Bryan, William [1]

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by John K. Bryan, Jr., 1979

ca. 1733–80

William Bryan, early Yadkin River [2] settler and Kentucky pioneer, was born in the vicinity of Winchester, Va., the fifth son of Morgan [3]and Martha Strode Bryan. His father had helped settle a large number of families in northwestern Virginia on a one-hundred-thousand-acre grant he and a Quaker [4]business partner obtained in 1730 from Virginia's government. In subsequent years, Morgan Bryan [3] moved his family deeper into the Shenandoah Valley, as his land-trading activities and the needs of his growing family dictated. By the late 1740s, some of William's older brothers and sisters had married. Since the Shenandoah was being settled rapidly, the entire clan set out, under Morgan Bryan's leadership, for a new frontier region where land would be cheaper and more abundant. The location selected was the area between the Forks of the Yadkin River in what was then Anson County [5], N.C.

William's family made the long journey to the south by way of the Staunton River Gap, where relatives had established themselves on the site of the present Roanoke, Va. They arrived on the Yadkin in the spring of 1749, and Morgan and his older sons began purchasing large tracts of choice land from Lord Granville, whose extensive Crown grant [6]included most of the northwestern part of the colony. By 1753, when Rowan County [7] was created from a part ofAnson [5], the area in the Forks of the Yadkin in what is now Davie County [8] had become known as the Bryan Settlements.

Within three years of the Bryans' arrival, theMoravians [9] from Pennsylvania bought land from Granville for theirWachovia [10]settlement a few miles east of the Bryan Settlements. Families from Virginia and Pennsylvania followed, including that of Squire [11]and Sarah Boone, with their eight sons and four daughters. In 1755, William Bryan married nineteen-year-old Mary Boone, daughter of Squire and Sarah and sister of Daniel Boone [12].

According to tradition, Daniel Boone first encountered his future wife, Rebecca Bryan, at that wedding. Rebecca was William Bryan's niece, daughter of his older brother Joseph. Daniel and Rebecca were married in the Settlements the following year. Tradition has it that the ceremony was performed by old Squire Boone [11], then a Rowan County justice. In later years, two more of William Bryan's nieces became his sisters-in-law by marrying younger brothers of his wife: Martha Bryan, Rebecca's sister, married Edward Boone; and Ann Linville, daughter of William and Eleanor Bryan Linville, married George Boone.

Very likely, William and Mary Bryan established themselves in a newly constructed cabin on one of Morgan Bryan's tracts in the Settlements. Rowan County records contain very few references to land transactions involving William; it appears, therefore, that he was not involved in real estate speculation to the same extent as his father and other family members. Neither does it appear that William developed a large permanent farm, as did his brothers Samuel [13]and John. William's close ties with the venturesome Boone brothers may have led him to spend more time hunting and trapping than clearing and planting.

Bryan and most of his brothers served in the local militia during the Cherokee uprising of 1758–61. After the death of his parents in 1762–63, he and his six brothers and their sister, Eleanor Linville, shared in the division of the estate. In 1764, Bryan purchased his father's Mansion plantation on Deep Creek from his younger brother Thomas, who had inherited it. The Bryans were apparently well liked by their Moravian neighbors, even though their casual Christianity sometimes scandalized the disciplined brethren. "Billy" Bryan was a particular favorite in Wachovia. Traveling Moravian preachers were often guests in his home, and in later years some of his Moravian friends invested in his Kentucky land venture.

Some time after Squire Boone's death in 1765, the widowed Sarah Boone came to live with her daughter Mary and son-in-law William. A Moravian minister mentioned having seen "old Mother Boone, a Quaker," in Bryan's home in 1772. He also noted that Bryan's cabin was on the south side of the Yadkin at the western curve of the bend; this would place it just south of the "shallow ford" crossing of the Salisbury-Wachovia road near Samuel Bryan [13]'s estate and four or five miles from Morgan Bryan's original Deep Creek property.

William and his younger brother Thomas were greatly interested in Daniel Boone's expeditions into Kentucky. William, his nephew John Bryan, Jr., and possibly Thomas were members of the Boone party that set out for Kentucky—then part of Fincastle County, Va.—in September 1773. The group turned back a few miles short of the Cumberland Gap when Boone's sixteen-year-old son was killed by Indians.

In its preoccupation with the growing rift with England, the colonial government in Williamsburg could not control the pressure of Carolina frontiersmen upon Kentucky. Settlement was discouraged, and Kentucky pioneers had no hope of military protection from Virginia. Nevertheless, the Boones, Bryans, and many other Rowan County relatives and friends continued their explorations of the "dark and bloody ground" in 1774. Shortly after James Harrod built his first permanent

"station" in Kentucky, Daniel Boone established Boonesborough. William Bryan and his party used Boonesborough as a base of operations while exploring the Elkhorn River area to the north.

At about the same time, Colonel Richard Henderson [14] of Rowan County formed the Transylvania Company [15] and purchased all of Kentucky from the Cherokees, in spite of the tribe's dubious right to sell it. Trail cutters under Boone began building a crude road for the company from the Holston River through the Cumberland Gap in the spring of 1775 to facilitate the sale of Kentucky land to settlers. Virginia acted promptly to thwart Henderson's scheme. Abandoning its futile discouragement of settlers, Virginia declared the Transylvania purchase illegal and passed a law offering four hundred acres of Kentucky land free to anyone who raised a crop and made "improvements" on his claim before 1 Jan. 1778. The new law also allowed such settlers to preempt an adjoining thousand acres for forty shillings an acre. This action killed the Transylvania venture and opened what became Kentucky County, Va., to settlement.

Daniel Boone moved his family to Boonesborough in the fall of 1775. The following spring, Bryan led a party to start construction of Bryan's Station sixteen miles north of Boonesborough on the Elkhorn River, near the present Lexington, Ky. Bryan became ill before reaching the Cumberland Gap and had to turn back. His party reached the Elkhorn, however, where they cleared and planted sixty acres and built a few cabins. Two black men stayed to tend the corn crop, and the Bryan party returned to the Yadkin to prepare to bring their families to the station in the fall. The concern of the Shawnees and other tribes north of the Ohio River grew as increasing numbers of whites pushed into the Indians' traditional hunting grounds from the south. They appealed to the British commander at Detroit, who at first tried to placate them. As the colonial rebellion grew, however, the British began encouraging the Indians to drive the settlers from Kentucky. This increasing Indian activity persuaded Bryan to delay his plans to establish his Bryan's Station outpost.

In early 1776, Bryan declined a proffered commission from North Carolina's royal governor to raise and lead a Loyalist [16] militia company. His brother Samuel accepted a similar offer and marched his company from the Forks region eastward that spring to meet disaster at Moore's Creek [17] at the hands of rebel militia. Loyalist-Rebel confrontations grew more acrimonious after the Declaration of Independence, and by the later part of 1776, the rebels were in control of Rowan County government. By then, the Forks region—particularly the Bryan Settlements—was regarded as a center of Loyalist sentiment. Many members of the Bryan, Hunt, Hampton, and other prominent area families may not have shared Samuel Bryan's keen sense of duty to the king, but they did react cautiously to cries for American independence. As propertied citizens, they had much to lose from the economic and political anarchy that seemed to lie ahead, and because anything less than wholehearted support of independence amounted to disloyalty to the new state government, many were branded Tories. This status undoubtedly gave William Bryan and his relatives additional incentive to forsake Rowan County for Kentucky.

Thomas Bryan, William's younger brother, died in early 1777. His widow later sold his Kentucky property to William, who had helped Thomas establish the land claim the previous summer. Later in that eventful year, William's oldest son, Samuel, together with George Boone and other Rowan County men, went to the relief of Boonesborough in response to Daniel Boone's urgent request for help in holding off an Indian assault. The year also saw the Bryans and their relatives excluded from the militarily oriented Rowan County government—several of them, like Tory Colonel Samuel Bryan, having shown themselves to be Loyalists.

During 1778, pressure from the radicals increased. Rowan County court records of August list William Bryan and his sons Samuel and Daniel as Tories, along with brothers John, James, and Samuel and six nephews. The records also show that brothers Morgan, Jr., and Joseph took the state's Oath of Allegiance. In addition, heads of some of the related Hunt, Hampton, Hinkle, Linville, Forbus, Boone, Howard, McMahan, and Wilcoxen families were listed as suspected Tories.

According to a contemporary Moravian account, William Bryan planned to return to Kentucky in the spring of 1778. He did not go, perhaps being dissuaded by the return from Boonesborough of Rebecca Bryan Boone and her children, following the capture of Daniel by the Shawnees under Blackfish. In the spring of 1779, however, William finally returned to Bryan's Station in the company of his brothers Joseph, Morgan, Jr., and James and several of their sons. They built more cabins and began a stockade to enclose an area about thirty yards square. William's eldest son, Samuel, and his brother-in-law, William Grant, brought their wives and children to the station that spring, and others of the Bryan-Boone clans arrived in Boonesborough. After planting crops, William and his brothers returned to the Yadkin to ready their families for the trip.

In the fall, Bryan led a caravan of several hundred people along Boone's Wilderness Road into Kentucky. A participant later described the scene as "like an army camping out," with wagons strung out over half a mile along the narrow trace. They were unable to draw together at night for protection and unable to build fires for fear of attracting Indians. It was the largest single migration into Kentucky at that time.

Upon arrival, the party dispersed to various stations. At Bryan's, the men continued to enlarge the stockade and add more cabins—many of them two-family houses facing the center of the enclosed area with their thick rear walls an integral part of the palisaded perimeter. The stockade did not completely enclose the houses within for nearly a year and the two-story corner blockhouses were not completed for some time. Bryan and his cofounders all had two-acre lots at the station.

In October 1779, four land commissioners arrived in Kentucky from Williamsburg and began making the rounds of the several stations and small forts to process land claims. They arrived at Bryan's Station in January 1780. To add to the discomfort of short rations and the snow and ice of an unusually severe winter, William and his brothers learned that most of the land they had claimed lay within a survey completed a year earlier on behalf of absentee Virginia land speculators.

When spring came, the Shawnees took the warpath in greater numbers than ever to avenge raids on their villages

conducted the previous fall by nearly three hundred Kentucky militia (including some of the younger Bryans). Several settlers were killed in scattered Indian raids, including sixteen-year-old William Bryan, Jr. A few weeks after his son's death, the intrepid Billy Bryan was mortally wounded when his hunting party was ambushed. He died shortly after making a will dated 23 May 1780.

Leaderless and disheartened, the Bryans began the long trek back to the Forks of the Yadkin in early autumn, returning, as Daniel Bryan later put it, "from the troubles of Kentucky to the troubles of North Carolina." Daniel also recalled that his arrival in Rowan County with his widowed mother found the man who had bought their Yadkin farm but had not yet paid for it "anxious to give it up, that he might get rid of the difficulties of the British and Tories and return to Virginia. We traded to him the pack horses that we had returned to Carolina on for the truck and corn. . . ."

Mary Boone Bryan stayed on the old Bryan Settlements farm until the fall of 1785. With her son Daniel and his family, she moved back to Kentucky to occupy her brother Daniel's farm on Marble Creek, Fayette County. She died in Kentucky in 1819.

No Bryans were present at Bryan's Station at the time its garrison withstood the famous Tory-Indian siege of August 1782. Eventually, however, the surviving founders of the station returned to Kentucky and lived out their years there. None of William and Mary Boone Bryan's nine surviving children remained in North Carolina. Most, like Daniel Bryan, established themselves in eastern Kentucky. When the Indiana Territory was opened to settlement after the defeat of the Shawnees at Tippecanoe, Samuel Bryan moved to central Indiana from Kentucky with two of his sons.

Both Samuel and Daniel received pensions for Revolutionary War service in Kentucky. Daniel gained some measure of fame with a small book of poetry, *The Mountain Muse* [18], which idealized some of the adventures of his uncle and namesake, Daniel Boone (Boone characterized the book, published in 1813, as rubbish). Daniel Bryan also furnished later interviewers and correspondents with many firsthand memories of the settlement of Kentucky, material since drawn upon by many historians.

For several years, Daniel battled in the courts with the Trustees ofTransylvania University [19] and others in an effort to recover some of his father's land on the Elkhorn. The school, first college west of the Appalachians, had been founded in 1780 with a gift of land including acreage to which William Bryan had been denied title. Ultimately, Daniel won back some of the land for which his father had fought and died.

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Additional Resources:

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