

MY FRONTIER ANCESTORS WITH DANIEL BOONE

By

Annabelle Winfrey, descendant of pioneer John Phelps

On the Kentucky River, in the thick woods, Daniel Boone and his frontiersman built a fort and named it Fort Boonesborough. Established in April 1775, the fort was the first fortified settlement in the Wilderness. It was one of the first English speaking communities in the Appalachian territory. The Wilderness had been a part of Virginia but later became Kentucky. Daniel Boone, an adventurous Virginian, and five frontiersmen ventured into this Wilderness and established a clearing. The quote from the 1989 movie, Field of Dreams, "if you build it, they will come" is fitting. Boone built the Fort and they did come! Boone was hired by the Transylvania Land Company to blaze a trail through the Cumberland Gap into Virginia's Kentucky territory. Two main roads were opened in this southeastern part of Kentucky by Boone and these fearless pathfinders, who chopped and cleared away brush and under growth following buffalo trails.

Boone went back to Virginia to gather more men to come to Boonesborough. Later these men were joined by their pioneer families and settled into cabins built inside the stockade. My ancestor, John Phelps left what was called plantation life in Virginia on the James River where they had lived for three generations. What inspired my ancestor to leave Virginia and cast his lot with Daniel Boone? It must have taken great courage to make the change from Plantation life to explorer. Was the reason for migration because the land in Virginia was exhausted from years of single crop growing of tobacco? Or was it merely the same urge to explore new land that urged their own ancestors, mostly English, to come to the Colonies.

Boonesborough was a target of Indian hostilities. The fort was attacked in December 1775 and in April and July 1777 by large war parties. Daniel Boone's daughter was captured with two other girls in 1776. In a legendary account, a party of men, led by Boone rescued the girls. In 1773 Boone's eldest son, James, was killed by Cherokee and Shawnee.

As the Revolutionary War was about to begin a battle known as "the Great Siege" of Boonesborough took place in September 1778. Boone and about 30 men had been on a salt making expedition. While they were gone, Daniel Boone and his men were captured by Shawnees, taken to Chillicothe in Ohio and eventually on to Detroit. On the march Boone made himself such an amiable companion to Chief Black Fish that the Shawnee chief refused to accept a large British reward for Boone's return. He adopted Boone and named him "Sheltowee" or Big Turtle. Boone overheard plans that the British were going to attack Boonesborough. On June 16, while hunting with his adopted tribesmen, he slipped away and traveled the 160 miles to the Kentucky River settlement to warn the settlers in the fort of the impending danger. An attempt was made by 400 Indians, accompanied by 12 French companions of British sympathizers, to take over the fort. The Fort was asked to surrender by Chief Black Fish. Boone and his men refused the Indian offer and held the fort. The battle is recorded as one of the first encounters of the Revolutionary War, "the Great Siege". John Phelps helped defend the fort. The author of this article is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, citing John Phelps service to the colonies at the Battle of Boonesborough.

John Phelps and his wife, Mary, received Virginia land in 1725 as a grant from King George II of England. This land was called Phelps Island on the James River. In 1736, they deeded the land to their son, Thomas. The grant was signed by William Gooch, Lt Governor and Commander in Chief of the Virginia Colony and Dominion of Williamsburg in August, 1746. In 1771, this land was willed to Thomas' son, John.

John Phelps and his wife, Mary Catherine, had 12 children, one of whom, Shadrack, was my 4th great-grandfather. Proof that Shadrack was at Fort Boonesborough is substantiated by a document in the museum of Daniel Boone selling land to Catrine Sherly that was witnessed by Shadrack. In 1776, Shadrack married Celia Stapp and they moved to Esto, Russell County, KY. The Phelps cemetery was established there in 1798. "Phelps Acres" homestead, established by Shadrack, is registered on a list of historic Kentucky homes.

An old obelisk at the site of the original Fort, and on the new monument near the reconstructed Fort are the names of the Phelps pioneers. This list includes Thomas and eight of his children, and my fifth great-grandfather, John. Today, as it was in 1775, the Phelps' cabin inside the Fort is located at the far-right corner of the stockade.

The Fort is located on Kentucky Route 388 at the junctions of Kentucky Route 627. Boonesborough is near Richmond, Kentucky in Madison County. There are campsites, RV Parks, a boat ramp, fishing, and hiking.

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