



The only portrait of Daniel Boone from his lifetime was painted by Chester Harding in 1819. (This is an engraving made from that painting.) Boone, born October 22, 1734, died at the age of 85 on September 16, 1820. (Portrait in possession of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.) Harding (1792-1866), born in Conway,

Massachusetts, survived by working in a variety of country crafts. His early skill in painting signs led to his painting faces, and he grew more expert in portraiture as he practiced on his business patrons, providing them with a rare likeness to display in their homes, although he is regarded as a “primitive” artist.

Daniel Boone

The Man *versus* The Myth

DANIEL BOONE WAS A GREAT AMERICAN EXPLORER and woodsman of Keltic ancestry—part Scottish, part Welsh. (And one odd and surprising thing about him that hardly anyone knows is that he was a Quaker.) He is a real American hero, but maybe not quite the way you have visualized him.

BY JOHN TIFFANY

Daniel Boone is considered so archetypal that it has been said the story of Boone is the story of America itself, a point hammered home in the new *Boone: A Biography*, by Robert Morgan, the author of 12 books.

Certainly Boone's career, as brought out in Morgan's fascinating tome, possesses a picturesque, romantic interest that cannot fail to charm the reader. He had his failings, but he was a great hunter, explorer, surveyor and "land pilot." He had few equals as a rifleman. No white man knew the Indians more thoroughly, or fought them more skillfully, than he. And as the legends say, his life was indeed filled to the brim with hair-raising adventures.

Although he was a Quaker like his parents, he was a fighting Quaker, not the usual peaceful kind. His youthful pranks and fights as told by his son Nathan years later make it clear young Daniel was no pacifist. However, while he enjoyed a good fistfight, Boone throughout life was not a sadist or murderer; he was in fact very reluctant to kill anyone. Although he was known, and rightly so, as an Indian fighter, he actually killed only one Indian in his whole life,



DANIEL BOONE, circa 1760.

a man who was trying to kill him, so it was a case of unavoidable self-defense.

Col. Boone participated in the American Revolution, but again he tried to avoid killing the Redcoats. He disliked having to kill anyone, of whatever ethnicity. But he would do it if he had to.

Daniel was born in the country near Reading, Pennsylvania on November 2, 1734, where his father raised livestock and plied the trades of weaver and blacksmith.

Many verified stories of Daniel are recounted in *Boone*. Morgan, by the way, is possibly a relative of his subject (many of Boone's kinfolk were named Morgan).

One of the most famous anecdotes about Boone tells of a time when his dugout canoe was passing Cincinnati, somebody asked why he left Kentucky. "Too crowded" was his laconic answer. At the time there were only several thousand whites living in Kentucky.

Eventually the Boones settled in Missouri, and Daniel (d. 1820) and Rebecca (d. 1813) lived the rest of their lives there.

Daniel's father, known as Squire Boone, was unindulgent and would use the strap when his sons needed punishment. But unlike his brothers, Daniel would not beg for forgiveness when beaten. Even as a boy, he showed the sto-

icism and self-control for which he was later famous. He was different from anyone else; even as a lad it was clear there was something special about Daniel.

Some folks are actually more interesting in real life than in their myths. Such is the case with Daniel Boone. Incidentally, neither he nor his protégé David Crockett wore a coonskin cap in real life—they both favored more practical headgear. The legend makers of Crockett clearly plagiarized the legend makers of Boone.

The other sons and daughters in the Boone family (Daniel had 11 siblings) received what was considered a good education for that time and place, but Daniel avoided the schoolhouse. His real school was the wilderness. Daniel's greatest teachers were the woods themselves, and the Americans, whom he watched, questioned and imitated. His spelling could be described as poor or "creative," depending how you want to look at it. But one thing he did know, and that was how to spell his name—always with an "e" on the end. And this, says Morgan, shows that the famous inscription supposedly carved into a beech tree: "D. Boon cilled [sic] a bar on tree in the year 1760" is certainly spurious. (It also seems improbable he would trouble to carve the unnecessary words "in the year"; see page 8.)

RELATIONSHIP WITH THE NATIVES

He was certainly no enemy to the natives, although the relationship was complex and sometimes ambiguous. He was captured twice by the Indians, and escaped twice. At one time he was adopted by Blackfish or Cottawamago, war chief of the Chillicothe division of the Shawnee tribe, and Boone grieved when Blackfish died.

After becoming an official member of the Shawnee tribe, Boone heard that a large Shawnee war party was about to attack Boonesborough, the Kentucky settlement he had named after himself. He escaped to warn his friends, and led the defense and fighting against his adopted father and tribal warriors, who numbered 400 against Boone's 30 men and 20 boys. The defense was spirited, but they probably would have been wiped out in the end, when the Shawnees set fire to the log palisade, had it not been for the intervention of divine Providence: rain came, putting out the fire and collapsing a tunnel the Indians had been digging under the wall. Blackfish withdrew, and Boonesborough was saved.



Engraving of Boone & friend.

Daniel had one great love in his life, a young girl (she was 15, he 19 when they met, and it was love at first sight) named Rebecca Bryan, with fair skin and coal black hair. Rebecca was rated a very good shot, even rivaling her husband Daniel, the champion hunter, trapper, marksman and wrestler of the Yadkin Valley region of North Carolina, where they initially settled, and started raising their children.¹

BOONE AND THE "BIG GAP"

The Appalachian Mountains presented a formidable obstacle to early inhabitants of our country. Explorers often described maddening attempts to navigate through the natural maze of steep ridges and dead-end valleys. By some accounts only three naturally occurring, easily navigable, east-west routes exist through the mountain

range. The most famous and most important of these passes is the gap, known to some Indians as Ouasiota (or Ona-Sciota) Pass, where today's Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky all meet. Today most folks call it Cumberland Gap—in honor, ironically, of a war criminal, the butcher of Culloden (1746), William Augustus, duke of Cumberland (1721-1765).

Interestingly, Ouasiota Gap was created as an impact crater where a space object, possibly a small asteroid, came crashing down, leveling that part of the mountains.

Before Boone's day, the Indians, following the bison, had discovered three great gaps in the Appalachians and the trail that joined them. The Cumberland Gap lay on the western leg of the Great Warrior's Path, and Moccasin Gap, the only water-level gap, lay near to the Great Warrior's Path in the east. In between was Kane Gap in Powell Mountain. These three gaps in the Appalachian Mountains defined the most direct route from the Ohio Valley to the Holston and Watauga valleys. Thus the trail from Cumberland Gap across southwest Virginia through Kane Gap and Moccasin Gap became a primary route of the Great Warrior's Path leading to the Holston and Watauga valleys.

Gabriel Arthur, a young indentured servant, was the first white man, so far as is known, to travel through Cumberland Gap. Arthur was sent along the trail in 1674 by Shawnee Indians.

In the early 1750s Dr. Thomas Walker led a scouting expedition into the area and although he eventually passed through Cumberland Gap, he failed to recognize the trail connecting Cumberland Gap and the Holston Valley. Fur-



ther exploration of the area was curtailed because the wars with the Indians and the French kept the frontier closed.

Sometime before 1755, John Finley traveled into Kentucky, and either rediscovered the gap or had heard about it via others. He brought back tales of the land as a hunter's paradise, a place where bison were so big the meadows sank beneath their weight when they walked across them and where so many turkeys lived there was not enough room for them all to fly at the same time—tall tales, of course, but the sort of stories that inspired other hunters to want to go there.

Relative peace came in 1761 with pacification of the Cherokees following the bloody uprising during which Fort Loudoun was taken and its occupants massacred.

That same year "long hunter" Elisha Wallen led a group of hunters into southwest Virginia. They roamed the area for 18 months. Wallen's group crisscrossed the Indian trail in Virginia several times and named various streams and ridges for members of the party.

News of Wallen's adventure spread, and other hunters followed. In 1767 Boone came from the Yadkin Valley and got as far as the Big Sandy River before turning back. In 1769 John Finley, with whom Boone had served in Braddock's army during the French and Indian War, told Boone of "a big gap in the mountains that the Indians use." Boone

Daniel Boone led parties of settlers through Cumberland Gap, as shown in this romantic image. (It seems unlikely, for instance, Boone would allow women to be placed at the head of the caravan, exposed to Indian attack and other dangers.) Dr. Thomas Walker visited Cumberland Gap in 1750 and named it for the duke of Cumberland. There would have been no clue for Dr. Walker that this one pass, among dozens, was the best way through the mountains unless there had been a bison/elk trail there already. (Indians also used it, for trade and sometimes for war, and called it Ousiota.) Boone was contracted to build a wagon grade road to Kentucky. Migration west followed Boone's trail because it had gentler grades, allowing four-wheeled traffic. Even so, some complained Boone's road often required unloading the wagon, carrying it and all its contents to the top of the pass and reassembling the wagon and reloading it.

was familiar with the trail in southwest Virginia and thus knew the route to take to get through Moccasin Gap, Kane Gap and on to "the Big Gap."

In March of that year Boone, Finley and four others made their way along the Wilderness Trail to Kentucky. Boone spent two years hunting and trapping in eastern Kentucky. When he returned home in March 1771 Boone probably knew more about eastern Kentucky than any other white man, and he knew the most direct route to get there from the Holston Valley.

Boone, awestruck by the bountiful lands of the west,

soon sought to move his family there. He recognized the significance of Cumberland Gap for the wholesale westward movement of settlers into what was then called Kaintucke (now Kentucky). In 1775, just before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Boone brought his wife to Kentucky and started a fort there called Boonesborough. She was the first white woman to see this part of America.

That same year, he was commissioned to clear a trail through Cumberland Gap. Originally called Boone's Trace, the route evolved into what is now referred to as the Wilderness Road.

Up until this time Americans had been effectively hemmed in by the Appalachians. Completion of Boone's Trace released a torrent of settlers itching for land and the freedom of the frontier. By 1792, over 100,000 people had followed Boone on foot across the Appalachians, compelling the union to admit Kentucky as the first western state.

Daniel claimed vast tracts of land and was thus a rich man for a while—until lawyers decided he had failed to acquire legal title to his discoveries, impoverishing him overnight. At one point in later life he traveled a long distance to pay off an old debt. This gave him much satisfaction but left him with a net worth of 50¢ in his pocket.

Morgan's book corrects a number of myths about Boone. For example, *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1969 ed.) claims: "Boone spent his last years in Missouri, hunting to the west whenever he could." Morgan quotes no less an authority than Boone himself as saying that he hardly hunted at all after about age 75, with his strength and eyesight not what they were as a teen. (He lived to 85—almost 86—and was lucky enough to die what was called in those days "a beautiful death"—a concept strange to modern Americans, but which Morgan explains at some length, in one of the most interesting chapters of the book.)

Even as a feeble old man, Daniel was still a performer, larger than life. Among his last visitors was a portrait painter named Chester Harding. Daniel had never seen a portrait painter before. The result was the only portrait from life that exists of the great man. While sketching, the young fellow asked Daniel about his remarkable career, stretching into nine decades. He asked if Dan had ever been lost in his years of wandering through the woods. "No, I can't say I was ever lost," Boone joked, "but I was bewildered once for three days." ♦

Boone: A Biography, by historian Robert Morgan (hardcover, 538 pages), is available for \$35 from FIRST AMENDMENT BOOKS, 645 Pennsylvania Avenue SE, Suite 100, Washington, D.C. 20003. Order item # 2488. No charge for S&H inside the U.S. Call FIRST AMENDMENT BOOKS toll free at 1-888-699-NEWS (6397) to charge your purchase to Visa or MasterCard.



It is said the earliest Sanskrit characters were carved on strips of beech bark; and the custom of inscribing the boles of beeches came to Europe with the Aryan people. Our word "book" comes from the Anglo-Saxon *boc*, which in turn derives from the Anglo-Saxon *beece*, for beech. There was once a beech tree on Carrol Creek, in Tennessee, with the worn inscription shown above: "D. Boone/Cilled a Bar/On Tree/In Year 1760." This tree fell in 1916, the scars of the inscription still visible. It was 28.5 feet in girth, and 70 feet high. Its age was about 365 years. Unfortunately for the myth, with the Cherokees on the warpath, Daniel Boone could not have "cilled a bar" on this, nor any other tree in 1760. Therefore, Revisionist scholars now agree that this inscription is a fake.

ENDNOTE:

¹The Booneses had 10 children: James (1757-1773), Israel (1759-1782), Susannah (1760-1800), Jemima (1762-1834), Levina (1766-1802), Rebecca (1768-1805), Daniel Morgan (1769-1839), Jesse Bryan (1773-1820), William (1775-1776) and Nathan (1781-1856).

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