WHO WAS JOHN FLOYD?—A story by Bob Hill

13 June, 1774 Monday

Mr. Douglas made a survey for Mr. (William) Christian of 1000 acres round the Lick, then marched off for Salt River. We went five miles & met with a branch & called it Floyd's River…

-Thomas Hanson’s 1774 Kentucky Surveyor’s Journal

And so it went and was later duly noted in the book “John Floyd – Frontier Surveyor” by Kentucky historian Neal Hammon that on June 13, 1774 a small band of Kentucky’s very early surveyors pushed through the virgin wilderness along the Salt River near what is now Shepherdsville, came across a stream without a name and honored their leader, John Floyd, by naming the stream for him.

And so it came that more than two centuries later this same branch of water – renamed Floyds Fork – would become the centerpiece of about 4,000 acres of protected Louisville park land flanking more than 20 miles of the fork from Shelbyville Road to Bardstown Road.

The Parklands of Floyds Fork will be part of a nearly 100-mile loop of protected land around Louisville, reaching southward toward Bullitt County and the Salt River where those early surveyors made history and helped create the famed Wilderness Trail.

The land will be a future asset to the city. But what of its past? What of John Floyd, a man who was among the first to reach the Falls of the Ohio, a man whose leadership helped survey and carve a new state out of the wilderness, a man whose loyalty and skills led him to write a long series of letters to friends back in Virginia that put enduring words to that difficult and bloody era of Kentucky history?

What of John Floyd, a man who worked for the great Virginia surveyor William Preston – and in turn surveyed land for Patrick Henry and George Washington. What of John Floyd, who won the admiration of Daniel Boone – whose daughter he helped rescue from Indians – and George Rogers Clark, the great military hero who would ask Thomas Jefferson to pick Floyd to lead and protect that first band of settlers at the Falls of the Ohio, making Floyd, in effect, the first ever head of local Louisville government?

Clark described Floyd to Jefferson as “a gentleman who would do honor to the position and known to be the most capable in the county, a soldier, a gentleman and a scholar whom the inhabitants, for his actions, have the greatest confidence in…”

And Boone, his life’s deeds enhanced to folklore status by books and articles of his day and television and movies in ours, once confessed to a friend that had John Floyd lived longer the tangled legal and land-holdings hassles that drove Boone penniless – and eventually to Missouri – could have been avoided.

What of John Floyd, the land entrepreneur who was made head of the first Kentucky militia during a time of bloody victory and horrible defeats, one labeled the “Long Run Massacre” and the other “Floyds’s Defeat.”

What of John Floyd, who was part of a 1775 gathering at Boonesborough that helped establish the colony of Transylvania – the earliest form or government west of the Allegheny Mountains?

What of John Floyd, who lived near the Falls of the Ohio at a time so dangerous forty-seven settlers were killed or captured by Indians from January to May in one year, a man who complained – with reason – of the futility of being in charge of a militia as war raged with the British-supplied Indians and Floyd was “without ammunition or horses.”

What of John Floyd, who helped lay out the town and served as one of its first judges when the land around Louisville was swamp, cane brake and wilderness and attacks by Indians were common? Floyd wrote about that, too. “Two men bring accounts that 600 English with united enemy Indians are now preparing to march against the Falls with artillery…hardly one
week passes without someone being scalped…and I have almost gotten too cowardly to travel about the woods without company.”

What of John Floyd, who during the Revolutionary War returned to his native Virginia and was given command of a privateer ship, the Phoenix, and began searching for British commerce to plunder? His boat was captured by the British and Floyd was taken to England to prison. He either escaped prison or was freed by British judges – history offers two versions of that point in his life.

Either way, in time Floyd made his way to Paris, France and got back home to Virginia on a French vessel with the help of Benjamin Franklin – but not after purchasing a handsome scarlet cape, or so many Floyd stories say, that became his trademark.

What of John Floyd, who after returning to Virginia gathered up his wife and son, three brothers and two sisters in 1779 and returned to the Falls of the Ohio to reclaim the 2,000 acres of prime land along Beargrass Creek in what is now St. Matthews – the land he’d first claimed for himself during in that 1774 surveying trip to Kentucky?

What of John Floyd, who on that return trip in 1779 also helped found and guide a string of six pioneer “stations” along Beargrass Creek – including “Floyds Station” near what is now Breckenridge Road and the urban clutter of DuPont Circle?

These stations were vital to Kentucky’s survival and future because they established a farming presence away from the Falls of the Ohio. They also provided early settlers with some security, drinking water, a small sense of community, rooms to rent, a possible “manor” house for the biggest land owners and – eventually – all too useful family cemeteries.

What of John Floyd, who often expressed unhappiness with his lot near the Falls of the Ohio and with bitter humor once wrote home saying that the only reason the Louisville area wasn’t deserted was that the Ohio River only ran one way?

Floyd’s gloomy letters – many detailing the deaths of his siblings and friends – left the impression he feared that he, too, might die in the wilderness. His prophecy came true. In April, 1783, his party was attacked by Indians near what is now Brooks, Ky., while on an expedition to Bullitt’s Lick near Shepherdsville.

Badly wounded, Floyd was taken to a cabin owned by James Moore in an area near present-day Okolona called “Fishpools” – big sinkholes that led to caves and underground streams. Floyd died two days later, on April 10, 1783. He was 32 years old – too young to leave a remembered legacy, or further build the one he had started.

“He got killed too soon,” is the succinct way biographer Neal Hammon explains why Floyd faded into history.

Hammon’s opinion has the ring of authority. He worked more than 30 years gathering information on Floyd and put all that research into a 167-page, carefully footnoted, double-spaced typewritten manuscript that never found a publisher. Its full title is “John Floyd – Frontier Surveyor – His Life and Letters.”

Hammon, 84, a lifelong-architect, is the son of famed Louisville architect Stratton Hammon. He lives in his self-designed Colonial-style home south of Shelbyville built on land once owned by Squire Boone – Daniel’s brother.

He is a long-time contributor to the Filson Historical Society and spent years researching Kentucky history in his travels around the state. He is author or co-author of three books, “Virginia’s Western War, 1775-1786,” “Early Kentucky Land Records: 1773 -1780” and “My Father, Daniel Boone,” – a compilation of interviews with Daniel Boone’s son and daughter-in-law.

Hammon believes Floyd was probably more famous than Boone when he died, but was then quickly forgotten as other settlers and land-owners pushed through Kentucky and beyond.

“He was one of the big leaders in Kentucky,” said Hammon. “He came in here with a crew in 1774 and his group surveyed all the land around Louisville, every bit of it…and they surveyed everything from Frankfort over to Lexington, and beyond, and to the Kentucky River down to Boonesborough.
“Floyd was more of a leader than Daniel Boone was, and certainly he was more talented when it came to surveying land and the ins and outs of government and running things…And he knew more people that counted.”

After his death, Floyd's body was taken by wagon to the cemetery at Floyds Station for burial. And he hasn’t been totally left out of the history books; Floyd County in Kentucky is named for him, as is Floyd Street in Louisville, the small Oldham County community of Floydsburg and, of course, Floyds Fork.

A son – John Floyd – born just 11 days after his death – would become governor of Virginia, as would a grandson, John Buchanan Floyd. His widow, Jane Buchanan Floyd, would marry Captain Alexander Breckenridge – which gave Breckinridge Lane its name.

The marriage also created the Floyd-Breckinridge Cemetery, where the body of John Floyd and many members of the two families would be buried in what was then a rural area surrounded by farm land near Breckinridge Lane. But over the years, as the land changed hands and various deeds fell into dispute, the cemetery was all but forgotten; no one still sure of its exact size or who was buried in it – or even if John Floyd's body has remained in it, creating a touch of mystery to the legend.

The old Floyds Station springhouse near the cemetery was also vandalized – and eventually rebuilt to about half its original size. It wasn’t until the 1920s when the Filson Historical Society became involved that the cemetery – and springhouse – would be saved, although forever all-but-hidden from public view.

A Filson Historical Society history of the graveyard written by an Alexander Booth said, “About 1920 certain members of The Filson Club (then its name) became interested in the Floyd-Breckinridge Graveyard. A committee was formed to investigate it…and on September 24, 1921 they signed a memorandum relating to the graveyard, which reads in part as follows:

“In the N.W. corner of this long abandoned graveyard are a number of small, crude and unmarked headstones, also many broken slabs of stone representing what may have been about a dozen stone-box grave covers.

“What is now the ruins of the largest marker is represented by three sections of monument lying on the ground…On the base stone appear this inscription: “To the memory of Gen. Robert Breckinridge. Born in the year 1754. He died Sept. 10, 1833.”

More interesting, the report went on to say, “There were no inscriptions of any of the other slabs or stones, and nothing was found to indicate when or where the body of John Floyd had been buried before its removal.” The report said nothing else about any removal of the body – or where it might have been taken?

A photo of the day showed an abandoned, vandalized, animal-trampled and forgotten cemetery surrounded by farm fields. The Filson report said that during the 1920s and 1930s the tract of land, including the graveyard, “was in the hands of persons who were not co-operative with the desires of the Filson Club to preserve the historic site.”

Still, Filson members did what they could. A Floyd Memorial Committee was appointed to restore the graveyard, mark the graves and surround them with a stone fence, shrubs and trees – and repair the roadway to the burial ground.

Booth’s report said the Filson committee obtained gifts from the Floyd and Breckinridge descendants “and had handsome marble slabs placed over the principal known graves in the area, with the pertinent data as to the Floyd and Breckinridge families fully set out on them.

“Nothing permanent could be done to preserve the graveyard, however, as the owners of the land were still uncooperative and would permit no permanent fencing which would cut down on the pasture area available for their use.”

Thus the gravesites of two of Louisville’s most prominent early families were apparently trampled by cattle until 1948 when “the property came into friendly hands.”

Filson members then raised $5,700 to hire the Carl Ray landscaping company to build the stacked native stone fences that surround the cemetery today, although it’s now fully surrounded by suburban houses and almost lost from sight save a turnaround off Jamestown Court in St. Matthews.
Much the same fate – if not worse – fell the old Floyds Station springhouse, which, still flowing water at times, has long been buried in a crease of land behind the looming Jamestown Apartments on Breckinridge Lane.

A great attempt to save the springhouse – and the entire Floyds Station area – was launched in the 1960s by the Filson Historic Society and the Historic Homes Foundation.

A Courier-Journal story said Filson member Bryan McCoy was leading a drive to raise about $250,000 to buy the entire 15-acre site from Jamestown’s developers. The plan was to rebuild the 1779 “fort” and add log houses, a trading station and a courtyard to serve as a major tourist site.

“The springhouse still stands, although it has lost its roof and vandals have stolen some of its stones,” the story said. “Nothing remains of the fort, but McCoy has excavated the foundations of a house that he believes was built by Colonel Floyd.”

Sounding very similar to what 21st Century Parks, Future Fund and Metro Parks Louisville would be doing along Floyds Fork 40 years later, the Courier-Journal story also said the 1960s preservation groups “want a strip of land 100 feet wide on each side of the Middle Fork of the Bluegrass Creek dedicated to public use. The strips run about three miles along the ribbon-like Middle Fork” – land now totally given to urban development and sprawl.

McCoy said the historical groups were trying to get the state, the city of St. Matthews or Jefferson County government interested in funding the project, with the federal government also a possible partner. He said the Jamestown owners had made an offer to sell the land – all the historic groups had to do was raise the money.

A subsequent report on the project said, “There was discussion with state officials about the site a state or county shrine, but the parties could not come to an agreement. Lots were reserved for the springhouse and cemetery in the subdivisions. The springhouse was rebuilt as a one-story structure by the city of St. Matthews, which owns and maintains it.”

And what of John Floyd? Try visiting The Parklands of Floyds Fork.

FLOYDS FORK

The man’s full name is James John Floyd, thank you. And all the 21st Century Parks fuss about that 20-mile-stretch of Jefferson County water and park that bears his name is well worth it.

But Floyds Fork doesn’t begin at Shelbyville Road nor end near Bardstown Road. The meandering, 62-mile river begins in long creases of sloping Henry County farm lands and woods. At least two smaller, often wet-weather branches formed in those slopes come together near Ballardsville in Oldham County to form the larger river.

From there Floyds Fork meanders through an area called Floydsburg where pioneer settler, surveyor and militia leader “Col. John Floyd” — the “James” lost to history — built a stockade in the 1770s. Only from there does the river slip into Jefferson County to begin its new life as a park. It exits to the south where it empties into the Salt River near Shepherdsville in Bullitt County.

There is a tendency to live for the moment when paddling along such a river, or walking its banks, to accept what the river gives in terms of natural beauty and serenity. We don’t always think about where the river has been, or where it is going.

So my journey this summer was to go with the flow; visit western Henry County where Floyds Fork begins and follow it to the Salt River where it ends. There is no one headwaters; the Floyds Fork watershed drains 284 square miles — and offers up a lot of stories.

One was in Henry County where William Potts, 68, greeted me at the porch door of his old white farmhouse, its long railing covered in potted plants, strips of bright shiny ribbons and country bric-a-brac; pink petunias, an angel in sweet, contemplative repose; three porcelain children climbing a wooden fence.

“My wife gets all that stuff,” he said. “She puts it up here and everything.”
The road near the front of his house is St. Estes Road. Potts said a man that owned a lot of land in the area was named Estes.

“And somehow or other, when he passed away, they put “Saint” on it,” Potts explained.

“Was he a pretty religious guy?” I asked.

“No, he wasn’t,” said Potts.

Potts has lived in the area 55 years. He led us to a grassy, sloping field behind his house with a long line of hackberry, ash and oak trees along its edge. Hidden there, in a deep ravine, was a thin run of water headed toward Louisville. “The water stays in it most of the year in some spots or pools,” Potts said of his Floyds Fork headwaters, “but not very many.”

Potts suggested I speak with his neighbor, Robert Morgan, whose farmhouse is perched on the long narrow Henry County ridge from which runoff for Floyds Fork falls off in one direction — and runoff for the Little Kentucky River the other.

Morgan, 87, was sitting on his front porch with his wife, Rose, 82. They were married in 1945, not long after he returned from a WW II POW camp. He’d been a tail gunner on a B-17 shot down near Berlin on his fifth mission. Anti-aircraft fire damaged the plane; a German fighter pilot finished it off.

“I bailed out, was wounded pretty badly and in a German hospital for a year and two days,” he said, “…liberated by the Russians…”

He bought his 137-acre farm in 1948 for about $100 an acre. Also working as a mailman, he and Rose built his house, the barn, the out buildings, raised cattle and seven children.

“There wasn’t no house here or nothing when I bought it,” he said.

That long ridge in front of his house was once the bed of the L&N railroad line. It carried mail, passengers and milk from Frankfort to LaGrange to Louisville — with stops at Smithfield, Tarascon and Jericho. Morgan pointed to a sloping piece of green pasture just above his house, a shallow, muddy pond dug into its flank.

“That's the starting of Floyds Fork,” he said.

A few days later I was standing in light rain where Floyds Fork empties into the Salt River. The fork is more of a force there; creating a big loop at Shepherdsville as if to take a better look; 30 to 40 feet wide as it pushes out of a tunnel of trees near a KOA campground and into the Salt.

The location is more forgotten history. A west branch of the famed Wilderness Trail ran through there. Salt from nearby licks was Kentucky's first industry. One of the earliest Kentucky settlements — Brashear's Station — was built there. And James John Floyd — his life, good works and heroic deeds much too lost in time — was killed by Indians just north of there on April 10, 1783.

And his river still runs through it all.