

THE NORTH FORK OF THE ELKHORN

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There were once an ancient people that drifted across the face of Kentucky hunting the elephant-like mastodon and mammoth and bear, elk and deer. In time they settled into villages where the women grew corn, squash and beans and the men continued to hunt but sadly the huge elephant-like beasts had been hunted to extinction. These people erected large earthen structures called mounds and when hundreds of year later the Indians were asked who had built them they didn't know. Many of the abandoned Indian villages are now buried beneath modern cities. With the ancient people's departure Kentucky became a vast, rich and unoccupied hunting reserve teeming with wild game.

Indian Nations living north of the Ohio River and those living south of the Tennessee River came into Kentucky to hunt and often the young hot-blooded men of the hunting parties would clash with each other and blood would be spilt. Most hunting parties returned to their villages not with scalps of their enemy but with meat to feed their families and thick pelts of the animals they had killed. These pelts and furs were much desired by European nations and soon a fur Trade sprang up with the Indians by the Europeans.

The French out of Canada and the English east of the Appalachian Mountains along the Atlantic seaboard vied to control the fur trade west of the mountains and in the Ohio Valley. To keep the English west of the mountains the French constructed a series of forts of which Fort Duquesne is best known. Fort Duquesne sat at the junction of the Monongahela and Allegheny Rivers which is the head of the Ohio River. To feed the French garrison at the fort flat boats were rowed or poled over nine hundred miles up the Ohio from the Illinois country where French farmers and their slaves tilled the rich soil producing bountiful harvests of grain.

One British-Colonial Army, General Braddock's, was lost trying to take Fort Duquesne but a second British-Colonial Army moved against the fort and the French destroyed it before fleeing. Thomas Hutchins, later official 'Geographer of the United States' "laid out Fort Pitt at Pittsburg." The British established forts in the Illinois country and to supply the garrisons there and trading goods to the Indians they sought to send boats along the Ohio River. In 1766 Thomas Hutchins "conducted a hydrographic survey down the Ohio---A great number of Shawnees and Delaware went too, the entire party, with baggage filling seventeen canoes. They traveled the whole length of the ever widening river, more than 1,000 miles to the Mississippi, with the result of the first published survey describing the river's depth, currents, bordering hills and bottomlands."

The Indians accompanying Hutchins thought that the white men were mapping the river so that flatboats could bring trade goods to exchange for their furs. Hutchins' party might have faced disaster if the Indians had known that the river being surveyed was to be a major invasion route into the Ohio Valley by an unstoppable flood of white settlers. In the next three decades 1,500 white settlers, and some of the their slaves, were killed by the Indian nations as they descended

the river.

The civilian crewmen manning the flat boats used nautical terms as they “coasted” down the river referring to the south bank of the river as “The Kentucky Shore” and the north bank as “The Indian Shore.” Thomas Jefferson called the Ohio “The most beautiful river in the world.” The crews of the boats may have seen the beauty but they also saw unoccupied rich lands waiting to be settled by men just like them. Many of them must have been desirous of returning and claiming land in Kentucky; there were too many Indians in possession of the Indian Shore which discouraged thoughts of settlement there. At least one of those men, James Harrod, would return and he played a significant role in the settlement of Central Kentucky, but not along the Elkhorn.

Virginia was a colony of England and “the largest and most westward subdivision of that colony was Fincastle County which extended across the vast area now comprising Kentucky, the southern parts of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, and those portions of Virginia and West Virginia---. To legally acquire land in this country, it was necessary to have ground surveyed by one of the appointed deputies of Colonel William Preston, the Fincastle County Surveyor.”

“In 1773 Captain Thomas Bullitt had led an expedition down the Ohio beyond the Falls for the purpose of surveying land for the veterans of the French and Indian War but upon his return Colonel Preston refused to honor these surveys, as none of his deputies was present when they were made. Although Bullitt’s company included Taylor, Douglas and Hite, these men were not appointed as official deputies until after their return to the east.”

The Bullitt party had passed the mouth of the Kentucky and had sent a small party up the Kentucky twenty some miles but the river level must have been low for Isaac Hite reported, “that his party was unable to go up that river beyond Drennon’s Creek by canoe because of rocky shoals.” Hite was twenty miles below the mouth of the Elkhorn. The Bullitt party went on down to the Falls of the Ohio. The falls were actually a cataract or set of rapids but for years after the city of Louisville grew up there men spoke of The Falls or Falls City. There would be a number of steamboats named Falls City and even a popular regional beer is called Falls City.

There was another land seeking party in 1773, the McAfee’s, who were some of the first non-native people to walk along the Elkhorn. The pioneer Captain Nathaniel Hart told of them. Hart said “they were an honest set of men. They were bold, hardy, enterprising men. Time of this expedition, Capt. (James) McAfee drank with his gun in his hand. The greatest piece of precaution I ever witnessed. He could run anyway he wished; whereas as if he stood it (rifle) against a tree, 3 feet from him, he might have been shot down, in the act of turning that way to get it.”The Indians resented the coming of the white man it was wise to be cautious.

The McAfee’s named the creek they found and three reasons for naming the creek are told. A silly Indian love story is the first; the second is that the creeks many forks and smaller streams

running into the forks resembled a set of elk horns. The third explanation is that the McAfee's found a set of elk horns at the mouth of the creek. There are three forks of the Elkhorn; the North, South and the Town Fork which flows into the South Fork. The creek is eighty-six miles long with a drainage basin of "about 276 square miles of prime Inner Blue Grass farmland. From the headwaters to its mouth, the streams gradient is relatively low, and it is bedded atop limestone that resists cutting down. The creeks channel is broad and largely flat-bottomed; the water is often no more than five feet deep, and it flows in wide meandering loops incised thirty feet or more in the area bedrock."

The McAfee's passed on claiming land here and went below the Kentucky River to claim land. The following year, 1774, Virginia sent out a number of surveying parties. Neal Hammons writes extensively of these parties in his "The Fincastle Surveyors in the Bluegrass, 1774." Two leaders in separate parties were Hancock Taylor and John Floyd. A report stated that "Mr. Floyd and the rest of the people are in high spirits, and determined to go down the river to do the business they came out (for) & try the consequences unless a Superior Force should attack them." Floyd's party surveyed land along the Ohio before reaching the Kentucky River.

"In our passage we came to an Indian Camp, landed and found two Delawares, & a squaw we gave them Corn and Salt." Three Indians weren't a Superior Force so they went on. "Our party divided, eleven men went up (the Kentucky River) to Harrod's Company--to make improvements." James Harrod was establishing a settlement south of the Kentucky River. "This day a quarrel arose between Mr. Lee and Mr. Hyte (Hite). Lee cut a stick and gave Hyte a whipping with it, upon which Mr. Floyd demanded the King's peace, which stopt it sooner than it would have ended if he had not been there." I have no idea what the 'King's peace' was.

One of the surveyors, James Norse, was with the party that went up the Kentucky which was passable to the Elkhorn. He told of passing a number of islands and canoeing over shallow water before reaching a creek he said was "supposed to be the Elkhorn-where we encamp, pitched my tent, the others did not; about midnight, violent thunder and lightning. Taylor and Johnson crept into my camp (tent.)" Thunder can terrify the bravest of men.

Floyd's party continued surveying down the Ohio and then worked their way overland towards the Elkhorn. Floyd came down sick so "we gave him an Indian sweat, which gave him some ease." Young active men eat a lot and soon they "were very short of provisions," until two hunters brought down two elk. The men were uneasy at trespassing on the Indian's lands and when they "heard the report of a gun" they hurried off. The next day "we heard the voice of one man calling to another, which made us imagine there were Indians about, therefore as soon as night came on we went about 3 miles up the river and lay without fire."

On the 26th of April, "We went to one of the main branches of Elk Horn Creek & there began our survey. It thundered and rained---we had to swim the creek, with our Guns, & Packs, on our heads. Our survey begin on the North Branch of Elk Horn Creek, about 7 or 8 miles from the

