

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The Early Days of Kentucky

by

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Some Reminiscences from the life of Col. Cave Johnson. Together With an Obituary Written at the Time of His Death. (Insertions are in [].)

Obituary

Col. Cave Johnson departed this life at his residence at North Bend, Boone County, KY, on the 19th day of January, 1850, in the ninetieth year of his age.

Sound and firm of constitution and health, endowed with strong common sense, sedate and thoughtful, taciturn and slow of speech, the deceased possessed much individuality and originality of character, and was a good specimen of that hardy, vigorous and manly class of men - the pioneers of Kentucky. For more than seventy years had he been a citizen or inhabitant of Kentucky. When he immigrated it was a wilderness whose rich soil and great productiveness made it the common property and general battle field, not only of the wolf, the panther and the buffalo, but of the equally wild and savage Indian. The white man came to "the dark and bloody ground," and in a few years the contest for dominion was over - the howl of the wolf, the cry of the panther, and the yell of the Indian were heard no more. But the connection of the deceased with the early settlement of our State, or with the active and busy scenes of subsequent times, it is not our purpose here to write. The sketch of his life, written by himself and furnished us but a few months before his death, must suffice.

In politics Col. Johnson was ever a Democrat. In religion he was a Baptist, and had been a consistent and zealous member of that church for more than fifty years. He also took great interest in the spread of the Gospel, and contributed liberally to the support of foreign and home missions. A short time before his death he prepared the following narrative, written in his own steady, plain, business hand:

Reminiscences.

I was born on the 15th of November in the year 1760, in the county of Orange and State of Virginia. My father's name was Wm. Johnson. He died when I was but four or five years old. My mother's maiden name was Elizabeth Cave. I had three brothers - Robert, the eldest, has been dead upward of thirty years; Benjamin, who has been dead near fifty years; and Valentine, the youngest, who now lives in Orange City, Va. I had five sisters - Nancy married Wm. Rogers; Mildred married Jno. Sebree, who died at the siege of York, in Virginia; Elizabeth married Geo. Eve, who died on Elkhorn more than thirty years ago; Hannah married Robert Bradly, who died in Scott County some forty years since; and Sally married Laban Shipp, who died in the southern part of Kentucky. After the death of my father, I continued with my mother and worked on the farm. What education I got was at country schools. I learned to read and write, and arithmetic so far as to include the rule of three.

On the first day of April, 1779, my brother Robert, myself and one other man (Wm. Tomlinson) set out from Orange County, Va., for a visit to Kentucky. There was then about two hundred miles of the road from the back settlements on Holston waters to Kentucky that was considered to be quite dangerous, traveling with so small a company as ours (only three); but we pushed on, and at Cumberland River we overtook a company of several families of the Bryants, from North Carolina, on their way to Kentucky to settle the place since called Bryant's Station, on North Elkhorn. We joined in with their company, and arrived first at Boonesborough, where we obtained some little Indian corn, and then went on to North Elkhorn, where we arrived about the last of April. We, that is Tomlinson and myself, assisted the Bryants in putting up some cabins. Robert Johnson left us, and went to Lexington, which had just been settled by a company from Allegheny and Monongahela. After viewing and exploring the country some few weeks, he returned home to Virginia. Tomlinson and myself planted about four acres of corn, and, after we had finished working it, in July we left for home.

And here I will mention an incident that happened on the way in the wilderness. A number, now of Bryant's and others, were along. Our company was considerable as to numbers, and when in the wilderness, not far from Cumberland River, we stopped to eat our dinners and noon it, as it was called, and to let our horses graze. While we were thus stopped, a number of the men took their guns and turned out to hunt, wishing to kill deer, and, while they were out from camp, one man, Aquilla White, shot and killed William Beamlett, mistaking him for an Indian. Beamlett was a preacher and one of our company, and there we buried him. Tomlinson and myself reached home in safety.

My brother Robert, having got somewhat acquainted while in Kentucky with some of the military surveys that had been made by John Floyd, purchased two tracts, and in the fall of that year started with his family to Kentucky, to go by water. He got to Redstone or Brownsville, when the river became too low, and continued so until it froze up. He continued there until spring of the year, when he took water and landed at the Falls of Ohio, and moved from there to Beargrass, on to John Floyd's land, where he raised a crop of corn, and some time during that summer he went out with the expedition under Gen. Clark into the Miami country against the Indians.

And here I will mention another incident which occurred while he resided at Beargrass. The Indians had waylaid the trace that led from the settlement on Beargrass to the Falls, and had killed several people there. Having understood from the spies that were sent out to examine the neighborhood that they had discovered Indian signs, and that they apprehended they might be waylaying that trace, the inhabitants at the Falls and those of the Beargrass settlement raised a company and undertook to examine said trace. They divided into three companies. One marched along the trace, the other two marched through the woods on each side. They found the Indians, as they expected, lying in ambush near the road, and, coming on their backs, fired on them, killing one dead on the spot and wounding one other that got off. The Indians, discovering the men on the trace, fired at them at the same time they were fired on, and wounded one of the white men badly. My brother Robert was one of the men who fired at the Indians.

While Robert Johnson with his family continued at Beargrass, Richard M. Johnson was born.

I will now go back a little. In the year 1779, some time after our arrival at Bryant's Station, Col. Bowman, who lived on the south side of Kentucky River, raised what force he could, and crossed the Ohio at the mouth of Licking and went against the Indians at a town where they lived on the Little Miami, at old Chillicothe. They got to the town in the morning before daylight undiscovered, and attacked them. The Indians stuck to their houses and fought, and killed several of the most daring and best soldiers. The whites retreated, and the Indians followed them nearly to the Ohio.

Robert Johnson moved from Beargrass to Bryant's Station, I think, in the fall of 1780. There he built some cabins, making part of the fort. I, then a young man, was part of his family. Buffalo being very plenty in the woods, there was not much difficulty in obtaining meat for the families, except that of risking our scalps, from which danger we considered ourselves never absented when out.

The next years, 1781 and 2, were disastrous ones for Kentucky. Captain Bird, a British officer from Detroit, with a large force of Indians, came over the Ohio, brought one field piece (I suppose a six-pounder), and captured Riddle's and Martin's stations, on the Licking. The Indians also broke up Grant's Station, on the waters of Licking, and killed a number of persons; also, Estil's defeat, on the waters of Licking. Captain Estil was considered one of our best defenders against the Indians. He raised and headed some twelve or fourteen men, said to be

good soldiers, to fight Indians, and followed about the same number of Indians that he had men, overtook them and had a severe battle. Captain Estil himself was killed, and near one-half on each side was killed, and they made a draw battle of it.

Another incident I will here mention. Hunting in the woods for our meat being a dangerous business, twelve of us at Bryant's turned out for that purpose, all in one company. When we got into the hunting woods, near where Georgetown now stands, we separated into three companies. Wm. Bryant, the head and principal man of the families and station at that time, headed one of the companies. Another of the Bryants headed [the company] that I belonged to. The agreement when we parted was that we were to meet at night at the mouth of Cain Run on North Elkhorn. Soon after we parted, the Indians, some twelve or fourteen in number, got on the trail of the company that I belonged to for it was easy to track a single horse in those woods at that time. Our leader, Mr. Bryant, had lit off his horse to shoot a deer. The other three of us were sitting on our horses when the Indians came in sight. I was the first to discover them. We made out to get off before they fired on us, and, having the heels of them, we made use of it, and not being strong enough to fight them, we went on to the station. On the next day twelve or fifteen men of the station turned out and went to hunt for Wm. Bryant and his company, who encamped at the mouth of Cain Run the night before, and all were out the next day not far from Georgetown. He discovered a horse that was hobbled and with a bell on him on the other side of the creek from where he was. He directed the other three of his company to remain where they were while he should cross the creek and see what it meant. He got over, and when near the horse, the Indians, who were in ambush, fired on him and wounded him with three balls. His horse, however, carried him off. The company from the station who were on the hunt of him were in hearing of the guns when they fired on him. They rushed on to the place and found the Indians, and a battle ensued. They killed one Indian and got his scalp, and wounded several more. Five of the whites were wounded; one of them (David Jones) was shot through near the middle of the breast, but none of them died except Mr. Bryant, whom the company on their return found in the woods badly wounded. He was taken on to the station, where he died, much lamented.

Again, during my residence at the station in 1781, we were in want of salt, and a company of us, about ten or twelve, got on our horses, with our rifles on our shoulders, and started for Bullet's Lick, near the Falls of the Ohio, where salt was made. We passed through Lexington and along a small trace to the Kentucky River at Leestown, as it was then called, situate[d] about half a mile below Frankfort. The weather was warm, and we rode down the bank into the water; and, while our horses were drinking, all near the bank of the river, a party of Indians that followed us came on the bank, fired on us and killed one horse, that fell in the river. His rider pushed on across the river, and the Indians crossed after him and took him prisoner. They wounded five men of our company, all of whom recovered. We gave up our trip and returned to the station.

And again, while a man by the name of Daniel Wilcoxon was plowing his corn, in full view of the station, about 150 or 200 yards distant, and a man with his son watching as sentry for Indians, a small party of them crept up near enough and shot him and killed him, and one of them, with tomahawk in hand, ran Wilcoxon toward the fort, and was very near getting him, when Wilcoxon jumped a fence, which saved him.

And again, A youth by the name of Hickey Lea was out of the fort on a horse, one morning, into the edge of the woods, distant some 200 or 300 yards, for the purpose of grazing the horse, and while sitting on the horse some Indians got near enough and shot the horse, which ran a short distance and fell. The Indians then killed the youth and scalped him.

In 1782 my brother, Robert Johnson was elected a member of the General Assembly of Virginia, and went to Richmond. I was then also in Virginia. We did not return to Kentucky

until after the defeat at the Blue Licks, therefore [I] can say nothing of my own knowledge as to that and the siege of Simon Girty and the Indians at Bryant's Station.

About the same time, or shortly after, General Clark carried an expedition against the Indians in the Miami country. My brother Robert commanded a company from Bryant's Station. Jeremiah Craig and myself were his subalterns. Every man fit for the campaign, except enough to take care of the fort, was called out. Colonel Benjamin Logan was second in command. One wing of the army marched from the Falls, the other from Lexington and Bryant's. They met in general rendezvous on the ground now occupied by Cincinnati, where General Clark took the command. We marched through Old Chillicothe, on the Little Miami, on to the Indian town of Piqua, on the Big Miami. We had one piece of cannon. The Indians fled and gave us no trouble. They did come one dark night and fire on us, which caused us to extinguish our fires, but they kept at such a distance as to hurt none of us. Some scouting parties from our camps went out and killed a few Indians and took some prisoners, and destroyed their corn fields and villages. We then returned, nearly in the same track we had gone out.

Very shortly after our return home, Colonel Thomas Marshall, Surveyor of Fayette, who had been waiting for the return of our army, opened his office in Lexington for the entering and surveying of lands. A mighty movement then commenced among the people, both for entering and surveying. I got the appointment of Deputy Surveyor and commenced surveying, and was employed considerably in that business for several years. The next year 1783, the people of the stations began to move and settle out on the lands. My brother Robert settled the Big or Great Crossing on North Elkhorn. Captain John Craig settled on Clear Creek, where Payton Short afterward lived.

Early in 1784 I got married and settled on Green Creek, near where Versailles now stands. I was then appointed and commissioned a militia Captain, and notwithstanding peace was then firmly established between England and the United States, yet the Indians continued troublesome.

In the year 1786, the government authorized General Clark to carry out another expedition against them, which he undertook, and raised a considerable force. Colonel Levi Todd was selected to command the Fayette troops, and Benjamin Logan from the south side of Kentucky; Colonel William Steele, Captain Robert Sanders and myself were selected as Captains, with others, whose names I do not recollect. In Colonel Todd's regiment we rendezvoused at the Falls, where General Clark took command. He sent his field piece by water down the Ohio and up the Wabash. The army marched through by land, and on the way, before reaching Vincennes, the officers held a council of war, and sent Colonel Logan back for the purposes of raising another army and marching into the Indian country on the Miami, presuming that the Indians were generally collected on the Wabash in order to meet our expedition. We marched on Vincennes, where we remained a number of days waiting for our cannon, which was detained by low water until we had eaten up the greater part of our provisions. When our cannon arrived, we marched on up the river about two days, when the regiment that Logan left mutinied and refused to go further, alleging they had not a sufficient stock of provisions, &c. I suppose losing their Colonel had its influence. General Clark was much mortified. We returned home. Colonel Logan, with the command he had raised, went on into the Miami country and succeeded against the Indians in that quarter, fully up to expectations.

In 1789 Woodford County was formed, taken from Fayette; and when the courts were organized, I got the appointment of Clerk to the County and Quarter Sessions; and when Kentucky was made a State, and the courts were reorganized, I again got the appointment of Clerk to said courts, which I held until 1796, when I moved to North Bend, in what is now Boone County. In 1798 an act passed to establish the said county of Boone, and when the

courts were organized I was appointed Clerk of the County Court. Not long after I was commissioned a Colonel of militia, which I held until 1811, about which time I was appointed and commissioned a Justice of the Peace, which office I held until commissioned Sheriff of said county in 1833. In 1817 I was elected a member of the Kentucky Legislature. I have held various other offices and appointments, and filled many stations; have all my life been a farmer, and attached to the cultivation of the soil; have served my day and generation; am now near four-score and ten, and feel that I must shortly be gathered to my fathers.

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