

Col. James Anderson Dysart: Soldier, Statesman, Pioneer

One Of Rockcastle County's Earliest Citizens

By David W. Owens - 2014

"There she be Laddie, there she be." The emotions must have been overwhelming for the 18-year-old youth that day in 1762 when his British schooner came within sight of the coast of Colonial America. James A. Dysart (1744-1818), the sixth of eight children, was born of Scotch and Irish stock. He was the son of Samuel and Frances Anderson Dysart.

James parents died when he was a young boy, so he and his younger siblings, Jane and Samuel, were reared by their grandparents at the Dysart's ancestral home, Brook Hall, in Donegal, Northern Ireland.

James received the rudiments of a common English education while at Brook Hall. At the age of 17, he determined on visiting America. His grandparents agreed to furnish his means to defray his expenses there, on the condition that he return the next season to finish his schooling.

With only his grandfather's letter of introduction and his inheritance, James had come to the New World to make his mark in this wondrous land of adventure that he had read much about back at Brook Hall. Landing at Philadelphia and determined not to go back to Ireland, he soon exhausted his inheritance. After spending eight years toiling as a planter in Pennsylvania, needing money and seeking adventure, he traveled to Southwest Virginia and signed on as a long hunter under Col.

James Knox's Company. Perhaps no group in our history has contributed so much knowledge of the early western pioneer topography than Knox's Long Hunters.

In the annals of American history there is no braver lot than these early hunters. Not only did they endure the rigorous winters in crude shelters but also the danger of sickness, privation, exposure, hunting accidents, and the very real and ever present danger of being scalped by the Indians. They were looked upon as robbers of Indian hunting

grounds, which they truly were. They also were the forerunners of the ever-spreading, land-clearing, soil-tilling settler.

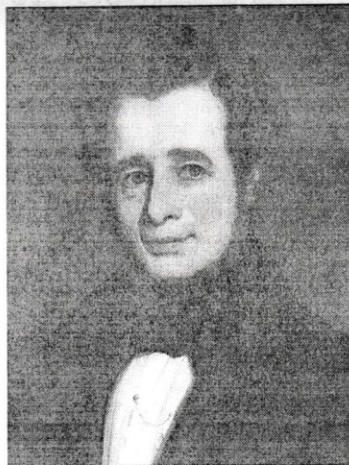
An interesting account of Dysart as a long hunter is found in Dr. Lyman C. Draper's book *The Life of Daniel Boone* (edited by Ted Franklin, pg. 261), "At another time, Dysart was hunting alone when, coming to where a double or forked tree had fallen in opposite directions, leaving a

passage between the sundered trunk and roots sufficiently large for an ordinary trail, he attempted to pass through, but just as he entered the narrow defile, he suddenly encountered a large bear. The bruin seemed determined not to turn his back upon his foe and, instantly raising himself upon his hind feet, seized hold of the breast of Dysart's coat. Dysart, possessing great muscular strength, made a violent push against the animal, when the coat gave way and the bear fell hurriedly backwards eight or ten feet; and recovering himself, he stood for a moment eying the young hunter who had just handled him so roughly, which gave Dysart barely time to raise his rifle, at the crack of which the huge bear bit the dust and the long hunter was happily relieved from his perilous situation."

Just why was this particular group of men given to hunting, instead of tilling the soil as most settlers did? The answer is simple; money. It was not uncommon for a hunter to realize \$1,600 to \$1,700 for his season take. This was far in excess of what he could earn in almost any other lucrative endeavor. Having spent two seasons with

Knox, James soon left and traveled down the Little Holston River to speculate for land.

In 1770 Dysart chose to settle in Abingdon which later became Washington County, Virginia. He soon proved to be a good manager of his money and became an influential member of the community. In 1775 he married Nancy "Agnes" Beattie (1754-1833). Nancy was the daughter of John Beattie, a very eminent man of those parts. As part of her dowry, Squire Beattie gave the newlyweds a large farm



James Dysart came to America in 1762. He served as a long hunter under Col. James Knox for two years, led a company of Virginia volunteers at the Battle of Kings Mountain, and later came to Rockcastle County, Kentucky, where he was elected to the House of Representatives. He died in 1818.

Dr. Lyman C. Draper wrote about Col. James A. Dysart in his book, *The Life of Daniel Boone*.

next to his, where James built a huge two-story, double-log house. He called his home Brook Hall in memory of his Irish home. James also acquired 2,000 acres on Moccasin Creek. When the area was later incorporated as Washington County (Virginia), James was elected its first sheriff and commissioned to build the courthouse and jail. With the profits from the construction of the courthouse and jail, he built a mill and distillery on Moccasin Creek and became quite well-to-do. While at Brook Hall, he and Nancy had six children. James was also one of the signers on the petition that called the first minister, Rev. Charles Cummings, to the Sinking Springs Presbyterian Church at Abingdon.

In 1776 the war for American Independence began and James received a captain's commission in the Regular Continental Army. Captain Dysart made quite a reputation for himself at the Battle of Kings Mountain (October 7, 1781) where he, although being wounded, led a militia company of Virginia volunteers. The Patriots faced a brigade of loyal Tory Americans, under the command of Col. Patrick Ferguson (regular British officer), a Scot known for inventing the breech loading Ferguson rifle. Ferguson, a strong disciplinarian was called "Bulldog" by his troops and known as a "High-minded Highlander" with a bad attitude. He looked down on the Americans calling them "A bunch of backwater men...a set of mongrels."

During the battle Colonel Ferguson had his men entrenched on a lofty plateau atop Kings Mountain in South Carolina. Col. Isaac Shelby, who later became Kentucky's first governor, commanded the brigade of Virginia and Tennessee men that approached Ferguson's position from the north while Col. Benjamin Cleveland with the Carolina militia (of which the author's great-great-great-great-grandfather and namesake, David Owens, was a member) approached from the south.

Soon the Patriots completely surrounded Ferguson's lofty haven and proceeded to march up the steep inclines only to completely rout the Tories in 65 minutes of heavy action. Afterward British Gen. Henry Clinton, speaking of the affair said, "The first link of a chain of evils." He feared the loss would lead to the collapse of British plans to quash the Patriot Rebellion, and he was right. Thus many historians consider Kings Mountain as the turning point in Colonial America's quest for Independence.

Later as the war progressed, Dysart was promoted to major and then colonel, serving out the rest of the war in pioneer service. After the conclusion of the war, he returned to Brook Hall and continued a very prosperous business with his mill and distillery. Later, he was elected with fellow Whig Samuel Meek to represent Washington County in the Virginia House of Delegates.

In 1800 he began to suffer a reversal of fortune. He was defeated by James Bradley in his bid to be reelected to the House. He had fallen in disfavor of voters for voting against the Alien and Sedition Act. He began to encounter financial difficulties. While in office he had agreed to sign promissory bank notes for constituents, some who failed to pay off the debts.

In 1803, broken in health and discouraged over political and financial difficulties, the Dysarts sold their holdings to pay the promissory notes. Dysart then applied for and was granted a War Land Grant in Kentucky. He and Nancy packed up their kitchen and working tools, as well as James' library of books, and headed out for Kentucky with their six slaves. Following Skaggs Trace in Rockcastle County, they selected a nice farm of 1,500 acres near a large double spring on Jones Creek (on Route 1250 off 461 Bypass, farm of Cecil McKinney). There, he built a large double-logged, two-story house with double-hearth stone chimneys at each end. He again named this home Brook Hall.

Dysart soon became a very influential citizen in his new home. When Rockcastle County was incorporated in 1810, a General Assembly act provided for the establishment of the Rockcastle Academy to further the cause of education in the new county. Named on the board were Col. James Dysart, William Carson, Capt. William Smith, Absolom Renfro, John Burdette, Henry P. Buford, and Colonel Dysart's son, John Beattie Dysart. In 1815, at the advanced age of 71, Colonel Dysart was elected to a seat in the Kentucky House of Representatives.

Here, James and Nancy contentedly lived out their lives. When a visiting friend commented on his isolation in his wilderness home, Dysart answered, "I am never lonesome when I have a good book in my hands." He had in time collected quite a library and lived to enjoy it. He died on May 26, 1818, at the age of 74. At the time of his death he was described as "a large, square-built, coarse-featured man, weighing 200 pounds, fond of books and newspapers, and a professor of the Christian religion."

After Colonel Dysart's death, his fifth child, Johnston (2/22/1787-8/5/1826), who was married to Mary Ann Cowan, moved into Brook Hall with his family and provided care for his mother. Nancy Agnes Dysart lived another 15 years. She died in 1833 and is buried by her husband in the Dysart/Kirtley Cemetery located on a picturesque wooded knoll near the old Brook Hall homeplace.

Johnston Dysart, in the tradition of his father, made quite a name for himself. He was heavily involved with Rockcastle politics, serving as sheriff and representative (Whig Party). During the War of 1812 (the Second War of Independence) Johnston raised a company of Rockcastle men and was elected its commander, becoming Captain of the Fifth Company, 11th Kentucky Mounted Volunteers.

On October 5, 1813, they participated in the Battle of the Thames, near Morgantown in Canada where Indian Chief Tecumseh was killed. There a brigade of Kentuckians, yelling "Remember the River Raisin," defeated British Gen. Henry Proctor and his Indian allies. The loss demolished both Proctor's Army and Tecumseh's Indian Confederation and hastened the British to sue for peace. Johnston Dysart's good friend, William Whitley, was killed in that battle. Captain Dysart later went on to be promoted to major and then colonel, just as his father.

Following the War, Colonel Dysart returned to Brook

Hall and farmed the plantation until he died on August 5, 1826, at the young age of 29. He was laid to rest near his father in the Dysart/Kirtley Cemetery.

James Dysart II (12/22/1817 to 1/8/1895), the eldest of Johnston and Mary Ann's children, was only nine years old at the time of his father's death. Mrs. Dysart then managed the farm and oversaw the slaves until Master James became old enough to intrust with the management of Brook Hall. When James II was 27, he married Louisa Elvira Harris, whose family lived on the neighboring farm. Following the footsteps of his grandfather and father, he was also elected colonel of a state militia regiment made up of Rockcastle and Lincoln County men.

James II continued to farm Brook Hall until 1850 when he uprooted the clan and moved to Buchanan County, Missouri, along with the Judge William Carson and Larkin Kirtleys families. One source stated they greatly feared Indian attacks, but no harm befell them.

They settled in Buchanan County where James farmed several hundred acres of land and became the minister of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. A history of the church by an unknown author recorded the following regarding Reverend Dysart: "Mr. Dysart is a genius in his way, singular and eccentric; yet gifted, forcible, and successful to a degree. There are a good many opposite and apparently antagonistic traits in his character; yet, if these unruly elements ever come in collision, they only affect him, nor from his great usefulness as one of the most successful revivalists of his day."

In 1861 Reverend Dysart's wife died, and he enlisted in General Sterling Price's Confederate command, where he received a commission as a captain. During the Civil War his house was approached by a Union Cavalry unit and his property plundered. They took anything of value, including his grandfather's silver hilted sword that he had carried during the Revolutionary War.

Reverend Dysart married Kate Martin in 1864, and they lived out their lives there in Buchanan County. They were both buried near Louisa Harris Dysart.

Presently, the Rockcastle County Cemetery Preservation Board has targeted the Dysart final resting place as a future project. This very important part of Rockcastle's history was almost lost to time after the Dysart family had moved west following the 1849 Gold Rush. Fortunately, in May of 1974, John Lair published a short account of Colonel



A painting of Brook Hall, the home of James and Nancy Dysart. James built this home on Jones Creek in Rockcastle County, Kentucky, after 1803. It was a large double-logged, two-story structure with double-hearth stone chimneys on each end. This home was surrounded by 1,500 acres of land owned by the Dysarts. (Photo courtesy of David Owens)

Dysart's life in his "Rockcastle Recollections" column.

Shortly after that article appeared in *The Signal*, Chester Whitaker contacted Mr. Lair. Mr. Whitaker had remembered hearing stories of the "Old Dysarts" when he was a young boy, and knew the location of the old cemetery. Together, Whitaker and Lair hunted through the worn markers and fieldstones until they found a rounded marker with the faint etching, "J.D. d 1818."

Later, the Rockcastle DAR Chapter was asked to obtain a marker for this old soldier. On October 5, 1986, a formal ceremony with approximately 60 people attending, including Dysart descendants, was performed to honor Colonel Dysart. Charles Griffin, a great-great-great-grandson, gave a short history of the patriot. The Rockcastle Chapter members conducted the dedication ceremony.

Following a recent trip to the Dysart burial grounds, County Judge Executive Buzz Carloftis made the statement, "This cemetery deserves special recognition by the county and its Cemetery board for historical preservation." His comment was echoed by Rockcastle Economic Development Project Coordinator Lynn Tatum, "Now that we have rediscovered this prestigious pioneer cemetery, we have a responsibility to preserve it for future generations."

Judge Carloftis hopes to see the cemetery restored so future generations of Rockcastle Countians can look back into history and be very proud of their heritage. The author extends his gratitude and thanks to land owner Cecil McKinney for allowing access to this historic cemetery.

James Dysart and William Whitley were very close as-

The Dysart family owned 1,500 acres of land in Rockcastle County, Kentucky.