Not much is known for sure about John Peter Salling except that he was among the first settlers in Rockbridge; went west to explore Unknown America; was captured and held prisoner for more than two years — and has a mountain near Glasgow named for him. Fantasical myths rose up about him, but few of these stand up to scrutiny. He was known to have kept a journal during his journey west, but well into the twentieth century the journal was assumed to have been lost (which fueled the rise of the legends). But the journal wasn’t lost; rather, it was buried in a 1922 article published in a scholarly magazine and then forgotten.

The article was “The Virginians on the Ohio and the Mississippi in 1742,” by Fairfax Harrison, a businessman, lawyer and longtime leader of the Virginia Historical Society, and published in the society’s official magazine. *This “Epilogue” begins with an introduction (based on Harrison’s) and reprints the Salling diary in full as it appeared in the 1922 article. We have generally kept Salling’s original punctuation and spelling. Except where noted, footnotes are summaries of Harrison’s original notes, which are filled with lengthy digressions.

INTRODUCTION

N 1737, JOHN HOWARD, a frontiersman, sought and was granted a commission from the Virginia government to lead a “wilderness journey” to explore the “Lakes & River of Mississippi.” John Peter Salling,

* To be exact, the document reprinted here is a transcript of a recollection. Salling’s original diary was confiscated during his imprisonment, and he re-created it after his release. This transcript was copied from the original by Joshua Fry, a mapmaker who relied on it in his cartography.

Above: Excerpt from the so-called Gilham map, 1860, showing Sallings Mountain and (bottom) the property of “Mrs. Salling,” located at present-day Glasgow, where the North River, now the Maury, meets the James. Courtesy of Library of Congress.
JOHN PETER SALLING (1706–55)

Johan Peter Salling was born in Alsace, Germany. With his family he emigrated to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1733 and moved south to Augusta County, Virginia, around 1740. (Rockbridge was not carved out until 1777.) Salling received a grant in July 1741 of 400 acres at the first fork of the Avawam River, now the James, at what is now Glasgow.

In March 1742, Salling departed in the company of four other men to explore the American west. The expedition was under the leadership of John Howard, then residing in another part of western Virginia. The state of Virginia promised each of the men 2,000 acres of land in the new territory. This was the first European-led exploration into the Ohio River valley region and beyond and is often considered as a model for the later Lewis and Clark expedition.

During this trip Salling kept a journal in which he recorded numerous firsts. He provided the first description of the Natural Bridge and of coal deposits in what is now West Virginia. He and his companions were the first to explore what is now West Virginia and Kentucky and the first expedition under the English crown to explore the Mississippi River. While traveling along the Mississippi, the Howard-Salling company were captured by a band of French, Blacks and Indians and taken to New Orleans in July 1742. Here they were accused of being British spies and held in prison for more than two years. Salling escaped prison in October 1744 and arrived back home in May 1745.

Salling’s journal was influential in Virginia and England during the 1740s and 1750s. It became a basis for the Jefferson and Fry map of Virginia with its “back settlements” and of John Mitchell’s 1755 map of North America. Both the journal and the maps were well known to the British government and were used by the British in their confrontations with the French along the frontier during that time. The tensions between these imperial rivals soon led to the French and Indian Wars.

— Neely Young *

or Salley, joined Howard. They traveled “down the rivers New, Coal (which Salley named), Kanawha, Ohio and Mississippi and led to their capture by the French, and imprisonment at New Orleans.” In 1742, Howard, Salling and their companions were captured on the Mississippi by “seventy Frenchmen” and brought to “a town called New Orleans” and arraigned before LeMoyne de Bienville, governor of French Louisiana. While in prison there, Howard drafted a petition to King George II that was intercepted by Bienville’s successor as governor, the Marquis de Vaudreuil, but later recovered in which he described being “grievously accused that our purpose had been to spy out the way for an army to come to destroy them [the French settlers] and their country. Nothing appearing against us to support this charge, except weak suspicions, we hoped to be put at liberty, but on the contrary were condemned to three years in prison. And I verily believe that [if left to their mercies] we will have indeed already been very near, partly by reason of weak suspicions, we hoped to be put at liberty, but on the contrary were condemned to three years in prison.”

In the March of 1741, 2 One John Howard came to my house, and told me, that he had received a Commission from our Governor to travel to the westward of this Colony, as far as the River Mississippi, in order to make Discovery of the Country, and that as a reward for his Labour, he had the promise of an Order of Council for Ten Thousand Acres of Land; and at the same time obliged himself to give equal Shares of said Land to such men as would go in Company with him to search the Country as above. Whereupon I and other two men, viz [John Poteat] and Charles Sinclair’ (his own Son Josiah Harwood having already joined with him) entered into Covenant with him, binding ourselves to each other in a certain writing, and accordingly prepared for our Journey in a very unlucky hour to me and my poor Family.

On the sixteenth of March, 1742, we set off from my House and went to Cedar Creek about five miles, where is a Natural Bridge over said Creek, reaching from the Hill on the one side to the Hill on the other. It is a solid Rock and is two hundred and three feet high, having a very large Spacious arch, where the Water runs thro’, we then proceeded as far as Mondongachate, now called Woods River; which is eighty-five miles, where we killed five Buffaloes, and with their hides covered the Frame of a Boat; which was so large as to carry all our Company, and all our provisions and Utensels, with which we passed down the said River two hundred and fifty-two miles as we supposed,1 and found it very Rocky, having a great many Falls therein, one of which we computed to be thirty feet perpendicular and all along surrounded with inaccessible Mountains, high precipices, which oblied us to leave said River. We went then a south west course by Land eighty five Miles, where we came to a small River,2 and there we made a little Boat, which carried only two men and our provisions. The rest travelled by Land for two Days and then we came to a large River, where we enlarged our Barge, so as she carried all our Company, and whatever Loading we had to put into her. We supposed that we went down this River Two Hundred and Twenty Miles, and had a tolerable good passage; there being only two places, that were difficult by reason of Falls. Where we came to this River the Country is mountainous, but the farther down the plainer in those Mountains, we found great plenty of Coals, for which we named it Coal River. Where this River and Woods river meets,3 the North Mountains end, and the Country appears very plain and is well water’d, there are plenty of Rivulets, clear Fountains and running Streams and very fertile Soil. From the mouth of Coal River, to the River Alleghany we computed to be ninety two miles, and on the sixth day of May we came to Alleghany which we supposed to be three Quarters of a mile [broad]4 and from here to the great Falls on this River is reckoned four hundred and forty four Miles, there being a large Spacious open Country on each side of the River, and is well watered abounding with plenty of Fountains small streams and large Rivers; and is very high and fertile Soil. At this Time we found the Clover to be as high as the North Mountains end, and the other Mountains, that the Water runs thro’, we then proceeded as far as Mondongachate, now called Woods River, which is eighty-five miles, where we killed five Buffaloes, and with their hides covered the Frame of a Boat; which was so large as to carry all our Company, and all our provisions and Utensels, with which we passed down the said River two hundred and fifty-two miles as we supposed, and found it very Rocky, having a great many Falls therein, one of which we computed to be thirty feet perpendicular and all along surrounded with inaccessible Mountains, high precipices, which obliged us to leave said River. We went then a south west course by Land eighty five Miles, where we came to a small River, and there we made a little Boat, which carried only two men and our provisions. The rest travelled by Land for two Days and then we came to a large River, where we enlarged our Barge, so as she carried all our Company, and whatever Loading we had to put into her. We supposed that we went down this River Two Hundred and Twenty Miles, and had a tolerable good passage; there being only two places, that were difficult by reason of Falls. Where we came to this River the Country is mountainous, but the farther down the plainer in those Mountains, we found great plenty of Coals, for which we named it Coal River. Where this River and Woods river meets, the North Mountains end, and the Country appears very plain and is well watered, there are plenty of Rivulets, clear Fountains and running Streams and very fertile Soil. From the mouth of Coal River, to the River Alleghany we computed to be ninety two miles, and on the sixth day of May we came to Alleghany which we supposed to be three Quarters of a mile [broad] and from here to the great Falls on this River is reckoned four hundred and forty four Miles, there being a large Spacious open Country on each side of the River, and is well watered abounding with plenty of Fountains small streams and large Rivers; and is very high and fertile Soil. At this Time we found the Clover to be as high as the middle of a man’s leg. In general all the Woods over the Land is Ridgey, but plain, well timbered and hath plenty

1 In the diary, the name before Sinclair’s is left blank, Harrison added Poteat’s name because it appears on the Howard petition seeking the commission to explore.

2 Noted here in the margin: “The New River.”

3 Salley’s distances do not bear critical analysis. One can understand that they seemed greater to him than they do to a traveler in a Pullman car. [Harrison’s note]

4 northeast fork of the Coal River.

5 The confluence that creates the Great Kanawha, below Charleston, West Virginia.

6 At Point Pleasant, where the Kanawha meets the Ohio River.

7 The falls of the Ohio at Louisville.
The current is not swift but easy to pass either up or down, Kaskaskia. Island without much Danger or Difficulty and in time
Ridges being higher, and continued so for the Space of
Country on both sides of the River, and is so for an Hun-
Country as far as we could view and bore North and
the Falls the Land appeared to be somewhat Hilly the
they being active or careful. About twenty Miles below
three Towns inhabited by the French, this Colony (excepting pine). The Falls mentioned above
and a much richer Soil; We then met
Springs, where the Inhabitants of the Towns mentioned
and those French on the mouth of the said River. In the
above make their Salt. Also they have there a very rich
themselves, by whom I was informed of the Manner of Gov-

A considerable gain. From the Falls mentioned above
in the River Allegany to the mouth of said River is four
Hundred fifty Miles, from thence to the Town of New
Orleans is One Thousand four Hundred and ten Miles, and
is Uninhabited excepting fifty Leagues above New
Orleans. It is a large spacious plain Country endowed
with all the natural Advantages, that is a moderate
healthy Climate, Sweet water, rich Soil, and a pure fresh
Air, which contribute to the Benefit of Mankind.

CAPTURE

We held on our passage down the River Missis-
ippi [until] the second day of July, and about
nine o’ the Clock in the Morning we went
on Shore to cook our Breakfast. But we were suddenly
surprised by a Company of Men, Viz. to the Number
of Ninety, Consisting of French men Negroes, & Indians,
who took us prisoners and carried us to the Town of
New Orleans, which was about one Hundred Leagues
from us when we were taken, and after being examined
upon Oath before the Governor [Bienville] first separa-
tely one by One, and then All together, we were com-
mitted to close Prison, we not knowing then (nor even
yet) how long they intended to confine us there. During
our stay in Prison we had allowed us a pound and half of
Bread a man each Day, and Ten pound of pork p month
for each man. Which allowance was duly given to us for
the space of Eighteen Months, and after that we had only
one Pound of Rice Bread, and one Pound of Rice for each
man p Day, and one Quart of Bear’s Oil for each man
p Month, which allowance was continued to us until I
made my Escape. Whilst I was confined in Prison I had
many Visits made to me by the French and Dutch who
lived there, and grew intimate and familiar with some of
them, by whom I was informed of the Manner of Gov-
ernment, Laws, Strength and Wealth of the Kingdom of
Louisiana as they call it, and from the whole we learned,
that the Government is Tyrannical, The Common Peo-
ple groan under the Load of Oppression, and Sigh for
Deliverance. The Governor is the Chief Merchant, and
inances all the trade into his own hands, depriving
the Planters of selling their Commodities to any other,
but himself, and allowing them only such prices as he
pleases. And with respect to Religion, there’s little to be
found amongst them, but those who profess any Reli-
gion at all, it’s the Church of Rome. In the Town are nine
Clergymen four Jesuits and five Capuchin Friers. They
have likewise one Nunnery in which are nine Nuns. Not-
withstanding the Fertility and Richness of the Soil, The
Inhabitants are generally poor as a Consequence of the
Oppression they meet with from their Rulers, neither is
the Settling of the Country, or Agriculture in any Meas-
ure encouraged by the Legislature. — One thing I had
almost forgot, Viz. we were told by some of the French
who first settled there, that about forty years ago, when
the French first discovered the place, and made attempt
to settle therein, there were then pretty many English
settled on both sides of the River Mississippi, and one
Twenty Gun Ship lay in the River, what became of the
Ship we did not hear, but we were informed that the
English Inhabitants were all destroyed by the Natives by
the Instigation of the French.

1 This all seems to be mere gossip derived from Salley’s fellow
prisoner the disaffected Créole Baudran, whom we are soon to
meet. [Harrison’s note]

I now begin to speak of the strength of the
Country, and by the best Account I could gather I did
not find, that there are above four Hundred and fifty
effective Men of the Militia in all that Country, and
not above one Hundred and fifty Soldiers under pay in
and about the Town of New Orleans, ’tis true they
have Sundry Forts in which they keep some men, but
they are so weak and despicable as not worth tak-
ing notice of, with regard to the Strengthening of the
County, having in some of them only six men, in oth-
ers Ten men, the strongest of all those places is at the
Mouth of the Mississippi In which are thirty Men, and
Fifty Leagues from thence is a Town called Mumev2
nine Leagues from the Mouth of a River of the same
Name in which is a Garrison, that Consists of Seventy
Soldiers.

ESCAPE

AFTER I HAD BEEN CONFINED in close Prison
above two Years, and all Expectation of being set
at Liberty failing, I begun to think of making my
Escape out of Prison, one of which I put in Practice, and
which Succeeded in the following Manner. There was a
certain French Man,3 who was born in that Country,
and had some time before sold his Rice to the Spaniards
for which he was put in Prison, and it Cost him six Hun-
dred Peices of Eight before he got clear. He being tired
with the Misery and Oppression under which the poor
Country People Labour, formed a Design of removing
his Family to South Carolina. Which Design was discov-
ered, and he was again put in Prison in the Dungeon,
and made fast in Irons, and after a formal Tryal, he was
condemned to be a Slave for Ten Years, besides the ex-
pense of seven Hundred peices of Eight. With this Mis-
erable French Man I became intimate & familiar, and as
he was an active man, and knew the Country he prom-
is ed, if I could help him off with his Irons, and we all got
clear of the Prison, he would conduct us safe untill we

1 Kaskaskia.

2 Salling apparently learned this while a prisoner, as the expedi-
tion did not go up the river.

3 A league is an approximate measure of distance, generally ac-
cepted as about three miles.

The governors of Louisiana who overaw Salling’s imprisonment:
Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, left, who ruled until
1742; and his successor, Pierre François de Rigaud, Marquis de
Vaudreuil-Cavagnal.

The Diary of John Peter Salling: Early Rackbrane Adventurer
were out of Danger. We then got a small file from a Soldier wherewith to cut the Irons and on the 25th day of October, 1744 we put our Design in Practice. While the French man was very busy in the Dungeon in cutting the Irons, we were as industrious without in breaking the Door of the Dungeon, and Each of us finished our Job at one Instant of time, which had held us for about six hours; by three of the Clock in the Morning with the help of a Rope which I had provided beforehand, we let our Selves down over the Prison Walls, and made our Escape Two Miles from the Town that night, where we lay close for two days. We then removed to a place three Miles from the Town, where one of the good old Fryers of which I spoke before, nourished us four Days. On the Eighth Day after we made our Escape, we came to a Lake 7 seven Leagues from the Town but by this Time we had got a Gun and some Ammunition, the next Day we shot two large Bulls, and with their Hides made us a boat, in which we passed the Lake in the Night. We tied the Shoulder Blades of the Bulls to small sticks, which served us for paddles and passed a point, where there were thirteen men lay in wait for us, but Thro’ Mercy we escaped from them undiscovered. After we had gone by Water sixty miles we went on Shore, we left our Boat as a Witness of our Escape to the French. We travelled thirty miles by Land to the River Shoktare, 3 where our French man’s father lived. In this Journey we passed thro’ a Nation of Indians, who were very kind to us, and Carried us over two large Bays. In this place we Tarried Two Months and ten Days in very great Danger, for search was made for us everywhere by Land and Water and Orders to Shoot us when found. Great Rewards were promised by the Governor to the King of the Indians to take us, which he refused, and in the meantime we were armed and well provided for our Voyage, we set off at a place called the belle Fountain (or in English fine Spring) 4 and Sailed fifty Leagues to the head of St. Rose’s Bay, 5 and there left our Vessel and travelled by Land Thirty Leagues to the Fork Indians, 6 where the English trade. Then there were three with them, and there we stayed five Days. The Natives were to us kind and generous, there left the two French men and Negro boy, 7 for us, and we having got a large Periaugue 8 and other necessary things for our Voyage, and on the 25th of January our French man and one Negro boy (which he took to wait on him) and another French man and we being all armed and well provided for our Voyage, we set off at a place called the belle Fountain (or in English fine Spring) 4 and Sailed fifty Leagues to the head of St. Rose’s Bay, 5 and there left our Vessel and travelled by Land Thirty Leagues to the Fork Indians, 6 where the English trade. Then there were three with them, and there we stayed five Days. The Natives were to us kind and generous, there we left the two French men and Negro boy, and on the tenth of February we set off and Travelled by Land up the River Giscaculufa or Biscaculufa, 4 one Hundred and thirty five Miles, passing several Indian Towns the Natives being very hospitable and kind, and came to one Finlas an Indian Trader, who lives among the Ugu Nation. 2 On the first of March we left Mr Finlas, and on the sixteenth we arrived at fort Augustus in the Province of Georgia. 3 On the nineteenth instant we left Fort Augustus and on the first of April we arrived at Charles Town, and waited on the Governor, 7 who examined us Concerning our Travels &c. and he detained us in Charles Town eighteen Days, and made us a present of eighteen pounds of their Money, which did no more than defray our Expenses whilst in that Town.

I had delivered to the Governor a Copy of my Journal, which when I asked again he refused to give me, but having obtained from him a Pass we went on board of a small Vessel bound for Virginia. On the Thirteenth of April, the same Day about two of the Clock were taken by the French in Cape Roman and kept Prisoners till eleven of the Clock next Day, at which time the French after having robbed us of all the Provisions we had for our Voyage or Journey, put us into a Boat we being twelve men in Number, and so left us to the Mercy of the Seas and Winds.

On the fifteenth instant we arrived again at Charles Town and were examined before the Governor concerning our being taken by the French. We were now detained three Days before we could get another Pass from the Governor, we having destroyed the former, when we were taken by the French, and then were dismissed, being in a strange Place, far from Home, destitute of Friends, Cloathing, Money and Arms, and in that deplorable Condition had been obliged to undertake a Journey of five Hundred Miles, but a Gentleman, who was Commander of a Privateer, and then lay at Charles Town with whom we had discoursed several times, gave to each of us a Gun and a Sword, and would have given us Ammunition, but that he had but little. On the Eighteenth Day of April, we left Charles Town, the second time, and travelled by Land, 2 and on the seventeenth Day of May, 1745 we arrived at my House, having been absent three years Two Months and one Day, from my family, having in that time by the nicest Calculation I am able to make, travelled by Land and Water four thousand six hundred and six Miles since I left my own House till I returned Home again.

__John Peter Salley__.