

Chapter Five. Conclusions

The most direct route to the west was the Wilderness Road which left from Big Lick (Roanoke), passed through Montgomery County, and headed west through the Alleghany mountains. This study sought to determine if food and lodging accommodations in the form of public houses were available to these travelers as they passed through Montgomery County, and if so, were any of the houses standing today that could be studied and documented for design of structures, floor plans, and interior furnishings. Additionally, if examples could be found, where were they located in relation to the Wilderness Road and what could be discovered about operating practices. The search focused on the first fifty years of the founding of the county, 1773-1823.

The research questions were addressed by searching county court records, historic materials housed in libraries, as well as WPA and Virginia Department of Historic Resources records. Most important to this study were the court records of names of people issued licenses each year to operate either an ordinary, house of entertainment, or a tavern; all considered public houses. Between the years 1773 to 1823, as many as 118 citizens of the county paid to hold a license. This was a surprisingly high number, but typically an individual purchased a license for only a few years. This trend of operating a public house for a short period of time could indicate that the business was a secondary means of income and was not essential, or that the difficulties in acquiring the necessary supplies of food and other items required by patrons were too great. Perhaps there were too few patrons for the number of public houses in operation in the county and the endeavor was not profitable. Historical records show that license holders were people with families. Times when it would be possible to bring this type business into the home would vary according to changes in family number, age, and activities. Conceivably most travelers could have had their own covered wagons and did not need lodgings. There is also the question of how conveniently located these houses were to the Wilderness Road.

Whatever the reason, records make it apparent that the business was not lucrative enough to purchase a license for a sustained period of time.

From the five documented former public houses selected for investigation in this study, it was determined that there was no evidence to indicate that a structure was built for the purpose of serving as a public house. Rather, it seems apparent that what were licensed as public houses were the family homes of individuals. The one exception that might indicate a design feature specifically useful to taking in travelers was an enclosed space below the central stairway that could be locked. Two of the five houses had such a space. Speculation is that the locked space would have been to store weapons and/or liquor.

A number of similarities were found in the design of three of the five houses. They each were two stories with a gabled roof and a centered entry opening on to a hall with a stairway to the upper floor. With one exception, each had one room flanking either side of the hall both on the first and second floors. In all cases there was a chimney on both sides of the house.

The location of two of the five structures could not be identified on available historic maps or in court records. The difficulty in locating historic structures is further complicated by geographical changes to the terrain that had been landmarks. Some structures may have been demolished and if the structure still stands, they often have been covered by various materials, added on to, or remodeled.

Little was learned from this study about the interior furnishings of early homes in southwest Virginia since most items have disappeared over time. Most likely, furnishings would have been limited to begin with, and what there was would have been used until worn out. It is possible that few possessions were elaborately crafted and therefore not treasured enough to be passed down in a family. Textiles are the least likely to survive time. Always limited in availability, textiles are the most susceptible to deterioration by

insects and wear. A few secondary sources showed examples of furniture that was of the simplest construction and with few details.

In comparing public houses found in Montgomery County to those reported to have been in business in Richmond, it became apparent that the greatest similarities were with the smaller, older, and less elaborate houses in Richmond.

Recommendations for further study

To complete the history of public houses in southwest Virginia, this study would need to be repeated in other counties along the Wilderness Road, such as in Wythe County, which is the next county beyond Montgomery. Court records, WPA surveys and the Virginia Department of Historic Resources reports could be reviewed to answer the questions addressed in this study. Further research on this topic would add final pieces to completing a comprehensive history of public houses in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

There is much more to learn about early interior furnishings of public houses and homes in general. Wills and appraisals of each public house license holder in Montgomery County before 1823 would be useful in identifying the typical types of household goods. Other museum collections, such as the Staunton Frontier Museum, could provide valuable insight into the furnishing of frontier and rural homes.

The history of Montgomery county would be more complete if the Lindsey Crow house and the Redmand Eakin house and other homes that once served as public houses were located, investigated, and documented for what remains of their original design. Documentation of these structures would add further credence to what was revealed in the investigation of the Hall, Ingles, and Brugh tavern structures in this study.