

Dr. Thomas Walker State Historic Site Historic Pocket Brochure Text

Neglected Historical Figure

Although Daniel Boone gained more acclaim, a lesser-known explorer, Dr. Thomas Walker, preceded the famed frontiersman into the Kentucky territory by 17 years. Walker's detailed account of his party's journey into previously uncharted lands, which he set down daily in a journal, later served Boone and other pioneer explorers such as George Rogers Clark well.

Twenty-six years before the United States declared its independence from England, Dr. Walker left three of his fellow explorers at a site near what is now Barbourville, Kentucky. As the leader of a surveying expedition for the Loyal Land Company of Virginia, Walker instructed his companions to build a house in order to establish a claim, while he and two others continued their foray into the wilderness.

When Walker and his company returned several days later, an 8- by 12-foot cabin had been erected. The structure, built in April of 1750, was the first house built by a white man in Kentucky and the farthest west of Anglo-Saxon civilization of that day.

That Walker is generally neglected historically and is not recognized like Boone today, is primarily a result of two factors. First, in his travels Walker found rugged terrain strewn with thickly tangled woods; thus his reports on the region were unfavorable. He missed the beautiful plains of rolling bluegrass, which were later reported in such glowing terms, by a day or two's journey. Secondly, at the time of his venture, the Kentucky area was disputed territory, claimed by England and France, but not yet relinquished by the Iroquois and Cherokee tribes that made it their home.

Man of Many Hats

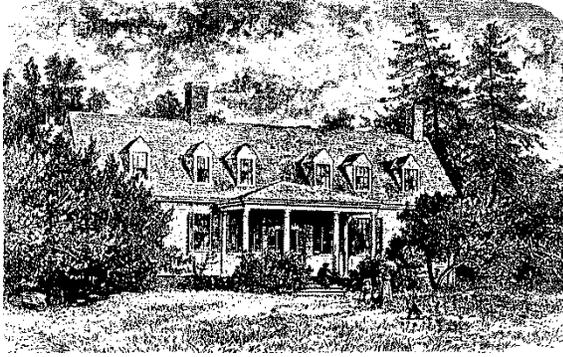
A doctor by profession, the man responsible for Kentucky's first house wore many hats during his lifetime. In addition to that of physician, the titles of surveyor, explorer, soldier, colonizer, merchant, diplomat, statesman, and treaty negotiator were all appropriately bestowed on Walker at one time or another.

Although details of Walker's early life are sketchy, it is known that he was born January 15, 1715, in King and Queen County of the Colony of Virginia, the third child and second son of Thomas Walker and Susanna Peachy. Thomas' father died when he was a child and he went to live with his sister Mary and her husband, Dr. George Gilmer, in Williamsburg.

Gilmer, who combined the vocations of physician, surgeon, and druggist, apparently had great influence on Walker. The young man studied with his brother-in-law and is reported to have lived in a drugstore for a time. Like many young Virginians from well-to-do families, Walker attended William & Mary College, where it is believed he studied medicine. In time, Walker became a physician. After becoming a doctor, he settled in Fredericksburg and practiced medicine throughout eastern Virginia for a number of years. He also owned a general store in the town.

In 1741, Walker married Mildred Thorton, the widow of Nicholas Meriwether, who was first cousin (once removed) to George Washington. After his Kentucky expedition, Walker assisted Washington in securing several treaties with various Indian tribes.

Through his marriage, Walker acquired an 11,000-acre estate near Charlottesville in Albemarle County called Castle Hill. He moved his family there in 1742. At Castle Hill, Walker became friends with his neighbor, Colonel Peter Jefferson, the father of Thomas Jefferson.



When the colonel fell ill, Walker attended him for many months. Upon Peter's death in August of 1757, the good doctor found that he and two others were executors of the Jefferson estate. Among other things, this involved the guardianship of all the Jefferson children and the supervision of young Thomas' education. One can only speculate as to the influence the enterprising and courageous Walker had on the nation's third president.

An adventurous, energetic man, the 5-foot-7-inch Walker found maintaining an estate as large as Castle Hill took up much of his time with little left for practicing medicine. In response to tending his land holdings, he became a surveyor and thus an explorer. His restless spirit led him and a friend, William Winston, on many hunting and exploration tours, but they never ventured farther than the headwaters of the James River. However as Walker's experience and knowledge of the wilderness grew, he became regarded as a leader among adventurers.

In 1745, Colonel James Patton was granted 100,000 acres of land by the Virginia Council, and in 1748 Walker, as a surveyor, accompanied an exploration party headed by Patton. The group journeyed as far as southwest Virginia and eastern Tennessee, but did not attempt to explore Kentucky. Another member of the party was John Findlay, who would later gain acclaim as Daniel Boone's scout.

Walker learned that the Virginia council was making such large land grants to promote western colonization in the name of England against the French. Walker began motions to acquire such a grant. While he traveled with Patton, John Lewis, a Pennsylvania emigrant who founded Staunton, Virginia, obtained a grant of 800,000 acres on July 12, 1748 for the Loyal Land Company of Virginia. Walker is said to have been highly influential in organizing the company.

A Loyal Venture

Almost a year and a half later on December 12, 1749, Lewis appointed Walker agent for the company. Walker was to explore the wilderness and discover a place for settlement. Upon his appointment, Walker wasted little time getting started for the Loyal Company. After waiting barely long enough for winter to subside, Walker and companions Ambrose Powell, Williams Tomlinson, Colby Chew, Henry Lawless, and John Hughes set out from Castle Hill at 10 a.m. on March 6, 1749-50*. Each man had a horse and two extra horses were taken along to carry baggage. Several hunting dogs also accompanied the group on their venture.

*The date is so written because during Walker's time, the new year in England and its colonies began on the 25th day of March. Therefore, when Walker's journey began it was still the year 1749; the change by which the first of January began the new year was made in 1752.

It took Walker's party a month to pass through the chartered regions of Virginia, staying with settlers at night. Their progress was hindered when one of the dogs was injured by a bear; when two horses became "choked" (ill) from eating too many reeds; and when they encountered inclement weather.

During one stop that lasted five days because the horses got loose, the party stayed with a religious sect known as the Duncards. Walker seemed fascinated by these hospitable people and described them thus:

"The Duncards are an odd set of people, who make it a matter of Religion not to shave their beards, lie on beds, or eat flesh, though at present, in the last, they transgress ... by the want of a sufficiency of grain and root ... They don't baptize either young or old, they keep their Sabbath on Saturday, and hold that all men shall be happy hereafter, but first must pass through punishment according to their sins."

On April 13, Walker and company reached what is known as "Cave Gap" in the mountain range they had been crossing and passed through. Walker described the gap in detail. He wrote, "On the north side of the gap is a large spring, which falls very fast, and just above the spring runs through and there is a constant stream of cool air issuing out. The spring is sufficient to turn a mill ... This gap may be seen at a considerable distance, and there is no other that I know of, except one about two miles to the north of it which does not appear to be so low as the other."

The mountain range, called Ousiotto by the Indians, and Cave Gap, which pierced them, would later be called the Cumberland. Four days later the group came upon a large river which earlier hunters had named the Shawnee. Walker was unaware of this and named the waterway "Cumberland" in honor of the Duke of Cumberland whom he admired.

The men continued through Eastern Kentucky following the Cumberland River for a way. During the next week, the wilderness again proved inhospitable. Walker reported in his journal that Ambrose Powell was bitten on the knee by a bear; a horse went lame; and it rained most of the time. One April 20, Walker deemed it necessary to build a canoe to ford the Cumberland River which blocked their path northward.

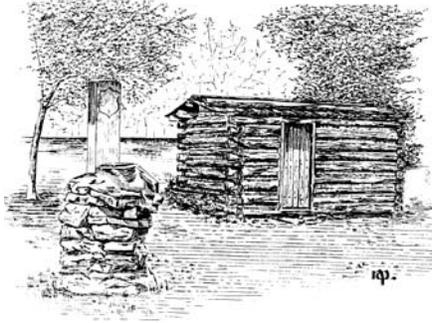
House Building & a Lame Horse

It seems ironic that a lame horse was responsible for the location of Kentucky's first house. When one of the horses belonging to Walker's party became lame on April 22, Walker proposed that three of the company remain behind while he and two others proceeded with their explorations. "Lots were drawn to determine who should go, they all being desirous of it. Ambrose Powell and Colby Chew were the fortunate ones," Walker wrote in his journal. As the day was a Sabbath, the group waited until April 23 to cross the river.

Once across, Walker, Powell, and Chew set off to the west, leaving Lawless, Hughes, and Tomlinson behind. In order to establish a claim for the Loyal Company, Walker commissioned the men to build a house and plant seeds which would serve as "corn rights" to the land. Walker's desire to make a physical claim on the land was warranted, for he was not the first white man to enter Kentucky, just the first to record his findings. Two days after splitting forces, Walker noted several trees that had been marked with initials, evidence of those who were previously there. He wrote, "On the lower side of the mouth of the creek is an ash marked T.W., a red oak A.P., and a white hickory C.C. ..."

The land to the west of camp continued to be unfavorable in Walker's estimation. Two days and thirty miles after leaving the base, Walker and friends came upon fresh tracks of what he determined to be seven or eight Indians. He tried to overtake them but could not. Then on April 25, after going just five more miles, he notes, "...the land continuing much the same, the Laurel rather growing worse, and the food scarcer. I got up a tree on a ridge and saw the growth of the land much the same as far as my sight could reach. I then concluded to return to the rest of my company." The wildlife also showed its unpleasant side for on that same day, Walker noted that a bear broke one of his dog's forelegs.

On April 28, Walker returned to the site where he left Lawless, Tomlinson, and Hughes and wrote, "The people I left had built a house 8 x 12, cleared and broke up some ground and planted corn and peach stones. They had also killed several bear and cured the meat." As was the custom of the time, the men also built a skinning rack and a salt trough outside the house to cure the meat and skins. The cabin was built near an abandoned village of several Indian-type cabins (thought to be Cherokee) grouped around a mound 20 feet high and 60 feet wide at the top.



Going Home

Apparently the historic significance of the house meant little to Walker as he moved his group two days later. The general unattractiveness of the area discouraged the party from surveying more. The lame horse which prompted the stop, and thus the house, had not recovered so he was left behind. Walker noted the horse's brand in his journal but also gave an excuse for deserting him as he remarked at the end, "... (the horse) ... is old."

After leaving the cabin the party headed north, passing near what are now the towns of London and Irvine before turning east. The eastern route took them near Salyersville and Paintsville as well as a fork of the Big Sandy River. One June 7, Walker named this fork, now known as the Levisa, the Louisa after the Duke of Cumberland's sister.

After going through Hot Springs and Staunton, Virginia, Walker arrived home on July 13. His last journal entry makes note of the game the party encountered. "We killed in the journey 13 Buffaloes, 8 Elks, 53 Bears, 20 Deers, 4 Wild Geese, about 150 Turkeys, besides small game. We might have killed three times as much meat, if we wanted," he wrote. The abundance of game was the only positive note of this exploration.

A Savage-less Trip

Surprisingly, Walker's party did not meet any Indians during their four-month trip despite the fact they followed a route known as the Warrior Path. Several times Walker noted that they came across the tracks of Indians, but there is no mention of any direct contact.

It seems their closest encounter came March 29-31 while the group was still in Virginia. On March 29, Walker's single diary notation was, "Our dogs are very uneasy most of this night" and followed on March 30 with "...discovered the tracks of about 20 Indians that had gone up the creek between the time we camped last night and set off this morning. We suppose they made our dogs so restless last night."

On March 31, Walker noted Indian lodgings but no Indians. He wrote, "...are five Indian houses, built with logs and covered with bark and there were abundance of bones, some whole pots and pans, some broken and many pieces of mats and cloth." He mentions four more houses situated on the opposite bank. In addition, the party camped that night opposite a large Indian fort four miles southeast of the abandoned housing settlement.

The absence of any contact with the Indians is significant throughout Walker's life he exhibited extraordinary skill in dealing with them. He was appointed to various Indian commissions which dealt with issues regarding trade, surveying boundary lines, and concluding peace.

After Kentucky

The Loyal Company never did take up the lands it was granted to the west of the Cumberland Mountains, but Walker remained an agent of the company until his death in 1794 at the age of 79. His long life and successful travels indicate an unusual degree of physical hardiness and courage.

After the Kentucky expedition, Walker was instrumental in formulating agreements with the Indians at Fort Stanwix, New York and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and served in the Virginia House of Burgesses for many years. However, the house for which Walker will be remembered best is an 8- by 12-foot cabin near Barboursville where he spent just two days.

Because he was the first white man to keep a diary of his explorations, albeit negative in its findings, he ranks with Christopher Gist, George Roger Clark, and James Harrod as one of the positive forces in opening the trans-Allegheny region to settlement and colonization.