



By C. Barton Crattie, LS, CFM

C. Barton Crattie holds a BFA degree from Murray State University and is a licensed surveyor in Georgia and Tennessee. He currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Surveyors Historical Society.

## Acts of Notice (Intrigue on the Kentucky & Tennessee Border)

**Y**ears ago, making the transition from strictly construction surveying to land surveying, I took employment with a tactless, rude and crusty old surveyor that really had a massive heart of gold. This fellow suffered from an affliction that I have unfortunately witnessed far too many times in our profession: optimistic procrastination. We all know how it goes. The client calls and the immediate response is “Sure, we can get started on Thursday.” All along, the surveyor knows he is backed up two to three weeks, and it’ll be at least a week before research can even be started. He just wants to secure the job.

There was a ritual in our company, and to this day I’ve never quite figured all of the many angles of the ethics involved. Once the poor, waiting client reached the ultimate level of frustration, I would be sent out solo to placate the individual. This I did by merely visiting the site and indiscriminately tying orange flagging on absolutely everything visible from the street, including dogs and cats should they not be alert. Strange the satisfaction of the client this simple act occasioned.

Now, let’s leave the past and go back many more years to the past, past. In 1779 and 1780 the gentlemen Dr. Thomas Walker and Colonel Daniel Smith, both of Virginia, ran the division line between the then states of Virginia and North Carolina. North Carolina appointed Richard Henderson and William B. Smith to watch out for her interests. Henderson and Smith quit early on leaving Walker and the other Smith to complete the task. (For a little perspective, 1780 was the year Benedict Arnold deserted to the British at



the time of our deep involvement in the American Revolution.)

The survey began in the mountains of what is now East Tennessee and proceeded west along the southern line of what is now Kentucky. Their original instructions were to cease surveying upon reaching the Tennessee (Tenasa) River. The land west of that river was recognized as sovereign of the Chickasaw Tribe.

Colonel Smith kept a fairly detailed journal over the course of the survey. On Thursday, March 23, 1780, he wrote how at 10 o’clock he was joyfully surprised to see the Tenasa River. After nearly eight months out, the terminus of this 36-degree, 30-minute line of latitude had finally been met. [Author Note: I will write more about this at a later date.] On the 24th, the party headed home. His entry for April 7 says “horses not all found. Received

a letter from the Governor to go to the Falls of the Ohio [present day Louisville, KY] on a particular business...” The official report of the survey by Walker and Smith states “When we had returned homewards about 160 miles, we met with orders from his excellency, the Governor, to do another piece of service, which we suppose he has made you acquainted with.” Thus, a mystery begins. What possibly could be so important a task as to detour the gentlemen from their return after so much time out suffering the hardships they had endured?

Part of the orders was to rendezvous with Colonel George Rogers Clark (Billy’s older brother by 18 years) on the Ohio River. The next few weeks were spent recruiting a guard to go to the Falls, settling various accounts in conjunction with the State Line survey and more traveling by land and waterways. On April 23, Smith cut his foot, an injury he had to cope with for the remainder of the assignment. Arriving at the Falls on the 25th, they found they had missed Colonel Clark by 11 days; he had gone downstream to a new fort under construction on the Mississippi River.

Smith and the others accepted an offer to travel by flatboat with a Captain Killer or Killen. Raining and misting much of the time, the leisurely float was anything but enjoyable. Nursing his now infected foot, Smith writes “If paper was plenty I would attempt a description of our unfavorable situation with a Xantippe of a Landlady, something like Petruccio of a Landlord their dirty children leaky boat, drunkennes &c. But I am by no means equal to the task.”

On May 3, they eventually found Clark at the old Fort Jefferson, a site on  
*continued on page 63*

*Crattie*, continued from page 64

the Mississippi River about five miles south of the mouth of the Ohio River. While in this vicinity, over the next week Smith's entries tell of running lines to determine the width of the river and observing (for latitude) all day on May 10. On May 11, they determined they were 3 minutes and 19 seconds into Virginia (north of the 36-degree, 30-minute line). Then "from this point of the island, we ran east to the main land where I marked a buck eye elm and sugar tree, then south 3 miles, 265 poles; thence west 106 poles to the river, 96 of which we marked. New land is forming here, nothing to mark but cotton trees..." That night, they "lay in the wet without fire," beginning the journey home the next morning. Why mark the line from the Mississippi River east for 1500 feet, then load up the canoe and head home?

In a letter written 35 years later, the now General Smith finally shed some light on the mystery. Smith wrote to a Judge Humphreys: "On our arrival at the French Lick [present day Nashville] we received a letter from the Governor of Virginia, directing us, as the Spanish Governor Galvez was then conquering the Natchez country and the adjacent parts from the British, to go to the Falls of the Ohio to Colonel Clark and apply to him for a guard; descend the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to the proper latitude and there make marks and give all the publicity to the claims of Virginia that far south. This duty we performed and then returned home."

Thomas Jefferson, the new Governor of Virginia, who had replaced Patrick Henry the summer of 1779, penned a letter to Smith and Walker on January 29, 1780. In it he said in part: "As we propose this Spring to take possession of and fortify some posts as near the mouth of Ohio as the ground will admit, it becomes very important for us to know the exact latitude thereabouts . . . You will first find the point at which our Line strikes the Mississippi or Ohio, and fix it by some lasting immovable natural mark if there happen to be any on the spot, or if not, then by its course and distance from some such natural mark, noting such course as corrected from the errors of variation, and the distance reduced to horizontal measure." Jefferson closes with an offer no 18th century Virginian could refuse: "The disappointment will therefore be of the great-est moment should you decline the Service."

Sixteen years later as President, Jefferson issued much the same order to Andrew Ellicott to be carried out in



the same vicinity of the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. This was to be accomplished by Ellicott en route to what is now Alabama. That expedition eventually ended with the survey of the International Boundary between Spain (Florida) and the United States (Georgia and Alabama).

...there make marks and give all the publicity... So, upon orders of Governor Jefferson, the honorable Smith was told to go out and in effect, tie orange flagging anywhere and everywhere any Spaniard floating up or down the Mississippi River could not help but see. One might still question the ethics of

this act, but as illustrated, there at the least, is precedence. *A*

#### **Resources**

Daniel Smith's journal and Walker and Smith's "Official Report to the Virginia House of Delegates" as found in the documentary *Four Steps West*, James W. Sames III, Versailles, KY, 1971.

Durham, Walter T. *Daniel Smith: Frontier Statesman*. Gallatin, TN, Sumner County Library Board, 1976.

Items in the photographs are from the author's personal collection.