

McClelland's Station

In late October 1775, Robert Patterson “left the Pittsburg country . . . with John McClelland and family and six other young men for the promised land, Kentucky.” Patterson had heard about the beauty and bounty of Kentucky firsthand from such men as Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, and James Harrod while serving with them in Dunmore’s campaign against the Shawnee during the summer and fall of 1774. His companions were John McClelland (1745–1777) and his wife, Sarah (née Lowry); John’s brothers Abraham and Alexander; the brothers William and Francis McConnell Sr.; Francis McConnell Jr.; a cousin, Andrew McConnell (the McConnells all being cousins to Patterson); and two others, David Perry and Stephen Lowry (Sarah’s brother). Most of the party had been to Kentucky before and were eager to return and make permanent settlements. John and Alexander McClelland, William McConnell, Francis McConnell Jr., Andrew McConnell, and David Perry had just returned from an exploring trip that set out the previous April and spent several months surveying and making improvements in the vicinity of Elkhorn. William McConnell had first explored the Kentucky lands in 1774, and, as the most experienced, was probably the leader of this party.¹

The McClellands were from the southwestern corner of Cumberland County, Pennsylvania (today Franklin County), in the vicinity of Mercersburg. Cumberland was, at the time, a very large county that occupied much

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of south-central Pennsylvania. The family was almost certainly previously acquainted with Patterson, whose home was about eight miles to the north, near present-day McConnellsburg (today in Fulton County). The Patterson farm was located at the southern toe of Cove Mountain, along the military road cut by General John Forbes during the 1758 campaign against the French at the site of present-day Pittsburgh. Robert Patterson, prior to leaving for Kentucky with the McClelland party, was courting Elizabeth Lindsay, who lived on her father's farm in Franklin County, four miles southeast from Chambersburg. It would be five long years, however, before the two were able to wed. John McClelland, thirty years old as the adventure began, was the eldest of a large brood of children born to John Robert McClelland and the former Margaret Chiswell. His wife, Sarah Louise, was a year younger than her husband and the only daughter of Abraham Scott Lowry and Sarah Sterrett. Additional friends and family would soon join them in Kentucky.²

Robert Patterson (1753–1827), then twenty years old, was outfitted by his father for a wilderness expedition with provisions, clothing, and a new saddle in exchange for a promise to survey some land for him in Kentucky. The party of ten men and one woman set off from Pittsburgh, some in canoes, into which they had loaded such goods and supplies as was thought necessary to set up households in a new land, while some, apparently including Patterson, kept pace along the bank of the Ohio, driving a few head of livestock. These would be the first stock imported into Kentucky, nine horses and fourteen cattle. In November, after a journey of nearly four hundred river miles, the party reached the mouth of Salt Lick Creek, presently the site of the community of Vanceburg, in Lewis County, Kentucky.³

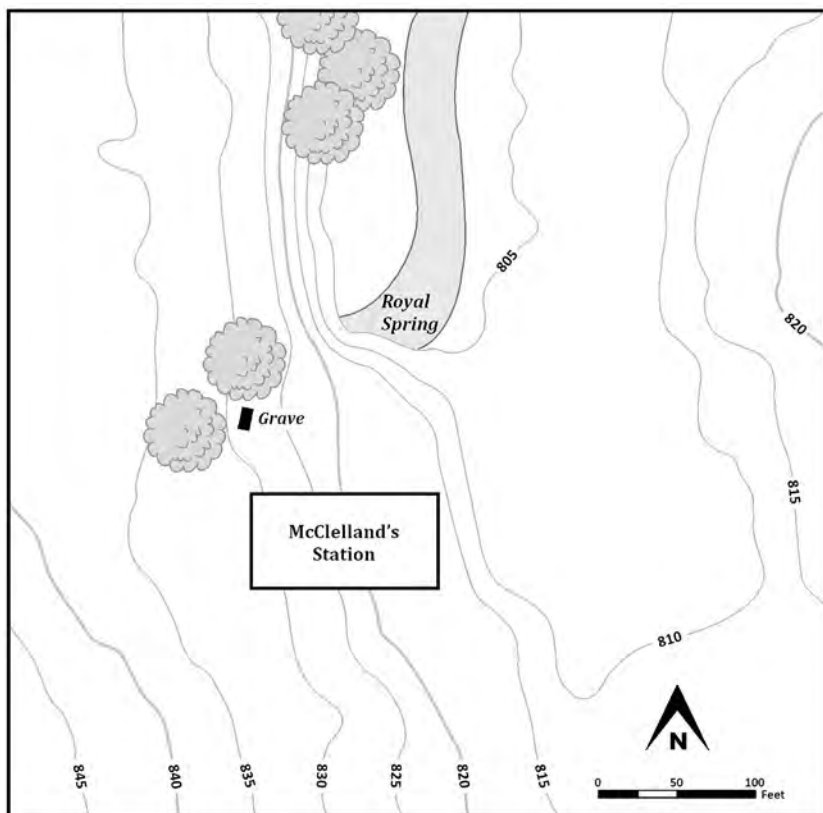
Here, the party divided, arranging to rendezvous in a few weeks at Leestown, a ford of the Kentucky River located about a mile north of where Frankfort would later be established. Most of the party, including the McClellands, remained with the canoes and continued down the Ohio River, planning to turn up the Kentucky River and follow it south-eastward to Leestown. This would require an additional journey of about 230 miles by water. Patterson, William McConnell, and Stephen Lowry bid farewell to the McClellands and, led by David Perry, turned their steps away from the Ohio River, driving the cattle and horses and scouting ahead for the best route for the animals. They headed almost due

west, following Salt Lick Creek for a time, crossing Cabin Creek (present-day western Lewis County), to Stone Lick (now Orangeburg in Mason County, about nine miles southeast from Maysville), and striking the old buffalo trace at May's Lick (Mason County) that led from the Ohio River to the Lower Blue Licks. They crossed the buffalo road and continued to the west a few miles until they encountered another trail known as the Middle Trace, and then turned southward and followed the trace to the Lower Blue Licks. Here Patterson and company ran into Simon Kenton and John Williams, who told them that they knew of no other white person then in the country.⁴

Herding the livestock, they crossed the Licking River at this point and traveled westward along another buffalo trace that led to Hinkston's Station (just south of present-day Cynthiana in Harrison County), from there following Townsend Creek southwest to yet another buffalo trail, known to the Indians as Alanant-o-wamiowee or the "Buffalo Path." This trail took them westward to Leestown on the Kentucky River, passing very near to Floyd's Spring along the way. Patterson and the other drovers had managed to reach the rendezvous ahead of the McClelland party, and there waited for them several days; when the canoes arrived and the separate groups were reunited, they lost no time in striking off to the east, following the same buffalo road back to Floyd's Spring. Clearly the McClelland party knew exactly where they were going to establish their settlement. John McClelland had very likely discovered Floyd's Spring during his explorations of the Elkhorn region a few months earlier, and was unaware that the land about the spring had been surveyed and claimed by John Floyd. At this spring, which was renamed Royal Spring, Patterson and the other men "helped to build a house and made our home until April [1776] when the young men of us built a cabin two miles below Lexington where Wm. McConnel formaly lived." Before the end of the year, they would be joined by additional family and friends, including Benjamin McClelland (another brother of John), John McCracken, John Lowry (another brother of Sarah), and James Sterrett (likely Sarah's uncle). The settlement at Royal Spring certainly constituted a closely knit group.⁵

In April 1775, John Floyd returned to Kentucky at the head of a party of thirty-two men; on the first day of May they arrived at a prominent spring on the headwaters of Dick's (Dix) River, known as Buffalo

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McClelland's Station. Size and position interpreted from notes by Lyman C. Draper, 1838, Draper mss., 16 J 35–36. Pioneer Levi Todd recalled a “woods” around the station. Although the settlers would have cleared most of the trees in the vicinity, according to Draper’s notes some few were left standing in the locations indicated. Map by Gary O’Dell.

Springs. Among the members of Floyd’s party were Joseph Drake, who five years earlier had been one of the long hunters who had first seen and named Dick’s River and probably served as guide to this location, and Benjamin Logan, who was to become one of the most famous military leaders of the frontier militia. Here, on a slight rise overlooking the spring, they began to erect a number of cabins, naming the settlement “St. Asaph’s” for a Welsh saint traditionally honored on May 1. For several years, Logan’s Fort at St. Asaph’s (today the site of Stanford in

Lincoln County), Harrod's Fort, and Fort Boonesborough were the only truly secure refuges in Kentucky, able to withstand a prolonged siege.⁶

Two days later, on May 3, Drake guided John Floyd twenty miles to Boonesborough, a little settlement that had been established on the Kentucky River only a few weeks before, the capital of Richard Henderson's infant Transylvania Colony. Floyd would use Henderson's settlement as his headquarters for the next eighteen months for surveying expeditions into the hinterlands until the partition of Fincastle County in December 1776 into Washington, Montgomery, and Kentucky counties. With Fincastle County abolished, Floyd lost his position as deputy surveyor and was recalled.⁷

In late April 1776, to his great distress, Floyd heard rumors that squatters had settled on the one thousand-acre Cave Spring tract (near the future site of Lexington) that he had surveyed for Preston in 1774 and on his own land around Floyd's Spring. On the first of May, Floyd, who was then camped at Powell's Valley on the Wilderness Trail en route back to Kentucky after a brief absence, wrote to Preston of the news he had been hearing from travelers heading back east. With the outbreak of the Revolution, a number of persons had fled from the virulent anti-loyalist sentiment of the East into the frontier. Floyd reported that eight Tories were now settled along the Elkhorn on William Russell's land and vicinity, and speculated, "I imagine some have got on yours, tho I can't learn for certain as yet." Before he completed the letter, he must have heard more, since he added a postscript, "The Cave Spring [Preston's] & my big spring are both settled & I don't know how to act." Soon after his arrival at Boonesborough, the rumors were confirmed. "My big spring," he wrote Preston on May 19, "is settled by a man who has his wife and family there, and has made large improvements and is determined, as I am told, to hold the land at the risk of his life."⁸

Almost immediately, an irate John Floyd set out to visit the Preston's Cave Spring tract and his own lands about the big spring to determine the circumstances and, if necessary, to evict the squatters. At the Cave Spring, he spoke with Francis McConnell, who appeared "very uneasy" in consequence of his unwitting infringement, but expressed a desire to purchase the land from Preston. At Floyd's Spring, the situation was not quite as he supposed, however, and when he confronted the McClellands, his anger quickly evaporated and was replaced by

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John Floyd surveyed thousands of acres of choice Kentucky land for his patron, William Preston, including one thousand acres around Preston's Cave Spring in Fayette County (above). Preston never traveled to Kentucky and saw none of the land claimed in his name. Photograph by Gary O'Dell.

compassion. Upon his return to Boonesborough, he wrote to William Preston on June 8 that "I paid one McClelland a visit, who lives at the big spring. I went determined to drive him off, but on seeing his wife & three small children, who must have been distressed, I sold it for £300, to be on interest for that time, if not punctually paid. I believe he is able enough." Tragically, before the sale could be finalized, John McClelland was killed during an attack on the station at the end of the year.⁹

Floyd's comment about the McClelland children is significant. At this early date, the settler population in Kentucky was almost exclusively male; women were few, and children fewer still. The McClellands had at least three very young children living with them at the station at the time of Floyd's visit, and possibly more that he did not see. These children were five-year-old Abraham McClelland; Margaret "Peggy"

McClelland, nearly three years old at this time; and Mary Ann "Polly" McClelland, a few months short of her second birthday. These would have been the children observed by John Floyd, the youngsters perhaps peering curiously at the stranger from behind Sarah's skirt. There are two other children reported to have been born to John and Sarah, although this is not consistent across the sources consulted: James, born in 1774, and John, born on March 3, 1775. These latter two, one a newborn, may have been considered too young to be outside and so escaped Floyd's notice. Sarah would continue to bear more children after the death of her husband and her remarriage to Joseph Wilson. Certainly, the sight of these children, a rarity on the dangerous frontier, provoked Floyd's sympathy.¹⁰

The fall of 1775 and spring of 1776 were relatively peaceful in Kentucky, but there was a distinct air of unease throughout the western country. The inhabitants of the frontier were worried that the Shawnee might renew their attacks across the Ohio at any time, or that the Cherokee might raid from the southeast. Settlers and speculators alike worried about the validity of their land titles, given the vast presence of the Transylvania Colony on the south side of the Kentucky River and the efforts of Richard Henderson and the proprietors to establish there a government separate from Virginia.

Even so, in recent months there had been many new immigrants into Kentucky. On May 19, John Floyd wrote to Preston, "Families are settled scattering all over the country & appear to be under no apprehension of danger." Even as Floyd was writing this assurance, the Cherokee, incited by British agents and emissaries from the Shawnee, declared war on the settlements near their tribal lands. In concert with this outbreak of hostilities to the east, in Kentucky raiding parties of the Shawnee began first with attacks on isolated individuals, then with increasing boldness against the settlements. The first Bluegrass settlement to be raided was Leestown, where in late April a band of warriors waded across the large buffalo ford of the Kentucky River and attacked, killing Willis Lee and wounding Cyrus McCracken. This attack prompted a quick flurry of stockade building and improvements to fortifications across the region.¹¹

Floyd's letter to his patron on July 21 reflected the heightened apprehension of the population: "The situation of our country is much

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altered since I wrote you last. The Indians seem determined to break up our settlement. . . . They have, I am satisfied, killed several which, at this time, I know not how to mention. Many are missing who, sometime ago, went out about their business who we can hear nothing of. Fresh sign of Indians is seen almost every day.” Floyd informed his employer that the inhabitants of Boonesborough were engaged in finishing a large fortification about the settlement, and that he had heard forts were being erected at Harrodsburg and at Royal Spring. Hinkston’s Station on the Licking River had been entirely abandoned, and to his knowledge, more than three hundred persons had fled the country in fear for their safety.¹²

Fortification of these stations was a united effort involving representatives from all of the settlements in the region working together. Among those helping to raise the fort on the bluff above Royal Spring (probably incorporating the McClelland house built in late autumn of 1775) were Robert Patterson, John Todd, and Simon Kenton. This was a strategic, if dangerously exposed, location, being then the only settlement north of the Kentucky River, more than forty miles in advance of any other.

Although there are a number of contemporary descriptions of the larger forts, such as those of Boonesborough, Harrod’s Fort, and Bryant’s Station, very little detail is available for smaller stations such as McClelland’s. No archaeological excavations have ever been made here, and so there is no physical evidence. If the city of Georgetown were able to acquire the Kentucky Utilities property south of the spring, where the fortified station was located, archaeological investigation might be able to reveal more of the nature of the settlement from peripheral deposits. Because the modern building was apparently constructed directly atop the station site, it is unlikely that any traces of the actual station have been preserved. The following hypothetical description of McClelland’s is derived in part from limited documentary evidence, and partly by drawing on more detailed descriptions of other pioneer forts and stations.

The best source of information concerning the characteristics of the pioneer station established at Royal Spring are the papers of Lyman C. Draper (1815–1891), an amateur historian and devoted chronicler of the trans-Allegheny region. As a child, Draper was regaled with the exploits of his grandfathers in the Revolutionary War and of his father in the War of 1812, and he developed a passion for history. In his readings, he discovered that different accounts of events were often inconsistent, and

concluded that the best way to discern the truth was from the testimony of the original participants, the frontiersmen and women who had explored the wilderness, founded precarious settlements, and fought in the battles to subdue the region. Draper was concerned that the pioneers of the West were growing old, and that many would die with their stories remaining forever untold. Recording these stories became his life-long obsession, and he corresponded with hundreds of early settlers and their descendants, and traveled extensively through the region to gain firsthand impressions of the territory.¹³

Draper visited Georgetown on August 25, 1838. The fortifications of the station had been dismantled long before, but there may have been some remnants or impressions in the soil, and at the time there were still persons living who were present during the attack in December 1776. Draper's notes for that date contain several sketches of the station in relation to the spring. When these sketches are evaluated in combination with his observations on the site and information from other sources, this allows a provisional reconstruction of some important aspects of the station: its location, size, shape, and internal layout. Of these, the greatest confidence can be attached to the location of the station. Draper describes the site: "The rocky cliff projecting over the spring is some 20 feet high, upon the top the ground ascends quite rapidly making the probable location of the fort some 40 feet higher or 60 feet above the level of the spring, ground then descending every way except to the west. From the summit immediately back, or south of the spring, is 40 paces, or about 120 feet, from the top of the cliff over the spring." The station was laid out on ground with a moderate incline. Kentucky archaeologist Kim McBride observed that it was not unusual for stations to be deliberately situated on sloping ground, as this provided a better view of the surrounding environment and so gave a defensive advantage. A position below the topographical crest on the slope toward a potential enemy is known as the "military crest" and allows maximum observation of the remainder of the slope. His sketches show the outline of the station on the hill above the spring with the long axis centered on the spring and perpendicular to the spring branch. Draper's calculation for the fort being 120 feet from the spring may be an overestimate of the length of a pace as being 3 feet long. I have taught "compass and pace" navigation as part of a course on maps for many years, and in my experience the average pace of a male is closer

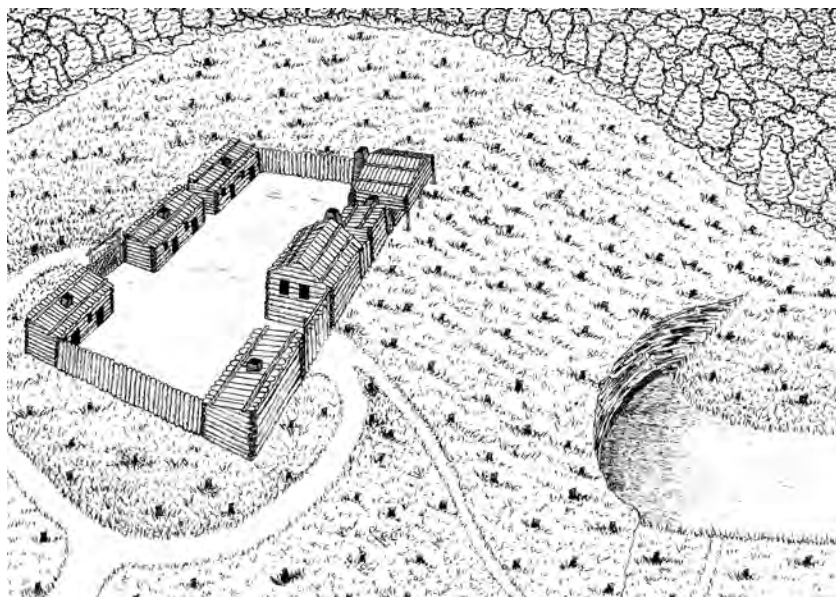
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to 2.5 feet than to 3 feet, and even less over rough ground. Accordingly, this would locate the fort at approximately one hundred feet from the edge of the bluff.¹⁴

The size of the station is more problematic. McClelland's was routinely occupied by six to ten family groupings, and Nancy O'Malley, a noted Kentucky archaeologist and expert on pioneer fortifications, estimates that as many as thirty families may have been living at McClelland's Station when it was used as a sanctuary in 1776. Although the pioneers in the region were accustomed to living in crowded conditions, this still indicates that McClelland's Station was a sizable structure, larger than most family-based stations if not quite on the scale of a regional administrative center like Harrod's Fort. Draper's notes provide a means to roughly estimate the size and shape of the fort at Royal Spring. His sketches show the fort as a rectangle, with a length roughly twice the width. He made three sketches of the fort and spring in his notes in an effort to get the proportions correct, the third being the most crudely drawn. Draper observed that the spring, at the cliff line, was "3 rods" across, or 49.5 feet, since a "rod" is equivalent to a pole, the standard length of 16.5 feet. His first sketch, which showed the spring as being almost exactly two-thirds the width of the fort would correspondingly require the fort to be at least seventy-five feet through the long axis. Draper, however, found his first sketch to be unsatisfactory, adding a side note that stated, "I see that the spring is too large for the proportionate size of the fort." This is corrected in his further drawings, which show the spring of a lesser width relative to the fort. In these, the spring is about half the width of the fort's long side, the latter of which accordingly would be about one hundred feet long, giving the fort dimensions of about one hundred feet by fifty feet. These must be considered as very crude approximations, since Draper's sketches were made freehand without benefit of a ruler or straightedge, and in fact he placed the fort proportionately much closer to the spring than the 120 feet he indicated was the distance between the two locations. Given the number of reported inhabitants of McClelland's station and typical dimensions of cabins within pioneer forts, a minimum size of 120 feet by 80 feet seems more reasonable.¹⁵

Lacking any sort of documentary evidence, the construction and internal layout of McClelland's Station is the most difficult aspect to assess with confidence, although much can be inferred from what is known

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McClelland's Station. Interpretation by Anna Thornton, Georgetown, Kentucky, based on research by Gary O'Dell.

of other forts and stations built during the settlement period. Detailed descriptions and plan sketches for many of the major Kentucky forts were obtained by Lyman Draper, and modern archaeological surveys have been conducted for a number of sites, some of which involved excavations and recovery of cultural artifacts. Fort Boonesborough in Madison County, Harrod's Fort in Mercer, and Bryant's Station in Fayette are among the best-known pioneer fortifications, each possessing richly detailed historical accounts. Of these, only the Boonesborough site has been subjected to professional archaeological investigation in modern times. Other sites for which limited archaeological investigations have been conducted yielding cultural artifacts include Daniel Boone's station in Fayette County, John Grant's station in Bourbon, and Hugh McGary's station in Mercer. Physical evidence obtained from such stations combined with their historical accounts and the more limited information available on McClelland's allow some probable conclusions to be drawn about the station founded at Royal Spring in 1774.¹⁶

This chapter continues for several more pages. I regret that legal restrictions imposed by the University Press of Kentucky do not allow me to post the entire chapter here.