Benjamin Borden: Early Rockbridge Settler

By Rose Mary Whiting Moseley

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The journal of Mrs. Margaret Lewis\(^1\) says: “Last spring, and this is 1737 now, John Lewis, visiting the seat of government, Williamsburg, met there one Burden [sic], but lately come as agent for Lord Thomas Fairfax. John was so pleased with his company that he must needs come back with him and hunt and explore. My sons took, in the chase, a young buffalo calf which the stranger much affected, and it was given to him. This was toward the end of his stay, for he made a pleasant inmate of our home some several months. He took the rude animal and made a present to the most worshipful Governor Gooch, who never having seen so comical a monster in lower Virginia, did promptly favor the donor by entering on his official book full authority to Benj. Burden for locating 500,000 acres of land nigh to James River and Shenandoah waters, this on condition that he should, within ten (10) years, settle at least one hundred families within its limits. The Presbyterians of North Ireland, Scotland and adjacent portions of England do abide at home uneasily, and they will come freely to Burden’s bidding, for the people of this new settlement.”

\(^1\) Margaret Lynn (1693–1773), married John Lewis (1678–1762) in 1715 in Ulster, where they were both born. They emigrated to Orange County (now Augusta) about 1732. The Lewis family settled around Staunton, and through the 1740s John Lewis explored the Greenbrier region, where he was a partner in a land grant of about 100,000 acres.

Rose Mary Whiting (1881–1965) was born in Chicago and married Thomas Emmet Addis Moseley, who became a professor of French and Spanish at Virginia Military Institute. The Moseleys lived in Lexington between the world wars.

Above: Excerpt from the so-called Fry–Jefferson map, 1755, showing “Bordens Irish Track,” Courtesy of Library of Congress.
Another writer rather testily says: "A silly story has been repeated time after time to the effect that Borden and Lewis visited the capital of East Jerseys setting forth that they are desirous to settle on the West Side of the great Mountain on Sherrando River and praying a Grant of 100,000 acres of Land to be laid out for them in one or more Surveys beginning at or near that part of the Great Mountains which is intersected by the South Branch of James River, etc. To settle one family for each 1,000 acres within two years and provided the same do not interfere with the Grant made to John Tayloe and Thos. Lee, Esqs., and Wm. Beverly, Gent."

"The patent to Borden was issued November 5, 1739. It ran as follows: 'George the second by the grace of God of Great Britain, France and Ireland, etc. We do give, grant and confirm unto the said Benj. Borden and his heirs and assigns forever, One certain tract or parcel of land, containing 92,100 acres situate lying and being on the West side of the Blue Ridge in the County of Augusta and on the north and northeast branches of James River between the Blue Ridge and North Mt., etc.' "

There is a statement that Borden sailed to England and brought back a large company of settlers. This was very doubtful. Such action was not necessary. He did advertise his lands, and to such effect that more than 100 families located on the tract within the two years. Immigrants were arriving in Philadelphia almost every week, sometimes to the number of hundreds, and efficient advertising was certain to bring the desired results.

Since the comfortable Quakers had a scant welcome for the newcomers in the small settled district, they pushed inland, the Germans moving rather to the right and the Ulstermen to the left. The Ulstermen became a frontier people as soon as they came to America. They were well-fitted to become such: They were overcomers by nature and did not shrink from facing difficulties. It was the Scotch-Irish who gave a dominant impress to the entire frontier. The Borden tract was primarily settled by Ulstermen and by occasional families East of the Blue Ridge.

When immigration began to flock into the Rockbridge area in the fall of 1737, it was not into an unknown land. Governor Gooch had given wide publicity to what had been seen by Spotswood and his companions. The prospectors who spied out the choicer portions of the Valley, with the intention of covering them with orders of council (as in Borden's case) or with patents of less ambitious size (as with that of John Peter Salling!) were desirous of seeing people come in. The colonial government encouraged the settlement of the Valley as a means of protecting the lower country from Indian incursions.

It had been assumed that it was a forbidding land. On the contrary it was found to be pleasant and fertile and abounding in game and fish. There were no Indian occupants, although a grassy prairie covered the lowlands between the Blue Ridge and the Alleghanies beyond, known as Indian meadows. These were fired by the Indians at the close of each hunting season so as to keep back the forest growth.

It was a vision to appeal to the land speculator, and it did not appeal in vain. In this class I think we may have been well satisfied with the proceeds of its sale.

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1 See "The Diary of John Peter Salling: Early Rockbridge Adventurer," Rockbridge Epilogues, No. 35, Summer 2022.
include Benjamin Borden. As a business man he was shrewd, alert and tactful. Besides Borden's Great Tract he is said to have owned land in several localities in the Shenandoah district and in New Jersey, his native state, where the name Bordentown commemorates an early settlement by the family.

Borden’s Tract was south of Beverly’s Manor.1 The first settlers on the Tract were kinsmen of Lewis, Ephraim McDowell and his family. McDowell’s daughter, Mary Greenlee, related, in a deposition taken in 1806, the circumstances under which her father went there. Her brother James McDowell had come into Beverly’s Manor during the spring of 1737 and planted a crop of corn near Wood’s Gap,2 and in the fall her father, her brother John, and her husband and herself came to occupy the settlement.

It was just after the McDowells had established their camp on Linville Creek3 that an incident occurred which led to some change in their destination.

A man giving his name as Benjamin Borden came along and arranged to spend the night with them. He told them he had a grant of 100,000 acres or the waters of the James, if he could ever find it. To the man who could show him the boundaries he would give 1,000 acres. John McDowell replied that he was a surveyor and would accept the offer. A torch was lighted, McDowell showed his surveying instruments and Borden his papers. Each party was satisfied with the representations made by the other. At the house of John Lewis, where they remained a few days, a more formal contract was entered into.

Accompanied by John McDowell, Borden went on from Lewis’s and camped at a spring where Midway now is.4 From this point the men followed the outlet of the stream, returning by a course. Borden could now see that he was within the boundaries of his grant.

McDowell and his family located on Timber Ridge. This was the first European man’s settlement in the Borden Tract.

Borden remained about two years on his grant, spending a portion of the time with a Mrs. Hunter, whose daughter married a Green, and to whom Borden gave the place where they were living when he left. When Borden went back to his home near Winchester, he left his papers with John McDowell, to whose house many of the prospectors came in order to be shown the parcels they thought of buying.

In consideration of building a cabin, the settler was given 100 acres, with the privilege of buying additional land at the minimum price of 50 shillings per hundred acres. These cabin-rights were of vital importance to Borden. Each one validated his own title to 1,000 acres of his grant.

Among others who came to Virginia at this time was an Irish girl named Polly Mulhollin. She attired herself in the habit of a man; and with hunting shirt and moccasins went into Borden’s grant for the purpose of making improvements and acquiring a title to land. Here she erected thirty cabins, by virtue of which she held 199 acres adjoining each. When Benjamin Borden the younger came on to make deeds to those who held cabin-rights, he was astonished to find so many in the name of Mulhollin. Investigation led to a discovery of the mystery, to the great mirth of the other claimants.

Mrs. Lewis mentions this incident in her journal, and she also says: “By this time Borden’s settlement is fast filling up. There be some of the Established Church among them, but most of our neighbors are Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. It soundeth like the gathering of the clans to call over the names of their numbers. There are some of the Established Church among them, but most of our neighbors are Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. It soundeth like the gathering of the clans to call over the names of their numbers. There are some of the Established Church among them, but most of our neighbors are Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.”

Benjamin Borden was probably less than fifty years old when he died, leaving personal effects valued at $487.00. The house furnishings were simple and primitive, many of them being listed as “old” and of little value. Borden was survived by three sons, Benjamin, John and Joseph, and seven daughters. The spring following Borden’s death, his son Benjamin appeared in Rockbridge with authority under his father’s will to adjust all matters with the settlers on the Grant.

The quit-rents coming due every year on the unsold portion of the Tract were a burden to the younger man. One deponent says a parcel was sometimes sold off merely to get the money for this purpose. It was the practice of the Bordens to sign no deeds until the purchase money had been paid in full.

Benjamin Borden Jr. married the widow of John McDowell and lived at Thorn Hill, afterward the Bowyer estate, which lies on Wood’s Creek two miles southwest of Lexington. That his home was just outside the Tract is explainable on the supposition, which is almost a certainty, that his wife, whose maiden name was Magdalena...
Woods, was a sister to Richard Woods, who settled here in 1738. Here, in April, 1753, the younger Borden died of smallpox.

Joseph Borden, the youngest brother, came to live with Benjamin Jr. and went to school. The fall after the latter died he went away by dark — claiming that he could not get along with his sister-in-law. About twenty years later he again appeared in the Tract and told Samuel McDowell that he had bought out the claim of his sister, Mrs. Worthington. He paid his sister $300.00 for her interest in her tract of 1,000 acres, and because of this land he brought suit against his niece, Martha Harvey, and her Husband Robert. The almost interminable depositions and other proceedings during the period 1790–1807 fill two large volumes in the office of the circuit court at Staunton. The kernel of the whole trouble was the provision in the will of Benjamin Sr. that five of his daughters should have 5,000 acres that was “all good land.” Judge McDowell deposed that as a boy he was a chain-bearer for the surveying parties in the Tract and thus became very familiar with the ground. He said it was not possible to embrace 1,000 acres of choice land in a single survey, and that it would require from fifteen to twenty surveys to cover the total of 5,000 acres.

Joseph Borden died in 1803 at his home in Iredell County, N.C., but the suit dragged its weary length along, and was at length merged into the suit of Peck vs. Borden. It appeared in the docket term after term with monotonous regularity. The Borden heirs became more numerous year by year, and the case never seemed ready for settlement. About 1885 the circuit Judge ordered the funds into the hands of the court, amounting with interest to some $5,000, to be paid to the army of heirs. The case was then stricken from the docket. It had involved the legality of all the Borden titles, but no landholder in the Tract was dispossessed.

Passing the entire Borden matter in review, it appears in the light of a long-continued nuisance and an unjustifiable and injurious monopoly. The elder Borden had performed no public service to warrant so large a benefit from the public domain. The heirs, with the one exception of Benjamin Jr., were non-residents. There was never any sound reason why the individual purchases should not have been patents issuing from the state. A vast amount of litigation and other forms of annoyance would thus have been avoided.