As you enter the East Fork Recreation Area at the Forks of the Stones River, there are signs marking this as part of the Trail of Tears route taken in 1838 by the Cherokees on their long trip to Oklahoma. But there is more here than just that sad story. At the beginning of the walking trail across from the picnic shelter, there is a line of daffodils to the right of a tall tree. It is evidence that there may have been a house there once. And indeed, there was. William Davis, brother to Sam Davis maintained a fine house here. As you continue on the trail up the hill you enter the vicinity of Fairmont, the home of Judge Bromfield Ridley during the Civil War. A blackened tree stands in what would have been the front door as reminder of when the house was burned by Union troops during the Battle of Stones River. A short segment of dry stack stone wall near a fence post bears mute witness the presence of slave labor supporting the grand plantation homes of the area.

The closer you get to Old Jefferson proper, the daffodils in the woods reminds you that two hundred years ago you would have been walking past a multitude of houses with tidy yards and prospering citizens. The road itself was paved using the latest technology. Macadam subsurface still remains in many places as you make your way along the road to Old Jefferson.

At the center of Old Jefferson the north-south road to the square is still evident to your left as broad path flanked by trees. Often there is some marking tape hanging from a small tree on the right as a slight monument to the center of town. Also on the right there remains a fragment of the trail to what was once a very busy wharf shipping goods like timber and furs to the rest of the world and receiving cloth, foodstuffs and other sundries necessary for the thriving town.

Imagine that main street during late October or early November in 1838, as wagons drawn by mules,
The Lady of Cofitachequi

In 1539 Hernando De Soto's army landed on the Gulf Coast of Florida looking for riches, beginning an assault on southeastern Indians. Upon seizing a trader from the chiefdom of Cofitachequi, an Indian boy they called Perico, the Spanish learned that Cofitachequi was ruled by a woman who collected tribute, sometimes paid in gold. De Soto made plans for the army to head that way.

By spring of 1540, De Soto had plundered his way out of Florida, through present day Georgia, and was near Cofitachequi. The army arrived on May 1 at one of the major towns, located on the Wateree River. They met a delegation of the ruling class and, with Perico as interpreter, De Soto told them he came in peace and wanted to meet the chief.

A little later a woman the Spanish writers call the Lady of Cofitachequi arrived on a litter covered with a white cloth. They described her as extremely beautiful. She welcomed De Soto with gifts of animal skins, cloth, and freshwater pearls. She set aside half the town for his use and gave him food, including turkey and venison.

De Soto asked about the precious metals and gemstones he thought would be found there. The Lady commanded the people of the town to bring all they had. They brought freshwater pearls, copper, and sheets of mica. This disappointed the Spanish who expected to be given gold and silver. Then De Soto's men looted over 200 pounds of freshwater pearls from the mortuary temples where the dead were laid to rest in wooden caskets.

De Soto had the Lady of Cofitachequi lead them to her town, Talimeco, about four miles away where he did the same, ransacking the mortuary places there.

Next De Soto sent foraging parties to find all the corn they could carry. Cofitachequi had been depopulated by disease two years earlier so the people really did not have all that much corn to be taken. De Soto stayed for 12 days while the army ate nearly all the food there. By now the people of Cofitachequi had had enough and threatened to take action against them.

De Soto made the Lady of Cofitachequi his hostage. He took her, with some attendants, as a guide and headed to a province called Coosa, which he heard was very rich and might have enough corn. Coosa was west of Cofitachequi, but the Lady led the army northwest, to the mountains. Once in the mountains, she escaped by saying she had to go relieve herself, taking one of her female slaves and a chest of pearls. De Soto never saw her again.
Yellow marks the Trail of Tears. The hiking trail follows the red route. The Yellow Route joins the red route and joins the Trail of Tears. Yellow marks the route.
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1. The sign marking Old Jefferson as part of the original Trail of Tears route.
2. A 19th Century dry stacked stone wall stands near the old wharf.
3. A chestnut oak that stood in the front yard of Fairmont.