The Metes and Bounds system of Survey, as used in Tennessee and other eastern states, Hawaii, and Texas, is an earlier system than the Rectangular System of Surveys, (a.k.a. Public Land Survey System) which is used in many states. Simply put, the Metes and Bounds system of survey is an archaic survey system were surveyed tracts are not linked to base line surveys, but rather to neighboring tracts, roads, trees, rocks, meanders of waterways, etc. But it was the best that could be had at the time it was used.

(The Metes and Bounds States: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia.)
"In the Eastern and New England States the system of surveying and describing lands by metes and bounds as followed prior to the establishment of the rectangular system of surveys still exists. The system at its best is imperfect and uncertain in its working, having no known lines for base of surveys, and seldom any official plats for references as to initial points. Diagram No. 4 shows a tract of land described and platted by 'metes and bounds,' as the same would appear in deeds."

Copyright secured by W. S. Brown, 1892

An 1826 English “Plan” in the Metes and Bounds Style.
A Sample Metes and Bounds Survey

This survey below is from Book 34, Plats & Surveys, page 31, Tennessee’s 3rd Surveyor’s District. The book can be found at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville Tennessee, but of course you would be shown a microfilm if you wanted to see the survey: that is, microfilm Roll 35, Record Group 50 (RG 50).

The survey is an easy one to place. Because it is in “County of Warren in the 34 Section of Said district”, and because it is on the west bank of Hickory Creek, and because this survey came from a “Plats & Surveys” book, we can pinpoint this tract exactly. The “Plats & Surveys” book had a nicely drawn plat of the tract. Incidentally, west of this tract is the town of Smartt, Tennessee.

State of Tennessee Third District ~ Surveyed the 23rd day of January 1808 for William C. Smart assee. of William P. Anderson who is of John Nelson his preference right of two hundred acres of land by virtue of part of a Warrant No.1120 for five thousand acres leaving a balance of said warrant yet to be Satisfied of 3657 acres located the 28th day of August 1897 location No. 190 Situate in the County of Warren in the 34 Section of Said district beginning on a black oak on the west bank of hickory creek of the barren fork of Collins river thence north Seventy five degrees west one hundred & Sixty eight poles with a conditional line between William Campbell & Said Smart to a hickory then north ninety Seven poles to a black oak near a Small branch a condition between Samuel Priest & Said Smart thence with the condition north eighty degrees east eighty eight poles then South eighty degrees east Sixty poles then South Sixty degrees east fifty two poles then east forty two poles to an elm on the west bank of hickory creek a condition between William Priest & Said Smart thence with the condition South twenty five degrees east twenty four poles then east twenty poles then north Seventy degrees east Sixty poles then South eighty Six poles then west one hundred __ forty ____ poles thence South thirty three degrees west twenty eight poles to the beginning ~

James Priest &
Geo. R. Smart , Chrs.

/s/ Jno. A. Wilson D.S.
Sent to Registers Office 15th Feby - 1809
Neither the black oaks, the hickory, nor the elm would have helped us locate this tract; the help came from other places. We know McMinnville is in the 34th Section, therefore, we have narrowed the area. However, any entry, survey, grant, or deed prior to 1806 will not have the section mentioned. After that date, only a small number of surveys record the section.

All tracts have at least three corners (here a tract would be a triangle in shape). Where the survey line turned, you find a corner. The “landmark” at the corner would be recorded. We could see a corner description as simple as elm or as descriptive as the dead tree where the boys once chased the rabbit.

We have two papers that might prove helpful. “Land Terminology” is a glossary of old terms found in land related documents. “Trees” is a list of trees and other growing things that also appear in old land related documents.