

2012 June 30, Fincastle, Virginia, Presbyterian Church: Dedication of 36 Revolutionary Patriot and 19 War of 1812 interments.

“Botetourt County, Virginia – Gateway to the West”

“Seed-bed of the Republic”. There are many who tended that seed-bed. In 1769/1770, as Botetourt County was being organized from Augusta County, no western boundary was specified. In the enacting legislation, residents along the Mississippi River were exempted, because of hardship, from levies. The western boundary was thus assumed to have been the Mississippi River! Botetourt County then included huge chunks of Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana & Illinois. For the next two years this invited speculation, settlement, and enterprise. Everyone came to Botetourt County to record deeds for western lands. There were prominent men from our history who entered the fray as speculators, including George Washington himself, who obtained property in this vast, vaguely defined territory to the west of Virginia. Something happened in this process; everyone wanted land, no one really knew where it was, and claims ran together. This created burgeoning problems with overlapping and competing claims. It didn’t help, either, that state governors awarded huge land grants to their prominent participants in the struggle for freedom and protection of the frontier. So many of these rewards were in what became Kentucky Territory.

And then, nepotism, conflict of interest, were really not very valuable concepts in those days; those so involved were either related or associated in other ways with one another, so such grants went, oftentimes, to family members and close associates.

I’ll divulge a bit to talk about one who is perhaps lesser known in history but who was highly influential in this development. William Fleming was a physician trained in his native Scotland who also became active in military service. At the rank of Colonel, he was severely wounded in the Battle of Point Pleasant, October 10, 1774 and, being a physician, was acutely aware of the nature of his injuries; he had been shot three times. As he later recorded in meticulous and rather gruesome detail, he reported that he did not lose consciousness (hard to believe), and that at some point he had looked down to observe lung tissue protruding from his chest. He retired with assistance to his tent where, with more help, he returned the protuberance within his chest. Obviously, he survived! This was, however, the end of his military activity. He also extensively documented his explorations and acquisitions in Kentucky, including the area which now includes Louisville. He nonetheless retained his residence at his “Bellmont” estate near what is now Roanoke, where William Fleming High School further commemorates his memory. He died at his Belmont at about 66 years of age on August 5, 1799. Yesterday, in 109-degree heat & sun, I visited, photographed and recorded gps coordinates at Belmont Cemetery where Dr. Fleming, his wife and, I’m reasonably certain, his mother-in-law, Elizabeth Starke Christian, were interred – adjoining the 18th hole at Ole Monterey Golf Course, 205 Tinker Creek Lane Northeast Roanoke, VA 24019. GPS Coordinates: N37.30793, W079.92200.

So, back to the organization of Botetourt County; on June 13, 1770, my fifth-great grandparents, Elizabeth and Israel Christian signed this document (display copy) of which the original remains in the county courthouse – I like to cite my sources, but I’ve had some difficulty with this one. The only way I can tell you is – it’s in the “Big Blue Book”, “Historical Documents of Botetourt County”, in the County Clerk’s safe; just don’t be afraid to ask to see the “Big Blue Book” for this and other important originating documents, including William Fleming’s will. The documentation in it is fascinating in its own right.

The construction of this document is also interesting. The forty-five acres for the county seat was not deeded directly to the County, but to the 29 Justices named therein, including – recall my remark about nepotism and conflict of interest – the son of Israel & Elizabeth, Col. William Christian, two sons-in-law of Israel Christian, Dr. William Fleming and Stephen Trigg. The primary purpose of the grant being the establishment of a courthouse, Israel and his son-in-law, Stephen Trigg, then set about construction of a log structure to house the court. The documents remaining from that time, especially pertaining to that first two years when Botetourt County extended to the Mississippi River, are nothing less than national treasures.

Perhaps speaking selfishly, Israel Christian is, to me, among the forgotten heroes of the founding of our free nation. He first appears in records in Staunton, Virginia, where he arrived, with a probable uncle, Gilbert Christian, about 1740 from Londonderry, Ireland, with something rare on the frontier – money! Israel established a mercantile business there, and became one of the burgesses and founding trustees representing the newly-organized town. He remained an official until, in 1767 – from the “Annals of Augusta County”, the trustees had been required to sign a declaration to be conformable to the doctrines of the Church of England. That staunch Presbyterian, Israel Christian, had refused to sign and was removed as a trustee, and, likely in a fit of pique, said goodbye to Staunton, and sold the manor in which his children, including my 4th-great grandmother, Rosanna, had been raised. Another aside – Rosanna apparently was not, in her early years, interested in, as every young lady was expected to be, the art of dancing, for her father had been sued by her dance-master for his fee of 5 pounds.

Israel proceeded south with his family, buying up tracts of land in the Virginia valley as he went. Eventually, feeling old and infirm, with failing eyesight, he had sent his son William further south to “Dunkard’s Bottom”, near Christiansburg, which is named for the family, where William established residences for himself and his family. Israel died there, probably in 1784, and I suspect his remains are now at the bottom of Claytor Lake, which was dammed and flooded at the site in the late 1930s. There was, at the time of the flooding, a cemetery, from which remains were relocated, but I’ve found no record for Israel himself. That’s, to me, a shame, as I still want to find a way to commemorate the contributions of this founder of a “seed-bed of the Republic”.

Thank you.

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