

McFarland's Defeat, transcribed from "the Lexington Herald", dated January 20, 1907:

"As far back into time as my memory runs my grandmother was an old, old woman. She was born on the Old Wilderness Road 99 years ago. The greater part of her life was lived at a time when the country was exceedingly new. The clearings were few and small. Bear, deer and other game were to be had for the hunting. Wolves howled around the little farms at night. She told me that nothing was more apt to cause lonesomeness to creep all over a fellow than the sound of the howl of a hungry wolf prowling around the back fencing in the dead hour of the night. The first I ever heard about McFarland's Defeat was from my grandmother years ago. It took place even before her day and time, but not so long before but that she had heard it discussed by parties well acquainted with the facts -- possibly some who had visited the place the day after and had seen the awful evidence of the massacre.

"It took place about four miles to the northeast of London, the capital of Laurel County, in a narrow valley not over a mile long and drained by a branch of Big Raccoon Creek, ever since called McFarland's Branch. At this date there is nothing especially significant about the valley. It is peaceful. The steep hills on either side are covered mostly by briars and bushes. Here and there gulleys are cut deep into the red clay down the hillside through fields that have been cleared, tilled and worn out by men who were born and have died of old age since the occurrence that made the spot a place sacred in Kentucky history. Now and then there is a small farm where appear many evidences of honest struggle with a soil not over friendly. In 1775, when Boone made his famous Trace from Cumberland Gap to Boonesborough he cut it down this narrow valley through an unbroken forest as old as the world. For the next twenty years all Kentucky settlers came over the bridle path. The Wilderness Road was not made until 1795. It followed the same general course of the Trace, but in many places it made a near-cut, and in doing so left the Trace to one side for several miles.

"All emigrants before the building of the Wilderness Road were in more or less danger from the Indians, who, though they did not live within the State, enjoyed it as a hunting ground and did not wish to see it broken up by the settlements of the whites. The Indians who committed the massacre came from Tennessee, probably entering the State through Clear Creek Gap, where the town of Jellico, now is, and following the course that the Louisville and Nashville Railroad now follows north into Laurel County. Striking Laurel County they struck Boone's Trace and ambushed and murdered the emigrants for scalps and for plunder. In the year 1786 a party under the McNitt while encamped near Fariston were surprised in the night and nearly all of them, some 24, were killed. The place is known to the older natives as the Defeated Camps, and today the graves of the murdered emigrants are easily to be found in a wooded portion of the Levi Jackson farm, four miles south of London.

"At the time, the spring of 1790, there was no living person in Laurel County and probably none in the territory between Cumberland Gap and Fort Estill, in Madison County, except one lone man living in a blockhouse on Hazel's Patch Creek, on the side of the Trace. He was called John Woods, but it was said that his real name was a long German one and that he had adopted the name "Woods" for the conveniences of his friends. Just why Woods lived alone so far from other settlements I am unable to say, but it may be that he was put there by one Ramey, who owned a large body of land in that section under a survey made in 1785. WOOD'S BLOCKHOUSE STOOD ON A POINT OF THE SOUTH SIDE OF THE CREEK, ABOUT 100 YARDS ABOVE WHERE THE WILDERNESS ROAD, BETTER KNOWN BY THE NATIVES AS THE "STATE ROAD", CROSSES THE CREEK NINE MILES NORTH OF LONDON. Afterwards pioneer John Pearl bought a large portion of Ramey's survey and built his home within a stone's throw of the site of the blockhouse occupied by Woods. Still later the place became known as the Landrum farm because it became the home of a Pioneer Methodist circuit rider, W.B. Landrum, a son-in-law of Pearl. The pioneer Pearl was the father of judge Granville

Pearl, a widely known jurist of his day. Editor John Pearl, of the "Laurel County Local," is a namesake and a grandson of the Pioneer Pearl.

“McFarland was a hunter, a woodsman and a man experienced in Indian warfare. He was well acquainted with the winding path made by Boone, and had tasted the dangers of the dark woods on either side. Many descendants of the venturesome and hardy English colonists of Virginia and the Carolinas heard the call of the wild and the west and came to cast their fortunes with the new settlements beyond the Cumberlands in "the land that is good but is hard to settle." For the sake of company and for safety sake they traveled together and engaged a pilot like McFarland to take them through the Wilderness. At this time McFarland was leading a company of 28 besides himself. Excepting those who became footsore by the way and those too young the company traveled on foot. Wagons on the Trace were impossible. What few horses the emigrants had were needed to carry on pack saddles provisions for the trip and a few belongings for furnishing the cabins they expected to build in the cane land. Knowing the dangers of the journey the company had, under the advice of McFarland, arranged a plan of action in case of an attack. At the appearance of the enemy it was agreed that the men should each seek the shelter of a tree and fight the Indians Indian fashion. The women and children were to push forward with the packhorses, leaving the men untrammelled. If the emigrants were victorious they could soon overtake the noncombatants. If the battle went against the whites the women would have some show of escaping by being out of sight. The little company passed where most of McNitt's company had found their graves by the Trace side only four years before. Perhaps some friend or a relative had fallen here, and when McFarland pointed out the spot a shudder, a chill, passed over some of the timid -- a premonition. Six miles beyond they passed down into the little valley. It was late in the afternoon. John Wood's sheltering blockhouse was five miles away. The whoop of the Indians hidden by the trees was followed by a deadly fire. There were stout hearted women in the company. They had severed ties at the old home and willingly undertook the hazardous journey to find a new one. They had agreed to the plan arranged for them and had thought themselves equal to it, but when the test came they found the task too great. Their feet refused to carry them forward. Terror struck the company, terror and grim despair. The women and children clung to their protectors who could neither protect nor save themselves. Without the shelter of a tree the men, women and children were at the mercy of those who never knew mercy. McFarland had no women folks, and he was able to get to a tree. From behind it he shot- the leader of the Indians, who as he fell took off part of McFarland's shot pouch with a last bullet.

“Late in the night John Woods heard at his gates a call that was different. The howl of a wolf, the hoot of an owl, the scream of a panther, or the screech of a night hawk failed to attract attention from this man of the woods. Such sounds came nightly from the forest. But a call from human lips out in the darkness meant something to the lone man in the wilderness, and instantly put him on the alert. John Woods had not lived so long in the woods alone without learning lessons. Every wild animal was a foe, but could come only as a foe. A man might be a foe appearing as a friend. It was sometime before McFarland could convince Woods who he was and how he came to be there. Then he was admitted, and soon the story of the massacre was told. After a consultation, made short for fear that the Indians had followed and would overwhelm them, Woods and McFarland left the blockhouse and hurried through the darkness over the long 30 miles that lay between them and Captain Whitley's Station near where the town of Crab Orchard, Lincoln County, now is. Next day with assistance from Whitley's they returned to the scene of the massacre. They found the bodies of the entire company and the body of the Chief that McFarland had killed. Upon examination they found that the Chief was a white renegade with a painted face and an Indian dress. It appeared at first that McFarland was the only survivor but a cry attracted them to a spot a little aside, and there they found a second survivor, a puny girl baby, and a third, a faithful dog that had lain huddled against her and kept her from freezing by warmth of his body.

The mother and father and all the others sleep by the Trace side where they fell. The child and her protector were taken to Captain Whitley's. What became of the child I never heard. Whether or not my grandmother knew I did not think to inquire until it was too late. Probably the baby lived to womanhood and possibly there are today many that could trace their lineage back to the helpless baby, the only one, of the large company of strong men and women setting out to reach the land beyond the Wilderness.

“In the early spring of 1790 Bishop Asbury, of the Methodist Episcopal Church, came from Virginia to Lexington, Kentucky, over Boone's path, to hold the first conference in the State. In his account of his uncomfortable trip through the mountains he mentions seeing on his way the graves of 28 emigrants who had been slain by the Indians but a few days before he came along. It could have been none other than the graves of McFarland's company on McFarland's Branch of Big Raccoon Creek in Laurel County.”

(Signed) Charles Robert Baugh.