

Outpost on the Wilderness Road

Boonesborough is associated with Kentucky's known frontiersmen—Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, Richard Callaway, John Holder, Richard Henderson and Nathaniel Hart Long before their arrival to this site. Migratory animals used the gap and ford at the head of the Kentucky River palisades to cross the river. Native Americans occupied the site of Boonesborough for centuries and used the migratory animal trails as a trade route to the north and south of the Kentucky River. After establishment in 1775 Boonesborough continued to serve as a gathering place for eastern settlers who ventured to the English colonial frontier through the Cumberland Gap on the Wilderness Road. The poorly built stockade withstood several Indian attacks and was a bastion of Euro-American civilization on the colonial frontier and thus became of utmost importance to American history.

Boonesborough's beginnings were inauspicious, developing while the American Revolution was taking place in the Eastern Seaboard colonies. However, one of the most important American victories of the Revolution in the western campaign took place at this site in 1778. Although it was occupied as a settlement and existed as a town only until 1820, Boonesborough played a significant part in Kentucky's history.

A Legend Begins

Perhaps no one figure has become more prominent to the American frontier experience than Daniel Boone. Through his own efforts and those of later writers, he is commonly regarded as the prototype of the American frontiersman. Nearly 70 of his 86 years were involved with the exploration and development of the trans-Appalachian frontier.

Boone always seemed to be on the edge of the frontier's advance. He was born on the western perimeter of civilization in Berks County, Pennsylvania in 1734. He ventured as far south as Pensacola, Florida and died at the western boundary of the United States in St. Charles County Missouri in 1820 - the same year that Boonesborough ceased to exist as a town. He was a market hunter most of his life and his constant movement across the frontier has been alternately attributed to the pursuit of game or the flight from debt collectors. Boone was raised a Quaker by his parents, who were seen as too liberal by the church elders. He often read his favorite story which influenced his entire outlook on life, *Gulliver's Travels*, and was known as an adept prankster throughout his life.

In 1748 his parents, Squire and Sarah Boone, were finally "disowned" by the Exeter Society of Friends. Selling their farm and moving Daniel along with his siblings, they emigrated to the Yadkin River Valley by 1751. Daniel elected to become a full time market hunter due to the family's circumstances, using his talents as a marksman and hunter to earn an income.

Four years later in 1755 a major change occurred in Boone's life when he signed on as a wagoneer with the British forces of Major-General Edward Braddock in the French and Indian War. Here in the Pennsylvania campaign, he met John Findley who had been a trader with the Indians in present day Clark County, Kentucky. Findley described the beauty and richness of the land beyond the Cumberland Mountains and told of a gap in the mountains to the south that led to the fabled Warrior's Path and onto the Ohio River.

After Braddock's defeat by the French and allied Indian forces Boone returned to the Yadkin and married Rebecca Bryan in 1756. For the next thirteen years Boone continued his occupation as a market hunter, farmed and raised a family in the Yadkin valley area.

A Quest for Kentucky

Boone's market hunting continued to drive him further west as the game played out. By 1767 his hunting companions William Hill and his brother Squire crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains and the Clinch River to hunt along the west fork of the Big Sandy River. They were in Boone's words "ketched in a snowstorm" that winter and built a station camp near a salt spring west of present day Prestonsburg, Kentucky.

Returning home late winter of 1768, Boone's life again took a change when John Findley appeared at his home in North Carolina. Findley rekindled the stories of the promised land of Kentucky he had told a 21 year old Boone in 1755. Findley was seeking the overland southern route through the gap in the Cumberlands he had heard about so many years before in order to continue his successful trading ventures with the Indians. Circumstances resulting from the conclusion of the French and Indian War made the northern route down the Ohio River to Kentucky too precarious. When Daniel and Squire related their failure to reach the meadows of Kentucky by way of the Big Sandy, Findley explained how the Warrior's Path used by the Shawnee and Cherokee led through a gap in the southern Cumberland Mountains. Fired with excitement, anticipation, and filled with wanderlust, Boone agreed to set off with Findley as a guide to find the gap in the spring of 1769. That winter Boone was also called into court for not paying his debts. Joining Boone and Findley that

spring were John Stuart, Boone's brother-in-law, Joseph Holden, James Mooney and William Cooley. Because of the size of the party and interest in western land speculation, this expedition may have been financed by Richard Henderson of the Transylvania Land Company.

After entering the Powell River Valley, Findley found a hunter's trail that led them to the larger Warrior's Path and eventually the Cumberland Gap. Passing through the gap and following the Warrior's Path northward for many miles they reached the Rockcastle River and set up a camp. Findley told the men that the meadowlands of Kentucky could not be far from their camp. The next day, June 7, 1769, they pressed on and climbed the highest knob on the ridge between the Rockcastle and Kentucky Rivers. From this spot they saw on the horizon their dream, the gently rolling meadows of what is now known as the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky. An account of the occasion recorded by John Filson, in an interview with Boone states, "On the seventh of June, after traveling in a western direction, we found ourselves on the Red River where John Findley had formerly been trading with the Indians, and from the top of the eminence saw with pleasure the beautiful river of Kentucky. Nature was here a series of joy and wonders, and a fund of delight." Setting up a base camp the next day they began their hunting and exploration of the area.

In December of 1769, while hunting along the Kentucky River, Boone and Stuart were so delighted with the abundance of the game they had taken that they let their guard down and were captured by a Shawnee hunting party. After seven days and the loss of their harvest, they managed to escape and returned to their base camp. Finding the camp plundered and the others gone, Boone and Stuart stayed on to recoup their losses to the Indians. By late winter of 1770 Alexander Neely and Boone's brother Squire who had agreed to bring supplies to the expedition prior to their leaving, met up with Boone and Stuart. Neely returned home and Stuart disappeared while hunting alone. The Boone brothers remained and continued hunting until April when Squire returned to North Carolina. Daniel stayed and hunted the central Kentucky area until March of 1771 when Squire returned and the brothers packed their harvest and began the journey homeward. Daniel had been in Kentucky for two years and was acquainted with the region more than any of his contemporaries.

Boone and his companions continued their market hunting through 1772 and went as far as French Lick (Nashville) and Hickman Creek in Kentucky. The following year Boone convinced his family and five other families to emigrate to Kentucky from the Yadkin Valley. Starting on September 26, 1773 they traveled in a long pack train along Indian Creek in the Powell River Valley. The evening of October 9, less than ten miles from the Cumberland Gap, Boone's son and five other boys, at the rear of the pack train, were killed by Indians. The expedition turned back the next day.

The Transylvania Company

The Transylvania Company was founded in 1775 with Richard Henderson as its principle officer. His ambition was to speculate in land in the Kentucky region and under his leadership establish the 14th colony of Transylvania.

Boone was the likely candidate to be an agent for Henderson to assemble the Cherokee and negotiate the sale of land from that tribe. On March 17, 1775 Henderson and the Cherokee leaders struck a deal and the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals was signed. The purchase extended from "the Ohio-Kentucky on the north to the head spring of the southward branch of the Cumberland River on the south." Both the North Carolina and Virginia royal governors denounced the treaty of purchase and declared it void and in violation of the King's Proclamation of 1763. Henderson intended to ignore the authority of the royal governors until he could secure authorization from the king to set Transylvania up as a separate royal colony. Within a month the American Revolution began and Virginia establishes Kentucky as one of its counties in 1776. Henderson's Transylvania Colony lasted less than a year.

The Wilderness Road

Even before the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals was signed, Boone left on March 13, 1775 with thirty axemen to blaze the Wilderness Road from Long Island on the Holston River to Otter Creek on the Kentucky River. Henderson's idea was to lead a mass migration to his new colony and he needed a clear path to follow.

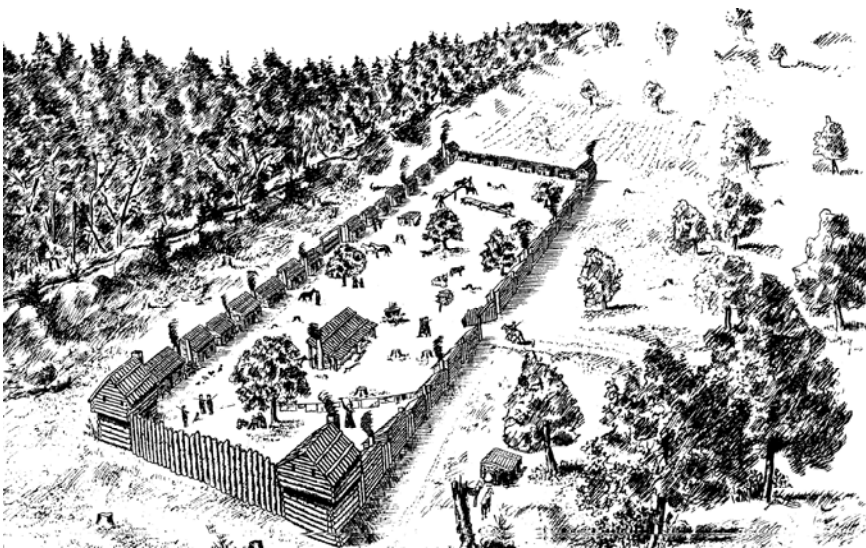
Blazing the trail presented extraordinary difficulties. The route, which followed a hunter's trace, was so narrow and rough that it was impassable for carts and wagons. The idea of the road was to combine numerous trails into one continuous route by clearing underbrush and foliage. In some areas this meant using axes and saws to clear trees for a new section of trail. Although roughly done, Boone and his crew expeditiously performed their task. For decades the Wilderness Road was known to be the roughest, most disagreeable road on the continent, but was a major component in the opening of the mid-west to settlement.

On March 25 and 27, 1775, the axemen were within 13 miles of the crossing of the Kentucky River below Otter Creek when they were attacked. Several men were killed and Boone sent a letter by courier for Richard Henderson, who was following Boone, to move as quickly as possible. Henderson was at the Cumberland Gap when he received the letter and assumed that Boone would turn back. However a determined Boone convinced his fellow axemen to forge ahead until

they reached the chosen site "about sixty yards from the river and a little over 200 yards from the salt lick" on April 1, 1775. They began to construct temporary shelters in the sycamore groves in the hollow by the spring and dubbed it "Fort Boone".

Henderson arrived on April 20th and declared "it was owing to Boone's confidence in us and the people's in him that a stand was ever attempted". Through the summer a few scattered cabins were constructed on a rise near the spring. Henderson constantly argued with his land owners to help complete construction of the station, as most were only interested in building cabins on their land. Finally three years later a haphazard palisade was completed with the threat of a major attack. Blockhouses formed the corners of an area about 260 feet by 180 feet, and the roofs of most of the cabins sloped inward. The walls of the station were comprised of the back walls of linked cabins running roughly parallel with the river and scattered log fencing filled the gaps. The front faced away from the river and towards a flat open meadow. There were two gates which swung like water gates one opening on the river side and one on the meadow side.

On May 8, 1775 Henderson began the organization of "a plan of government by popular representation for the Transylvania Colony" with himself in mind as the governor, and called for an election to form a "House of Delegates for the Colony of Transylvania". Boonesborough was to be the capital. Representatives from the other settlements at Harrodsburg, St. Asaph, and Boiling Springs met with Henderson under a large elm tree near the Sycamore Hollow in 1776 to conduct the first legislative assembly and Christian service of the colony. Virginia immediately disbanded the newly formed government before it had any effect.



A Constant Threat

Before Boonesborough was built, the emigrants coming to the area were the primary targets of Indian hostilities. May 23, 1776 was the first attack on Boonesborough followed in July by the capture of Jemima Boone and Fanny and Betsy Callaway. "The Year of the Sevens", 1777, was one of the worst for the settlers. Attacks came in March, April, and May followed by one of the coldest winters on record.

No attack on Boonesborough was as dramatic as the "Great Siege" in September of 1778. The preceding January Boone headed a party of 26 to boil salt from the Lower Blue Lick spring. While working at the spring on February 8th the men were surprised by a

band of Shawnee and captured. At first they were taken to a village near Chillicothe, Ohio and eventually taken to the British in Detroit. On the march, Boone made himself an amiable companion to Chief Blackfish and convinced the chief not to accept the British reward for his capture. Blackfish was so impressed with Boone's savvy that he adopted Boone and named him "Sheltowee" or Big Turtle.

Boone learned of plans by his captors to attack Boonesborough in alliance with the British in the fall of 1778. Because of his skills, his Shawnee tribe gave him freedom to leave on short hunts. On June 16, he was able to slip away with a small quantity of supplies and traveled the 160 miles to Boonesborough to warn of the impending danger. However, upon his arrival he was met with suspicion. Not only did he look like an Indian, it was said that he had turned over his loyalties and the salt party in January to the Shawnee and that he was merely spying for the Shawnee before they attacked. These charges of collaboration with the enemy brought Boone before a court-martial but he was eventually acquitted after the attack occurred.

September 7, 1778 - 400 Indians and 12 French mercenaries in the employ of a French officer, Captain DeQuindre, who was hired by the British as a partisan, appeared along Sycamore Hollow by the stockade. Surrender was demanded through Pompey, a runaway slave and Blackfish, Boone's adopted Shawnee father. Boone asked for time to consider the terms but actually was buying time to continue repairs to the dilapidated state of the fort. In hopes of capturing the settlers, DeQuindre resorted to trickery and invited the fort's leaders to meet him and Blackfish outside the stockade to draw up a treaty in two days. The men refused to go further than the shadows of the walls. Under the sham of shaking hands with two Indians for each fort leader, the men were grabbed but managed to slip out of the grip of their would be captors.

The attack began in earnest at this point and continued until the 18th. The French and Indians attempted to burn the stockade by shooting and throwing torches upon the roofs. This failed because rain had begun and the inhabitants knocked off the split shakes from within the cabins that did catch afire. This failing, the attackers began to burrow a tunnel from the river bank under the cabins. Seeing a line of mud in the river, the settlers knew what the enemy was up to and dug a counter tunnel. Throughout the siege insults were shouted from one side of the walls to the other with a boastful tone. Only two inhabitants were killed and four were wounded while the enemy losses are estimated to be thirty-seven. After thirteen days the French and Indians left in the night and abandoned the attack. The decision to hold out by the Boonesborough people eventually broke the power of the British to influence the Indians to attack the American settlements and their control of the western theater of the American Revolution.

The Decline of the Community

Boonesborough's story was intended to be that of a capitol city of a trans-Allegheny colony under the Crown of England. Instead it played a short but important role in the settlement of Kentucky and the new United States. As a river port and transportation hub, a steady stream of settlers passed through from 1775-1800 crossing the Kentucky River at the only point from its headwaters until Benson's Creek at Frank's Ford, now the state capitol, Frankfort. The population of Boonesborough steadily declined after the American Revolution ended and the fort was not needed for defense. The rich farm lands of the rolling Bluegrass absorbed most of the population into the more lucrative agricultural pursuit of tobacco, hemp, corn, and sheep.

At its peak the town never contained more than 30-32 buildings. Many of the settlers left in disgust over valueless land titles and the constant threat of attack. Others left because of the seasonal flooding of the Kentucky River each spring. Some simply left to seek better land and opportunities elsewhere.

After the Transylvania Colony was declared void by the Virginia Legislature, the inhabitants petitioned for approval of a town charter in 1779. The settlement's population continued to decline despite its importance as a river port and trade center. The 1810 Federal Census listed only eight households of 68 people. By 1820 Boonesborough was not even counted as an incorporated town. In 1830 the post office was closed and the town ceased to exist. The fort's chimneys were dismantled prior to 1850 by Samuel Halley to build a water gap, and the cabins merely became out buildings and allowed to rot away. The land was sold and resold and heavily farmed into the 1900's.

In 1905-1906 the Army Corps of Engineers built Lock and Dam No. 10 at Boonesborough. A major breaching of the dam while under construction caused sand deposits from upstream to be exposed and created a large sand beach on the river's edge. Dr. David J. Williams purchased most of the acreage near Boonesborough and opened a resort spa utilizing the sulfur springs and sand beach as its main attractions.

In 1963, David Williams Jr. sold 57 acres to the Kentucky Department of Parks to establish Ft. Boonesborough State Park. On June 14, 1963 the state park was founded. A fort replica was built in 1974 above the original site out of the flood plain. In 1987 an archaeological dig was conducted to locate the physical remains of the fort. In addition to finding the fort site, 12 other associated sites and a Native American site were located. On November 8, 1996 the National Park Service designated the original fort site at Fort Boonesborough State Park a National Historic Landmark.