

From the Foyle to Fincastle: The Roots of a Southern Dynasty

Remarks to the Preston Family Reunion
50th anniversary Smithfield Homecoming

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Jim Glanville

The Foyle River flows north into a large estuary that today separates the Irish Republic from Northern Ireland. James Patton was born near the Foyle River. We have no documentary evidence as to where precisely, but; Preston family records speculate in the town of Londonderry — on the Foyle — perhaps in 1692.¹

James Patton died within a few hundred yards of where we are now gathered — killed by Indians in 1755 and buried in an unmarked grave.

Patton's early career is a mystery, but by 1730 he had established himself as a ship's captain in transatlantic tobacco trade and was sailing out of the tiny port of Whitehaven in northwest England. He was a hired ship's captain who was expected to trade independently and wisely on behalf of the ship's owner. He probably served several owners, but we know that the last ship owner who employed him was Walter Lutwidge.²

Patton's Chesapeake landfalls to pick up loads of tobacco were in Maryland and in Virginia along the Rappahannock River. It was near Hobbes Hole, the present town of Tappahannock, that Patton encountered the Virginia oligarch William Beverley. Tradition records that ships' captains enjoyed the hospitality of the plantation owner while their ship was discharging its cargo of rum from the Caribbean or manufactured goods from Europe and being loaded with local tobacco. My guess is that Patton and Beverley "hit it off" personally and that relationship and favorable circumstances soon led to a business partnership.

William Beverley ranked high among the ruling elite that controlled Virginia — a powerful man connected to Virginia affairs at the topmost level.³ His late father in 1716 had accompanied Governor Spotswood on the famous expedition of the Knights of the Golden Horse-Shoe to view the Shenandoah Valley. The Beverley family knew the potential of opening western land for settlement, and by 1730 William Beverley was engineering land grants in the Valley. Beverley needed a man like Patton to organize the settlement. There are two surviving letters from Beverley to Patton dated August 1737.⁴ Beverley wrote in part: "I should be very glad if you could import families enough....," and that he would give Patton 8500 acres of land for procuring settlers.

This was Patton's Virginia beginning and by 1745, through his Beverley connection, he had his own land grants in Southwest Virginia, and he thereby secured the Preston family fortune. Patton's sister Elizabeth was married to John Preston, and they were the parents of William Preston. The Preston family accompanied Patton to Virginia in 1737. James Patton the uncle was forty-six; William Preston the nephew was eight. Eighteen years later, on Patton's death, William Preston would take over.

As a young man, William Preston in 1754 (the year before his uncle's death) laid off the land that would eventually become the Smithfield Plantation as part of the 7,500 acres Draper tract.⁵ In 1773 William Preston bought four parcels of that same land totaling 1770 acres to make the plantation property.⁶

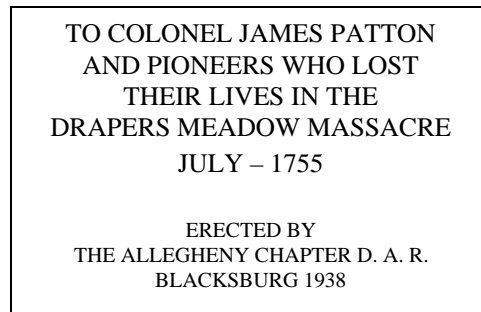
Now, to conclude, I will tell you about the results of some very recent research. I have long wondered why Smithfield Plantation was planted on this very spot, and not somewhere else in this general region. Here is the explanation.

The formation of Fincastle County in 1772 was under the provisions of an act passed that spring with the title "An act for dividing the county of Botetourt into two distinct counties."⁷ A map of that dividing line was very recently published on line as part of the *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*,⁸ a 30-year project of the Newberry Library in Chicago.

An examination of that map and with assistance from Mary Kegley and members of the Virginia History list serve run by the Library of Virginia led me to a reevaluation of the dividing boundary line. The dividing line in fact runs from the Culbertson's Creek site in Summers County, West Virginia (on the New River about ten miles north of the present Glen Lyn Power plant) from where the dividing line runs to Luster's Gate, just east of present day Blacksburg, it is clear that William Preston's influence in Williamsburg in 1772 was sufficient to make as

convenient as possible his move from Greenfield in Botetourt County to the new county where he was to take up offices with their concomitant emoluments. Smithfield is only about three miles into the new county.

Figure: Facsimile of the bronze marker plaque on the east side of the road leading from the Virginia Tech duck pond to the Smithfield Plantation.



References

1. Three standard, relatively recent secondary sources for the early history of James Patton are Mary B. Kegley and F. B. Kegley. *Early Adventurers on the Western Waters: The New River of Virginia in Pioneer Days, 1745-1800*, Volume 1 (Orange, Virginia: Green Publishers, 1980). Patricia Givens Johnson, *James Patton and the Appalachian Colonists*, 3rd., ed. (Charlotte, NC: Jostens, 1983). And, Richard Osborn "Part 1: Beginnings (1729-1738). William Preston: Origins of a Backcountry Political Career" (*Journal of Backcountry Studies* 2(2): 1-37, 2007, which is on line at <http://library.uncg.edu/ejournals/backcountry/Vol2No2/Osborn.pdf> and derived from Osborn's Ph.D. thesis, *William Preston of Virginia, 1727-1783: The Making of a Frontier Elite*. University of Maryland, College Park, 1990).
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3. Evans, Emory. A "Topping People:" *The Rise and Decline of Virginia's Old Political Elite, 1680-1790*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, 96 and 107.
4. Ford, Worthington Chauncey. "Some Letters of William Beverley." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3(4): 223-229, 1895.
5. Mary B. Kegley and F. B. Kegley. *Early Adventurers on the Western Waters*, 249.
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7. Hening, William Waller. "An act for dividing the county of Botetourt into two distinct counties," in *The Statutes at large: being a collection of all the laws of Virginia*, volume VIII, 1764-1773 (Charlottesville: Jamestown Foundation and the University of Virginia 1969, [1823]), 600-601.
8. *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*. The Newberry Library — Dr. William M. Scholl Center for American History and Culture. See Virginia County boundaries on line at: <http://historical-county.newberry.org/website/Virginia/viewer.htm> and specifically the downloadable file Va_Historical_Counties.pdf.

