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The Journal of James Nourse, Jr.
1779-1780

Edited by Neal O. Hammon
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This brief journal was kept by James Nourse, Jr.¹ of Berkley, Virginia when he and his brothers traveled to Kentucky in the winter of 1779 and 1780. The purpose of this trip was to acquire land in the new country, so it was no coincidence that the journey began just after the Virginia Land Commissioners began hearing the settlers' claims at the frontier stations. Four years earlier, James Nourse, Sr.² had traveled to Harrodsburg and Boonesboro, and with the assistance of James Harrod, had staked out a large tract on the waters of the Licking River which he intended to secure with a military warrant. In all, he surveyed 3000 acres on this warrant plus 700 acres for "head rights." A note to his sons written prior to their departure explains the purpose of the proposed trip:

It is at the ferry of New River, called now or formerly, Maj. Englis' ferry, which is twelve miles from Col. Preston's³ that you are to inquire and leave word for Robert. Robert may Come in with Pharoah as soon as he has secured the three thousand and seven hundred acres, and assisted James and Charles to secure theirs and Joseph's [claim]. If Robert [should] chuse to stay and improve the lands, Pharoah must be sent [back] by some neighbor.

Efforts to locate the original manuscript have thus far been unsuccessful. Excerpts of this diary were first published in *James Nourse and His Descendants*, by Maria Catharine Nourse Lyle, 1897. Unfortunately, Mrs. Lyle did not bother to give the location of the journal, but did mention that many of the family papers

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¹ James Nourse, Jr. was born in London, England on 11 March 1758 and died near Bardstown, Ky. In 1799. All personal data on the Nourse family was obtained from *James Nourse and His Descendants*, Maria Lyle (Transylvania Printing Co., Lexington, 1897).

² James Nourse, Sr. (1731-1784) migrated to America in 1769 and settled near the Potomac River in Berkley, Va. (now W. Va.) He visited Kentucky in 1775, during which time he kept a journal which was later published in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. XIX, Nos. 2-4, 1925.

³ Col. William Preston was the surveyor of Fincastle County, Va. And resided in Drapers Meadows, now Blacksburg, Va.

were in the possession of the Nourse descendants who resided in Washington, D.C. A type-written copy of the journal was also obtained by Reuben T. Durrett, which is now in the possession of the University of Chicago Library. The quoted text, which is from this source, has never been published in full. It is hoped that one of the readers may be able to furnish information which will lead to the re-discovery of this historic document.

James Nourse, Sr. also included the mileage to various points along the way, as follows:

From Maj. Englis ferry to fort Chiss'tt, 25 miles. From there to Col. A Cambell's 33; to Capt. Thompson's, 17. To Wolf Hills where there was a smith shop, 20. To Capt. Shelby's-to Kings Mill, 14. To the blockhouse, 8. To the Ford of Clinch, 15; To Powell's valley, 56; to Boonsburg, 150. To the North River, 30. To the ferry on James River, 12. To the town of Fincastle, 46.⁴

James Nourse, Jr., and his brothers Charles and Robert waited until after Christmas to begin their trip. As the diary shows, they brought a wagon as far as Colonel Evan Shelby's farm, then proceeded westward on horseback following the route which is now generally referred to as the Wilderness Road.⁵ The family's slave, Pharoah, accompanied them on the journey. Prior to reaching Martin's Station, they were joined enroute by four other men, three of whom are identified as Alexander Reed, Easton, and Bowles. This trip was made during the coldest winter in Kentucky's history. The journal begins as follows:

JOURNAL

Monday, Dec 17th, 1779

Arrived with waggon and team at Col. Shelby's; the fore wheel broke.

[Tuesday, Dec] 28th

Set to making pack saddles, getting bells, etc.

⁴ "Englis" or Ingles Ferry was on the New River at the present Radford, Va. Fort Chiss'tt or Chiswell was located a few miles east of Wytheville, Va. Arthur Campbell's residence, called Royal Oak, was not far from Marion, Va. Captain Thompson's home appears to have been near the Seven Mile Ford or Chilhowie, Va. Wolf Hills was the early name for Abingdon, Va. Col. Evan Shelby and his son, Major Issac Shelby, the first governor of Kentucky, then lived near the present Bristol, Va. The "blockhouse" was located just south of the modern Gate City, Va., at Moccasin Gap. The ford at the Clinch River was just south of Clinchport, Va. and "Boonsburg" refers to Boonesboro.

⁵ The general location of this road is covered in *The Wilderness Road*, Robert Kincaid (Middlesboro, 1966). A more detailed description of the route is contained in my articles, "Early Roads into Kentucky," *The Register* of the Kentucky Historical Society, Vol. 68, No. 2, April 1970, and "The First Trip to Boonesboro," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 3, July 1971.

Wednesday[, Dec 29th]

Set off with our pack horses, got to Major B[ledsoes]⁶ where we had our horses shod.

Thursday, [Dec 30th]

Proceeded over a very ugly hill, and two or three of our packs troubled us. The path [being] narrow, [it is] very difficult for a waggon to go farther than the widow Elliot's. [We] got this day only 7 miles to Roberts mill where we got corn for our horses but could get no kind of fodder, and there being scarce[ly] any picking in the woods, they had the next morning got almost back to Major Blenchines⁷

Saturday[, 1 Jan 1780]

Got [to] Bercheers,⁸ only six miles from Roberts where we got plenty of fodder at a dollar a bundle.

Sunday[, 2 Jan]

A cold snowy day; arrived at the blockhouse about 12 o'clock. It is nothing but a common log house with the upper part built wider than the under. Not one waggon had been this far [in] three years past, which much surprised us.⁹ [There was] nothing to be had here so [we] proceeded over the north fork of [the] Holstein [River] to the last cabin in the settlement and for the first time turned our horses to cane. Here we overtook two fellow travelers to Kentucke—one of them having killed a Deer, we filled our hungry stomachs with fried venison and bacon.

Monday, [3 Jan]

[It was] cloudy and snow above ankle deep and no path broke; we did not proceed till near eleven o'clock, the traveling however is tolerably good, the ground being froze under the snow. [We] traveled only six miles to the head of Mauasen creek, which runs along the foot of Clinch Mountain.¹⁰ Plenty of Deer and Turkey here about. Camped by a good canebrake.

Tuesday, [4 Jan]

[This] morning our horses looked as well as when I paid ten dollars for fodder. Yesterday, Alexander Reed, one of the company, killed two turkeys, and this

⁶ Probably Major Anthony Bledsoe, who resided at Sapling Grove, which was not far from Shelby's and on the road to Kentucky. James Nourse, Sr. stopped here on his return from Kentucky, as did other travelers using this route.

⁷ The person who copied the original manuscript placed a question mark behind this name indicating he was unsure of the writing; this should probably read Bledsoe.

⁸ Brashears. At the time there were two roads from Shelby's to the blockhouse, as there are today. One went by the way of "Poor Fork," a branch of the Holston, and the other was farther south, and passed near the modern Kingsport, Tenn.

⁹ In 1775, Richard Henderson and his company had taken their wagons as far as Martin's Station, which was only a few miles from the Cumberland Gap. This journal indicates that the practice had ceased after 1776, when the Indians became hostile.

¹⁰ From the blockhouse westward, the old road nearly coincided with Highway US 25-58.

morning Charlie, to his satisfaction, brought down to the ground a large cock. Eat a hearty breakfast on stewed turkey and Bacon and then proceeded twenty-seven miles further [to] a good cane brake. [We] crossed [the] Clinch river about 3 o'clock; remember to keep just above the rapid and the ford is good. [We] camped two miles up the river [at] a good cane brake. Continuous to this river is a very mountainous country, tho' in some places there are fine bottoms.

Wednesday, January 5th, 1780.

Last night my sorrel mare got away from the rest of the horses. I followed her, [but] before I got her, [she traveled] as far as the block house.¹¹

Thursday, [Jan 6th]

[I] brought my mare back to camp [and] had a roast and boiled turkey for dinner.

Friday, [Jan 7th]

[We] staid at our camp, [so] that a couple of travelers might overtake us, which they did towards evening; one of them [is] named Easton, a Baptist preacher, the other a young man named Bowles. Employed ourselves mostly in hunting of turkeys which are plenty along the river but are very poor. Mr. Easton gave us prayers at night.

Saturday, [Jan 8th]

[We were] detained by another misfortune. Alex'r Reed, having one of his horses missing, which was not found till evening.

Sunday, [Jan 9th]

[Being] excessively cold, [we] could not get ready to continue our journey till near eleven o'clock. [We] crossed a run five or six times—mountains on each side. Camped by the north fork of Clinch [in] a good cane brake.¹² This day we [were] so unfortunate as to break our Dutch oven and loose the lid in the snow.

Monday, [Jan. 10th]

Monday morning I returned back to look for the lid of the dutch Oven, but could not find it. [It was] a cold snowy morning [and we] proceeded along Powell's valley, crossed the mountain and camped at the foot of it.¹³ Powell's mountain is a long ascent on the east side and short on the west. Wrote home by Maj. Shelby.¹⁴

Tuesday, [Jan 11th]

Tuesday crossed Walden's ridge, which we had been led to expect was almost unpassable, with the greatest [of] ease. Crossed Powell's river, turned down it about one mile to good cane and camped.

¹¹ On this day, James Nourse, Jr. backtracked 35 to 40 miles to recover his horse.

¹² They were then near the present village of Pattonville, Va.

¹³ The existing highway crosses the mountain opposite Sticklelyville, Va., but the old crossing place was probably farther west.

¹⁴ This entry would indicate that the travelers met Isaac Shelby on the road, and that he was returning from Kentucky.

Wednesday, [Jan 12th]

[This was] a bitter cold day [so we] endeavored to keep ourselves warm by making a good day's march. [We] reached by night a good cabin one mile from Trading creek—¹⁵ across Powell's river. This retreat [is] very acceptable for my brother Charles, Mr. Easton and Antony; when they came to the fire, found they had got their toes frost-bit, which obliged us to remain at the cabin the four following days. Labored under a disadvantage in getting meat for there was such a crust on the snow, it made too much noise for any chance in hunting. [We] lived entirely on poor turkeys, which we killed as they roosted on the river banks.

Monday, [Jan 17th]

Proceeded about nine miles to Martin's cabins.¹⁶

Tuesday, [Jan 18th]

[Traveled] fourteen miles to a big spring. Brother Charles killed a Deer.

Wednesday, Jan. 19th

[We] could get no further than the foot of Cumberland Mountain. [My horse,] Nabob, [was] giving out, either by the belly ache or the botts; gave him antimoney, put a blanket over him and left him by the fire all night, the weather being unusually cold.

Thursday, [Jan 20th]

The horse seemed much better. Proceeded over Cumberland [Mountain] with ease¹⁷ but the horse failing, did not get much further.

Friday, [Jan 21st]

[I] put no pack upon Bob—Drenched him well with salt and water, nevertheless it was with great difficulty we got to Cumberland river.¹⁸

Saturday, [Jan 22nd]

Agreed to cross the river [and we] find good cane about 2 miles from the ford and there pitched our tent; drenched Nabob with soapsuds and salts—¹⁹ seems very sick and I am much afraid he will not get over it.

¹⁵ Trading Creek is east of Hubbard Springs, Va. In this area the original road followed the route now designated US 58 Alternate, which runs north from Jonesboro, Va.

¹⁶ Martin's "cabins" or station was near the present Rose Hill, Va.

¹⁷ The crossing was at Cumberland Gap.

¹⁸ The Cumberland River ford was at the modern Pineville, Ky.

¹⁹ Suspecting that the horse Nabob or Bob had the "botts" a stomach parasite consisting of larva from the Botts Fly, the animal was "drenched" or given strong laxatives and emetics in an effort to purge him of the parasites. Unfortunately, such treatment would leave the horse in a weakened and dehydrated condition, which would have been very unhealthy in view of his past diet of cane and the extremely cold weather. When the horse did not improve, he was given soapsuds, which in those times contained lye, a poison. Dr. Paul Fenwick, DVM, of Louisville, Ky., expressed the opinion that the treatment was more responsible for the death of the horse than was the disease, under the conditions that prevailed.

Sunday, [Jan 23rd]

[In the] morning I found Nabob dead. Being out of fresh meat, Brother Charlie and [my]self agreed to go and try to kill some Buffalo, as we were informed they used [an area] about ten miles up a creek which makes into [the] Cumberland.²⁰ [We] took Anthony and Pharoah with us and proceeded on good ice near[ly] 12 miles up said creek. Saw a number of tracks and main buffalo path on one side of the creek but no buffalo.

Monday, [Jan 24th]

[We] proceeded still further up the creek till we found the tracks began to be very scarce, then thinking we had little chance, concluded to return. Coming back, came across them [and] shot down two, a bull and a fine fat barren cow, which we jerked up.

Tuesday, [Jan 25th]

[We] loaded our wallets [with the meat] and returned to camp well satisfied with our expedition.

Wednesday, [Jan 26th]

Proceeded—met Col. Swearingen, Capt. Duncan and others going to Berkely, [Virginia.]

Thursday, [Jan 27th]

[We] got to Richland creek [where there was] good cane.²¹

Friday, [Jan 28th]

[Traveled] to Lyn camp creek,²² [then] went down it two miles to cane and then but middling.

Saturday, [Jan 29th]

[We proceeded] to Laurel river; could get no cane tho' I have heard since there is good cane two miles up it. [I] wrote home from here by Col. Callimus.²³

Sunday, [Jan 30th]

[We] traveled fifteen miles to Raccoon creek and down the creek two miles to cane, [but it is] mostly eat out and what is not, [is] frost bit. [We] cut the tops for the horses but it does not seem to satisfy them; think they fall away.

Monday and Tuesday

Remained camped at Raccoon creek.

Wednesday, [Feb 2nd, 1780]

[This] morning, Charles bay mare shunk foal, a very unlucky circumstance, as it promised to be a very likely horse colt. [We] proceeded, however, to Rockcastle river [and] on the banks we got good cane for the horses.

²⁰ Only Straight Creek would fit this description.

²¹ The old road reached Richland Creek several miles north of Barbourville, Ky.

²² The party was then in the vicinity of Grey, Ky.

²³ Marquis Calmes had led a party to Kentucky in the spring of 1775 and for a time resided at Boonesboro. The meeting place was a few miles south of the present London, Ky.

Thursday, [Feb 3rd]

Endeavored for the far fork of [the] Rockcastle²⁴ but we could not reach it, so we camped by the side of a mountain, and was obliged to feed on corn. These two days last passed, I have scarce[ly] seen the track of a single deer, and all other game [is] very scarce.

Friday, [Feb 4th]

[We] went 4 miles to the far fork of [the] Rockcastle, and there camped and staid to recruit our horses. Went up a river a buffalo hunting without success, [and were] obliged to eat our Bacon.

Saturday, [Feb 5th]

[We] made an early start and went 20 miles to Silver Creek [where there was] good cane.²⁵ [Noticed] some very good bottom land for about four miles along [the] Rockcastle, than came over a great deal of white oak—middling land.

Sunday, [Feb 6th]

Being almost out of meat, [we] went to the head of Silver Creek a buffalo hunting. In the afternoon killed a cow, [but it was] very poor meat. As we had not time to bring it home, we camped at the place, and in the night [there] fell such a snow that in the morning we could not tract our horses and the bells were out of hearing. [We] went to camp, got fresh horses and brought home our meat, but could not find those which were missing.

Tuesday [was] a very cold, windy day, and we could not find our horses. Thursday [we] found them.

Friday, [Feb 11th]

[We] proceeded and got within 10 miles of Boons [fort.]

Saturday, [Feb 12th]

[We] got to Boonsburg²⁶ [where there is] a great deal of cleared land about the town, tho' hilly. Bought two bushels of corn; gave as high as sixty dollars a bushel. By the quantity of corn people seem to have still by them, and [by] the great consumption there must have been, there were certainly great crops raised. [We] crossed [the] Kentucke river and camped on the hill over against the town.

Saturday,²⁷

[We] went ten miles to Strands station.²⁸ About the river the Land is very hilly (I am told it is so all the way down it) and not ever good. In about 7 miles came to very good lands. Strounds is such, but appears to be very heavy clearing. [I] found by making inquiries at Boons and here, that the lands my Papa located on

²⁴ The term "far fork of the Rockcastle" was then commonly used to designate Roundstone Creek.

²⁵ The men were then near the present town of Berea, Ky., and probably hunted at the Blue Lick on the following day.

²⁶ "Boons" and "Boonsburg" refer to Boonesboro.

²⁷ At this point, the dates of the entries become confused.

²⁸ Actually Strodes Station, which was located a few miles west of the modern Winchester, Ky.

[the] Licking [River] is in all probability taken up by preemption and settlements.²⁹

Sunday, Feb 13, 1780.

Enjoyed myself with reading [and] got acquainted with some of the people in the fort. Took a view of the fort and the lands about it; [it is] very heavy clearing, and a vast quantity of cane to ambush the enemy. The water is moreover very indifferent, and in all likelihood will be dried up in the summer. Neither do I think the garrison strong enough for a frontier station. For these reasons brother Charles and self agreed to move to some other.

Monday,

Mr [John] Stroud³⁰ [went] with Charles and Bob a hunting; [they] killed between them a buffalo calf, which Mr. Stroud gave entirely up to us, [so we] bade him a present of a piece of bacon.

Tuesday,

Myself intended to go to Harodsborg to see the commissioners and to endeavor to get a preemption for my father for his journey here in the year 1775. Ralph Morgan who was to ride with me and Capt. Swearingen could not find his horse, so it was put off till tomorrow. [It was] a rainy day [but] Bro[thers] Charles and Robert killed two bulls.

Thursday

Set off with Capt. Swearingen for Harodsborg by way of Bryan's³¹ and Lexington stations. Strouds station lies near a due north course from Boonsburg about 10 miles, [while] Bryans [is] about N.W. from Boons [at a] distance [of] 16 m[iles.] On my journey to these two stations, [I] was obliged to avoid a very thick cane break and keep near a south course from Strouds, then [proceed] to the west till we got upon the ridge which divides the Elkhorn from the Licking Creek waters. Along this ridge where there are vast cane breaks, there has been during the winter a great resort of buffalo, as we judged from the quantities of dung, but the snows how wetted off the ground, they have now left it. The lands along this ridge is very good and in many places we came across sink holes, where I do not doubt in the least but water would be easily got at. As we came upon Elkhorn waters, [we] got upon lands which seem to me to be of the very best quality, and I believe it is. The soil [is] very dark, and by the roots of the trees which were blown down, I could discover no variation. The ground even in this season of the year [is] green with cloves and wild rye; the growth [of trees consist of] black

²⁹ This was probably true, as the Kentucky land records show that James Nourse, Sr. only salvaged 1000 of the 3000 acres that he claimed on the Licking, although he managed to obtain an additional 1000 acres at another location with the same military warrant, which was issued for service during the French and Indian War.

³⁰ Captain John Strode, often spelled Stroud, had erected this station in 1779.

³¹ Bryan's Station was located about 8 miles northeast of the center of Lexington, and at that time was one of the largest forts in Kentucky. In August, 1782, 44 riflemen defended this fort against attack of 400 or so Indians.

walnut, wild cherry, locust, Ash of different sorts, [and] shell bark hickory. I thought I has got into a garden spot, but found the lands continued nearly the same all the way to Bryan's. This [station] is in a very pretty situation of the Elkhorn waters. [We] found the station so full of inhabitants there was no chance of my getting in.



So ends the journal. James Nourse, Jr. reached Harrodsburg safely, and was heard by the land commissioners who were then in session at the fort. As the result of his efforts, he and other members of the family eventually received land grants in Kentucky amounting to over 50,000 acres.³²

James and his brother Robert first established their home on Goose Creek, near Louisville, in a house he described as "sort of a bachelor's hall." In the spring of 1781 both men moved to Central Kentucky, and lived on the Salt River, due west of Danville. Later James met Sarah Benois, and they were married in 1789. The couple resided in Bardstown, where he practiced law.

James Nourse, Jr. died in 1799, at the age of 41; his death occurred nearly 20 years after he had made the first entry in this journal.

³² The Kentucky land records show that James Nourse, Jr. was awarded 1000 acres on "Bowman's Creek" in "Fayette County" by virtue of having purchased an old military warrant from "Major General Charles Lee." Both his father and brother Joseph also obtained land in the area by reason of having similar military warrants issued "under the King of Great Britain's proclamation of 1763" for service in the French and Indian War. No member of this family ever applied for nor received land by virtue of settlement rights in the state, nor did they use any Revolutionary War warrants to obtain land in Kentucky. Most of the land granted to the Nourse family was from consideration of Treasury Warrants issued by Virginia.