

McFarland Defeat Last Major Attack On Trace

From Russell Dyche's *History of Laurel County, Kentucky* (1954)

One of the most notable defeats, and the last major depredation by the Indians on Boones Trace, was that of Capt. McFarland and his small band on April 1, 1793. It followed a number of attacks on small parties in which several were killed, and the loss of two small girls and the capture of a third, who were rescued immediately afterwards. William Whitley organized a party to pursue the Indians, and the infant[.] Commonwealth of Kentucky sent a company of militia to bury the dead. Among the militiamen were two who later returned to make Laurel county their home: William Pearl, who fell in love with the country and secured 4,000 acres on Rockcastle river, and John Evans who possibly got land on the same river, but across the county near present Highway 80. His son, Jack, from whom W. R. Maples learned of many of the incidents connected with the McFarland defeat which occurred on his farm, lived on Rockcastle river, near Highway 80 bridge--still known to many as "Evans Ferry"--about 1880.

Another member of the militia company that buried the McFarland dead was Robert McClure. There is evidence that it was a Robert McClure who abandoned his family in an Indian attack at the head of Skaggs creek in 1785, whom Colonel Whitley roundly condemned.

Capt. McFarland, head of the massacred company, was a cousin of Major McFarland who was killed at Blue Licks battle, according to Mrs. Sarah Graham, whose two cousins, Christopher Spillman and James Jones, were killed in the affray. According to all authorities, McFarland was the only one of six or eight men to escape. Some of the others lost their lives because of failure to make full use of protection furnished by trees, and still others because their clinging women made them double targets for the attacking Indian. Mrs. McFarland and their four or five children ran away, but took the wrong end of the road as far as Laurel river. McFarland had given them up as dead, and there was a joyous reunion as a following company brought his wife and children to Crab Orchard.

The Indians also lost heavily in the battle. According to the story by Jack Evans, McFarland and only one Indian remained, each armed with a musket. The Indian's ramrod became fastened and this gave the victory to McFarland, for whom the spring around which the fighting occurred, and the branch, were named.

Writers differ as to who found little Betsey Drake, who had been abandoned by her parents in a previous encounter and adopted by the Indians from whom she escaped at the beginning of the McFarland battle. Whether it was Capt. McFarland or Col. Whitley, she was taken to the Whitley home and finally reluctantly given to Mrs. Drake after the mother was taken with fits because of her grief.

Jack Evans also told Mr. Maples how a party from Logan's the third day after the massacre, found "two children and their pet dog under a rock cliff about a half mile to the west, on the right side of the road as you go to London." These probably were the two Mrs. Levisa McKinney, daughter of Col. Whitley, mentioned as "at another time."

"One," she related, "had been riding behind her father, who was shot off--she kept on and road off, and the little dog followed her; she kept on, and being weary, she would get off, tie the horse and go to sleep. Finally she was tracked and found by Col. Whitley and party, who found her asleep and her horse near by, the little dog watching beside her--he found the other girl alone--she had wandered off--particulars not recollected.... The relatives of the little girls got them subsequently from Col Whitley,

who had taken them to his own home.”

Johh Pearl of Pineville, in a collection of family history and legends prepared for his children in 1929, writing of his grandfather, John Pearl, pioneer who settled where Hazlepatch creek crossed the Madison branch of The Wilderness Road, said: “My grandfather had some adventures with the Indians. He and his brother William followed their trail after a massacre of some emigrants from Virginia... and found in some canebrakes a little white child, a girl, and a big dog, which they afterwards took to Colonel Whitley at Crab Orchard, Ky. The name of the child was never known. Colonel Whitley reared her and she has many descendants in Kentucky.”