that Water Street ran all of the way between the southwest and northeast boundaries of the town. The 1830 deed for Lots 55 and 56 was the first to use the modern spelling of Water Street.

The fact that a clockwise numbering system existed is established by the first deed,¹⁵ which was executed by the new town trustees on August 8, 1798. Describing the purchase of Lots No. 1 and 3 by John Preston, the deed said Lot No. 1 was “bounded on the east by the main street, on the south by Lot No. 2 purchased by Robert King, on the west by Lot No. 4 purchased by John McGee,¹⁶ and on the north by Smithfield Street” (now Jackson Street).

The description of Lot No. 3 follows the same pattern. That lot, according to the deed, was bounded on the south by Roanoke Street, on the west by “the lower street” (as today’s Draper Road was called), on the east by Lot No. 2, and on the north by Lot No. 4. Traced on a map, those descriptions clearly show that the lots were numbered clockwise, starting from the upper left corner of the block on the Eheart-Hurd map and the upper right corner on the other maps.

The importance of the lot numbering arrangement and the location of Water Street is demonstrated by the deed for the 1828 sale¹⁷ of Lots No. 6 and 8 to John B. Goodrich. It describes Lot No. 6 as being “on Toms Creek Street adjoining lots five, seven and eight.” The language of the deed also reserved public access to the Town Spring on the property, which, according to the deed, was in a 16-foot square enclosure near Water Street “with a pass way to it six feet from said Watter Street.” Those specifications could not be met unless Water Street and Toms Creek Street intersected.

In the same deed, Goodrich’s other purchase, Lot No. 8, was described as being “on Roanoke Street and Roap Street.”¹⁸ In modern terms, that would be the lot at the corner of Roanoke Street and Draper Road, where traditional maps place Lot No. 6. Again, the description of the property does not conform to those maps.

Mistakes, either in writing a deed or in transcribing it, can call for creative reading to determine the actual location of some lots. For example, Harmon Sifford bought Lots No. 26, 9, and 12¹⁹ in 1807, which would give him three lots on Water Street, assuming Lots 9 and 12 were numbered clockwise. Unfortunately, the deed is one of the confusing ones, and the compass directions — two sides of Lot No. 26 facing the northeast, for example — do not match reality.

Ignoring the inaccurate compass references, the deed says Lot No. 26 was “bounded by Toms Creek Street..., by Lot No. 25..., by Lot No. 28...and...by Watter Street.” With those directions, Lot No. 26 can be located easily on a traditional map.

The descriptions of Lots No. 9 and 12 are more complicated, but the proper placement of those two lots is aided by the knowledge that an 1811 deed for Lot No. 10²⁰ described that property as “fronting on main street,” which would be the beginning of a clockwise pattern for that block. Ignoring the compass directions, again due to obvious inaccuracies, the deed says Lot No. 9 was bounded by Toms Creek Street,

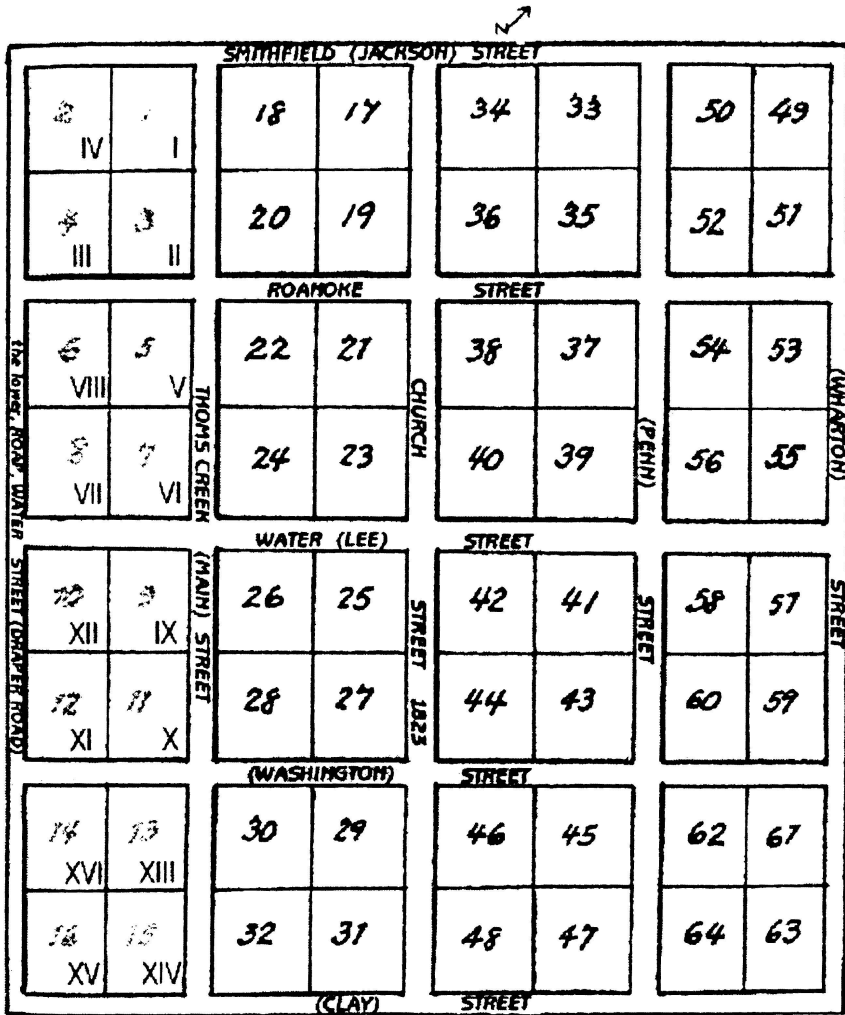


Figure 2. This map, based on the Hildebrand-Kegley map of Blacksburg in 1798 (see endnotes 1 and 2), shows the lot numbers (the gray numbers 1–16 on the left) that do not coincide with the lot numbers described in early deeds. The proper numbers, according to the deeds, are shown in Roman numerals. The early street names are followed, where applicable, by the modern name in parentheses. Roanoke Street has the only name that is unchanged from the beginning.

Lot No. 10, Lot No. 12, and Water Street. The same deed locates Lot No. 12 on Water Street and next to Lot No. 9 and Lot No. 10. There is no reference to a fourth side. Those directions, while imprecise, certainly suggest that Sifford's three lots touched Water Street and that 9 and 12 were in a clockwise rotation.

The sale of Lots No. 13 and 14²¹ in 1821 to William E. and Thomas Rutledge confirms again the clockwise numbering system along the southwest side of Toms Creek Street. The deed describes Lots 13 and 14 as being "on Toms Creek Street, adjoining Lots No. 15 and 16..." It is worth noting that Toms Creek Street is the only named street in the deed, although the two lots were bounded by the rights-of-way for what now would be Washington and Clay streets. Apparently, those passages had no names in 1821.

The deeds tell what was done but not why. Without evidence, such as a letter or a diary, from one or more of the original participants, it may never be known why the town's first trustees deviated from the system of lot numbers shown on the only town map known to have survived. That the map was important is indicated by the fact that each deed for a town lot contained a declaration that the property being sold was "a certain lot or parcel of land ... designated in the plat or plan of said Town by the number [the applicable lot number]." It is possible that the map we know differs from the original or that the trustees made a mistake in their first deed and decided, in the interest of consistency, to perpetuate the error in the four blocks southwest of Main Street while following the town plan in the remaining 12 blocks.

According to the story of the deeds, four and maybe five of Blacksburg's original ten streets had names from the beginning. With one exception, they were destination names: Roanoke (for the river or the valley; the city was many years in the future); Smithfield, and Tom's Creek. Water Street was first used as a lot boundary in 1803, placing it among the earliest, if not the first, streets. The only street without a destination name had, instead, a descriptive name: "the lower street." In the beginning, it followed the town's southwestern boundary. Roanoke is the only original street name that has survived into the 21st century.

The current Church Street was not named in a deed until 1823, a quarter of a century after the establishment of the town. That first

mention came when the town trustees sold William Argabright three lots, Nos. 45, 46, and 47²² “on the northeast side of Church Street” and Lot No. 29,²³ “on the southwest side of Church Street.”

Everyone knew, of course, that there was church activity in the area that would become Church Street. In 1819, when Adam Croy, Jr., bought Lots No. 37 and 38,²⁴ they were described as adjoining each other “and the meeting house lot.” The actual sale, however, of one half of Lot No. 40²⁵ to the trustees of the Methodist Meeting House was not recorded until August 14, 1830, seven years after the name of Church Street showed up in a deed.

There were several occasions prior to 1823 when Church Street could have been mentioned as a boundary but was not. That name did not exist in 1807, and the deed writer went out of his way to avoid it, when John D. Helms purchased Lot No. 17.²⁶ The boundaries of that lot were given as Smithfield Street, Lot No. 19, Lot No. 18, and Lot No. 34, which was in the next block, across what would become Church Street.

As time passed and the writers of Blacksburg’s deeds became more familiar with the town and its residents, they also became less meticulous in their descriptions of the land being transferred. And, as interest grew in building lots on the northeast and southeast sides of town, the writers had to learn to do without named streets as lot boundaries. Gone was the precision with which Lots 1 and 3 were described in 1798. In its place came an easier style that allowed the town trustees to sell to William Thomas on October 1, 1821, Lot Nos. 61, 62, 63, and 64 “the whole composing the square on the southeast corner of said town and being the same lots now occupied by William Thomas.”²⁷

Even when a street was available for use as a boundary, it was not always mentioned. On May 23, 1846, the trustees sold a lot²⁸ on Water Street to Wesley Argabright that they described as “adjoining the lot on which the said Wesley Argabright now lives and fronting the house which James M. Evans occupies the said lot is known and designated in the plan of the said town as lot No. 41.” The street on the lot’s northeast boundary, now known as Penn Street, had no name in 1846.

Street names continued in use when available, and the deed writers occasionally managed to tell an interesting story. An example is

the deed of September 15, 1841, which recorded that James R. Kent of Kentland bought the home of Edwin I. Amiss, a prominent attorney and banker, practically out from under Amiss and sold it back to him. The deed²⁹ says Kent sold Amiss “two lots lying between Smithfield Street, Tom’s Creek Street, Roanoke Street and Church Street and ... numbered on the plan of said town 18 and 20 being the same on which the said Edwin I. Amiss now lives and on which he has erected a large brick building...”

Kent bought the two lots, according to the deed, at a public auction arranged by a James Mitchell, who was described as heir-at-law to his deceased minor son, John. It is not explained how John came to be owner of the property or why Amiss didn’t buy it from the father in the first place.

Amiss was involved in a controversy over the location of Main Street, according to local historians, who said he blocked the use of what is now Church Street for the main street. The old deeds, however, indicate that the town’s first citizens thought of today’s Main Street as the principal thoroughfare or “the main street.”

That’s the way it was described in the first deed (1798): with the article “the” but without capital letters. In 1803, the street, mentioned as a boundary of Lot No. 20, was referred to as “the main street called Toms Creek Street.”³⁰ When Lot No. 1 was re-sold in 1815, the northeastern boundary was given as “main street,” but someone went back and squeezed a “the” into the narrow space before “main street.” When Lot No. 2 was resold in 1818, it was described as “a corner lot on the south side of Main Street” — no “the” but a capital “M.” But there was no consistency in those references, and Toms Creek appeared in deeds until at least 1841.³¹

An unusual street name found in the deeds involved John Goodrich, who in 1828 purchased the Town Spring. He also bought 25 acres just outside the Blacksburg limits with one corner “at the northeast end of Cross Street and also called Roanoke Street of said town.”³² There is no other reference to Cross Street, which may refer to the intersection of Roanoke and Main Streets, two main arteries.

In the end, the story of the deeds adds a few more footings on which to build a solid understanding of Blacksburg’s early history. Beyond that, the message of the deeds is that the study of any town’s history should be a continuing challenge to conventional wisdom be-

cause the simple act of re-reading the county's deed books may produce a new way of looking at the past.

Endnotes

1. F. W. Kegley and Mary B. Kegley, *Early Adventurers on the Western Waters*, Vol. I (Orange, Virginia, 1980), p. 197.
2. See James Paxton, "A Story of Continuity and Change: Blacksburg, 1798-1998," *The Smithfield Review*, 2 (1998), p. 22; and *A Special Place for 200 Years: A History of Blacksburg*, ed. Clara B. Cox (Town of Blacksburg, 1998), p. 13.
3. For information about James R. Kent, I have relied on Patricia Givens Johnson's *Kentland at Whitethorne* (Blacksburg, 1995), pp. 35-51. The text of Kent's inscription on the town map, however, comes from the map itself, and the speculation about the map's fate is my own.
4. Deed Book C, p. 163.
5. For reference to Union General George Crook's decision to abandon his army's drive east toward Lynchburg and turn instead toward Blacksburg and, ultimately, his base in West Virginia, see Richard D. Duncan, *Lee's Endangered Left*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), pp. 42-72.
6. John P. Hale, whose work in *Trans-Alleghany Pioneers* (condensed by Lottie Phillips Bryant to cover only Draper's Meadow, Smithfield, and Blacksburg) is available in the Special Collections Department of Virginia Tech's University Libraries, p. 5. The same set of streets is named by Mrs. S. A. Wingard (1939 manuscript), Mary Apperson (1944 speech), and Mrs. W.D. Altman (May 30, 1957, *Montgomery News Messenger*). All three are available in the Blacksburg history section in Newman Library.
7. Paxton, "Continuity and Change . . .," p. 22.
8. Deed Book C, p. 636.
9. This street originally was referred to as "Watter Street," just as "Toms Creek Street" (now Main Street) was first spelled "Thoms Creek Street" and "Smithfield Street" (now Jackson Street) in one deed (1807) was spelled "Smythfield Street." I use the modern spelling except in direct quotes.
10. For a discussion of the town's alignment 45 degrees from due north, see Donna Dunay et al., *Blacksburg — Understanding a Virginia Town: Town Architecture* (Blacksburg: the Town of Blacksburg, the College of Architecture and Urban Studies, and Virginia Cooperative Extension, 1986), p. 95.
11. Deed Book D, p. 326.
12. Deed Book D, p. 413 (1807).
13. Deed Book D, p. 414 (1807); Deed Book D, p. 513 (1808), and Deed Book E, p. 87 (1811).
14. The sale of Lots 55 and 56 is recorded in the same deed, found in Deed Book K, p. 469 (1830).
15. Deed Book C, p. 141.

16. No deed for the King and McGee transactions has been found. It appears that the trustees of the town used the Preston deed to get the purchase of the King and McGee lots written into the record.
17. Deed Book K, p. 194 (1828).
18. The handwriting on the deed makes it difficult to determine whether the name attributed to the southwest boundary street is "Roop" or "Roap." Mary Kegley (op. cit., p. 197) calls it "Roop," but James Paxton (op. cit., p. 22) uses "Roap," and a 1934 *Plat of Blacksburg Town* (Deed Book 98, p. 313) says "Rope," which could be a misunderstanding of the spoken "Roap." I prefer "Roop" because I have heard the word before — it is a familiar Montgomery County name, but the two middle characters of the word appear similar to the "oa" in Roanoke and do not look at all like the double "oo's" in Goodrich. So, reluctantly, I say "Roap" although I cannot determine what it means, if anything.
19. All three lots are included in one deed at Deed Book D, pp. 413-14.
20. Deed Book E, p. 115.
21. Deed Book G, p. 589.
22. Deed Book H, p. 345.
23. Deed Book H, p. 346.
24. Deed Book G, p. 580.
25. Deed Book K, pp. 471-2.
26. Deed Book D, p. 412.
27. Deed Book H, p. 250.
28. Deed Book O, p. 201.
29. Deed Book N, p. 128.
30. Deed Book C, p. 636.
31. Deed Book N, p. 128.
32. Deed Book K, p. 174.