DANIEL BOONE'S LIFELONG PURSUIT OF LANDED WEALTH

By Edward J. Dodson / December, 2019

As had many other Quaker families during the early eighteenth century England, the Boone family decided to leave for the wilds of the new Province of Pennsylvania, although their primary reason was economic rather than the pursuit of religious freedom. As Boone biographer John Bakeless began his penetrating study on which this essay is based: "The Friends were really in control of the government. Further, there was land."[1] Pennsylvania was, indeed, perceived a land of great opportunities.

When George Boone and his children arrived in Pennsylvania sometime during 1713, the province was still thinly populated. The first Europeans began arriving during the mid-seventeenth century, and the pace of settlement accelerated after 1681, when King Charles II awarded William Penn a royal deed to the region. Philadelphia was then established as the first planned city in North America. Four years later the remaining members of the Boone clan arrived in Philadelphia to begin their new lives.

By this time, the *First Nations*[2] peoples of the region were greatly reduced in number by diseases brought by Europeans against which they had no natural immunity and, of course, by periodic warfare with one another and then the new European arrivals. The one *First Nation* remaining in the Philadelphia area when the Boones arrived was the Leni Lenape (referred to as *The Delaware* by Europeans).

The Boones temporarily settled on land a short distance north of Philadelphia, then were issued by the local Society of Friends a certificate to settle on land southwest of the city. From this homestead members of the family would strike out into the wilderness. The future father of Daniel Boone, named Squire Boone, acquired additional land in the somewhat distant county of

Berks, northwest of Philadelphia. These tracts of land were days apart travelling by horseback. However, easier access provided by the river named by *First Nations* people *Tool-pay Hanna* (and by the Dutch, *the Schuylkill*). Originating in the mountains north and west of Philadelphia, the Schuylkill meandered through the city, eventually draining into the Delaware River. Squire Boone chose well, as the Schuylkill and its many tributaries run directly through the center of Berks County, providing a path for settlers and setting the stage for an almost continuous increase in the value of the Boone family landholdings. In 1744, Daniel's father, Squire, added another twenty-five acres of land to his holdings to provide grazing for his cattle.

Squire Boone and his wife produced a large family. Daniel, born in 1734, was the family's sixth son. Young Daniel learned how to fish and hunt and otherwise survive in the wilderness. There were still numerous small villages of *First Nations* peoples in the region, and young Daniel gravitated to them, learning much about their way of life and how they thought. He would also come to master the skills of a blacksmith and wagon maker, occupations of significant use on the frontier.

Up to this point in time, the movement of settlers into the interior had been blocked by the long chain of mountains stretching from the northern border of Pennsylvania all the way south into modern-day Alabama. As yet, passage through these mountains had not yet been discovered, so settlers moved as far inland still east of the mountains to claim land. Then, in 1750, a path through the mountains was found by a frontiersman named Thomas Walker. Other frontiersmen followed, as well a small number of brave (or foolish) settlers.

In Berks County, the Boones found themselves increasingly in conflict with more orthodox members of the Society of Friends. By 1747, Squire Boone decided the family should leave the area. John Bakeless provides a second reason for this decision:

> "The crude agriculture of that period exhausted the land quickly. There was no rotation of crops and little fertilization of the fields. At first it had been easy to move on to better land. But now the good land in Pennsylvania was filling up."[3]

Squire Boone settled his affairs late in the autumn of 1751, and the family departed for the Yadkin Valley in North Carolina. There he purchased land from the agent of the Earl of Granville, to whom the King had granted a huge tract of land. As a condition of the sale, the King retained the right to half of any gold or silver that might be discovered, and the Earl of Granville retained a right to half of the balance. Also, the sale imposed an annual payment of rent on the Boones. An added risk of living in this remote region was the less than stable relations with the *First Nation* tribe of Cherokees. Not only were the Cherokees fighting off attacks from Shawnee raiders, but the struggle between France and the United Kingdom of Great Britain for control of North America had reignited, intensified after a skirmish in the western reaches of Pennsylvania occurred between a French detachment based at Fort Duquesne (at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers) and Virginian colonial troops under a very young and inexperienced George Washington.

In the spring of 1755, Daniel Boone, working as a wagoner, accompanied the North Carolina militia attached to General Braddock's expedition against the French at Fort Duquesne. Braddock's force was forced to retreat with heavy losses, but Daniel Boone was one of the survivors. He returned to North Carolina, married Rebecca Bryan and moved into a cabin constructed on his father's land. The family now faced the dangers of frequent attacks by warriors aligned to the French. Some of the family moved back to safer locations in Maryland. Daniel and his bride moved to Virginia, near Fredericksburg, remaining until 1759. They then returned to the Yadkin valley to farm a tract of some 640 acres he purchased from his father. Finally, at the end of 1760 peace returned to the region. The

Cherokees were after this point no longer able to offer resistance to the much larger forces they faced:

> “Strong militia forces had laid waste the whole Cherokee country, burned the villages, destroyed the crops, and driven five thousand Indians into the hills to starve or submit.”[4]

Daniel Boone then began to explore the frontier, always keeping alert for fertile land, anticipating “you could sell them off at enormous profits to the settlers who were sure to come.”[5] He soon sold his landholdings in North Carolina and moved inland toward Kentucky. However, speculating in frontier land was not how he ever made his livelihood. That was to as a hunter, farmer, guide, and surveyor:

> “Farming in spring and summer, hunting in the autumn, trapping in the winter, Boone could make a living. The farm provided corn, fruit, vegetables, food enough for part of the season. …The forest provided the meat supply. Cattle were for milk.”[6]

Responding to an offer by Spanish authorities of a grant of land in Florida, Boone made a short trip to investigate. Not impressed, he returned home. Yet, Boone’s current land was losing fertility and game was becoming scarce. Perhaps more importantly, life in North Carolina was worsening under the administration of Governor William Tryon. In the Spring of 1769, Boone and several others headed into the frontier to hunt and to claim land for possible future settlement. They made their way through the Cumberland Gap and to a well-used path followed by *First Nations* hunters and warriors. They had reached Kentucky safely, but late in December his group was attacked by a mounted party of Shawnees returning from their own hunting trip. The Shawnee commandeered “all the horses and the stock of skins and peltry which six men had worked seven months to accumulate.”[7] Boone and one other member of his party were captured, but released after a few days with a warning not to return. Boone, of course, had no intention of heeding this warning.

During 1770 Boone extensively explored Kentucky, carefully avoiding any contact with *First Nation* hunters or war parties. By the middle of the year, Boone “was ready to lead the settlers who were soon to follow.”[8] His problem was a desperate shortage of money as a result of what was taken by the Shawnees. By 1772 he was living in a small hamlet in what is now Tennessee, surviving by hunting and trading with friendly Cherokees. At every opportunity, he discussed the possibility of purchasing all of the Kentucky territory under Cherokee control. Of course, he had no means of carrying out such a purchase, whatever the terms might have been. Even so, Kentucky beckoned. Early in 1773 he decided to take the plunge. He sold his farm and with a group of other families headed to Kentucky -- knowingly in direct disregard of the edict against westward migration issued by the Governor of North Carolina. Getting his family to Kentucky was no easy undertaking:

> “There was no road in 1773, only a narrow ‘trace’ winding among the trees. Wagons were out of the question. Not for two years would the trace be even roughly cleared with axes. One rode if there were horses enough. Otherwise one walked.”[9]

Boone’s party was attacked several times, with the loss of lives, and they turned back. Then, by the autumn of 1774 the Kentucky frontier had become a very dangerous place to be. Daniel Boone was engaged to go back to warn surveyors and others to depart. Even so, he made his way to the new settlement of Harrodsburg, where he registered a land claim and built a cabin, as required. The settlement was then abandoned as summer approached, left uninhabited until the following Spring.

A particularly gruesome murder of members of the family of the Seneca-Cayuga chief Tahgahjute (known to colonials as Logan) resulted in retaliatory raids against the frontier settlements. A large militia force was raised, which drove the Seneca-Cayhuga from their villages, which were then destroyed.

Lord Dunmore also sent one thousand men to construct a fort on the Kanawha River (in modern-day West Virginia) and wage war against the Shawnees. At the signing of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1774, the Shawnees relinquished claims to land east and south of the Ohio River.

Settlers soon began to make their way back to the Kentucky wilderness. An attorney and former justice in North Carolina named Richard Henderson decided "to disregard the royal proclamation, the necessity of a royal grant, and the laws of both Virginia and North Carolina."[10] Henderson formed the Transylvania Company with the intent of negotiating the direct purchase of land from the Cherokee and other *First Nations* tribes. Daniel Boone capitalized on his good relations with Cherokee chiefs to open the door for the land sales. Henderson began advertising to recruit settlers. The conveyance treaty, signed in the Spring of 1775, transferred most of present-day Kentucky and part of Tennessee to the Transylvania Company. What was then needed was the clearing of a "Wilderness Road" to get people there.

Leading the vanguard hacking out the new road was none other than Daniel Boone. They endured repeated attacks by war parties as they moved further west. A large contingent headed by Richard Henderson followed, improving the road as they went. At the end of the road, a few rough cabins were constructed by Boone's work party, and the new settlement was given the name Boonesborough. The actual construction of a settlement was not a high priority for the vanguard arrivals:

> "Henderson … found only a few rude cabins, without defense, though Boone's men had now been on the ground for weeks. Smitten with the land greed of the pioneers, they had neglected everything to survey land and establish a claim."[11]

The terms of purchase set by the Transylvania Company included "the right to collect an annual quit-rent of two-shillings

per hundred acres on all land in Transylvania. Even when all the land was sold, the proprietors expected that they and their heirs would collect at that rate on twenty million acres for ever and ever."[12] After a brief time helping to organize work at Boonesborough, Henderson returned to North Carolina to recruit more settlers. Henderson and his partners voted to award Daniel Boone two thousand acres of land for his services. However, as would happen to Boone again and again during his life, fate was against him:

> "When the company's claim to the whole territory was voided, [Boone's] claim vanished with theirs."[13]

However, at that particular moment, the Transylvania Company ran into a different problem. The colonies were now in rebellion against British authority. Nonetheless, a land office was opened at Boonesborough on the first day of December, 1775, setting off "a wild scramble for real estate" which was in later years "to cause Boone and other Kentuckians years of litigation and heavy losses."[14] As John Bakeless reminds us:

> "Daniel Boone was a poor man, the son of a poor father. He had a family to provide for; and when the land which he had risked his life to win through long and bitter years was to be had for the taking, he undoubtedly asked for some of it. His claims seem large in modern eyes. Actually, they were no larger than those of many another Kentuckian."[15]

Not until the end of hostilities and the opening of peace negotiations in November of 1782 was Boone again able to think about his land claims. He now moved his family to a new tract of land he had earlier marked and claimed; however, he was forced to leave in 1785 when authorities sided with another claimant. His next move was to land on the Ohio River, at a location already attracting trade and settlers. On paper, writes John Bakeless,"Daniel Boone was now one of the richest men in Kentucky. His land claims reached at least fifty thousand acres and probably a hundred thousand. Hunting and trade added to his

income. His services as a surveyor were in demand on all sides."[16] In reality, Boone's tenuous land business exposed him to claims and counter-claims. Over time the number of creditors lining up to take whatever assets he possessed kept increasing. What Boone experienced in these matters was commonplace for the frontiersmen and the first settlers clearing the land for farming. As government followed settlement, courts became the final arbiters of ownership:

> "Land legally belonged to the man who could prove that he had been first to buy his warrants, make his surveys, file his claims, and get his certificates. ...One wonders not that there was confusion in the land claims, but that the courts ever managed to untangle such conflicts at all."[17]

Daniel Boone frequently failed to follow the necessary steps in order to substantiate his land claims. In a number of instances, surveys and other documents were entrusted to others and lost. Another serious problem for Boone was that he frequently sold land to others that he did not actually own. He was also victimized by frauds that left him unable to meet contractual obligations. With the passage of the years, even his fellow Kentuckians attacked his honesty as a surveyor and his life was threatened.

The time had once again come for Daniel Boone to leave civilization and move deeper into the wilderness. With his wife, their two married daughters and sons-in-law, Boone returned to the forests and hunting for survival. However, by 1795 he and Rebecca were back in Kentucky, living in a cabin built near what was called the Blue Licks, along the Licking River. A year later they were living on a ten-acre tract of land in the northeast part of Kentucky. Daniel's hard life in the wilderness was now catching up with him. He suffered from rheumatism that more and more frequently prevented him from hunting. Again, he moved, to a small tract of land on the Little Sandy River, a tributary of the Ohio River in northeastern Kentucky.

Not all of his landholdings had been lost. Documents from 1796 or 1797 indicate he still held title to about twenty-six thousand acres. With British authority removed, and the new United States of America hardly assured of survival as a nation, Boone now considered moving much further westward, all the way into Spanish-controlled territory. One of the leading figures of the war for independence, George Rogers Clark had written to Spanish officials offering to lead settlers into Spanish Missouri. Following a visit by Boone's son Daniel Morgan Boone, the Spanish lieutenant-governor (Don Zenon Trudeau) wrote to Boone offering sizeable land grants to Boone and any family members who came to settle in Missouri. Daniel Morgan Boone returned to Missouri to finalize arrangements the following year. In September of 1799, the Boone clan and a small continent of family friends made their way to Missouri.

Students of history will now recall that in the year 1800 the Spanish Empire agreed with the First French Republic to exchange its North American colony of Louisiana for territories in Tuscany. In an effort to assure the grants would be honored, the Spanish lieutenant-governor "carefully antedated" the grants. Formal transfer to the French occurred on March 9, 1804, and the next day the French turned Louisiana over to the United State of America. As a result, some of Boone's problems with land titles followed. This time, however, Boone had kept good records to present to the new American land commission. After a prolonged investigation, adverse judgments and support from an old Kentucky friend (now a judge), Boone and his family members retained some of what the Spanish had granted them. The rules established by the United States government were very specific:

> "The United States had given its board of land commissioners no discretion. Land claimants had to show that they were making use of their lands, not merely speculating."[18]

By Congressional decision, Daniel Boone was confirmed in his title "to one thousand arpents [820 acres] of land," the bill

signed by President James Madison on February 10, 1814. Boone stewed for a time over the loss of most of his Spanish land grant, then was faced with claims on him by private individuals from back in Kentucky. The next year he sold his Missouri landholdings in order to raise the funds necessary to satisfy his creditors. However, there is yet another chapter to the story of Boone's landholdings:

> "On January 20, 1819, Jonathan Bryan and Mary, his wife, deeded to Daniel Boone a tract of three hundred acres, for which he paid them eighteen hundred dollars. It was the last and most successful of his land deals; it made him a landed proprietor for the rest of his life."[19]

His end was not long in coming. A stroke had partially crippled him in 1818. He died quietly on the 26th of September, 1820. To an itinerant parson Boone put his life in perspective:

> "Now I am ready and willing to die. I am relieved from a burden that has long oppressed me. I have paid all my debts, and no one will say, when I am gone, 'Boone was a dishonest man'."[20]

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

All quoted material comes from the book *Daniel Boone, Master of the Wilderness*, by John Bakeless (published by the University of Nebraska Press, 1939)

[1] Bakeless, p.3.
[2] Note: This term, "First Nations," more accurately describes the tribal societies that came to settle throughout the Western Hemisphere. They considered themselves to be sovereign, controlling territory against incursions by other *First Nations* and by arriving Europeans.
[3] Bakeless, p.17.
[4] Ibid., p.32.
[5] Ibid., p.36.
[6] Ibid., p.39.
[7] Ibid., p.51

[8] Ibid., p.61.
[9] Ibid., p.69
[10] Ibid., p.83
[11] Ibid., p.99
[12] Ibid., p.105
[13] Ibid., p.107
[14] Ibid., p.115
[]15] Ibid., p.116
[16] Ibid., p.324
[17] Ibid., p.341
[18] Ibid., p.378
[19] Ibid., p.383
[20] Ibid., p.406