Dr. Thomas Walker and the Dunkards


Carter was born in Hiltons, a small community near Gate City, and graduated from the University of Missouri School of Mines and Metallurgy in 1949 as a chemical engineer. He worked for Eastman Kodak for 36 years, retiring as a project manager with several patents to his credit.

In retirement, Carter pursued several hobbies and had a special passion for land grant research. Other than his coauthored book about the Holston militia, his publications were mostly printed in small circulation, local magazines and were difficult to find. That situation has changed now that the Sullivan County, Tennessee, Department of Archives and Tourism has been posting some of his manuscripts online.

Carter concluded in his 2004 article "Was Dr. Thomas Walker a Crook?" that the answer was yes. Carter wrote that Walker, an 18th century explorer, "devised a way to defraud the colonial land office of the correct payment due for land patents (grants)." Thus, in 1752 Walker obtained 6,800 acres at the Wolf Hill tract (modern-day Abingdon) and paid the colonial land tax of 34 pounds at the going rate of 1 pound per 200 acres. Carter's detailed study of the land records conclusively proved that the actual area of the tract was 13,000 acres, or almost twice what Walker paid tax on.

Other contemporary surveyors and land speculators such as John Buchanan and James Patton similarly defrauded the colonial land office. Carter's fascinating article can be read online at the link http://bit.ly/1YGeiJ6.

Walker trained as a physician at the College of William and Mary. In 1741, he married the wealthy widow Mildred Thornton Meriweather of present-day Albemarle County and acquired her Castle Hill plantation, where he fathered 12 children with her.

In 1749, the Loyal Land Company obtained a grant of 800,000 acres in today's southeastern Kentucky with Walker being a leading company member. In consequence, he led an exploration and survey of the grant in 1750. He kept a detailed journal during this expedition which recorded the first English-speaking account of the Cumberland Gap. Walker's cabin built near the Gap is considered the first Kentucky house. A replica stands on the spot today.

Of local interest is Walker's account of the Dunkards. They were German-speaking Protestants who had settled at Dunkard's Bottom on the New River near Radford as early as 1740—at a spot now inundated under Claytor Lake. Walker's party swam its horses across the quarter-mile-wide river to reach these Dunkards on March 16, 1750. He wrote they were an "odd set of people, who make it a matter of religion not to shave their beards, lie on beds, or eat flesh." Their religion notwithstanding, the Dunkards lacking suitable farmland had ceased to be vegetarians "by the want of a sufficient of grain and roots.

Walker and his party spent an unintended four nights with the hospitable Dunkards. The party's horses ran off on the Sunday after their arrival on the New River and they did not track them down until Tuesday morning.

The next time you cross the New River on Interstate 81 near Radford, give a passing thought to the Dunkards, to Thomas Walker the explorer and land magnate, and to the historian Dale Carter.

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