

DANIEL BOONE FAKELORE

JOE NICKELL AND JOHN F. FISCHER

More than two decades ago, men searching for eastern Kentucky's legendary "lost silver mines" came upon a huge rock shelter (or cliff overhang) in the Daniel Boone National Forest, roughly three miles northeast of Natural Bridge State Resort Park. Within the shelter were wooden troughs and other relics of human habitation including a crude "hut." This had been assembled from poles suspended across large rocks, and upon these makeshift rafters had been laid rows of old-fashioned shakes (split shingles like those used for the roofs of log cabins). Inside the hut the men discovered a board (another shake) with the carved inscription, "D. Boon."

Although the treasure hunters kept their discovery secret for some years, they finally made it public. But then few took the matter seriously until a professor from Eastern Kentucky University arrived on the scene, asserted that the "camp" was surely associated with Boone's explorations, and removed the inscribed plank for safekeeping. Subsequently, forest officials obtained the board, enclosed the rock shelter with a fence, and attempted to authenticate the site.¹

Media coverage in the late sixties reported on the "cabin" (as

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[Editor's note: This article was accepted for publication in 1986 and thus antedates several more recent revelations about Boone artifacts.]

1 Glen Adams, "Employee Discovered Site Connected to Daniel Boone, Lost Silver Mine," *LBDA News*, 29 May 1984, publication of the Lexington Bluegrass Army Depot; Robert F. Collins, *A History of the Daniel Boone National Forest, 1770-1970* (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, 1975); George W. Billings, Jr., "'Historic' Hut Draws Crowds Until —," *Lexington Herald*, 9 April 1968.

it was sometimes called) with astonishing inaccuracy. For example, the rock shelter was described as a "cave."² The board's inscription was given variously as "D. BooN," "D. boon," or "D. Boone."³ Unidentified "scholars" reportedly "examined the lettering and declared it had been made by Boone."⁴

Of various notions about the hut's construction, one was that it had been fashioned by "John Swift" who had supposedly mined silver in the region in the 1760s. Other suggestions were that Boone had shared the camp with "Swift" or had later discovered "Swift's" site and adopted it for his base camp. Some took the carved board at face value and assumed Boone was alone responsible. Still other theories held that the hut was constructed by miners producing niter for gunpowder during the War of 1812 or that it was built even later by moonshiners.⁵

Obviously much depended on the "D. BooN" inscription. Whether or not it was authentic was a question we addressed in a two-year investigation that grew to include a number of questionable Boone artifacts — not only the "hut" but various tree and rock inscriptions as well as carvings on rifles and other supposed possessions of the famous Kentuckian.

As we learned from studying many authentic Boone letters and documents, the evidence is that Boone always rendered the family name with a uniform spelling. Our conclusion supports that of Kentucky historian George W. Ranck who observed that "all the original autographs of the famous woodsman or *fac-similes* of them that the writer has ever seen show the name with the final 'e'."⁶ In its issue of 23 December 1934, the Louis-

2 Bob Rankin, "Dan'l Boone May Have Visited Ky. Cave," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 2 April 1978.

3 Nevyl Shackelford, "'Tantalizing' Find in a Secret Gorge," *Lexington Herald*, 24 November 1967; Sharon Sherman, "Boone's Burrow?" *Louisville Times*, 4 April 1968; Billings, "Historic' Hut." A more recent story about the Boone "hut" appeared in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 25 August 1988.

4 Rankin, "Dan'l Boone."

5 Chip Callaway, "Did Ol' Dan'l Boone Really Sleep There? Tiny Hut Holds Key," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 25 October 1970.

6 George W. Ranck, *Boonesborough* (Filson Club First Publication Series, Number 18; Louisville, 1901), 111, note 1.

ville *Courier-Journal* sagely advised that Boone's lack of education had been exaggerated and that, apparently, "he knew how to spell his own name." The distinguished New York autograph expert, Charles Hamilton agrees. As he pointed out to us, Boone's "handwriting and spelling were remarkably consistent."⁷

As a result, proliferating inscriptions bearing the explorer's name can often be dismissed on purely orthographic grounds. According to Boone biographer Lawrence Elliott, "unhappily for a number of historical societies still cherishing segments of ancient tree bark with what is said to be Boone's carved inscriptions — 'D. Boon killa bar on this tree 1773,' or 'D. Boon cilled a bar on tree in the year 1760' — he did know how to spell his name properly."⁸

The first of the examples Elliott cites — found near Long Island, Tennessee — is additionally discredited by its use of the present-tense form "kill" for the past tense *killed*.⁹ Boone generally used tense forms correctly. In fact, in a letter dated 7 May 1789, Boone wrote of hearing that Indians "have killed" (sic) some people, and again that "5 pursons Were Certinly killed" (sic) a few days earlier.¹⁰

The use of "cilled" in the second example, found on a large tree at Fancy Gap, Virginia, is not only a non-Boone spelling but is not a very credible rendering in any case. And as to the spelling "bar," we found entries in Boone's account books — authentic entries in the frontiersman's own handwriting — for "Bear Skines" (sic).¹¹

Again, a misspelling of the frontiersman's name betrays the

7 Charles Hamilton to Joe Nickell, 5 August 1983.

8. Lawrence Elliott, *The Long Hunter* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), 12.

9 John Bakeless, *Daniel Boone: Master of the Wilderness* (New York, 1939), 33

10 The Durrett letter is in the Durrett Collection at the University of Chicago; a copy is in the special collections department at the Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

11 Draper Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, series C, Vol. 4, p. 75.5 and Vol. 26, p. 186; also Vol. 4, p. 77.

spuriousness of an inscription on a slab of beech tree in the warehouse of the Kentucky Historical Society. Reportedly from Clay County, Kentucky, it reads, "D. Boon" and bears the date "1775."¹² Another obviously fake inscription — "D. Boon camp't here" — supposedly came from a tree "near the mouth of one of the caves that he explored."¹³ Yet another "D. Boon" — scribed in the chinking of a log house in Harrison County, Kentucky — was discovered when it was being renovated by its owner, Ernie Covington.¹⁴

The inscription "D. BOON 1776" has turned up on beech trees in Tennessee and Kentucky as well as on an aspen in Idaho!¹⁵ A small book was written on the latter. Amusingly, its author once thought the carving a fake because she had been misinformed that the spelling was "BOONE"; when she saw it was actually "BOON," she decided it might be genuine after all! And when tree experts determined the carving was made about 1895 and was therefore a fake, she came up with an incredible hypothesis. She decided some trapper or prospector had likely seen "the old Boone inscription after the original tree had died, and decided to carve the exact name and date on a similar tree in order to pass on a message for another century."¹⁶ She does not appear to be joking.

We see, then, that authentic specimens of Boone's writing — as Elliott says, "his undisputed signatures on letters, deeds and claims" — always have the final "e."¹⁷ It is only with the highly

12 Byron Crawford, "Some Odd Bits of History Wind Up in the State Museum's Warehouse," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 6 January 1982.

13 Shannon Garst, *The Picture Story and Biography of Daniel Boone* (Chicago, 1965), 70.

14 Ernie Covington, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 26 March 1985.

15 Charles Campbell, "Tennessean Positive that Initials on Tree Were Carved by Boone," *Lexington Herald*, 2 September 1977; Henry P. Scalf, *Kentucky's Last Frontier* (2nd ed.; Pikeville: Pikeville College Press, 1972), 435; Louise Rutledge, *D. Boon 1776: A Western Bicentennial Mystery* (Idaho Falls, Idaho, 1975).

16 Rutledge, *D. Boon*, 9, 18.

17 Elliott, *Long Hunter*, 12.



Ranger Don Fig at the Boone "Hut" in 1967

U. S. Forest Service



Ranger Don Fig at the Boone "Hut" in 1967

U. S. Forest Service

questionable artifacts — which often bear additional signs of faking — that one finds the other spelling. At least one source for that persistent error is Boone's so-called autobiography — actually written by John Filson — which was popular in the last century and which gave the backwoodsman's name as "Col. Daniel Boon."¹⁸ In turn, repeated publicizing of the fake inscriptions no doubt caused the misconception to become even more widespread.

Nevertheless, in an attempt to justify particular instances of the misspelling, some writers have offered an ingenious explanation. According to one such writer, "Boone did not begin spelling his name with the 'e' until after he moved to Boonesborough in 1775."¹⁹ Unfortunately — since there is no documentary evidence for that assertion — the argument is necessarily circular, running something like this: "Tree carvings prove the explorer formerly spelled his name as 'Boon'; therefore, that spelling adds credibility to the tree carvings." Actually, entries in Boone's own family Bible refute the assertion of an early "Boon" spelling.²⁰

As might be expected, however, not all hoaxers have omitted the final "e." In 1983 Joe Nickell was able to inspect a sandstone rock that was reportedly found on a Madison County, Kentucky, farm in 1900.²¹ Above the "D. Boone" name was carved the year, "1765." That date brands the inscription a fake because, historians agree, Boone never entered Kentucky until 1767 as he himself told Filson for the "autobiography."²²

Another example of the correct spelling but the wrong date is the carving on a section of an old tree that was cut down in 1932 in Louisville's Iroquois Park. Now in possession of The Filson

18 John Filson, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784).

19 Callaway, "Did Ol' Dan'l Boone."

20 Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, illustration facing p. 20.

21 Byron Crawford, "Signature on Sandstone Either a Boone or a Bust," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 11 March 1983.

22 Filson, *Discovery, Settlement*.



The Boone Tree in Iroquois Park

The Filson Club



The Boone Tree in Iroquois Park

The Filson Club

Club, it reads, "D. BOONE. KILL A BAR. 1803."; appended is a word that appears to read "ZOIS" but which has not been satisfactorily explained.²³ But if the final word is puzzling, the matter of the carving's legitimacy is not. In addition to the non-Boone forms such as we have already discussed, the date brands the inscription a fake. In 1803, Daniel Boone was serving as a magistrate in Missouri where he had resided for a few years, and he would not return to Kentucky until about 1810.²⁴

Then there are the "D.B." inscriptions presumed to have been made by Boone. Two so attributed once stood on opposite sides of Morgan County, Kentucky.²⁵ However, our research shows the possibility of mistaken identity. Some Blairs, including a David, had been early settlers of one of the locales, and the family of Richard "Dickie" Burks — including a grandson, David Burkes — had lived in the other.²⁶ There is no independent proof that Boone ever visited either area; it is, in fact, unlikely that he did.

Among many other "D. B." inscriptions was one found on a large tree above a "cave" (actually a rock shelter) where Boone supposedly wintered in 1769.²⁷ (This may be the same "D.B." carving preserved on a segment of bark in the Mansion Museum at Old Fort Harrod in Harrodsburg. It is captioned: "The initials D.B. cut by Daniel Boone on an oak tree above the cave where he spent the winter of 1769-70 in Kentucky.") However, author/

23 F. W. Woolsey, "Seeking New Life for an Old Institution," *Courier-Journal Magazine*, 24 June 1983.

24 Michael A. Lofaro, *The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 115, 121; Garst, *Picture Story*, 133-37.

25 Arthur Johnson, *Early Morgan County* (Ashland, 1974), 84; John T. Hazelrigg, Centennial Address, *Licking Valley Courier* [West Liberty], 27 December 1876.

26 Hazelrigg, "Centennial Address" said that the tree was on the land of Cyrus Perry, Jr., and the 1850 census for Morgan County indicates the Perrys and Blairs lived near each other. Johnson says one tree stood on Smith Creek in Morgan County. Richard "Dickie" Burks lived on nearby Burks Creek (erroneously given as Birch Creek on some maps), according to Johnson. See Johnson, *Early Morgan County*, 84, 129.

27 Maria T. Daviess, *History of Mercer and Boyle Counties* (Harrodsburg, 1962), 13.

historian Maria Thompson Daviess, on whose father's property the "cave" had been located, wrote that she "always had too much respect for D.B.'s good judgment to believe for an hour that he wintered in that one when so many more commodious caves and even hollow trees offered their hospitable shelter all around." She added, "As to the letters, the average boy is fond enough of climbing and cutting to make that much history."²⁸

Among the best known of the "D.B." carvings is that on the stock of a rifle in the museum of the Kentucky Historical Society. That the initials are supposed to refer to the famous Kentuckian is clear from the inscription carved on the other side: "BOoNs bEST FREN."

The inscription implies this was Boone's favorite rifle, whereas Boone reportedly referred to his trusty firearm as "old Tick-Licker."²⁹ He would not have carved "FREN" in any case. He spelled the word with the final "d," as in a letter to his sister-in-law in which he sent his affection to "all my frends."³⁰ The possessive form of his name is also wrong since he retained the final "e" there as well. For example, in a survey document in his handwriting he referred to "said Boones SW corner."³¹

Cut into the gunstock are also fifteen notches — "for Indians shot," according to the man who sold the rifle to the historical society at the turn of the century. But Kentucky historian Winston Coleman stated: "I seriously doubt that Boone put the notches there. In the first place, those people thought too much of their guns to mutilate them." Bayless Hardin agreed: "It seems the custom of notching a pistol or rifle originated out West during the Buffalo Bill era."³²

28 Ibid.

29 Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, 59, 218.

30 Lofaro, *Life and Adventures*, 129. A phonetic speller would be more likely to omit the *d* in "frends" than "frend" in final position since the *d* sound between /n/ and /z/ (-s plural) would be assimilated in speech.

31 See document number 52W37, special collections department, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

32 Sue McClelland Thierman, "It Says Here: D. Boone, 1793," *Courier-Journal Magazine*, 29 September 1957, pp. 23-27.

A museum display card informs us that the rifle was "sold to the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 1900 by Prof. Gilbert Walden." No doubt that title "Professor" conjures up visions of a venerable historian, possibly even a Boone expert, in the minds of visitors. Actually, a somewhat different impression comes from Walden's letter to the governor of Kentucky in 1900. The bold letterhead reads:

CULTURE. ORATORY. PATRIOTISM. STORY. AND. SONG.
AMERICA'S FAMOUS ELOCUTIONIST.

Below, in large, ornate letters is:

Gilbert Walden,
Washington, D.C., Virginia, Texas, and Oklahoma.

"Professor" Walden's photo dominates the letterhead. It shows him seated, dressed in western attire, with a rifle balanced on his knee and a pistol stuck in his belt. In bold letters is this additional list of his talents:

Noted Cow-boy Orator, Rough Rider,
Scholar and Rifle Shot.

In a sprawling hand, the self-described "Scholar and Rifle Shot" wrote of the rifle:

It is about 140 years old, and was made for Boone by a famous gunsmith from N.C., named Graham, who lived on the Elkhorn in Ky., and made guns for many years after the Pioneers had moved away or died. I got it through the kindness of Dr. Percy de Bonay, of Tallulah Falls, Ga., who had gotten it from a gentleman in Louisville and who had found it through a newspaper article in a country paper in N. E. Kentucky.

It was given to an old trapper and friend of Boone named Dedman and kept in a mountaineer family for years. For a long time it was hidden away in an old closet until found. The people were nice and intelligent who had it, but poor, and they sold it to a Col. Ellis (I think) of Louisville and a friend of Dr. de Bonay's.³³

If the rifle were indeed made when Walden claimed — circa 1760 — it would be most unlikely to have actually belonged to Daniel Boone. That is because Boone's rifles, as well as his other possessions and those of his companions, were confiscated by

33 *Ibid.*



"Professor" Walden and His Boone Rifle

Kentucky Military History Museum



"Professor" Walden and His Boone Rifle

Kentucky Military History Museum

the men's Indian captors in late 1769. The only weapon the men were allowed to take with them on their release was a small "trading gun."³⁴

Another problem with Walden's story concerns his mention of the "newspaper article in a country paper in N. E. Kentucky." We found a photocopy of what must surely be the same old clipping in the files of the Kentucky Military History Museum. It is unidentified and undated and quotes an anonymous "gentleman from Eastern Kentucky." The man (who refers to himself with the royal "we") stated that he had an old rifle which was "said to have been" owned by Daniel Boone. He mentioned the fifteen notches and the "rude letters: BoONEs bEst FRIN" (sic). (The slightly different typography does not necessarily suggest a different rifle, since we have already seen just such variations in articles about the inscribed "Boon Hut" board.)

But the anonymous gentleman gave a notably different record of the rifle's prior ownership. He said that, "The old flintlock was given to an uncle of mine by a trapper named Dedmon, who lived on Powell's River, in Virginia, and whose grandfather had hunted, fished and trapped with the hardy Kentucky woodsman on many an occasion." Referring to Walden's version (above) one sees that Walden has changed Dedmon to "Dedman," and has eliminated a link (the anonymous gentleman's uncle) in the alleged chain of ownership.

The point here is not that "Professor" Walden intended to be deceptive in this regard. (After all, it was probably he who supplied the old clipping.) Rather, it is merely to show that the alleged provenance is even more tortuous and uncertain and unverifiable than has heretofore been reported.³⁵

In short, the gun's provenance is confused and suspect, and the inscription is fraudulent. As forgery expert Charles Hamilton told us, shortly after he had exposed the "Hitler Diaries" as

³⁴ Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, 51.

³⁵ Thierman, "It Says Here." See "In the Museum: Daniel Boone's Rifle," *The Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* 49 (1951): 166.

spurious on the basis of the handwriting: "I think the Kentucky Historical Society has a lot of nerve to display a remark [i.e., "BOoNs bEst FREN"] that even from this distance I can spy as a fake."

In addition to this damning evidence, during our investigation we repeatedly heard doubts expressed about the rifle's antiquity. These came from a number of knowledgeable persons — including sources close to the historical society. A long-rifle expert who had once thoroughly examined the rifle branded it an obvious fake, and a collector of antique firearms agreed the rifle is of doubtful authenticity on stylistic grounds. Still another, a dealer in old guns, told us that several persons whose opinions he respected in such matters had indicated the rifle was clearly spurious.³⁶

Such expressions persuaded us to contact an independent expert, and we asked for a recommendation from Henry J. Kauffman of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, author of the important work, *The Pennsylvania-Kentucky Rifle* (1960). Since the rifle in question was alleged to have come from North Carolina, Mr. Kauffman suggested we contact John Bivins of the Museum of Early Southern Decorative Arts in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, who readily agreed to assist us in our investigation.

In a subsequent letter, Mr. Bivins wrote:

Matters of provenance are certainly important to us in studying any material culture, but we certainly can't overlook the documentation provided by an object itself. Matters of style, technology, and social custom can speak as powerfully as the documented history of an object, and in the case of the "Boon" rifle, they speak clearly enough to provide us with more information than the history of ownership does.

To be as succinct as possible, I believe that it is generally understood among students of the American longrifle who are familiar with this particular weapon that the piece is exceedingly unlikely to have enjoyed actual ownership by Daniel Boone. That is certainly my opinion.

He continued:

³⁶ Those we interviewed generally requested anonymity; their names are recorded in our files. Hamilton to Joe Nickell, 5 August 1983.

The rifle is a southern Appalachian type, showing in its architecture (shaping of the stock), form of the iron mounts (particularly the trigger guard) and the use of a bone heel plate at the butt a combination of details typical of the mountain areas of northwest Georgia, western South Carolina, and southwestern North Carolina. The style of the stock, most particularly the thickness of the butt and the shaping of the wrist area, indicates a probable date range of 1820-30, and this is reinforced by the style of the rifle's lock.

Citing the tendency of pre-1800 American rifles to show "a good deal more of the Baroque heritage of European gunstock design," Mr. Bivins stated: "Stocks were more robustly shaped, and buttplates were significantly wider. Rifles of the pre-Revolutionary period often have a buttplate 2" in width or more." He added, "Every aspect of the style of the 'Boon' rifle clearly points to a latter period."

In conclusion Mr. Bivins stated that — while Boone undoubtedly had owned a number of longrifles — "I most emphatically do not believe 'Boons best fren' to be one of them." He added:

It could not have been made earlier than the year of Boone's death, and for that matter I don't believe Boone would have so wretchedly defaced the stock of a rifle in such a manner. I have never seen any longrifle so treated other than a few that had been decorated by plains Indians. In addition, we have no evidence of a gunmaker by the name of Graham.³⁷

There have been attempts to account for the proliferating "Boone" carvings:

In his declining years, we are told by a great grand-nephew (who had heard the story from his grandfather, Elijah Bryan), Daniel Boone spent his idle hours carving, with his knife, little souvenirs for his family and friends. On all he would cut the initials or full name.

That this story is apocryphal is strongly suggested by the remainder of the paragraph:

He gave to his rifles names, it is said, and one of these is in the Historical Society of Missouri, another in the family of a son-in-law in that State, and still another, carved by his own hand, is in the Kentucky State Historical Society.

Or so "it is said."³⁸

³⁷ John Bivins to Joe Nickell, 5 December 1984.

³⁸ Mrs. Jennie C. Morton, "Daniel Boone," *The Register of the Kentucky State Historical Society* 5 (May 1907): 50.

Another "Boon" rifle is in the Kentucky Military History Museum's own collection, but it is kept in storage — presumably because it is such an obvious fake. Its provenance is unknown beyond the fact that it was donated by a Florida man in 1979. Thus the sole "proof" that it belonged to the famous Kentuckian consists of inscriptions on both sides of the stock. On the right-hand side is carved: "D. Boon. CILLED. BIG/PanTHER. this/GUn. I WAS. 13. YEAR OLD/in. BUCKS. Co. PA." An inscription on the other side has an altered date. In addition to that suspicious detail are the obviously spurious elements of misspelled name and the telltale "CILLED." That word was probably copied from the "BAR" tree with that spelling (mentioned earlier) which was reproduced as a line drawing in a popular 1939 Boone biography.³⁹ Still another phoney element is a series of notches on the stock.

An unsigned typewritten page in the files of the Kentucky Military History Museum, apparently written by a former curator and headed "Boone Relics," cites such multiplying rifles as the one formerly on display by the Historical Society of Wisconsin and known as early as 1918. On one side of the stock were five notches and the initials "D.B." and on the other the inscription "Boons Tru Fren." Concluded the writer: "One of these guns may have been Daniel Boone's, but certainly not all, and perhaps none of them were. Unless positive identification is established, I don't think 'Tick-licker' [a designation he earlier equated with BOoNs bEST FREN] should be called Boone's rifle." We agree.

Among the *uninscribed* rifles sometimes claimed to have belonged to Boone is one in the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville. Its provenance is known from 1852 at which time it was presented to the Tennessee Historical Society by Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, a longtime president of the society. It is a French musket of a type supplied to American Revolutionary War

³⁹ Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, 32.

soldiers and so "could have been used by Daniel Boone," although the museum has "no information as to the basis for this belief."⁴⁰

Another uninscribed rifle is in The Filson Club's museum. However, it is most likely the work of Kentucky gunsmith Jacob Rizer and therefore probably dates from after Boone's death or, "at least, from a time when Boone was aged and no longer in Kentucky."⁴¹

In making inquiries about alleged Boone rifles, we heard of yet another, one that had once reposed in the Blue Licks Battlefield Museum. Park Manager J. Richard Gaw stated that while the museum had no Daniel Boone rifle, several years ago thieves had broken in and stolen more than a hundred firearms. He referred us to Judy Bullington who had been cataloging the museum's artifacts.⁴²

Judy Bullington insisted there was "no documentation" to indicate that any rifle ever owned by the museum had actually belonged to Daniel Boone. (She also cast doubt on a salt kettle in the museum's possession that "supposedly" once belonged to the pioneer.)⁴³

Still another reputed Boone rifle is in the possession of a Missourian named Marshal Ralph Hooker, but on stylistic grounds it "leaves a lot of questions unanswered" and there is no documentary evidence to support its alleged provenance.⁴⁴

As might be expected, in addition to alleged Boone rifles, there are also several inscribed powder horns that supposedly belonged to the frontiersman. One — initialled "D.B." — was "thrown in" by Gilbert Walden when he sold the infamous

40 William C. Baker to William Barrow Floyd, 9 May 1974.

41 Thomas A. Strohfeltd, "The Kentucky Long Rifle: Some Bardstown Examples," *Antiques Magazine*, April 1974, p. 840ff; Lynn S. Reneau to Joe Nickell, 17 January 1985.

42 J. Richard Gaw, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 18 December 1984.

43 Judy Bullington, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 1 February 1985.

44 Ralph Marshall Hooker, "The Boone Rifle," *Muzzle Blasts*, February 1966, pp. 13, 31; Terry Noble to Joe Nickell, 22 April 1985.

"BOoNs bEst FREN" to the Kentucky Historical Society.⁴⁵ That, and distinctly similar carvings, tie the horn to the rifle and brand it as spurious.

Another powder horn is owned by Illinois resident Jerry Noble. It is a supposedly "autobiographical" work, bearing a hodgepodge of carvings relating to Boone's life: Indians, a map, a heart containing "REBECCA DEAR" (with the date of his wife's death), and the like. The last of several dates is 1816 when Boone was eighty-two.

Noble's horn has Boone's name spelled correctly, but some of the other spellings and abbreviations do not match those in authentic Boone writings, and the horn's provenance is also problematical. So far as is known, there is no record of it for thirteen decades after the frontiersman's death when it turned up in a Mexico, Missouri, junkshop about 1950.⁴⁶ The collector who discovered it there (and who subsequently sold it to Noble) reportedly returned to the store and "tried to back-track the ownership of the horn, but had no success."⁴⁷

Yet another carved horn had until recently been in the possession of Donald Handrick, a collector of powder horns from New York State. It bears some scrimshaw pictorials of animals, including bison and a turtle. Beneath the latter is "SHELOWEE" (sic: Boone's Indian name was Sheltowee, "Big Turtle"). An inscription reads, "DANIEL BOONE" (in large letters) and "HIS HORN/MAYd AT BOONES/BORO 1778." Mr. Handrick states he purchased the horn from a dealer who obtained it from a supposed Boone descendant. The horn was accompanied by a notarized statement from the latter who claimed he had gotten it from his grandmother Boone.⁴⁸

While — as Mr. Handrick insists — the horn itself may be

45 Thierman, "It Says Here."

46 Miles Gilbert, "'A Powder Horn by D. Boon?' *Muzzle Blasts*, July 1978, pp. 4-6.

47 Terry Noble to Joe Nickell, 14 February 1985.

48 Donald Handrick, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 19 March 1985.

stylistically correct for the period, there are other problems. He said he had attempted to contact the Boone descendant but without success. More important, perhaps, is the spelling "MAYd"; Boone would be expected to have used "made" as he did in the letter to his sister-in-law.⁴⁹ Equally revealing is the spelling of the fort's name: we found a letter from about the same period headed "Boones Borrogh" in Boone's own handwriting and thus with his own spelling.⁵⁰

Still another "Boone" powder horn we learned of began as an innocent creation. This occurred some two decades ago when Darrell M. Hall, a young man from Morgan County, fashioned a "Daniel Boone" powder horn as he imagined the frontiersman's might have looked. Later stolen from a historical display during a local festival, the horn was subsequently "discovered" in a plowed field. Those who believed it authentic pointed to a map carved on it which matched an old map of Kentucky.⁵¹

Our search for reputed Boone artifacts was necessarily less than exhaustive, and our primary interest was in ones bearing Daniel Boone's name or initials. For example, to those already mentioned we might add a small powder measure made of antler and bearing Boone's name (with the final "e"). This was once owned by Mr. Handrick who recalled that it had also had a date carved on it as well, but we lack information as to provenance and other details.⁵²

However, we did learn of several interesting, uninscribed items that supposedly belonged to Boone. These included a "Hearth rock from Boone's home in the Yadkin Valley, N. C.," that is at Fort Boonesborough State Park, the pioneer's tomahawk and "best beaver trap," a small walnut table and desk, and a walking stick plus another tomahawk, supposedly one Boone had "lost,"

49 Lofaro, *Life and Adventurers*, 129.

50 Draper Papers, see note 11.

51 Darrell M. Hall, interview by Joe Nickell, 17 June 1985.

52 Handrick, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 19 March 1985.

which was later "plowed up" and is presently in the Museum of History and Science in Louisville.⁵³

The "Boone Relics" typescript mentions a "watch, Daniel Boone's," that "has no provenance or authentication at all," and "a walnut beam from Daniel Boone's cabin" (in Mason, Missouri) that "could be a piece of an old railroad tie."⁵⁴ Another page of typed notes in the Kentucky Military History Museum files refers to a plaster cast (belonging to the Kentucky Historical Society) that is "said" to be the one made of Boone's skull when his remains were re-interred in Frankfort — although one expert thinks it may be negroid.⁵⁵

A somewhat comparable list could be assembled for Daniel's brother, Squire. For example, "a snuff box that allegedly belonged to Squire Boone" gathers dust in the warehouse of the Kentucky History Museum and a boulder — carved "1770 SQUIRE BOONE (the 'N' made backward) — is enshrined in the Madison County courthouse.⁵⁶

However, these latter items, as well as the uninscribed "Boone" curios, represented little more than interesting diversions from our primary investigation, namely the question of authenticity of the "Boon hut" with its "D. Boon" carving, together with some of the better known "Boon(e)" inscriptions such as "BOONs bEST Fren" and "D. Boon cilled a bar on tree in the year 1760."

53 George E. Price, a 1929 dedicatory speech, reprinted in Jim Comstock, ed., *The West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia* (Richwood, West Virginia, 1976), III, 524-27. For a photograph of "the beaver trap made by Boone in 1776" and "presented to the West Virginia State Museum by Dr. J. P. Hale," see Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, illustration facing p. 36. John Peter Hale, *Daniel Boone: Some Facts Not Hitherto Published* (Wheeling, West Virginia: Baker & Company, n.d.). Harry Wandrus, "Daniel Boone's Tomahawk," *Hobbies - the Magazine for Collectors*, April 1955, pp. 114-15. William M. Sudduth, director of the Museum of History and Science, Louisville, to Joe Nickell, 23 November 1984.

54 "Boone Relics," unsigned typescript in the Kentucky Military History Museum, Frankfort, Kentucky.

55 Thomas S. Watson, "Clues Indicate Boone May Still Lie in Missouri," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 24 June 1983.

56 Crawford, "Some Odd Bits of History," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 6 January 1982.

Orthography, dates, stylistic considerations — all had provided useful investigative approaches to such inscriptions, particularly when actual examination was impossible or simply unproductive. With the “D. BOON” board and “hut,” however, examination and analyses were to prove decisive.

We visited the “hut” on several occasions, taking photographs and regarding with amusement the fresh inscriptions made by wags: “D. Boon” traced with a finger in the sand under the rock overhang; “D. BOON 1721” carved on the walkway railing; and “D.B.” carved at least twice on the railing, once on a nearby rock, and no doubt elsewhere.

We had wanted to examine the “hut” quite closely and had made arrangements for doing so with the Daniel Boone National Forest’s recreation supervisor, Don Fig. Unfortunately some of our ardor was dampened when we learned that vandals had crawled under the protective fence and scattered the boards. Although the “hut” had been reconstructed, a massive search for a missing youth in the area repeatedly delayed our examination.

Nevertheless, courtesy of Public Information Officer Charles J. Crail, we were able to inspect the “D. Boon” board at the forest office in Winchester. And, although a full laboratory inspection was not possible, we were able to study the board briefly, aided by such techniques as macroscopic observation, oblique lighting, and infra-red examination, and we took numerous black-and-white and color photographs for further study.

Ironically, many of the types of examination we had envisioned had already been performed. Distressingly, journalists had generally ignored — or even misrepresented — results of two professional analyses contained in reports in the park office files.

The first is a 1967 memorandum report by R. C. Koeppen, Botanist, Wood Identification Research, Division of Wood Quality, United States Forest Products Laboratory. The examination showed that the board was split from a red oak tree and turned up even more important information:

The carving was made after the board was well weathered. Evidence for this is chiefly the sharp edges of some letters, especially the "n," which would be rounded if the carving had been made in sound wood and then weathered.

This was a significant finding since it is most unlikely that Boone would have found old, ready-made shingles with which to fashion his hut. In fact, botanist Koeppen wrote that, while he could not positively prove it, it was "the general consensus of our staff members that Daniel Boone did not make the carving." He also stated:

The board certainly appears to be very old but it seems to be weathered too much to have been in such a protected place for about 200 years. It gives every evidence of having been quite moist, if not wet, for considerable periods of time. Even the beetle holes are of the type produced by a group that works in wood of a higher moisture content than do the ordinary powder post beetles.⁵⁷

In other words, the laboratory examination not only cast extreme doubt on Boone's having done the carving, but it also fully supported other evidence that local schoolboys had actually fashioned the hut.

In the late 1960s, during the controversy over the discovery of the hut, Powell County resident Henry Catron admitted he had made what was essentially a boy's rustic playhouse about 1935 from wood found in the area.⁵⁸ But some journalists and forest service employees attempted to cast doubt on Henry Catron's claim — made after he recognized the hut from a television news account and confirmed by a trip to the site. His brother Hugh was even quoted as saying Henry must have been mistaken.⁵⁹ Interviewed by us, however, Hugh Catron said that — while he did not recall helping them — his brothers Henry and Troy (now deceased) had constructed the hut. "It

⁵⁷ R. C. Koeppen, memorandum report from U. S. Forest Products Laboratory to Lionel R. Johnson, 26 October 1967, Office of the Daniel Boone National Forest, Winchester, Kentucky.

⁵⁸ George W. Billings, Jr., "Historic' Hut," *Lexington Herald*, 9 April 1968.

⁵⁹ Billings, "Builder of 'Boone Hut' Reaffirms Story, But Forest Service Still Investigating," *Lexington Herald*, 11 April 1968.

wasn't made by Boone," he assured us.⁶⁰ Troy Catron, Jr., confirmed Hugh Catron's statement. He said his father had told him that they (Henry and Troy) had built the hut with boards from an old barn that had stood farther down in the hollow (known then as "Catron Hollow," now Martin's Fork).⁶¹

But even when he was admitting to having fashioned the hut, Henry Catron had disclaimed any knowledge of the "D. BooN" board. As it turns out, that inscription was made by one of the neighborhood boys of a younger generation. The youthful carver was *not* Eugene Peck as had been erroneously claimed in a newspaper article.⁶²

However, Eugene Peck told us he believes he knows who did the carving. Peck stated that about 1954, when he lived on Red River, he visited the hut with some other local youths. One of these was off by himself for a time and then showed up with a board on which "D. BooN" was carved. The inscription "looked fresh" and Peck assumed it had just been done. He said the boy was fond of carving his name on beech trees and had a characteristic method of carving. He would mark the letters first with spaced holes, made by gouging and twisting with the point of his pocket knife; then he would connect the "dots" with a gouged line in just the fashion used for the "Boon hut" board.⁶³ Hugh Catron independently named the same youth, saying he had been told this and had reason to believe it was true.⁶⁴

We mentioned two studies. The second resulted from an inspection of the hut and rock shelter by Martha A. Rolingson, then acting director of the University of Kentucky's Museum of Anthropology. She determined that wooden troughs and paddles, an iron kettle, and other items were "likely to be the remains

60 Hugh Catron, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 4 November 1984.

61 Troy Catron, Jr., telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 4 November 1984.

62 Billings, "Builder of Boone Hut."

63 Eugene Peck, telephone conversation with Joe Nickell, 4 November 1984.

64 Hugh Catron, telephone conversation.

from a niter mining operation, either in the 1805-1814 period or during the War Between the States." She believed the hut dated from after the niter-mining period. As she wrote:

If the hut were constructed by Boone and already in the shelter when the niter mining began, it would probably have been re-used and damaged by the later activities. The low area where the hut is placed could have been dug out by the niter miners processing the sands of the shelter floor.⁶⁵

Quite obviously, our investigation and the previous studies are mutually supportive. There is persuasive evidence that the so-called "Boon hut" was made, not by Daniel Boone in the eighteenth century, but by the Catron boys about 1935 and that the phoney "D. Boon" inscription was the product of a school-boy's pocket knife about 1954.

A by-product of our investigation was the scrutiny given a number of alleged Boone inscriptions, all of which lacked credible evidence of authenticity and most of which were obvious fakes. Therefore we are suspicious of Boone inscriptions as such.

However, in the course of making two large surveys (over 200,000 acres) in 1795 in what is now West Virginia, Boone and others of the surveying party did reportedly cut their names and date on beech trees at several places on the route. Supposedly, on some of the trees only "D.B." appeared instead of Boone's full name.⁶⁶

That account gains credibility from a deposition by Boone in Mason County, Will Book A (132-33) which concerns 3000 acres he "located" in 1789 for a Nathaniel Hart. A record on the following page (134) describes two white oaks that Boone identified in his deposition as having "old blazes"; the trees were marked "with new letters NH-DB-WW & PW" (i.e., first the initials of the original owner Hart, followed by Boone's and then those of witnesses). This marking, which took place in 1796, was obviously not the work of idle Kilroys but instead was

⁶⁵ Martha A. Rolingson to Robert F. Collins, supervisor, Daniel Boone National Forest, 3 May 1968.

⁶⁶ Hale, *Daniel Boone*.

"Agreeable to an order of the Worshipfull Court of Mason County."

In contrast are what we might term the Boone-as-Kilroy inscriptions. Famous personages often inspire such fakes. For example, there is the ax helve carved with "A LINCOLN/NEW. SALEM. 1834" that Carl Sandburg took seriously but which was a cheap forgery.⁶⁷ Then there is the stone allegedly "dug up" near Lincoln's old Illinois store, attended by affidavits to that effect, that promotes a silly fiction: "A Lincoln/Ann Rutledge/were betrothed/here July 4/1833."⁶⁸ Spurious love letters to Ann from "Abe" (who actually hated that nickname) were also produced.⁶⁹

With the "Boon(e)" inscriptions much of the fakery seems intended to foster the popular image of a mighty hunter and Indian fighter — the image of a scarcely literate one, to be sure — rather than, say, that of a surveyor or magistrate. Fortunately for us, hoaxers often exaggerate Boone's lack of education or at least render it inaccurately. Not only was his spelling, as Charles Hamilton said, remarkably consistent, it was also generally a sensible phonetic rendering of his archaic Southern Appalachian speech. For example, Boone wrote "sarvent" for "servant" and "clark" for "clerk."⁷⁰

The bogus carvings often strain credulity to the breaking point. One has to wonder why would Boone find it so remarkable to have "cilled a bar on tree" in 1760 when even two decades later the account books for a store he operated routinely gave credit for bear skins? (A single fur trader's consignment included, in addition to 1,790 deerskins and 5 black fox pelts, 729 bearskins.)⁷¹ Or why — given that Boone had sought the shelter

67 Hamilton, *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes*; Carl Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), second plate following 80 and 133-34.

68 Sandburg, *Lincoln Collector*, 133-34.

69 Hamilton, *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes*, 20.

70 Bakeless, *Daniel Boone*, 12, 314.

71 *Ibid.*, 329

of a great cliff overhang but had nevertheless decided to assemble therein a juvenile "hut" scarcely big enough to crawl into — why would he literally "hang out a shingle" bearing his misspelled name? Again, why would a soldier deface his rifle with carvings — "BOoNs bEST FREN," a childish picture of an Indian holding an upraised tomahawk, and fifteen notches — when he did not spell his name that way, apparently had a different appellation for his favorite firearm, and could be certain of having killed only a single Indian in his entire life (as he told his son, Nathan)?⁷² Yet again, why would he attempt to carve his name and initials on "little souvenirs" during his "declining years" when his signature at that time — shakily penned — shows that that would have been a most unlikely pursuit?⁷³

To answer these questions with even a modicum of common sense is to do little harm to the memory of Daniel Boone. To the contrary, it is to restore to him a measure of the dignity he deserves — dignity sapped by wags, forgers, credulous biographers, Hollywood filmmakers, well-meaning preservers of Americana, and promoters of tourism.

It is also to pass on to younger generations a model of judgement and ethical conduct of which Daniel Boone would have eagerly approved. Honest and fair-dealing in his relationships, he could say, in a letter to his sister-in-law after his wife's death, that while he had little formal religion, "I Beleve God neve[r] made a man of my pri[n]sepel to be Lost."⁷⁴

⁷² *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷³ Hazel A. Spraker, *The Boone Family* (Rutland, Vermont, 1922), illustration facing 567.

⁷⁴ Lofaro, *Life and Adventures*, 129.