

Brief Note The Siting of Smithfield in Relation to the Fincastle/Botetourt County Line

Jim Glanville

©2011

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of rapid political development in western Virginia. Between 1745 and 1800 no fewer than 20 counties were established west of the Blue Ridge Mountains. One of the biggest steps in this process of county formation came in 1772 with the division of the then extremely large Botetourt County into a newly created Fincastle County and a much smaller, residual Botetourt County.

The counties of western Virginia as they existed immediately after the Botetourt-Fincastle division made on 1 December 1772 are shown in Figure

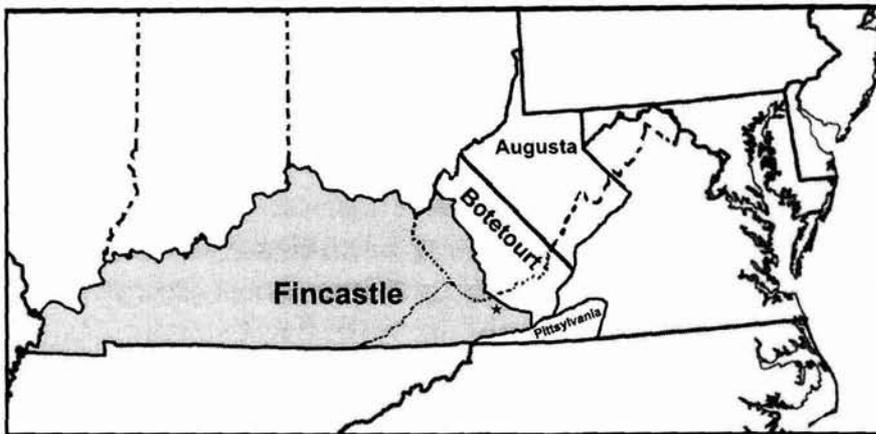


Figure 1.¹ The boundaries of the four principal counties of western Virginia as they were drawn on 1 December 1772, immediately after Fincastle County had been carved from Botetourt County, leaving behind a much smaller Botetourt. Some present-day state boundaries are shown dotted for reference. Fincastle County is shaded gray. The star near the eastern end of Fincastle County shows the approximate location of the Smithfield Plantation.

1. The region around the Smithfield Plantation (marked by the star) in the present-day town of Blacksburg is shown enlarged in Figures 2 and 3.

William Waller Hening's *Statutes at Large* records the language of the act dividing Botetourt County as authorized by the Virginia Assembly. The act describes the route of a line from the Ohio River in the north to the

crest of the Blue Ridge in the south. The description of the line, with some annotations added by me in brackets, reads:

[The numbered locations are shown in Figure 3] ... That from and after the first day of December next [1772], the said counties [Botetourt and Fincastle], that is to say, all that part of the said county, within a line, to run up [meaning upstream and hence southward] the east side of New River to the mouth of Culbertson's creek [location 1], thence a direct line to the Catawba road, where it crosses the dividing ridge, between the north fork of Roanoke and the waters of New River [location 2], thence with the top of the ridge to the bent [meaning present Bent Mountain, location 3] where it turns eastwardly, thence a south course, crossing Little River, to the top of the Blue Ridge of mountains [location 4], shall be established as one distinct county, and called and known by the name of Fincastle; and all that other part thereof, which lies to the east and north east of the said line, shall be one other distinct county, and retain the name of Botetourt.²

Because of my earlier study of the Fincastle Resolutions³ I was interested in the general county boundaries in western Virginia circa 1774, although I did not concern myself with the precise location of the 1772 dividing line between Botetourt and Fincastle. However, in July 2010 there came an announcement that the Newberry Library in Chicago had published an online atlas of historical county boundaries:⁴ “The Newberry Library is pleased to announce the completion and release of its *Digital Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*, a dataset that covers every day-to-day change in the size, shape, location, name, organization, and attachment of each U.S. county and state from the creation of the first county in 1634 through 2000.” The *Atlas* was 30 years in the making, with the Newberry Library clearly having devoted many resources and much energy to its production. Reuse by others of the county maps is authorized under a Creative Commons license.

Once I learned about the atlas I promptly downloaded and studied the pdf file of Virginia county boundaries and particularly the maps of Fincastle and Botetourt. The key map relevant to the siting of the Smithfield Plantation is version 2 of Botetourt County, which is presented on page 91 of Newberry's downloadable file. It shows the outline of Botetourt County after its loss of Fincastle County in 1772, and hence the dividing line. A small section from that map centered on Smithfield is shown in Figure 2 (and as-revised by me in Figure 3).

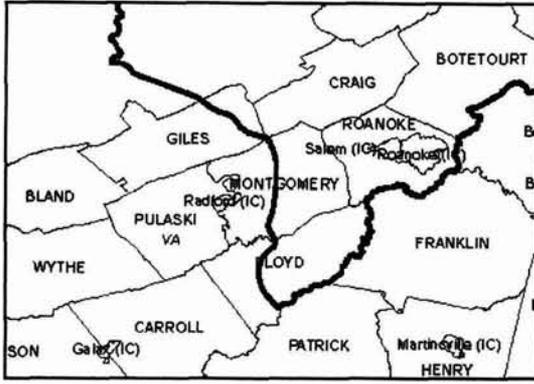


Figure 2. A portion of the version 2 map of Botetourt County as published on page 91 of the *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries, Virginia Historical Counties*. Used here under a Creative Commons license. The scale of both maps is approximately 70 miles east to west and 50 miles north to south.

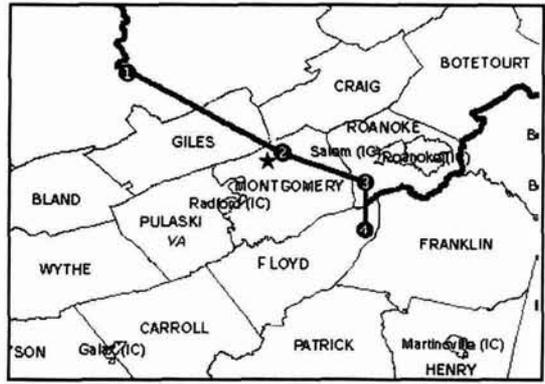


Figure 3. The map from Figure 2 revised and redrawn by the author from Crumps Bottom (location 1) to the watershed crossing (location 2) to Bent Mountain (location 3) to the top of the Blue Ridge (location 4). The star shows the approximate location of the Smithfield Plantation. Used here under a Creative Commons license.

When I examined the mapped route of the dividing line in present-day Montgomery County, it did not seem to me to be correct. Consequently, I reviewed the language of the act in Hening's *Statutes* (as quoted above) and sought the opinions of others. The main question that arose was "Where is Culbertson's Creek?" This is a tricky question because the present-day Culbertson's Creek in Summers County, West Virginia, is not the creek referred to in the act.

A private communication to well-known western Virginia historian Mary Kegley quickly produced the information that David Johnston's *Middle New River Settlements*⁵ speaks of "... Culbertson's-Crump's Bottom now in Summers County, WVa." Additionally, a request for help posted to the Library of Virginia history list server produced a suggestion from Karen Stuart to search the US Geological Survey's Geographic Names Information System database.⁶ That database immediately yielded Crumps Bottom and the further information that the Bottom is described in Wikipedia. Wikipedia explained that Andrew Culbertson was the first English settler in the present Summers County in 1753 and that he eventually built there a lavish plantation home. The answer to the question above is that what in 1772 was called Culbertson's Creek is today known as Crumps Bottom and is located on what is now called Indian Creek.

In Figure 3 Crumps Bottom is at location 1. From there, the dividing line runs to location 2, which is on the north side of Blacksburg (Figures 4 and 5), where the “Catawba Road” (today’s Harding Avenue) crossed the ridge dividing the Roanoke and New River watersheds.⁷ From location 2 the county line ran to “the bent” at location 3, which is identified as Bent Mountain by Miller.⁸ Location 4 is where the south-running line reached the top of the Blue Ridge after crossing the Little River in present-day Floyd County. As can be seen, the county outline of the Newberry map does not link up at location 4; if the interpretation given here is correct, the Newberry map will require slight additional revision.

The suggestion has been respectfully submitted to the Newberry Library that they reconsider the location of the boundary line on version 2 of their Botetourt County historical county boundaries map.

Commentary

The creation of the new Fincastle County in 1772 clearly much benefited William Preston, who took up many of the newly-instituted county offices such as sheriff, surveyor, and lieutenant.⁹

After the new Fincastle County was created, Preston quickly purchased several lots of land to assemble the Smithfield plantation property. He may have lived there at times during 1772 and 1773—when the Smithfield house was being built.¹⁰ His wife Susanna and the children moved to Smithfield in the spring of 1774. Their relocation was just 35 miles southwest from Preston’s former home at Greenfield in Botetourt County, to their new home only 2¼ miles beyond the new county line on a tract of cleared land called Draper’s Meadows. Preston knew these meadows well. He had surveyed the land and laid off the subdivisions there almost twenty years earlier in 1754, the year before his uncle James Patton was killed by Indians on the meadows.¹¹

It is obvious that William Preston’s political influence in Williamsburg immediately prior to 1772 was quite sufficient to make as convenient as possible his move from Greenfield to Smithfield. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the drawing of the dividing line was engineered by Preston for his own private advantage.

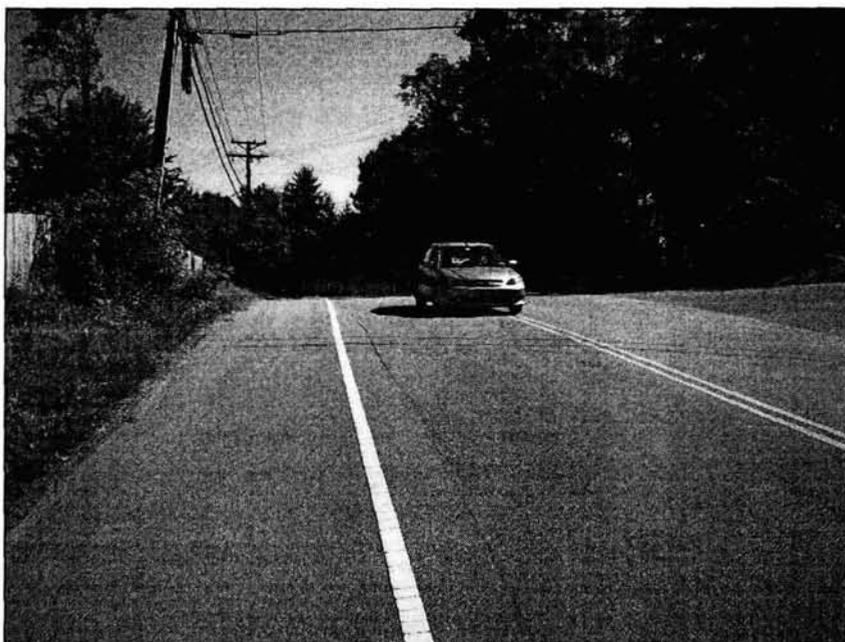


Figure 4. A photograph taken at location 2. This is on the north side of the Town of Blacksburg looking north up Harding Avenue (the former Catawba Road). The car is just crossing the dividing ridge that separates the Roanoke River watershed from the New River watershed. The map coordinates of this location are 37.24052° N of the equator and 80.400284° W of Greenwich.

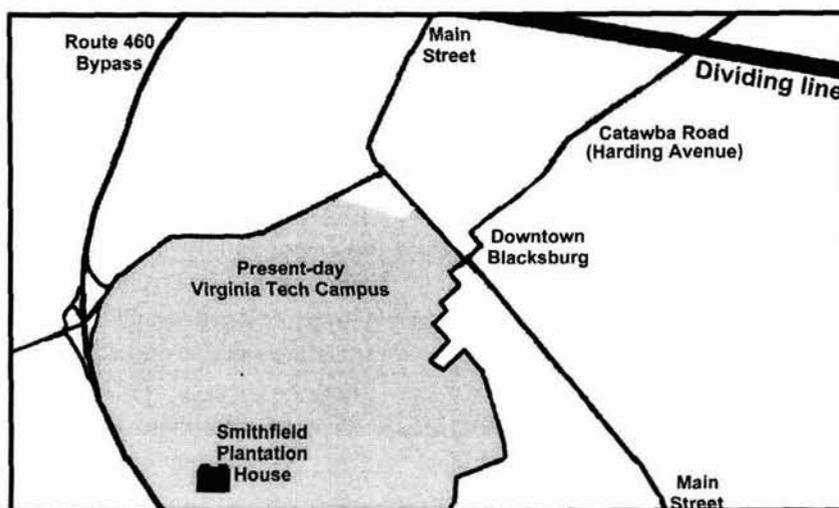


Figure 5. Schematic map showing the relation of the Smithfield Plantation house to the 1772 boundary line that divided Fincastle County from Botetourt County. The boundary is the thick line in the upper right. The plantation house is located on the present-day Virginia Tech campus. The measured distance from where the Catawba Road crosses the ridge to the plantation house is 2.3 miles.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Mary Kegley and Ryan Mays for corrections and helpful suggestions on several drafts of this article. Thanks to Hugh Campbell for helpful discussions. Appreciation is expressed to the Newberry Library for producing this valuable and remarkably comprehensive atlas and making its reproduction possible under a Creative Commons license. This note is intended as a supplement to, not a criticism of, the work of the Newberry Library.

Endnotes

1. This map here in figure 1 is revised and improved from the one I drew last year (see reference in Endnote 3) using newly available information from the Newberry Atlas (see reference in Endnote 4).
2. William Waller Hening, "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.
3. Jim Glanville, "The Fincastle Resolutions," *The Smithfield Review*, 14 (2010): 69-119. Figure 1 in this previous article is shown revised and corrected in Figure 1 of the present article.
4. John H. Long, ed., *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries*. The Newberry Library — Dr. William M. Scholl Center for American History and Culture. The historical Virginia County boundaries are online at: <http://historical-county.newberry.org/website/Virginia/viewer.htm> and specifically the downloadable file *Va_Historical_Counties.pdf*. Maps and a modified map from this publication reused here under the terms of a Creative Commons license. See the website at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/>. In addition to version 2 of the Botetourt County map on page 91, mentioned in the text, other outline maps for western Virginia counties on 31 December 1772 are Augusta (version 3, 53), Fincastle (version 1, 229), and Pittsylvania (version 1, 482).
5. David E. Johnston, *A History of Middle New River Settlements and Contiguous Territory*. (Huntington, W. Va.: Self published by the author, 1902). Online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=1SYSAAAAYAAJ>.
6. Online at <http://geonames.usgs.gov/domestic/>.
7. The path of the Catawba Road into present-day Blacksburg is shown and discussed in a recent book by Mary Kegley: *Finding Their Way from the Great Road to the Wilderness Road, 1745-1796*. (Wytheville: Kegley Books, 2008), 7-8. Based on a purpose-made map of Blacksburg showing the path of the eastern continental divide through the town (Town of Blacksburg, GIS Division, map prepared for the author, 2008; author's personal collection), location 2 is at the present-day junction of Harding Avenue and East Roanoke Street.
8. James Henry Miller, *History of Summers County From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*. (Hinton: Self published by the author, 1908), 10. Online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=vz8VAAAAYAAJ>.
9. Patricia Givens Johnson, *William Preston and the Allegheny Patriots*. (Blacksburg, Va.: Walpa Publishing, 1976).
10. 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, Va.: Green Publishers, 1980). See 183-184 and 245-249.
11. Kegley and Kegley, *Early Adventurers on the Western Waters*, 249.