

# Montgomery County and the land rush for Virginia's west

In December 1773, Virginia Governor Lord Dunmore "started a land rush that was unprecedented in American history." So writes the venerable Kentucky historian Neal Hammon in the introduction to his new book "John Floyd: The Life and Letters of a Frontier Surveyor" (Louisville: Butler Books, 2013).

The subject of Hammon's book, James John Floyd, was a key figure in that land rush. Floyd lived to be only 33 years old, but his adult years were remarkable and closely associated with Montgomery County, which was created in 1776. He was born in 1750 in central Virginia and died in 1783 at the hands of American Indians in Kentucky. He was both the father and grandfather of later Governors of Virginia.

Lord Dunmore was the last British Governor of Virginia. What he did in 1773 was to reverse a ten-year old British policy prohibiting land grants in the vast unclaimed region to Virginia's west in the future states of Kentucky and Tennessee. Here was where the land rush took place.

The February 1763 peace treaty that concluded the French and Indian War changed North America utterly and forever. All the territory east of the Mississippi River and north of the Great Lakes became British, with French claims extinguished. The treaty ceded to Britain half a billion acres of new land.

In October 1763, King George III and his ministers issued a Royal Proclamation to establish North American administrative regions so that the faraway British government could organize and control its enormous, newly-won American Empire. The Proclamation forbade settlement by Virginians west of the Appalachians and created there an area reserved for American Indians. The Indian Reserve was "West-



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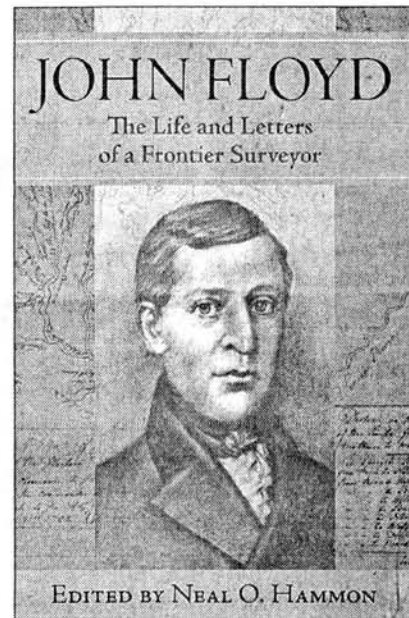
ward of the Sources of the Rivers which fall into the Sea from the West and North West," or geographically the Eastern Continental Divide. The Divide is also known as the "Proclamation Line." It runs north-south bisecting today's Montgomery County, and through both Blacksburg and Christiansburg. Local people daily cross the Proclamation Line many times in many places without ever knowing it.

The King's 1763 Proclamation also provided for grants of land to officers and soldiers for their wartime service. "We do hereby command and empower our ... Governors," said the King, to grant field officers 5,000 acres, captains 3,000 acres, subalterns 2,000 acres, non-commissioned officers 200 acres, and private soldiers 50 acres.

Between the years 1763 and 1773 these military land grants were made only east of the Appalachians. In December 1773, Dunmore and his Council declared that Virginians who had fought in the French and Indian War could claim land "wherever they should desire." This declaration ignited the land rush.

Frontier surveyor John Floyd, author Neal Hammon asserts, "deserves a more lasting memorial than he has received." If Floyd were to get such a memorial, Montgomery County would be an appropriate place to erect it.

Floyd grew up obscurely in present-day Amherst County, where his family farmed. His first wife died giving birth to their only child when he was 20. Floyd named his infant



daughter Mourning, left her with his parents, and headed west to Botetourt County and to William Preston's plantation at Greenfield—near today's town of Fincastle. There, Floyd probably first served as a tutor to Preston's many children, became Preston's trusted clerk, and learned the skills of surveying. In August 1772, Floyd was awarded a Botetourt County commission as a deputy surveyor to Preston. In 1773, Floyd moved, along with the entire Preston family, from Greenfield to the Smithfield Plantation at Drapers Meadows (modern Blacksburg). The move came after Preston was appointed surveyor for the newly created Fincastle County, which stretched all the way from Blacksburg to the falls of the Ohio River at present-day Louisville, Kentucky. The original Montgomery County (much larger than it is today) was created when the short-lived Fincastle County was divided into three parts in 1776.

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The so-called “Fincastle surveys,” made in western Kentucky during 1774-76 by Floyd and others, encompassed over 200,000 acres of land under military land grants. Most histories of the state of Kentucky begin with these Fincastle Surveys.

John Floyd was a great admirer and friend of William Preston. Hammon’s book reprints almost ninety letters written by Floyd, and over half of them (fifty-one) were addressed to Preston at the Smithfield Plantation. Most of Floyd’s letters to Preston dealt with surveying, and subsequently Floyd’s later move to Kentucky and his settling on Bear Grass Creek with his second wife Jane. Floyd married William Preston’s ward Jane Buchanan at Smithfield in 1777.

Over a quarter (twenty-three) of the others of Floyd’s letters went to General George Rogers Clark. Clark is famous as the “Conqueror of the Old Northwest,” who by beating the British at Fort Sackville at Vincennes, Indiana, in 1779 assured America’s claims to frontier land as large as the original thirteen colonies. The Old Northwest comprised the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan,

and Wisconsin. As Floyd’s letters to Clark describe, Floyd served as a supplier of both men and food for Clark’s campaigns,

A particularly remarkable incident in the life of John Floyd occupied most of the year 1777. In December 1776 Floyd wrote to Preston at Smithfield from “On board the Privateer Phoenix” saying “should I live to return [I intend to] pursue some kind of business I am better qualified for, than what I am engaged in now.” Reliable information is scarce, but his voyage apparently ended with the ship’s (and Floyd’s) capture on the high seas, followed by his imprisonment in England, an escape to France, and a return to Virginia late in 1777.

These ninety-odd letters provide readers with an intimate view of life during an exciting period of Virginia history. They also remind us of the vital role played by Western Virginia in the development of the American Nation.

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