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Johnston House Journal

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Johnston House News

You might notice a lot of activity at the Johnston House. Painting and other preparations are being made for a beautiful new (historic) roof and other needed repairs. The Research Library now has a new floor, where county history, genealogical, and digitization projects continue. We are holding off on our annual Christmas open house until construction projects are completed next year.

Celebrating 250 Years of Freedom

Though Jamestown established Virginia more than four hundred years ago, it is only now two hundred and fifty years since we have been free from the tyranny of the British imperial order. The colony's western frontiersmen were an important component in winning that freedom. They had begun settling the New River and adjacent valleys (in violation of both colonial law and native treaties) by the 1740s. The articles in this edition detail how the dynamics between early pioneers, officials in Williamsburg, and natives shaped the Revolution on the frontier that became Giles County a generation later.

About the Johnston House

Scottish-descended Revolutionary veterans Andrew and David Johnston were already living on New River when officials formed Giles in 1806 and tasked them with dividing up the new town of Pearisburg. The Johnston brothers remained active during the county's first two decades, and by 1829 laborers had completed work on Andrew's new brick home. The home, an impressive display right at the center of old Pearisburg, passed to Andrew's son Dr. Harvey G. Johnston in 1853 and later to Dr. Harvey G. Johnston Jr., both of whom served as local doctors for generations. The house remained a home for the family until as late as the 1980s. In 1993 the Virginia Department of Historic Resources placed the property on its list of historic landmarks, and the family deeded it to the Giles County Historical Society in 1995 to preserve as a museum and center for local historical study.

Giles County Families

Part 1: Earliest Pioneers

Virginia colonists were never offered free land. They had to purchase rights to hold a tract (on behalf of the king) or else enter themselves into a legal bond to the captain who transported them, or to a property owner. The contractual bond typically entailed seven years of servitude, after which officials awarded fifty acres. The realities of early colonial life remained close enough to feudal barbarity, and lower-class plantation living was hard enough, that many preferred to escape deep into the lawless wilderness to illegally squat beyond the practical reach of authorities.

Once Pennsylvania became overcrowded with its welcoming immigration policy, hundreds of additional families began spilling over the border southward from that colony, down the Shenandoah Valley past Staunton to the Roanoke and New River valleys. Many of these immigrants not only settled without permission, but were Scottish Presbyterians or German Baptists who practiced religions contrary to the Church of England and Virginia law. Even so, Virginia's colonial leaders were pragmatic and allowed the non-conformists to occupy the back-country to help shield established Tidewater plantations from native attacks.

Since settling in the New River Valley remained illegal for colonists until the mid-1700s, there are very few records of anyone living that far west at that early time. It was only when the French and Indian War was on the horizon that colonial officials began making reforms that opened the New River Valley to settlement. Specifically, it was the 1744 Treaty of Lancaster which opened the way, but with a dangerous caveat.

Officials in Williamsburg knew that war with France was coming, and they sensed that the powerful Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy would side with the French Canadians and attack British frontiers. To prevent this, Thomas Lee, Richard Beverley, and Colonel James Patton traveled to Pennsylvania to represent Virginia at a larger British convention seeking a peace treaty with the Iroquois. The natives seemed reluctant to commit to much, but Lee, Beverley, and Patton finally convinced them to allow Virginians to settle the New, Kanawha, and Ohio valleys in exchange for £400 and some goods, as long as the Iroquois could retain their freedom to travel through the region while raiding the Catawba tribe to the south. The three Virginians came away satisfied with the 1744 Treaty of Lancaster, but the problem was that the Iroquoians did not control those western valleys; the rival Shawnee did.

Colonial officials sprang into action just the same. Lieutenant Governor Gooch sent a letter in December of 1744 advising that the Iroquois would be traveling by "Adam Herman's at Tom's Creek on New River, above the Blue-Ridge." Thus one of the earliest surviving references to a New River Valley colonist appears, although the name "Tom" in "Tom's Creek" implies

someone else was there even before Harman.

Adam Herman was in fact the first member of the Harman family known to settle on New River. Whether he had moved immediately after learning of the 1744 treaty or whether he had already been living there beforehand is unclear, but Harman (or "Herman" as Lt. Gov. Gooch spelled it) was a German immigrant who had come down from Pennsylvania and so had probably been in the area for at least a few months or years already.

Harman had chosen a location for himself along the river at a natural ford where the water was shallow and could be easily crossed by foot, which is likely why the Iroquois passed by there. This ford was about one and a half miles downstream from the mouth of Tom's Creek on what is now the Radford Army Ammunition Plant's property. Historian Ryan Mays argued that "Harman and his family had built a cabin by June 1744, probably at the present site of the James R. Kent plantation house, on a hill overlooking the vast New River bottomland at what is now called "Whitehorne" and "Kentland Farm" in present-day Montgomery County." Mays notes that the Kent's brick mansion built there between the 1820s and 1830s had "replaced an earlier log house built in the 1790s by Abram Trigg," and that Trigg's structure might have been preceded on that very same site by Harman's.

The only known family on the New before Harman was the Porter family. Their early presence in what became Glen Lyn was attested by an old tombstone rediscovered by John Toney during the Revolutionary War, in 1780, and which read: "Mary Porter, killed by the Indians 11/28/1742." This would have put the Porters at the present-day Virginia-West Virginia border two years

before Harman settled at Tom's Creek.

The same James Patton who had attended the 1744 treaty negotiations meanwhile formed a land company to purchase, divide up, and resell large tracts of land, and so "Col. James Patton and Company" had already begun surveying Virginia's western valleys by 1747.

The Lybrooks, Drapers, and Ingles were among the earliest families to follow the Harmans to the New River. The French and Indian War made the frontier nearly uninhabitable for much of the 1750s, but with peace there came more families fleeing westward than eastward. Those seeking some peace and freedom on the frontier would not come by it so easily, however, as the Shawnee resumed their retaliatory raids by the early 1770s. What at first seemed like isolated incidents of violence turned into a wave of killings from the Ohio and Kentucky territories toward Virginia by 1774.

(Continued in the next edition.)

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Discover more at NewRiverGenealogy.org.

The Lybrook-Snidow Massacre, August 1774

The McGriff family joined the Lybrooks near Sinking Creek along the New River by 1774. They settled on the east side of the river just downstream from the mouth of Sinking Creek around the same time that the Irish immigrant Samuel Shannon and his family settled on Poplar Hill. Back at the county seat in Fincastle, officials gathered for a regular court on Sunday, August 7th, 1774. It was then that county councilors ordered John Burk, Andrew Hatfield, and Paulser Lybrook to survey a road from Tom's Creek to "Rich Creek Mountain." As those men went about their business, that very same day, a group of natives appeared at Sinking Creek and began attacking the families of surveyor Paulser Lybrook and his neighbor John McGriff.

Eleven-year-old John Lybrook, a son of Philip Lybrook, had been staying at his relative Paulser's place. Young John already knew his neck of the woods well, and escaped the violence occurring behind him by running to a place where he could not be followed: on the other side of a twelve-foot ravine that he jumped. Getting to safety from the other side, he raised the alarm to the local militia. Help came too late to save three of his brothers,

two of the widow Snidow's daughters, and a Miss Scott.

The militia tried to pursue the native party, and five days later Capt. James Robertson sent a letter back to Col. William Preston at Smithfield stating that the militia had recovered another one of the McGriff boys and a son of the widow Snidow "taken from Palser Lybrook on Sunday last." The Shawnee had evidently kept these boys alive with the intention of raising them as their own, a practice they repeated on other occasions.

What had happened to the Lybrooks, Snidows, and McGriffs was not unique. The entire western frontier from Pennsylvania to the Carolinas was on edge and experiencing waves of attacks. It became a common occurrence for families to wake up to knocking at a window or door at night, a friendly alert to quickly dress, gather important belongings, and go straight to the fort because a native war party had been seen in the area.

A general sense of outrage meanwhile grew as Virginia's commander-in-chief, the royalist Governor Dunmore, seemed noticeably reluctant to lift a finger. Newspapers circulated the latest outrages all around him in the capital of Williamsburg, but he may have already sensed the western frontiersmen would soon be on the opposite side of a coming civil war; his orders and behaviors would repeatedly seem to benefit his native fur-trading partners, the very same Shawnee now attacking the colonists across the frontiers. Not wishing to repeat the mistakes of Governor Berkeley leading to Bacon's Rebelllion a century earlier, Dunmore finally summoned the western militias for an offensive campaign. It was this campaign which would culminate in the Battle of Point Pleasant later that same year.

Native Americans of Giles County, Part 1

The "Clovis" culture from the end of the ice age is the earliest prehistoric culture recognized by Virginia's archaeologists. Named for the discovery of one of their distinctive spear points still between the ribs of an ice-age animal in Clovis, New Mexico, these were essentially the last ice-age spear-hunters of disappearing mammoths, mastodons, giant sloths, and other Pleistocene megafauna, though they actually ate a wide range of foods and probably most anything edible they could find. Virginia historian and archaeologist Ben C. McCary began one of the earliest state catalogs of these types of spear points by the 1950s, and as of 2005 that catalog listed the discovery of three spear points of this era from Giles: two made of black flint and one made of chalcedony (a form of quartzite). If these early hunters were in Giles, the huge beasts they hunted likely were, too.

By the time new forests had matured following the ice age, there was a second group of people coming to the New River from the South. These people originated as a distinct culture or nation from around the Savannah River down to the northeast coast of Florida, out of which territory they spread over many generations.

Early Savannah River people in Southwest Virginia created stemmed atlatl points (called Savannah River points), favoring white quartzite as a material. They mined soapstone to carve bowls as trade goods and baked

the earliest clay pottery in eastern North America. All of this suggests a people who were not hunting across such wide territories as their predecessors, but living, trading, and marrying within a smaller region as the landscape warmed and thickened with greater food resources.

Archaeologists have noted that the prehistoric sites in Virginia's Piedmont and Appalachian Mountains show a remarkable cultural continuity between "Archaic" (pre-pottery) times and the Contact Era when European trade goods appear in associated layers of soil. Early colonists like John Smith documented these early tribes as the Monacans, Manahoacs, Saponi, and others which linguists and anthropologists like John Swanton more than two centuries later showed were all Siouan-speaking and related to the Sioux and Dakota farther west. With no major discontinuities in evidence, a case can be made that the primary ancestral origin of the Siouan-speaking tribes was in the Savannah Valley, and that these people occupied much of Virginia through most of prehistory.

Archaeologist C. G. Holland surveyed the New River Valley in the 1960s and documented hundreds of early prehistoric sites along the New River, including eight in Giles County. Some of these, like a site on Sinking Creek near Hoge Store Road, yielded diagnostic Savannah River points. Others also contained early pottery fragments. Holland found these sites by the mouth of Little Stony Creek, at Eggleston, Ripplemead, and Castle Rock. Other archaeologists have located early villages by the mouth of Wolf Creek at Narrows and near the headwaters of Wolf Creek near Burke's Garden, by Bland County's Wolf Creek Indian Museum.

(Continued in the next edition.)

When Narrows Had Its Own Minor League Baseball Team

In 1946, a U.S. Navy veteran of the Second World War named Shannon Hardwick joined up with manager Jack Crosswhite and local attorney "Liv" Dillow to start a minor-league baseball club based in Narrows, Virginia, associated with and sponsored by the Chicago White Sox. The New River Rebels played in the Appalachian League (a minor league association founded 1911) for five seasons between 1946 and 1950. Consisting mostly of men from Giles County, their team was headquartered at Ragsdale Field in Narrows, where they held their practices and the home games where they charged the admissions which funded their operation. Their home plate was where the scoreboard stands today.

The Rebels saw tremendous success during their brief existence. The players received a considerable salary for that time, as much as $90 a month, though most of them seem to have played baseball part-time and only attended a handful of games in any given season. The

make-up of the team could vary considerably from game to game, but still the Rebels placed first in their league in their first year with eighty-three wins against forty losses. The final win that season came 9-8 at a home game against the Elizabethton Betsy Cubs from Tennessee. Hardwick himself was one of the team's best players that season and posted an impressive ERA of 3.53.

In 1947 the Rebels returned to defend their title in the Appalachian League. Though they did not score as many wins overall, they had some of their greatest success as a business that year. They hosted sixty-two home games at Ragsdale Field and sold nearly forty thousand tickets at sixty cents each. Popcorn and a soda were only fifteen more cents. In these early days, the team could reliably draw a few hundred spectators to every game.

In 1948 the team's successes took a significant turn. They scored forty-eight wins to seventy-six losses, making their first season with more losses than wins. Unfortunately, the team only dropped farther down the ladder after that. Ticket sales began to dry up by the 1950 season, when they had their worst season with 31 wins and 95 losses. Local crowds had no enthusiasm for watching their team lose, and local sponsors stopped helping fund them. Given this difficult situation, Hardwick moved to Bluefield in 1951 and so disbanded the team.

The Rebels were gone, but they left a legacy that extended far beyond the New River Valley. Two other men who had played on the team were Bob Bowman (1910–1972) and Harry Bushkar (1925–2008; shortstop in the Rebels' opening season), both of whom went on to

have notable careers as atheles in other organizations.

The Rebel with the most successful sports career may have been Bob Humphreys, who only appeared in some of the Rebels' games during their final season of 1950. Bobby was still a freshman at Montvale High School in Bedford County that year, but he served as the team's relief pitcher with an ERA of 8.71 and a batting average of .207. Bobby was still green, but the experience he gained playing in a real minor league team would help him lead Montvale High School's baseball team to two back-to-back district titles in his junior and senior years. He then attended Hampden-Sydney College while still playing as a relief pitcher. He won two MVP awards in his college years and made the All Mason-Dixon Conference Team in 1957 and 1958. Next came the Big Leagues.

In 1958 Bob Humphreys began his professional baseball career, still playing as a relief pitcher. The Detroit Tigers signed him that year and kept him for about five seasons before selling him to the St. Louis Cardinals in 1963. With the Cardinals he participated in the defeat of the Chicago Cubs and the Philadelphia Phillies to go on to the World Series in 1964. He went to the Chicago Cubs in 1965, the Washington Senators in 1966 (where he performed his best season with three saves and an ERA of 2.82), the Milwaukee Brewers in 1970, then briefly returned to Triple-A baseball before retiring as a player. Humphrey's professional baseball had lasted more than twelve years from the late '50s to the early '70s.

In 1974 he signed on as Virginia Tech's head baseball coach, a position he held for four years while building a record of 135 wins and 60 losses, including a streak of

thirty-one straight wins in 1977 and two appearances in the NCAA Division I championship tournaments. With this start he advanced to become a pitching instructor for the minor league Toronto Blue Jays from 1979 to 1983, then moved on to instruct the major league Baltimore Orioles and then his former teams the Brewers and Cardinals. Like many enthusiastic players, he spent his winters playing in baseball leagues in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. He was also active in his local Bedford community, including doing work for his local congressional office.

In 1988 Humphreys's alma mater Hampden-Sydney inducted him into their Athletic Hall of Fame. In 1994 the Salem-Roanoke Baseball Hall of Fame followed suit and inducted him. In 2004 Bob Humphreys retired from instructing pitchers to focus on life closer to his home, still in Bedford County, where he enjoys golfing and spending time with his wife Genevieve.

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Capt. David A. French—Letter to His Mother in Pearisburg, 1862

[Editor's note: David Alexander French was born in Pearisburg in 1837. He was the son of Guy Dingess French and grandson of David Edwin French, an early militia captain and Giles County's first Clerk of Court. In May of 1862 the twenty-five-year-old French was in Norfolk with a group of Giles County men who had just elected him captain of "French's Battery," an artillery unit in General Albert Blanchard's brigade. Captain French dated his letter May 6th, about two months before some of the most bitter fighting of the Peninsula Campaign; Lee would take command on the first of June.

"On an advance we take the front, on a retreat we bring up the rear," French wrote, while noting that one of his men had been "mad ever since the election and I fear will cause me a good deal of trouble." Their resistance would finally convince the Northerners to withdraw from

Virginia by sea, creating the chance to invade Maryland.

French wrote of rumors that the Union army was approaching Giles County. In fact, Union troops were moving into Pearisburg even as he was penning his letter, which they would occupy for four days until the 10th.

The transcription here derives from a letter previously scanned by J. Tracy Walker III and deposited in the Giles County Historical Society's Research Library. It is unclear if this letter has ever previously been published.]

May 6th/62
Deep Creek Norfolk Co. Va,

My Dear Mother

I received your most welcome and long looked for letter last night between 12 and one o'clock. I arrived here at that time after marching all day through about as hard a rain as I ever remember to have seen to last as long and met Gussy here, he is very well. I now have an order to march back 10 miles down the canal to night. I believe they intend to kill both my men and horses with hard marching. I have went through enough marching since the battle of the 19th [illegible[1]], to kill any common set of men. On an advance we take the front, on a retreat we bring up the rear. All the troops have been ordered from this section and I have to move back towards the enemy. I believe they expected me to defend this canal by my self. Norfolk & Portsmouth will be evacuated in a few days and I saw in to days paper the Yankies were expected in

1. Walker also could not make out this word, but it appears on first glance to be "inlt." with an uncrossed 't'. He might have intended "inst." for "instant," but the third letter loops backward to form an 'l' shape rather than forward to produce his 's.' French's lower-case letters 'r', 'i', 'n' can appear also quite similar.

Giles last Saturday. I cannot believe it at least I hope that it is not true, but I think that it is the intention of the Government to give up Virginia. I believe that our darkest hour is at hand and I do hope that the clouds will soon break and that we may have peace. Oh! to return to my home in peace and forever detached from the North, but my dear Mother as much as I desire to be with you at this time, I never expect to leave the Army as long as the invader is on our soil. I think I could have gotten a chance to have went home a few days but Web Mason I think would have died if I had not consented to let him go to tell the news of his promotion. I suppose Allen will give you all the points about our election, it was ordered to be held on the 1st day of May by Gen. Blanchard who is in command of this brigade. I was petitioned by nearly all the men to become a candidate for Captain. I had said to some that I did not desire it, and soon after I received this petition almost unanimously signed. They declared they would go under no one else, but my dear Mother, I have every thing to do myself, and it is very hard on me. I have my two Lieutenants with me, Fizer & Tom Mahood and you can judge how I get along. I am afraid to trust them to do anything, but I intend to bring them to the mark. Broderick has been mad ever since the election and I fear will cause me a good deal of trouble. Hoback is also attempting to raise funds in the company, but I don't think either of them can do much. I promise you to try to do my duty. Oh! how I should like to see you all now. I can't write all I want to say to you, and have not the time to write any more. I could write much more but for the want of time, I would feel much better satisfied if Dear Papa was out of that public house and situated some

where in the country. did he receive any better from Great Bridge? I have never heard. Tell poor sister Sarah that I will try and write to her the first opportunity but my Dear Mother I do not know how to write to her. Tell Jeff I will also write to him as soon as I can. I must close give my love to all my Dear friends, and for goodness sake write after to your devoted son,

David

P. S.

Please find out from Jeff the amount he spent in taking the remains of my dearest friend and Capt. home. I wish to pay it myself. don't let him know why you wish to know, or he will not accept it. let me know and I will try and send it to him before he finds it out.

David

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