

*"The Unnoticed Observers"*  
By David Wright



# The RIVER GAUNTLET

Chronicling the many challenges faced by Donelson's 1779-80 pioneering flotilla

BY J. WAYNE FEARS

**IN** 1779, Colonel John Donelson informed the citizens of Halifax County, Virginia, that the government had offered a bounty of land near French Lick on the Cumberland River to any male 21 years of age and upwards who would become a citizen, build a cabin, raise corn and be willing to encounter danger and privations.

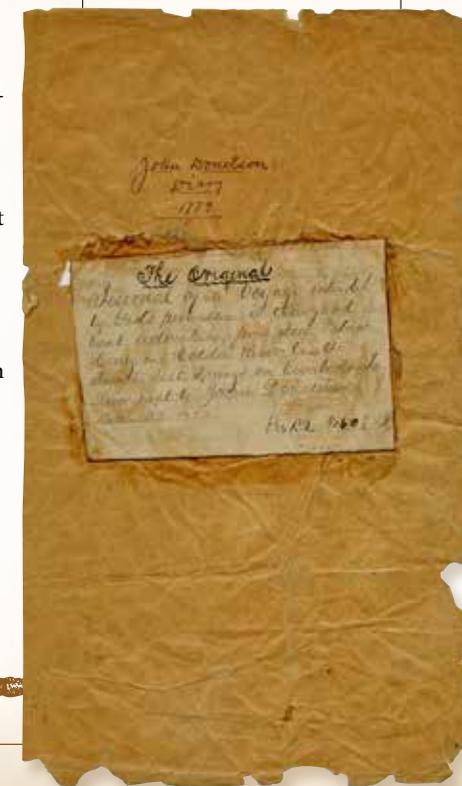
It was the best of plans; it was the worst of plans! During the summer of 1779, a group of pioneers living near Fort Patrick Henry on the Holston River began meeting to organize their move to a paradise. Their destination held the promise of rich bottom lands that they could own. The location was

French Lick, sometimes called French Salt Spring or Big Salt Lick. Longhunters had been to French Lick and had reported that the virtually unexplored area had abundant game, and there were vast acres of rich bottom lands. They said it

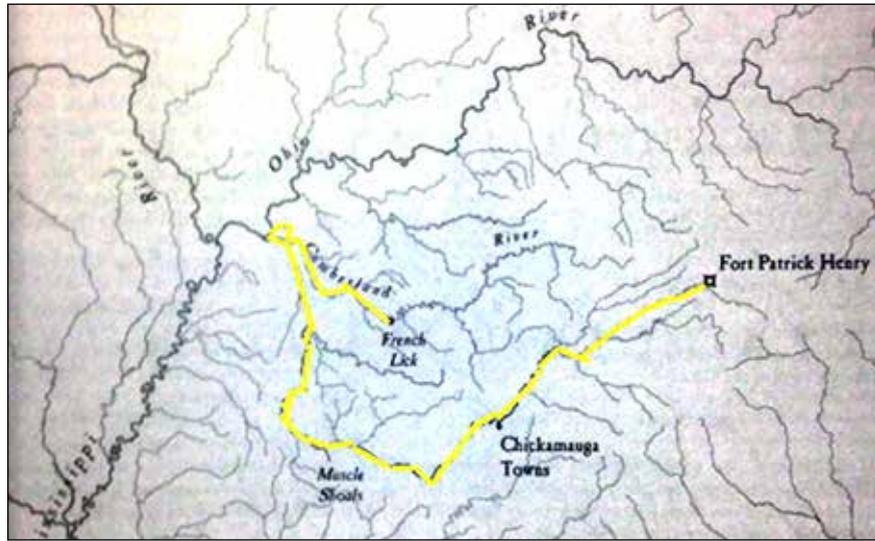
was a paradise—and just 270 miles as the crow flies west of the fort.

## The Plan

As the late summer meetings were held, a plan was developed to split the settlers up into two groups to travel to French Lick. Using a crude, not to scale, hand-drawn map, one group was to take a river route. The leaders of the group said that the river route, using flatboats, canoes and dugouts, which would take them down Holston River to the big Tennessee River and



(Top left) Historic engraving of the Donelson flotilla. (Left) Cover of John Donelson's diary of the trip.



(Left) The map of the Donelson flotilla route. (Below left) Tennessee historical marker at the Fort Patrick Henry site.

launch, the heavily loaded boats began to run aground due to low water flow. Also, the weather was bitterly cold (the winter of 1779-80 was one of the coldest ever recorded), and the boats became iced in. There was no turning back. The group had to spend the next two months living under harsh winter conditions until the water level rose and the ice broke up.

### Under Way, Again, At Last

On February 13, 1780, the boats of the flotilla were able to launch, and for the next week, the boats moved at a fast pace. On February 20, the flotilla, after fighting rapids and traveling in a cold, thick fog, reached Cloud's Creek where the boats landed and the group rested.

Additional boats on the same voyage joined the group. On February 27, the flotilla reached Poor Valley Shoal, and the boats began to hang up in the shallow,

swift water. The next day, the river began to rise, but the boats still had to lighten their loads to get beyond the shoals.

On March 2, one of the flatboats was driven by the force of the current onto a point of a rocky island. The boat hit rocks and sunk, so the fleet of boats stopped and came to the rescue. With much effort, the boat was raised and some of the contents saved.

### The Flotilla Grows In Numbers

March 5, the flotilla got underway before sunrise. That afternoon, they met up with another group of about 50 additional pioneer families who, by prior arrangement, joined the flotilla at the Clinch River. The weather was quite cold and it rained constantly. Several of the 28 occupants of one of the Clinch River flatboats had come down with smallpox, so it was agreed that that flatboat would stay a distance away from

the flotilla and camp separately at night.

The next day dawned bitterly cold and foggy, but the flotilla made progress. That night, one of the servants fell victim to the cold. It was recorded that his feet and legs had become "much frosted." It was the first death of the flotilla, but not the last.

The following day, the flotilla passed an abandoned Native American village and camped nearby on the opposite shore. During the night, the wife of one of the men who drove stock with the overland party gave birth to a child.

### Natives Encountered

On March 8, the flotilla encountered the first tribe-related trouble. They floated down the Tennessee River past an inhabited native village of the Chickamauga on the south side of the river. The tribesmen shouted greetings and wanted to trade. Several of the natives came to the boats and were given presents. Then, the pioneers spotted more tribesmen armed. A half-breed with the tribe told the pioneers to sail off immediately, which they did.

A few miles downstream, the flotilla passed another tribal village. Again, the natives tried to entice the pioneers to stop. After the last experience, they decided against slowing, and the tribesmen started shooting, killing one of the boatmen.

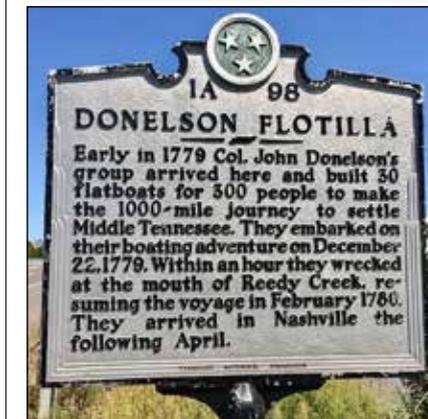
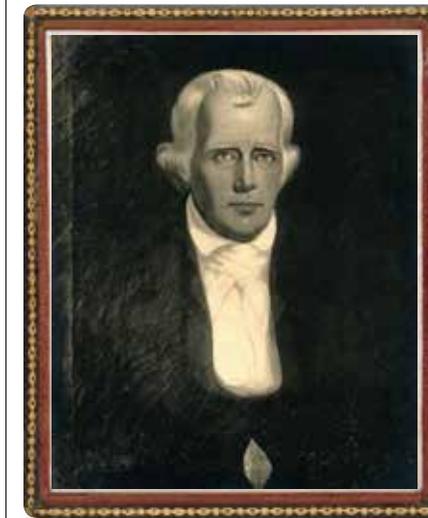
The flatboat with the smallpox patients, following a distance behind the fleet, passed the village and the tribesmen, seeing that they were alone and helpless, concentrated their attack on them. Their cries could be heard by the boats in the rear of the fleet.

### Terror At The Suck

Thinking they had outrun the natives, the boatmen were suddenly faced with a giant whirlpool in the river; the pioneers called it a "suck." Each of the 40 boats had to fight through the icy, churning waters. A canoe with its cargo was overturned. Several of the boats stopped to help but came under heavy fire from tribesmen on the cliffs overlooking the river. Hastily, the boats fled, but one fell behind and went missing. The flotilla continued downstream all that day, that night and the following day.

**“That night, one of the servants fell victim to the cold...It was the first death of the flotilla, but not the last.”**

Before daylight on March 10, the camped flotilla heard cries for help, and the missing boat appeared in the dark. Once ashore, the survivors told a tale of horror. Their flatboat had hung up on rocks, and as they tried to free the boat by throwing goods overboard, the natives attacked. Three of the crew panicked and



tried to escape in the river; they were shot or captured. In the confusion of throwing household items overboard, the day-old baby was accidentally thrown overboard with some blankets, never to be found. A lady on the boat was shot in the leg. All hands had to jump into the near-frozen water to lift the boat off the rocks. They barely escaped.

On March 12, the flotilla coasted by another native village where they were fired upon, but the fast, cold current sped them to safety without any injury. That afternoon, they reached Muscle Shoals where they came ashore to look for signs of the Robertson overland party who was to meet them there for the overland trip to French Lick. There were no signs of the overland party. The pioneers' food was about gone, and everyone was cold and exhausted. Their hopes for going overland were dashed. Colonel Donelson had to make a quick decision: They must continue by boat to where the Tennessee River meets the Ohio River and then go upstream to enter the Cumberland River—a backbreaking trip if they were to get to French Lick. Now they had to run the rocky, shallow



(Top left) Painting of John Donelson. (Above) Historical marker dedicated to John Donelson. (Left) The Donelson flotilla historical marker, Tennessee.



then downriver to a set of rapids known as Muscle Shoals, was the safest route. Once they reached Muscle Shoals, then it was just a short distance overland to French Lick. This river voyage, according to the leaders, would avoid tribal trouble for the women, children, older men and servants. The flotilla would also take the settlers' household goods. Looking at the map, it appeared to be an easy float trip. No one in the group had actually made the trip before. Colonel John Donelson, a surveyor, was selected to lead this group. Donelson was the son of an English gentlemen and not a woodsman. He knew little of the ways of the Native Americans and had never navigated the rivers they were to travel.

Since the overland route was thought to be the most dangerous, a second group made up of most of the settlers' menfolk and older boys, well-armed, would drive the pioneers' livestock overland following tribal and game trails to French Lick. They

selected James Robertson, an experienced woodsman, as the leader of this group. They would leave about a month earlier than the river group. According to the plan, they would get to French Lick before the river group reached Muscle Shoals. With the livestock delivered to the new settlement site, some of the men would go down the "guesstimated 40 miles" to Muscle Shoals to meet the river group to help get them overland to their proposed settlement.

### The Launch

In October, the overland group consisting of 226 men and boys left Fort Patrick Henry driving cattle and horses headed to French Lick.

Due to unexpected delays, it wasn't until December 22 that the river flotilla of mostly flatboats carrying about 60 families and their possessions left the safety of the fort heading downstream for Muscle Shoals. Just three days after

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shoals that roared with whitewater rapids some 25 miles. Fortunately, every boat made the run in three hours.

Two days later, the flotilla was making good time when they were fired upon again by Native Americans. Five on the boats were wounded, but the flotilla managed to escape.

About mid-afternoon on March 20, the hungry, injured and fatigued fleet reached the swift-running Ohio River. Their provisions were exhausted and they had no idea as to how far they had to go to reach French Lick. Several flatboat occupants

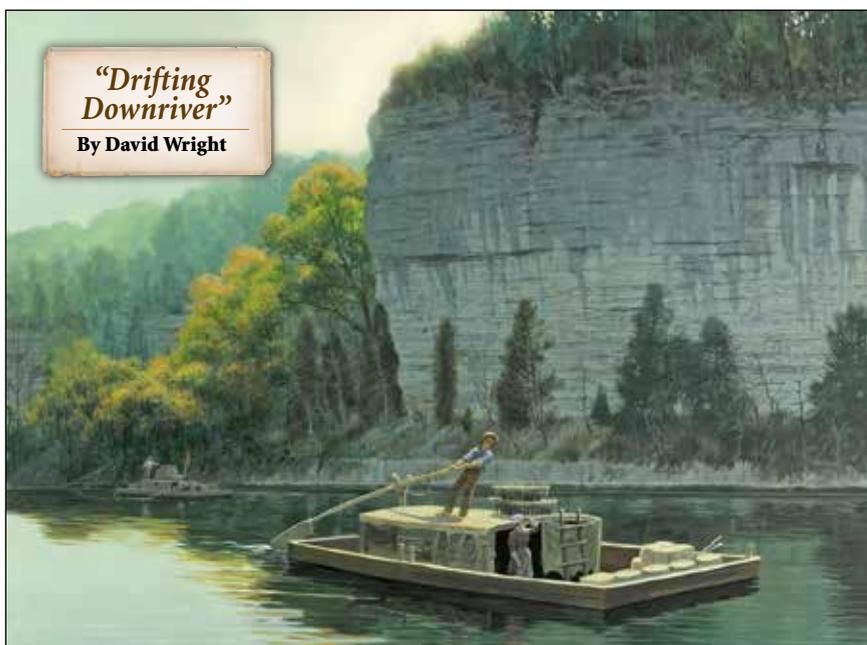
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decided to leave the flotilla and descend downstream to Natchez; others set out down the Ohio to Illinois. The remainder of the flotilla decided to try to reach their original destination.

### The Push To The Finish

On March 24, after struggling up the Ohio River, the exhausted group came upon a smaller stream which they thought was the Cumberland. They decided to try and float up its gentle course, praying it was the Cumberland. The next few days they used improvised sails and every able-bodied person paddling to push the flatboats up the river. They were out of provisions, and their food was what they could forage from the land: catfish, an old buffalo, a swan and lamb's quarters growing along the river bottoms.

On April 24, the ragtag flotilla arrived at the end of their 1,000-mile journey. They met the Robertson party with much jubilation, although at least 34 of the boat occupants had died or were captured.



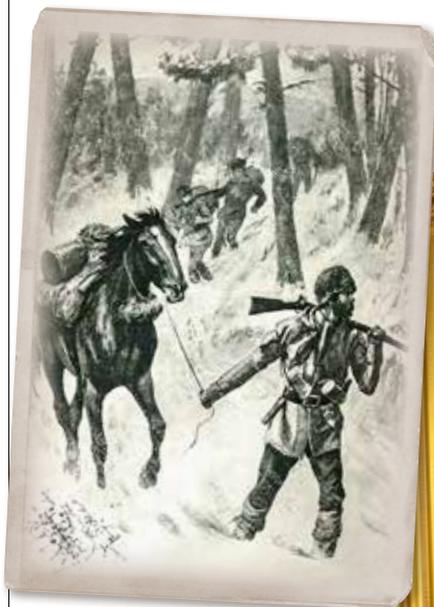
The men, boys and livestock who took the "more dangerous route" overland suffered no casualties, no frostbite and no tribal trouble. They arrived at French Lick during Christmas week of December.

Robertson had kept his word. After arriving at French Lick, he had attempted to reach Muscle Shoals, but it was a hard winter with deep snows and he'd gotten

lost. He rode 160 miles trying to find the shoals, and failing, he turned back.

It has been written that whatever Colonel Donelson may have lacked in regional geographical knowledge, Native American experience and good judgment, he made up with grit, determination and courage. His daughter, Rachel, who was 13 years old when she made the trip, became the beloved wife of Andrew Jackson.

The French Lick settlement became the present-day city of Nashville, Tennessee. ★



**(Above) A sketch of James Robertson's overland party. (Right) Portrait of James Robertson.**

