

THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO SETTLE KENTUCKY: BOONE IN VIRGINIA

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Practically everyone in America knows something about Daniel Boone. He often looms larger than life and he undoubtedly is better known than any other frontiersman. Why this is true is difficult to explain. Perhaps, as one writer expressed it, there were others who were better woodsmen, but Boone who had a way of inspiring men "talked his way into immortality."¹ One sometimes gets the impression that Boone single-handedly settled Kentucky, that it was his creation, and that he was a well-known leader from the beginning. Perhaps this was not the case, and the first attempt at the settlement of Kentucky and the events which followed in Virginia might help us understand this intriguing individual.

Boone spent the years from 1769 to 1771 with friends on one of his long hunts in Kentucky. As he returned to his home in North Carolina he quite probably met a frontier leader by the name of William Russell who had settled at Castle's Woods in Virginia. Later Boone sold his farm and most of his household goods and departed for Kentucky on September 25, 1773.²

Boone took with him his large family while some of those traveling with him left their families at home.³ From North Carolina they traveled to Abingdon (then Black's Fort) in Virginia. Next according to Boone's biographers the group traveled westward, but the evidence seems to indicate that instead they journeyed twenty-five miles northward to Castle's Woods before heading west. This seems to be true because the settlement was then one of the most westward communities and also because several members of the community joined the group.⁴

Castle's Woods (now Castlewood), Virginia was first settled in 1769. The first settlers apparently were William Snoddy, William Cowan, John Cowan, and Patrick Porter, all of whom were married to sisters. They moved into the area from North Carolina.⁵ The community was the first settlement on the Clinch River and the first in modern Russell County. Later many of the people who first settled in Castle's Woods

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moved on to Kentucky; a number of them were with Boone in 1773 when he made the first attempt to settle the state.

Boone, because he became famous, has been credited with the leadership of the group which was moving to Kentucky; however, contemporary records state that William Russell was the leader.⁶ As an important citizen in his own state, and as one who already had a claim to land in Kentucky as the result of a reward for duty in the French and Indian War, Russell was probably the actual commander of the caravan with Boone merely acting as the guide. None of the records mention Boone by name.

The party was divided into three detachments: in front was the main body with the women, the children, the baggage, and the cattle; in the center were William Russell's oldest son, Henry, Daniel Boone's oldest son, James, James and Richard Mendenhall, Isaac Crabtree, a man named Drake, and two slaves named Charles and Adam who belonged to Russell; bringing up the rear were William Russell and David Gass.⁷ Some others in the group were Edmund Jennings, William Bush, and Michael Stoner; they, like Russell, were from Castle's Woods.⁸

Some information on a few of the men who joined the expedition from Castle's Woods is available. Certainly one of the most important residents there was William Russell. He was descended from an old English family which had been in Virginia for some time. He was born in 1735 and at the age of nineteen enrolled at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg with the intention of becoming a lawyer, but he stayed only a year. Soon after he quit school he married his first wife, Tabitha Adams, whose father was an Indian trader and tobacco farmer. Tabitha had twelve children, the last five of whom were born in Castle's Woods. During the French and Indian War, Russell was sent on a mission to the Cherokee nation in the region of Chattanooga. For his service in the war, he received a grant of land in Kentucky which seemed to be a great attraction to him for many years. Then in 1770, Russell moved with his family to Castle's Woods. He took his slaves and built a home there. Later he served in the Revolution and when he was discharged he was given the rank of general.⁹ He was quite active in local and state politics for many years, being helped by his second marriage to a sister of Patrick Henry.¹⁰

Another man living in the same settlement was Michael Stoner. He was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. His German parents died when he was quite young, and the local authorities placed him with a saddler to learn a trade. But he would not be tied to a saddler's bench and at the age of twenty-one he went to Virginia and settled in Castle's Woods. Stoner, a short stocky man, spoke with a strong accent. An

outstanding example of a frontiersman, he went with Boone to Kentucky in 1774 to warn surveyors of the danger of Indian attacks, helped Boone cut the Wilderness Road, and was said to have been the best shot in Kentucky.¹¹

David Gass was also one of the early settlers of Castle's Woods who was engaged in the expedition of 1773. He, like Stoner, was born in Pennsylvania about 1729. Gass first moved westward to Albemarle County, Virginia; later, in 1769, he moved to Castle's Woods. Gass owned land about two miles below Moore's Fort, one of the two forts in the community. On this land he had a cabin in which Boone lived from 1773 to 1775 before he moved to Kentucky.¹² Eventually Gass moved to Kentucky himself where he died in Madison County in 1806.¹³

Little else is known about the rest of the people from Castle's Woods who participated in the caravan. But this group is quite prominent and the fact that so many of the residents were involved lends credence to the belief that the final stopping point was Castle's Woods.

The middle group under young Boone and Russell carried provisions of flour, farming tools, and various other articles including some books which belonged to the Russells. They also drove a small number of cattle. On the night of the ninth of October, the first two groups pitched camp only a few miles from each other near Walden's Ridge in present Lee County, Virginia.¹⁴ During the night, the howls of wolves (or perhaps Indians) frightened the Mendenhall boys who were unfamiliar with life on the frontier. Crabtree teased them saying that what they heard then was nothing compared with what they would hear in Kentucky where the buffaloes bellowed from the treetops. Near day-break Indians attacked the group. Henry Russell was shot through the hips and could not escape. He died slowly because the Indians who ran up to stab him with their knives were careful not to deliver a fatal wound. As they did so, he grabbed the knives with his bare hands until the steel had severely sliced his hands. James Boone received the same treatment: a shot through the hips and a slow agonizing death. The Indians made his pain more unbearable by pulling out his toe nails and finger nails. One Indian, Big Jim, he recognized and he begged him for his life — finally he begged him for his death. Both the Mendenhall boys and the Drake youth were killed instantly. Adam, a slave belonging to the Russell family, was able to escape and hide under a pile of driftwood on the bank of Wallen's Creek. From that position, he watched the torture. After being lost for several days in the forest, he returned to Castle's Woods; but the other slave, Charles, was led into the woods where he was killed. Isaac Crabtree, the other white man, although wounded, was able to escape.¹⁵

Soon after the incident occurred, William Russell and David Gass found the mutilated bodies. Arrows were still in Russell's son, and a war club lay beside him.¹⁶ Both Russell and Gass had planned to establish homes in Kentucky, start crops, and later return for their families.¹⁷ These dreams were destroyed; they had to bury the dead. Rebecca Boone, when she learned of the death of her son, sent sheets to the scene to be used in burying him. The two eldest sons of two frontier families were wrapped together and buried in a single grave.¹⁸

After the burial the group held a meeting. Boone, who had sold his farm and most of his personal belongings in North Carolina, wanted to go on, but the others refused. He therefore accepted the invitation of David Gass to live in a cabin on his property in Castle's Woods.¹⁹ Most of the others returned to their homes — in Castle's Woods and other communities in Virginia and North Carolina.²⁰

At first, Virginia officials thought that the Indians who attacked the caravan were Cherokee. Later, however, they were proven to be Shawnee.²¹ Upon hearing of the attack Governor Dunmore of Virginia wrote to the Indian agent telling him to inquire about the murders and to deliver the culprits to justice.²² Alexander Cameron then contacted the Indians and said the Governor of Virginia demanded satisfaction for the five whites and the Negro belonging to Russell. According to Cameron's letter two Cherokee were thought to be involved.²³ After a time two Shawnee chiefs were found to have been members of the Indian group and were put to death for their actions. Some of the goods, such as the farming equipment and the books, were returned; but the horses that had been stolen had been sold to some traders in Pennsylvania.²⁴

Thus the first attempt at the settlement of Kentucky came to an end. The main question raised by reading the reports made at the time is who was in command. To all appearances Boone was not the leader but merely a guide. Two of the reports should substantiate this point. The first was made by a militia leader, Arthur Campbell, to the Governor of Virginia. He stated:

About the latter part of September Captain William Russell with several families & upwards of 30 men set out with an intention to reconnoiter the country towards the Ohio and settle in the limits of the expected new government.²⁵

Later he relates that the Indians killed "young Mr. Russell, four white men & one Negro."²⁶ There is no mention of Boone or even his son. The report that appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg is essentially the same. A deposition sworn by one of the people on the expedition, Thomas Sharp, stated that:

On the tenth of the same instant (October), your deponent set out to join a company going with William Russell to Ohio, accordingly your Deponent did join the said company and proceeded on to the head of Powell's River, where the Company had proposed to wait for the said William Russell and some others, who were expected soon after.²⁷

From the evidence available therefore it seems that the idea for the settlement of Kentucky was possibly not that of Daniel Boone but William Russell who had persuaded Boone to lead the expedition since he had extensive knowledge of the country. Even if this is not the case, Boone was such an unknown figure at the time that he is mentioned in none of the official reports while the name of his son is only listed along with others.

For nearly two years the Boone family lived in Virginia at Castle's Woods. Apparently there was little thought of moving to Kentucky until frontier conditions became more settled. The Shawnee Indians in the Ohio country to the north and the Cherokee to the south were both highly agitated by the white man moving into their territory. By May, 1774, hostilities had broken out in the north. Then another incident among the Cherokee caused great fear among the western settlers. Isaac Crabtree, one of the survivors of the attack on the party led by young Russell and Boone, developed a hatred for the Indians. In June, 1774, he attended a horse race in the Watauga Settlement and without any apparent provocation killed a local Indian.²⁸

In 1774, Kentucky was still unsettled, but surveyors were swarming into the future state staking out claims. Because of the threat of Indian attacks, they were in danger. Colonel William Preston, the militia commander of western Virginia, instructed William Russell to send two men to Kentucky to warn the men there. Russell, who had "lately suffered by the inhuman, blood-thirsty devils," agreed that the surveyors should be notified. Therefore he said he "engaged to start immediately, on the occasion, two of the best hands I could think of, Daniel Boone and Michael Stoner."²⁹ The task of the two men was to traverse Kentucky as far as the Falls and to return through Gasper's Lick and Cumberland Gap. Boone and Stoner went first to Harrodsburg where James Harrod was laying off the first town in Kentucky. From there they went on to the mouth of the Kentucky River and then to the Falls of the Ohio. Many surveyors were warned and, perhaps, saved.³⁰ After about two months, the two woodsmen returned to Virginia.³¹

When Boone and Stoner arrived they found that most of the men of the settlement had already gone to war. The militia forces had been ordered northward by Governor Dunmore to fight the Shawnee. Boone and Stoner hurried forward to catch up with the forces, but Russell, who commanded one of the companies, ordered them back to help pro-

tect the homes in the settlement since most of the men of the community were on the expedition.⁸² This was a wise decision because the Indians were soon active on the Clinch as well as on the Ohio where the militia forces were going to meet them in Lord Dunmore's War.

As the reports of the initial attacks on the Clinch settlements began to come into Castle's Woods, the citizens there became so afraid they would not leave the forts to care for their crops. They did, however, send small ranging parties under the command of Boone, and he was "very diligent at Castle's Woods and kept things in good order."⁸³

Boone was in charge of Moore's Fort and had twenty men serving under him.⁸⁴ On a quiet evening about dark three men left the fort to check a pigeon trap. Some distance away, Indians fired upon them and one of the men was killed. The other two escaped and reported the attack to the men inside the fort who rushed after the Indians but the approaching darkness prevented them from venturing far from the fort. As they often did, the Indians left a war club beside the body of the dead man. Boone at the time thought the Indians were Cherokee,⁸⁵ not Shawnee, as was later proved at their next attack which took place at Shelby's Fort.⁸⁶

When Blackmore's Fort, some distance down the Clinch River, was attacked and another man killed, the call for help was answered by Boone and another militia leader named Daniel Smith. They brought about thirty men and seven horses with them. The horses were left outside the fort during the night and the Indians stole six of them. Despite the fact the woods were searched the next day, no trace of them was found.⁸⁷

Even if Boone had his horses stolen, the people at Blackmore's Fort wanted him to be made a captain in the militia. They drew up a petition which readily met with the approval of the militia authorities. Boone was made a captain with the responsibility of protecting Moore's Fort, Russell's Fort, and Blackmore's Fort until the men returned from the expedition in the north.⁸⁸ He continued on duty until the war against the Shawnee had been won.⁸⁹

An event which apparently took place during Dunmore's War, possibly when Boone was at Blackmore's Fort, provided an interesting insight into the Boone family. While Boone was away he left Rebecca Boone and some of their children in the fort. The men who were in charge of protecting the fort were somewhat careless with their duties and would often leave the fort where they played ball or merely lay around on the grass without their guns. On one day only one man was left in the fort. Rebecca Boone and a number of other women decided to teach the men a lesson. They loaded their guns much as the Indians did and about six of the women went on the other side of the fort

where they fired their guns rapidly. After doing this they ran into the fort and slammed the gate so the men could not get in. This so scared the men that some of them were reported to have run through a nearby pond. Only one was able to get over the walls of the fort. When the rest of the men discovered they had been fooled, they wanted to whip the women. Instead they had three fights over the matter.⁴⁰

A possible permanent contribution of the Boones to their hosts in Virginia was a religious institution. Local tradition has long maintained that "Brick Church," a union church of Baptists and Methodists, was founded as a Baptist church by Daniel Boone. But there is no evidence that Daniel Boone ever did any preaching, or, for that matter was very religious. Squire Boone, his brother who accompanied him to Castle's Woods, was known to occasionally preach and there is a strong possibility that he actually founded the church. It was located a short distance from where Moore's Fort was situated. The church seems to have been founded about that time and was disbanded in 1788 only to be founded again later.⁴¹

As is well known, Boone was contacted by Richard Henderson in 1775 and began cutting the Wilderness Road for him in March of that year. Sometime later he returned to the Virginia settlement and removed his family to his new town in Kentucky.

Daniel Boone therefore spent a relatively short time in Virginia. During his two years there he suffered a horrible defeat at the hands of the Indians, often guessed wrong as to the tribe of those who attacked, and had his horses stolen during the night. But he also served valiantly as a militia officer and his reputation began to grow there. Perhaps it was the people of Blackmore's Fort who first recognized his qualities. Whatever his situation might have been in 1773, it was considerably enhanced in 1775. He was to carve his initials into the bark of Kentucky history.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Harriette Simpson Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (New York: 1960), p. 114.

² Daniel Boone, "The Adventures of Colonel Daniel Boon: Containing a Narrative of the Wars of Kentucky," appendix to John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (Wilmington: 1784), pp. 49-57. The autobiography also appeared in *Thomas's Massachusetts Sun*, June 30, 1785.

³ Draper MS 9B94. The "B" manuscript is an unpublished biography of Boone by Lyman C. Draper. The manuscripts are held by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁴ For a biography of Boone, see: Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Daniel Boone* (New York: 1902).

⁵ M. B. Wood to Draper, August 23, 1883, Draper MS 4C27; William Russell to Governor Harrison, September 25, 1783, in William F. Palmer (ed.), *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts* (Richmond: 1883), III, p. 532; Thomas W. Carter to Draper, Draper MS 4C26.

- ⁶ Arthur Campbell to Lord Dunmore, December 14, 1773, Haldimand Papers, Volume B 14, pp. 206-207, Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario; *Virginia Gazette*, December 23, 1773.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*; Draper MS 9B95.
- ⁸ Draper MS 9B94.
- ⁹ Mary Katherine Thorp, "William Russell: A Revolutionary Patriot of the Clinch Valley," (unpublished Master's thesis, University of Virginia, August 1, 1936), pp. 5-7, 9.
- ¹⁰ One of his main accomplishments was to have a county formed and named for himself.
- ¹¹ George W. Stoner to Draper, Draper MS 24C53, 24C55; Arnow, *Seedtime on the Cumberland*, pp. 114, 189, 200; Thwaites, *Daniel Boone*, p. 116.
- ¹² Notes from John Gass, November 14, 1844, Draper MS 24C74; 24C75; John Gass to Draper, November 6, 1847, Draper MS 24C79.
- ¹³ Draper MS 24C74, 11CC11; Montgomery County Virginia Record of Plotts A, p. 84.
- ¹⁴ Haldimand Papers, Volume B 12, pp. 206-207.
- ¹⁵ Draper MS 9B96-98; *Virginia Gazette*, December 23, 1773.
- ¹⁶ *Virginia Gazette*, December 23, 1773; Haldimand Papers, Volume B 12, pp. 206-207.
- ¹⁷ Draper MS 9B95.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9B101.
- ¹⁹ The cabin was located about two miles from Moore's Fort.
- ²⁰ Draper MS 9B101.
- ²¹ Haldimand Papers, Volume B 12, pp. 206-207; Draper MS 9B102; Letter of William Preston, August 13, 1774, in Peter Force and M. St. Clair Clarke (eds.), *American Archives: Fourth Series* (Washington: 1837), I, p. 707.
- ²² Dunmore to John Stuart, December 20, 1773, Draper MS 6C15.
- ²³ Alexander Cameron to the Indian Chiefs, July 7, 1774, Virginia Papers, Papers of the Continental Congress, pp. 153-156, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- ²⁴ Draper MS 9B101-103.
- ²⁵ Arthur Campbell to Lord Dunmore, December 14, 1773.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ Deposition of Thomas Sharp, February 20, 1774, sworn before William Russell, enclosed in a letter from William Oglivy to Haldimand, June 8, 1774, in the Gage Papers, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- ²⁸ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, June, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ40.
- ²⁹ William Russell to Colonel Preston, June 26, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ46.
- ³⁰ Thwaites, *Daniel Boone*, pp. 106-107.
- ³¹ Boone in his autobiography said the trip took sixty-two days, that he left on the 6th of June and was "solicited by Governor Dunmore." He and Stoner, however, were paid for only fifty-nine days. See Dunmore's War Records, a collection of documents in the Virginia State Archives, pp. 226, 228. Russell in a letter to Preston on June 26, 1774, indicated that he chose Boone and Stoner and that they departed on the 26th of June.
- ³² William Russell to Colonel Preston, August 28, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ84.
- ³³ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, September 26, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ104. See also: Letter of Colonel William Preston, September 28, 1774, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, I, p. 808; Arthur Campbell to Preston, September 29, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ106-107.
- ³⁴ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, October 6, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ116.
- ³⁵ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, October 1, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ109; John Gass to Draper, November 14, 1845, Draper MS 24C74.
- ³⁶ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, October 9, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ117.
- ³⁷ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, October 12, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ118.
- ³⁸ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, October 13, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ123; Daniel Smith to Colonel Preston, October 13, 1774, Draper MS 3QQ119.
- ³⁹ Arthur Campbell to Colonel Preston, October 15, 1774, Campbell-Preston-Floyd Papers, Volume I, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
- ⁴⁰ Statement of Mrs. Samuel Scott, circa 1850, Draper MS 1CC225.
- ⁴¹ Vera Duff Gilmer, "Squire Boone and Castlewood Baptist Church," MS in Russell County Virginia Library; Mrs. W. S. Banner, "The History of the Brick Church," MS in Russell County Virginia Library; Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, revised and extended by G. W. Peale (Richmond, 1894), pp. 358, 361, 363. This book was originally published in 1811.