

John Donelson's Journal

John Donelson

Diary

1779

The Original

“Journal of a voyage, intended by God's Permission, in the good Boat Adventure, from Fort Patrick Henry on Holston river to the French Salt Springs on Cumberland River, kept by John Donaldson.”

Decem. 22 1779

Journal of a Voyage, intended by God's Permission, in the good Boat Adventure, from Fort Patrick Henry on Holston river to the French Salt-Springs on Cumberland River, kept by John Donaldson

Decm. 22. 1779 Took our Departure from the Fort and fell down the river to the mouth of Reedy Creek, where we were stopped by the fall of water. and most excessive hard frost: and after much delay and many difficulties we arrived at the Mouth of Cloud's Creek, on Sunday evening the 20th Febry. 1780, where we lay by until Sunday 27th when we took our departure with sundry other vessels bound for the same voyage, and on the same day struck the Poor-Valley-Shoal, together with Mr. Boyd and Mr. Rounsifer, on which shoal we lay that afternoon & succeeding night in much distress.

Monday, Febry. 28th 1780 In the morning, the water rising, we got off the shoal, after landing thirty persons to lighten our boat. In attempting to land on an island, received some damage and lost sundry articles, and came to camp on the south shore, where we joined sundry other vessels also bound down.

Tuesday Proceeded down the river [and] camped on the north Shore, [the afternoon and] following [day proving rainy.]

Wednesday March 1st. Proceeded on and camped on the south shore, nothing happening that day remarkable.

Thursday March 2nd. Rain about half the day, passed the mouth of French Broad River: and about 12 O.'clock, Mr. Henry's boat being driven on the point of an island by the force of the current was sunk, The crew's lives much endangered, the whole cargo much damaged, which occasioned the whole fleet to put on shore and go to their assistance; but with much difficulty bailed her out & raised her, in order to take in her cargo again. The same afternoon Reuben Harrison went out a hunting and did not return that night, though many guns were fired to fetch him in.

Friday 3rd. Early in the morning fired a four pounder for the lost man, sent out sundry persons to search the woods for him, firing many guns that day and the succeeding night, but all without success, to the great grief of his parents and fellow travelers [i.e. travelers]. "Vale! Vale!"

Saturday 4th. Proceed on our voyage, leaving old Mr. Harrison, with some other vessels to make further search for his lost son;

about 10 O.'clock. the same day found him a considerable distance down the river, where Mr. Ben Belew took him on board his boat. At 3 O.'clock. P. M. passed the mouth of Tennessee river and camped on the south shore about 10 miles below the mouth of Tennessee.

Sunday 5th. Cast off and got under way before sunrise. 12. o'clock. passed the mouth of Clinch River. At 3 P.M. Came up with the Clinch river Company, whom we joined and camped, the evening proving rainy. * (Here follows the list.).

Monday 6th. Got under way before sunrise: the morning proving very foggy, many of the fleet were much bogged: about 10. O.'clock. lay by for them, when collected proceeded down. Camped on the north shore, where Capt. Hutchings' negro man died, being much frosted in his feet & legs, of which he died.

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|--------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| JohnDonelson Sr. | James Cain | Moses Rentfro |
| Thomas Hutchings | Isaac Neely | Wm. Crutchfield |
| John Caffery | John Montgomery | <u>Mr.</u> Johnes |
| John Donelson Jr. | John Cotton | Hugh Henry Sr. |
| James Robertson's Lady & Children | Jonathan Jennings | Benj. Porter |
| Mrs. Purnell | Benj. Belew | Thomas Henry |
| M. Rounsifer | Peter Looney | <u>Wm.</u> Cockrell |
| | Cap. John Blackemon | Frank Armstrong |

Tuesday, 7th. Got under way very early, the day proving very windy, a S.S.W. & the river being wide occasioned a high sea, insomuch, that some of the smaller crafts were in danger, therefore came to at the uppermost Chiccamauga Town, which was then evacuated, where we lay by that afternoon and camped that night. The wife of Ephraim Peyton was here delivered of a child. Mr. Peyton has gone through by land with Capt. Robertson.

Wednesday 8th. Castoff at 10 O'clock. & proceed down to an Indian village, which was inhabited, on the south side of the river, they invited on us to "come ashore", called us brothers, & showed other signs of Friendship, insomuch, that Mr. John Caffery & my son then on board took a canoe which I had in tow & were crossing over to them; the rest of the fleet having landed on the opposite shore. After they had gone some distance, a half-Breed who called himself Archy Coody with several other Indians jumped into a canoe, met them, and advised them to return to the boat,

Hugh Rogan.
Dan^l. Chambers
Robert Cartright.

----- Stuart.
David Guinne.
Reuben Harrison.

Frank Haney
----- Maxwell.
Solomon White.

which they did together with Coody and several canoes which left the shore & followed directly after him. They appeared to be friendly. After distributing some presents among them, with which they seemed much pleased, we observed a number of Indians on the other side embarking in their canoes, armed and painted red & black. Coody immediately made signs to his companions, ordering them to quit the boat, which they did, himself and another Indian remaining with us & telling us to move off instantly. We had not gone far before we discovered a number of Indians armed and painted proceeding down the river, as it were, to intercept us. Coody the half breed & his companion sailed with us for some time, & telling us that we had passed all the Towns & were out of danger, left us. But we had not gone far until we had come in sight of another Town situated likewise on the south side of the river, nearly opposite a small island. Here they again invited us to come on shore, called us brothers, & observing the boats standing off for the opposite channel told us that "their side of the river was better for boats to pass." And here we must regret the unfortunate death of young Mr. Payne on board Capt. Blackemores boat, who was mortally wounded by reason of the boat running too near the northern shore opposite the town where some of the enemy lay concealed, & the more

tragic misfortune of poor Stuart, his family and friends to the number of twenty eight persons. This man had embarked with us for the western country, but his family being diseased with the small-pox, it was agreed upon between him & the Company, that he should keep at some distance in the rear, for fear of the infection spreading: and he was warned each night when the encampment should take place by the sound of a horn. After we had passed the Town, the Indians, having now collected to a considerable number, observing his helpless situation, singled off from the rest of the fleet, intercepted him & killed & took prisoners the whole crew, to the great grief of the whole Company uncertain how soon they might share the same fate; their cries were distinctly heard by those boats in the rear.

We still perceived them marching down the river in considerable bodies, keeping pace with us until the Cumberland mountain withdrew them from our sight, when we were in hopes we had escaped them. ____ We were now arrived at the place called the Whirl or Suck, where the river is compressed within less than half its common width above, by the Cumberland mountain, which juts in on both sides. In passing through the upper part of these narrows, at a place described by Coody, which he termed the "boiling Pot;" a trivial accident had nearly ruined the expedition.

One of the Company, (John Cotton) who was moving down in a large canoe, had attached it to Robert Cartwright's boat, into which he and his family had gone for safety. The canoe was here overturned & the little cargo lost. The Company pitying his distress concluded to halt & assist him in recovering his property. They had landed on the northern shore at a level spot & were going up to the place, when the Indians to our astonishment appeared immediately over us on the opposite Cliffs & commenced firing down upon us, which occasioned a precipitate retreat to the boats. We immediately moved off, the Indians lining the Bluffs along continued their fire from the heights on our boats below, without doing any other injury than wounding four slightly. Jennings's boat is missing.

We have now passed through the whirl. The river widens with a placid & gentle current. And all of the Company appear to be in safety except the family of Jonathan Jennings, whose boat ran on a large rock projecting out from the northern shore and partly immersed in water immediately at the Whirl, where we were compelled to leave them perhaps to be slaughtered by their merciless enemies.

Continued to sail on that day and floated throughout the following night.

Thursday 9th. Proceed on our journey, nothing happening worthy attention today, floated till about midnight, & encamped on the northern shore.

Friday 10th. This morning about 4 o'clk, [i.e. o'clock] we were surprised by the cries of "help poor Jennings"; at some distance in the rear. He had discovered us by our fires, and came up in the most wretched condition. He states that as soon as the Indians discovered his situation they turned their whole attention to him & kept up a most galling fire on his boat. He ordered his wife, a son nearly grown, a young man who accompanied them, & his two negroes to throw all his goods into the river, to lighten their boat for the purpose of getting her off, himself returning their fire as well as he could (being a good soldier & an excellent marksman). But before they had accomplished their object, his son, the young man & the negro man jumped out of the boat & left them. He thinks the young man & the negro were wounded before they left the boat. Mrs. Jennings, however, & the negro woman succeeded in unloading the boat, but chiefly by the exertions of Mrs. Jennings, who got out of the boat & shoved her off, but was near falling a victim to her own intrepidity on account of the boat starting so suddenly, as soon as loosened from the rock. Upon examination he appears to have made a wonderful escape, for his boat is pierced in numberless places with bullets. It is to be remarked, that Mrs. Peyton, who

was the night before delivered of an infant, which was unfortunately killed in the hurry & confusion consequent upon such a disaster, assisted them, being frequently exposed to wet & cold then and afterwards, and that her health appears to be good at this time, & I think & hope she will do well. ~~Their clothes were very much cut with bullets, especially Mrs. Jennings's.~~

Saturday 11th. Got under way, after having distributed the family of Mr. Jennings in the other boats. Moved on quietly that day and encamped for the night on the north shore.

Sunday 12th. Set out and after a few hours sailing we heard the crowing of cocks, & soon came within view of the Town, here they fired on us again without doing any injury.

After running until about 10. o'clk. [i.e. o'clock] came in sight of the Muscle Shoals. Halted on the northern shore at the appearance of the shoals in order to search for the signs Capt. James Robertson was to make for us at that place. He set out from Holston early in the fall of 1779, was to proceed by the way of Kentucky to the Big Salt Lick on Cumberland river; with several others in company was to come across from the big Salt Lick to the upper end of the Shoals, there to make such signs that we might know he had been there, & that it was practicable for us to go across by land. But to our great mortification

we can find none. From which we conclude that it would not be prudent to make the attempt, and are determined, knowing ourselves to be in such imminent danger, to pursue our journey down the river. After trimming our boats in the best manner possible we ran through the shoals before night. When we approached them they had a dreadful appearance to those who had never seen them before. The water being high made a terrible roaring, which could be heard at some distance, among the drift-wood heaped frightfully upon the points of the islands; the current running in every possible direction. Here we did not know how soon we should be dashed to pieces and all our troubles ended at once. Our boats frequently dragged on the bottom. And appeared constantly in danger of striking. They warped as much as in a rough sea. But by the hand of Providence we are now preserved from this danger also. I know not the length of this wonderful shoal; it had been represented to me to be 25 or 30 miles: If so, we must have descended very rapidly, as indeed we did, for we passed it in about three hours. Came to & camped on the northern shore, not far below the Shoals, for the night.

Monday 13th. Got under way early in the morning and made a good run on that day.

Tuesday 14th. Set out early. On this day two boats approaching too

near the shore were fired on by the Indians. Five of the crews were wounded but not dangerously. Came to camp at night near the mouth of a creek. After kindling fires and preparing for rest, the company were alarmed, on account of the incessant barking our dogs kept up, taking it for granted that the Indians were attempting to surprise us, retreated precipitately to the boats, fell down the river about a mile, & encamped on the other shore. In the morning I prevailed on Mr. Caffrey & my son to cross below in a canoe, and return to the place; which they did, & found an African negro, we had left in the hurry, asleep by one of the fires. The Voyagers returned & collected their utensils, which had been left.

Wednesday 15th. Got underway & moved on peaceably the five following days, when we arrived at the mouth of the Tennessee, on Monday 20th. & landed on the lower point immediately on the bank of the Ohio. Our situation here is truly disagreeable. The river is very high and the current rapid. Our boats not constructed for the purpose of stemming a rapid stream. Our provision exhausted. The crews almost worn down with hunger and fatigue. And know not what distance we have to go or what time it will take us to our place of destination. The scene is rendered still

more melancholy; as several boats will not attempt to ascend the rapid current. Some intend to descend the Mississippi to Natchez: others are bound for the Illinois. Amongst the rest my son in law & daughter. We now part, perhaps to meet no more, for I am determined to pursue my course, happen what will.

Tuesday 21st. Set out & on this day laboured very hard & got but a little way. Camped on the south bank of the Ohio. Passed the two following days as the former suffering much from hunger & fatigue.

Friday 24th. About 3 O'clk. [i.e. o'clock] came to the mouth of a river which I thought was the Cumberland. Some of the Company declared it could not be, it was so much smaller than was expected: But I never heard of any river running in between the Cumberland & Tennessee. It appeared to flow with a gentle current. We determined however to make the trial Pushed up some distance & encamped for the night.

Saturday 25th. Today we are much encouraged. The river grows wider. The current is very gentle. And we are now convinced it is the Cumberland. I have derived great assistance from a small square sail which was fixed up on the day we left the mouth of the river. And to prevent any ill effects from sudden flaws of wind, a man was stationed at each of the lower corners of the sheet with directions to give way whenever it was necessary.

Sunday 26th. Got under way early. procured some buffalo-meat.

tho poor it was palatable.

Monday 27th. Set out again. Killed a Swan, which was very delicious.

Tuesday 28th. Set out very early this morning. Killed some Buffaloe. [i.e. Buffalo]

Wednesday 29th. Proceeded up the river. Gathered some herbs on the bottoms of Cumberland, which some of the Company called Shawnee Salad.

Thursday 30th Proceeded on our voyage. This day we killed some more Buffaloe [i.e. Buffalo].

Friday 31st. Set out this day and after running some distance met with Col. Richard Henderson, who was running the line between Virginia and North-Carolina. At this meeting we were much rejoiced. He gave us every information we wished And further informed us that he had purchased a quantity of corn in Kentucky to be shipped at the falls of Ohio for the use of the Cumberland settlement. We are now without bread and are compelled to hunt the Buffaloe [i.e. Buffalo] to preserve life. Worn out with fatigue our progress at present is slow. Camped at night near the mouth of a little river at which place and below there is a handsome bottom of rich land. Here we found a pair of hand-mill stones set up for grinding, but appeared not to have

been used for a great length of time.

Proceeded on quietly until the 12th of April, at which time we came to the mouth of a little river running on the north side, by Moses Renfoe & his company called Red River, up which they intend to settle. Here they took leave of us. We proceeded up Cumberland; nothing happening material until the 23rd, when we reached the first settlement on north side of the river, one mile & half below the Big Salt Lick, and called Eaton's station after a man of that name, who with several other families came through Kentucky & settled there.

Monday April 24th. 1780. This day we arrived at our journey's end at the Big Salt Lick. Where we have the pleasure of finding Capt. Robertson & his Company. It is a source of satisfaction to us to be enabled to restore to him & others their families & friends, who were entrusted to our care, and who, some time since, perhaps despaired of ever meeting again. Tho our prospects at present are dreary. We have found a few log cabins which have been built on a Cedar Bluff above the Lick. by Capt. Robertson and his company.

