

JAMES BRECKINRIDGE

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments ii

The Early Life of James Breckinridge 1

Career in the Virginia House of Delegates 23

James Breckinridge, Member of Congress 40

The Indian Summer of a Federalist: 1816-1824 65

A Militia Career: 1780-1815 71

James Breckinridge and the University of Virginia 70

Life at Grove Hill

The End of a Fruitful Life 95

Works Cited 99

Appendix 105

Vita 109

Abstract

CHAPTER I

THE EARLY LIFE OF JAMES BRECKINRIDGE

To be a Breckinridge of Virginia or of Kentucky between 1750 and 1865 was to belong to one of the most prominent political dynasties in the United States of America. All the members of this family before the end of the American Revolution spelled their name "Breckenridge;" afterwards both John Breckinridge, who removed to Kentucky, and J Breckinridge, who remained in Virginia, adopted the spelling "Breckinridge."¹ Although its members were convinced of the superiority of a republican form of government and of the necessity for the protection of individual freedom by means of a Bill of Rights, the Breckinridges were not less devoted to the maintenance of property rights. Not unlike European aristocrats, in the fertile valleys of transmontane Virginia and in Kentucky, these "barons of the Bluegrass" were acutely conscious of their interrelationship with similar families, chief of whom were the Prestons and their cousinly network of Pattons, Buchanans, Floyds, McDowells, and Browns. Among the first families of these border lands between Piedmont Virginia and the Ohio, there were some of German origin, such as the Hites, and some of Anglican roots, such

¹James Breckinridge spelled his name both Breckenridge and Breckinridge, but he signed his will, a legal document, "Breckinridge." Both his father and grandfather used the spelling "Breckenridge." James' contemporaries used both spellings along with several other variations.

as the Innesses and Donelsons; but most were, like the Breckinridges and Prestons, Scotch-Irish. With few exceptions before the Civil War, they "went in for land speculation and Indian fighting, for politics and public affairs. . . ."2

Fellow citizens honored one Breckinridge with a nomination as U.S. presidential candidate after he had already been a vice-president at thirty-five years of age. Before the Civil War, the Breckinridge name was borne by two senators, five representatives, four generals, three ministers and college presidents, and a minister of Russia. Marital connections included governors, senators, representatives, generals, and cabinet members.³

With dignity and sometimes with elegance, the Breckinridge men disproved the old Virginia saying that "Gentlemen and clams end at the fall line." They were usually "over six feet [in height]; handsome with auburn or chestnut hair, which turned prematurely silver or iron gray; eyes piercing and deep set."⁴ James Breckinridge was six feet two inches in height with broad shoulders and an erect carriage. He possessed "a fine head with high, expansive brow, a well-shaped mouth and a keen piercing eye. He was elegant in his dress, generally

²Thomas P. Abernathy, Three Virginia Frontiers (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1940). Hereinafter cited as Abernathy, Three Virginia Frontiers, pp. 59, 67.

³Stephen Hess, American Political Dynasties: From Adams to Kennedy (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1966). Hereinafter cited as Hess, Political Dynasties, pp. 626-627.

⁴Ibid., p. 242.

appearing in public with neat fitting cloth coat and pants, polished boots, spotless ruffled bosom, and gold headed cane."⁵

Just as was the case among Tidewater planters, the Breckinridges sought and acquired title to large, undeveloped tracts of land as a legacy for their children. Since there were not even banks in British North America, there was little alternative to investment in land. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Breckinridges became successful speculators in the lands located in the western counties of Virginia and in Kentucky. In this activity they followed in the tracks of the Prestons who came to western Virginia somewhat sooner, with greater capital, and with pre-existing political and financial allies in the Virginia tidewater.

In 1728 Alexander Breckenridge arrived in Philadelphia with his wife, family of young children, and a small amount of capital. He was possessed of an ambition fired by a capacity for hard work; and his subsequent activities gave proof of his success. He was the progenitor of the Breckinridges of Virginia and Kentucky and the grandfather of the subject of this study.⁶ Direct evidence is lacking to establish Alexander's motives in coming from Great Britain via Philadelphia to what became the town of Staunton in the Valley of Virginia. Yet there

⁵Thomas D. Houston, "Early Days in Fincastle," June 20, 1873. Speech in possession of Mrs. English Showalter, Roanoke, Virginia.

⁶Mary S. Kennedy, Seldens of Virginia and Allied Families (2 vols., New York: Frank Allahan Genealogical Co., 1911). Hereinafter cited as Kennedy, Seldens of Virginia, II, 588. See also Thomas M. Green, "A Sketch of the Breckinridge Family," typescript, Library of Congress. Hereinafter cited as Green, "Sketch," p. 2.

is abundant indirect evidence to project the broad outlines of how the Breckinridges' hardy independence on Virginia's transmontane frontier in the half century before the United States of America won its independence. If the Breckinridges' achievement of the American dream revealed a mixture of aristocratic and democratic values, of material success and religious satisfaction, it is likely that they were typical of frontier leadership.

Economic opportunity in Northern Ireland was restricted enough, but for a man of as large a family as Alexander Breckenridge's, it was oppressive. For a man of as enterprising nature as Breckenridge, to remain in Pennsylvania where the Penns sold land for between ten and fifteen pounds an acre was hardly a meaningful option. In Virginia, on the other hand, land was to be had from the crown for only ten shillings for each hundred acres. Even after the costs of locating, surveying, and registering land were paid by the Virginia settler lucky enough to obtain land directly from the colony, amounting to about £ 2 per hundred acres for small tracts, he paid a great deal less than what was required in Pennsylvania for his homesite.

Advertisements in port towns lured many emigrants to the border settlements. By 1736 Robert Beverley, a grandson of the famous William Byrd of Westover and a member of the colonial council, had settled sixty-seven Scotch-Irish families on his 60,000 acre tract on the headwaters of the Shenandoah that he called his Manor of Beverley, after having sold to the settlers on generous terms of payment parcels of less than 400 acres for about one-half shilling per acre. Because

of his success in thus populating the frontier, Beverley and a syndicate he formed received an additional 118,491 acres.⁷

Alexander Breckenridge was no longer a greenhorn when, on May 22, 1740, he traveled to Orange Court House to obtain 450 acres of land to which he swore that he was entitled under Virginia's ancient head-rights system of land tenure which awarded to whomever transported persons into a colony a bounty of fifty acres per head. Alexander Breckenridge might have been stretching the truth when he swore that he transported to the Augusta region himself, his wife, and their seven children: John, George, Robert, James, Smith, Jane, and Le... It is possible that Alexander Breckenridge may have been in the vicinity of Staunton in the Augusta area for some while since deeds were registered in his name in 1738.⁸

The village of Staunton grew up on Lewis Creek after its foundation by John Lewis in 1732, but it was not incorporated as a town until 1761.⁹ If the Breckenridges lived there, as was likely, they moved farther west in the 1740's to the Tinkling Spring neighborhood. At about the same time some other Scotch-Irish settlers made similar moves. Among these were the Pattons and the Prestons; and all three families were members of the Congregation of the Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church, which was founded in 1738. When Breckenridge

⁷Richard L. Norton, Colonial Virginia (2 vols., Chapel Hill: Virginia Historical Society, 1960), II, 549-550. See also Abernathy, Three Virginia Frontiers, pp. 55, 60.

⁸Kennedy, Seldens of Virginia, II, 588.

⁹James R. V. Daniel, A Hornbook of Virginia History (Richmond: Virginia Department of Conservation and Development, 1949), p. 31.

died in 1744, he was a member of its Board of Trustees.¹⁰ So was Colonel James Patton, the frontier magnate who had invested in Augusta County the proceeds of his voyages between the British Isles and North America, in which trade he had been an associate of Colonel Beverley in transporting Scotch-Irish settlers to transmontane Virginia.¹¹

Upon Alexander Breckenridge's death, the leadership of his family passed to his son Robert who was then about twenty-two years old.¹² He was destined to establish his family's fortune as a surveyor, Indian fighter, and civic leader of the frontier. In 1750, the young man's stature was sufficiently recognized for him to be joined with such established figures as Andrew Lewis, the Indian fighter, and Robert McClanahan, the High Sheriff of Augusta, as surveyors of lots in the growing town of Staunton. A decade later, when the town was incorporated, Breckenridge was elected to its Board of Trustees.¹³

It can only be a matter of conjecture to attribute any financial involvement by the Breckenridges in the grandiose schemes for a landed empire that Colonel James Patton had inherited from his business dealings

¹⁰Kennedy, Seldens of Virginia, II, 588. See also Howard M. Wilson, The Tinkling Spring: Headwater of Freedom (Fishersville, Va.: The Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church, 1954).

¹¹Morton, Colonial Virginia, II, 550, 570-72.

¹²This estimate of Robert Breckenridge's age presupposes that: (1) Alexander Breckenridge's petition for headrights was truthful in implying that his children were all born before 1728, (2) that none were twins, etc., (3) that each child was one year older than the next younger, (4) that Robert was the eldest child, and (5) that Letitia was the youngest and only one year old in 1740.

¹³Louis A. Burgess, Virginia Soldiers of 1776 (2 vols., Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc., 1927). Hereinafter cited as Burgess, Virginia Soldiers, II, 733.

with Robert Beverley, but the role of minor partner in such an enterprise became a stronger probability with the son Robert than it had been with the father Alexander. Certainly, Robert Breckenridge was as concerned as his fellow frontiersmen when, in July, 1755, Colonel Patton was killed by the Indians when seeking to plant a settlement about 150 miles southwest of Augusta at Draper's Meadows.¹⁴ It appeared as if the Virginia frontier would be engulfed in a general uprising, and retrenchment was the order of the day. Robert Breckenridge had been commissioned a Captain of Rangers since 1755 and he became a Lieutenant Colonel of the Augusta militia during the French and Indian war.¹⁵ However, when Augusta did not furnish its militia to aid Braddock's march, Virginia's Governor Dinwiddie became so furious at Breckenridge that he ordered Andrew Lewis to "put him out of his commission." The disaster of Braddock's march and the alarms on the southwestern frontier so impressed Lewis that he did not follow the Governor's orders against his long-time associate and friend.¹⁶

In 1752 Robert married Mary Poage who bore him two sons, Robert, Jr., and Alexander, before her early death. In 1758 he remarried, this time to Lettice, or Letitia,¹⁷ the daughter of John and Elizabeth Patton Preston and the sister of Colonel William Preston, who had succeeded

¹⁴Morton, Colonial Virginia, II, 678.

¹⁵Burgess, Virginia Soldiers, p. 733.

¹⁶Green, "Sketch", p. 6. See also Morton, Colonial Virginia, II, 642-643.

¹⁷Robert Breckenridge referred to his wife as Lettice in his will.

his uncle Colonel Patton as the leader of their family and of its land speculations. By this alliance, the Breckenridges gained full acceptance as leaders of transmontane Virginia.

Following Colonel Preston's example, Robert Breckenridge, Sr., moved his family southward "sometime in the early 1760's" to the area near Fincastle in what was to become in 1769 Botetourt County. Here, he and his wife raised their five children: William, their first son; John, the second; James, born March 7, 1763, was the third; followed by their daughters Elizabeth and Jane who died young; and Preston, the youngest son.¹⁸

According to family tradition, young Alexander and Robert Breckenridge, Jr., did not get along with their new stepmother, although they were on good terms with her brother, Colonel William Preston. Probably at the boys' request, the latter arranged for Robert Breckenridge, Sr., to apprentice them in the building trade to Francis Smith, the "undertaker" of Hanover County who was Preston's father-in-law. This was accomplished, and when Robert, Jr., and Alexander completed some eighteen months apprenticeship, they built in 1772-1773 Colonel Preston's new seat, Smithfield Plantation, some sixty to seventy miles southwest of Fincastle in what was to become in 1776 Montgomery County. These two Breckenridge boys subsequently removed to Kentucky, where

¹⁸Lowell H. Harrison, John Breckinridge: Jeffersonian Republican (Louisville: The Filson Club, 1969). Hereinafter cited as Harrison, John Breckinridge, p. 3.

Colonel Preston had extensive lands which required management; but they did not pass on until after Alexander had served Colonel Andrew Lewis' division in Lord Dunmore's War.¹⁹

Few details are known of James Breckinridge's boyhood. Like most lads, he liked to hunt and fish and shoot; and he probably disliked performing chores. From the time that his father died, when the boy was nine years old, his Uncle William Preston served as his and his younger brother Preston's guardian. He was at least occasionally under the kindly admonition of his mother's brother-in-law, the Rev. John Brown, parson of the New Providence and Timber Ridge Presbyterian churches in Augusta County.²⁰ But the boy must have been more interested in the militia musters that took place near his father's ordinary at Fincastle,²¹ and perhaps he helped wash the mugs from which the soldiers in buckskin quenched their thirst. He was eleven when his family's friend, Andrew Lewis, received orders from Governor Lord Dunmore to enlist more men into the Botetourt militia and to march them down the Kanawha River to its junction with the Ohio in order to crush the Shawnee Indian power. Among those commanded by Colonel Lewis in Dunmore's War were James Breckinridge's half-brother, Alexander, while his cousin, James Brown, served in James Harrod's party under Colonel William Fleming.²²

¹⁹Green, "Sketch," p. 8. See also Euben G. Thwaites and Louise P. Kellogg, Documentary History of Dunmore's War: 1774 (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1905). Hereinafter cited as Thwaites and Kellogg, Dunmore's War, p. 422.

²⁰Ibid., p. 27.

²¹Harrison, John Breckinridge, pp. 3-4.

²²Thwaites & Kellogg, Dunmore's War, pp. 420-422.

Like most Virginians, Robert Breckenridge, Sr., had been "hard-pressed for cash." By raising "hemp as his chief money crop," he prospered enough to purchase two slaves in 1771 for £ 150.²³ We may safely speculate that these two slaves were intended for the cultivation of hemp and for helping Mrs. Breckenridge as house servants. Eight additional slaves were purchased before Robert's death on August 17, 1772. After his demise, his ten slaves and 2,000 acres were divided among his wife and children. By his last will and testament he provided that when James became twenty-one in 1784, he should receive half of his father's 800 acres of land on Tinker Creek "known by the name of the Lower Place."²⁴ Although his will was valid, Robert Breckenridge's usual informal way of transacting business led to land disputes that complicated settlement of the estate.

Mrs. Letitia Preston Breckenridge was confined to her house by illness during most of the first year of her widowhood. Not only was she burdened with the problem of finding an overseer, but many of the problems of settling her husband's estate fell upon her. Numerous joints claims and dual ownerships made settlement particularly difficult.²⁵

²³Harrison, John Breckinridge, p. 3.

²⁴Will Book A, 1770-1801, Botetourt County, Virginia, 36. The executors of Robert's will were William Preston and Andrew Woods.

²⁵William Preston to Mrs. Lettice Breckenridge, Oct. 12, 1773, Breckinridge Papers, Library of Congress. Hereinafter cited as Breckinridge papers, DLC. See also Harrison, John Breckinridge, p. 5.

Like most families whose capital was invested almost exclusively in land, the Breckinridges were short of cash during and immediately after the Revolutionary War. As a consequence, they turned to the production of hemp, brandy, and whiskey to obtain goods which they hoped to exchange for cash but which they knew they could barter for articles.²⁶

Evolution of the Breckinridges from Presbyterians into Episcopalians occurred after their removal to Botetourt. Bishop William Meade gave the contradictory and implausible explanation that James Breckinridge was one of those recalled to "the faith of their forefathers" by the Reverend Mr. Gray, who was the Episcopal minister at Fincastle in the late 1790's before he "died in the parish poor-house, the miserable victim of drink."²⁷

Chronologically it is much more probable that Fincastle's rector in 1774-1776, the Reverend Adam Smith, brought young Breckinridge into the Anglican Church. Contrary to general belief, the Episcopal ministers in the Valley, led by the Reverend John Jones of Augusta, were patriots, not loyalists. During the Revolution, they managed to join together in the popular mind their clerical complaints against the royal authorities with popular resentment against British authority that

²⁶Harrison, John Breckinridge, p. 5.

²⁷William D. Meade, Old Churches, Ministers, and Families of Virginia (2 vols., Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1939), II, 65. See also Robert D. Stoner, A Seed-Bed of the Republic: A Study of the Pioneers in the Upper (Southern) Valley of Virginia (Roanoke: Roanoke Historical Society, 1962). Hereinafter cited as Stoner, Seed-Bed of the Republic, p. 332.

seemed ready to thwart acquisition of land in Kentucky.²⁸ But theological hair-splitting was hardly the normal preoccupation of a schoolboy whose uncle was a Presbyterian minister and who grew up to be an Anglican.

In 1770 young Jaimy Breckinridge, along with his Preston and Smith cousins, was tutored at his uncle William Preston's Greenfield estate near Fincastle. Colonel Preston was a resourceful man in securing tutors for his family. He once had bought the services of a fine classical scholar named Palfreman, whose creditors in England had sold him into indentured servitude in Virginia, but he came to admire that tutor so much that he released him from his obligations. Utilizing his commanding position as County Land Surveyor of Botetourt--and later of Montgomery--which extended indefinitely to the south and west and included all of the present states of Kentucky and most of West Virginia, Preston required persons desirous of becoming his Deputy Surveyors to teach his children for about six months. John Floyd accepted these terms, and it was to him that Jaimy Breckinridge went to school until 1773. In that year, Colonel Preston moved his family and the school to his new seat, Smithfield Plantation, farther west, from which he better could superintend his own and his relatives' extensive land claims. At the same time, the Colonel dispatched John

²⁸George M. L. Brydon, Virginia's Mother Church and the Political Conditions Under Which It Grew (2 vols., Philadelphia: Church Historical Society, 1952). Hereinafter cited as Brydon, Virginia's Mother Church, II, 127, 177-188 passim, 609.

Floyd to Kentucky. Both John and James Breckinridge later taught for awhile at Smithfield after completing their studies at William and Mary.²⁹

In 1777 Colonel Preston secured a new tutor by the name of Philip Bacragar who would teach his own and his sister's sons. Everything would be provided for the children who lodged at the tutor's home except for bedding, which they would have to bring by wagon. Meals would include "beef, bacon, milk, butter, turnips, cabbage, and good bread." Colonel Preston paid £ 10 a year for each boy, with a bonus if the Colonel thought it deserved.³⁰ It is likely that the curriculum of the tutorial school did not differ greatly from that at Nomini Hall, Westmoreland County, where in 1773-1774 Philip Fithian taught the eight children of the Tidewater nabob Colonel Robert Carter. Just before his graduation from Princeton, Fithian received from Carter an offer of £ 35 a year to teach his eight children English, Latin and Greek.³¹

James' education was, however, interrupted by the tumultuous events of his times. At eighteen years of age Jaimy Breckinridge joined his Uncle Preston's company of riflemen and served briefly under General Nathaniel Greene in North Carolina.³²

²⁹Letitia Preston Floyd to John B. Floyd, Apr. 5, 1860, typescript, Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

³⁰William Preston to Mrs. Lettice Breckenridge, Oct. 13, 1777, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

³¹Philip V. Fithian, Journal & Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Plantation Tutor of the Old Dominion, ed. Hunter D. Farish (Williamsburg: Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., 1943), p. 8. See also John Harrower, The Journal of John Harrower, An Indentured Servant in the Colony of Virginia: 1773-1776, ed. Edward M. Riley (Williamsburg: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963).

³²Breckinridge's military career will be treated in Chapter V.

Like most young men, Breckinridge wanted to see for himself places about which he had heard exciting tales. In 1783 he wrote his mother of an intended trip to Kentucky, stressing with the innocence of a favored son that he was short of both money and clothes.³³ Writing to his elder brother Johnny, he mentioned that another intended trip on surveying business was delayed because of poor horses. Surveying jobs in Kentucky gave the young man a good excuse to explore in that area in September, 1784.³⁴ Four years later, when John contemplated moving to Kentucky, James was still so enthused about the bluegrass region that he declared that Kentucky was "the country in which I at present design burying my bones." He advised John to wait two or three years before moving his family thither, by which time the area would have become more settled and freer of Indian trouble. He confided to his brother that only his lack of money had prevented him from purchasing a larger Kentucky land claim.³⁵

Even so, he was interested in 7,000 acres of military warrants, in which his cousin John Brown and his half-brother, Robert Breckinridge, were also interested.³⁶ The hard times of post-Revolutionary years curbed most speculative schemes everywhere in the United States, but

³³James Breckinridge to Mrs. Lettice Breckinridge, 1783, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

³⁴James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, May 23, 1784; J. Brown to John Breckinridge, Ky., Sept. 20, 1784, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

³⁵James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Aug. 29, 1788, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

³⁶James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge at Albermarle, Botetourt, Mar. 18, 1790, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

deflation was particularly severe in Virginia. Well aware of his inability to fulfill his contract to buy, and equally aware of the decline of land prices, John Brown expressed hopes that Jaimy could interest in their project speculators in Richmond and Williamsburg.³⁷

Breckinridge's enthusiasm for Kentucky waned and his cousin James Brown questioned his intentions. Urging him to come to Kentucky to live, Brown described how good-looking the girls of Kentucky were in hopes that such a "very womanish man" as Breckinridge would regain his earlier enthusiasm. He reproached Jaimy for his conviction "that Beauty without wealth have no charms." Continuing his bantering, he wrote that his cousin must have "turned Jew" to believe that there was "No Happiness in Life without Money--No Honor without Money, No Women without Money . . ."³⁸

Following in the footsteps of his brother John, the Brown boys, and several other relations, James Breckinridge decided to complete his education which had been interrupted by the war. There is difference of opinion on when John and James attended the College of William and Mary because its records are so fragmentary for the years 1780-1790. Because the History of the College listed James as graduating in 1785

³⁷John Brown to James Breckinridge, Feb. 25, 1787, Breckinridge Papers, Albermarle County Historical Society, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. Hereinafter cited as Breckinridge Papers, ViU.

³⁸James Brown to James Breckinridge, Apr. 4, 1790, ibid.

with John's subsequent achievements, here has been much confusion.³⁹ According to his biographer, John entered William and Mary in the fall of 1780 but returned home in 1781 when classes were suspended because of Revolutionary War activities. He returned to Williamsburg in 1783, when classes resumed, but left again in June, 1784, because of a money shortage.⁴⁰ That John was in Williamsburg in 1784 rather than James is certain from a letter of May 23, 1784, in which James recounted how he and his cousin, John Preston of Greenfield, campaigned in Botetourt for John's re-election to the General Assembly while John divided his time between his studies at Williamsburg and his legislative duties at Richmond.⁴¹

In November, 1786, James announced his intention to winter in Williamsburg because his clients would give him no surveying business in that season. Asking John to advise him on the merits of studying natural and moral philosophy, the twenty-three-year-old Jaimy blithely requested his brother also to forward his clothes, which he had forgotten.⁴² In the spring of 1787, John wrote to his mother of James' financial distress and suggested that, since he could not spare any money, Mrs. Breckenridge should insist that the playboy Jaimy return home. Apparently the feckless blade did return to Botetourt,

³⁹The History of the College of William and Mary From its Foundation, 1660 to 1874 (Richmond, J. W. Randolph & English, 1874), p. 98.

⁴⁰Harrison, John Breckinridge, p. 7.

⁴¹James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, May 23, 1784, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁴²James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Nov. 6, 1786, ibid.

but it was only for a summer vacation until his return to Williamsburg in the autumn.⁴³ The last record of James' residence in Williamsburg was in December, 1788, when he had recovered from what must have been a severe illness. To the prodigal, Brother John conveyed their mother's uneasiness about Jaimy.⁴⁴ Since Jaimy's reply was dated March 6, 1789, from Botetourt,⁴⁵ one may surmise that James Breckinridge terminated his studies at William and Mary in the winter of 1789.

Nevertheless, both James and John were exposed to the changes which Governor Thomas Jefferson instigated in 1799 at the College of William and Mary. Chief among these was the establishment of a professorship of law and police, chaired by George Wythe, who previously had taught law informally. The method of legal instruction was based more upon philosophic principles in those days, but Wythe also lectured extensively and made use of Blackstone's Commentaries as a convenient abridgement. More important was the Moot Court, which met "monthly or oftener" in the old General Court in the Capital, over which he and other professors presided as judges.⁴⁶

It is at this point in his life that James Breckinridge had the time to correspond with his brother Johnny in letters that show the

⁴³John Breckinridge to Mrs. Lettice Breckenridge, Apr. 11, 1787, June 14, 1787; James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, July 31, 1787, ibid.

⁴⁴John Breckinridge to James Breckinridge, Dec. 2, 1788, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁴⁵James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Mar. 6, 1789, ibid.

⁴⁶Robert M. Hughes, "William & Mary, The First American Law School," William and Mary Quarterly, 2nd series, II (1922), 40.

warmth of his personality. Professing to be more homesick than a prodigal son, Jaimy declared that his brother abandoned and neglected him, ignoring the fact that John was burdened with a family and a business:

I have written to you so frequently since I came here without receiving any answer . . . I would not think of taking up your time with reading my nonsense, was it not to convince you that time or the distance which separate us has not yet eradicated my usual affection for you . . . Your not writing I am sure has not been occasioned by the want of opportunities, you have the daily /post/ to Richmond from where the /letter/ would come by the Stage safe to me. But I believe nothing is wanting but an inclination which I dont think any apology ought to excuse . . .⁴⁷

Yet the following winter his cousin, Francis Preston, admonished James for being "ungrateful, ungenerous, & Lazy" in not answering his letters. Moreover, his mother was also anxious to hear from him.⁴⁸

Actually, correspondence with the two brothers was frequent, often treating scholastic problems. John wrote to James that he was quite courageous in studying Blackstone, but that he should not fear being overpowered by him. He thought James' talents would suit him well as a lawyer and advised him to "look around you (among those I mean, whose Line in Life you intend to pursue), it is impossible you can be discouraged." As a course of study, he recommended Lawson's Orator, Cicero's de orator, Sheridan's On Elocution, and Blair's Sermons.⁴⁹

⁴⁷James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Mar. 15, 1787, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁴⁸Francis Preston to James Breckinridge, Dec. 20, 1787, Breckinridge Papers, ViU

⁴⁹John Breckinridge to James Breckinridge, Jan. 25, 1788, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

Jaimy was quite a ladies man, to judge from somewhat racy allusions in his correspondence with his cousin, John Brown, and friend, Samuel McCraw.⁵⁰ The college youth spent much time traveling back and forth to Richmond, where he visited his cousin, Francis Preston, during sessions of the legislature. When on one occasion he forgot his shirt, Preston declared that he himself would have kept it, but that more honest people had sent it on. Most likely, Breckinridge engaged in the favorite pastime of having sport with the reynards while he was in Richmond.⁵¹ Another indication of Jaimy's gallantry showed that the young swain could summon up the strength of a warrior. According to cousin John Preston, "Jeamy Breckenridge fought a duel in Richmond with a certain Young-husband . . . the story was told very favorably for Jamy."⁵²

It was on one of these expeditions to Richmond that James Breckinridge attended debates of the Ratifying Convention of 1788. Properly impressed by that galaxy of Virginia founding fathers who included Edmund Randolph, Patrick Henry, James Monroe, Edmund Pendleton, George Mason, John Marshall, Henry Lee, and James Madison, the young man from Botetourt wrote to Brother Johnny that the debates were

⁵⁰John Brown to James Breckinridge, Feb. 25, 1787; Samuel McCraw to James Breckinridge, Oct. 21, 1787, Breckinridge Papers, ViU.

⁵¹Francis Preston to James Breckinridge, Nov. 11, 1788; Francis Preston to James Breckinridge, Oct. 21, 1787, ibid.

⁵²John Preston to Francis Preston, Dec. 26, 1786, quoted in Stoner, Seed-Bed of the Republic, p. 279.

"elaborate, elegant, eloquent, and consequently entertaining and instructive." He noted that the convention had intended to argue the Constitution clause by clause, but that the members abandoned such a methodical course as being inexpedient. According to him, it was commonly believed that the only important point of contention was whether amendments should be added before or after adoption of the Constitution. It was his opinion that the anti-federalists' major purpose was only to require that adherents of immediate ratification give assurance that the Bill of Rights would be added soon after ratification. Sarcastically, James noted that delegates from Kentucky and the western regions were afraid that northern interests might try to thwart their economic and political progress. The Kentuckians, he commented, succumbed to Patrick Henry's "elevation and oratory" which often led "ignorant people astray." Instead of the mercurial Henry, Breckinridge preferred "Madison, plain and ingenious," even if he was easily eclipsed once the orator of the Revolution persuaded the gullible.⁵³

When he returned to the valley in the winter of 1789, James Breckinridge was admitted to the Botetourt bar. Because his community could not support a lawyer who did not have other economic interests, he became quite active as a surveyor.

Most of his law cases were routine, being mainly concerned with "land titles, the collection of debts, the interpretation of wills,

⁵³James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, June 13, 1788, Breckinridge Papers, DLC. See also Hugh B. Grigsby, History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788, ed. Robert A. Brock (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1891), II, 377.

and the management of estates." The careless Virginia land grant system allowed for litigation, and the need for uniform currency caused difficulty in collecting debts.⁵⁴

Breckinridge already possessed previous experience with legal forms inasmuch as he, at the ripe old age of nineteen, had been, in June, 1782, the unanimous choice of the County Justices for the position of Deputy Clerk. As a popular young war veteran, as well as being the most prosperous young man of the county, Breckinridge in 1789 easily secured election to the General Assembly. His appointment as one of the Trustees of Fincastle on November 14, 1789, was almost perfunctory. In May, 1796, he was appointed, along with Henry Bowyer and John Miller, to contract the building of a Clerk's Office on the Courthouse common, which was not to cost more than £ 200.⁵⁵

On March 15, 1791, George Washington noted to the Secretary of the Treasury that James Breckinridge had been appointed Inspector of Survey No. 6, which included the counties of Rockbridge, Botetourt, Montgomery, Wythe, Washington, Russell, Greenbrier, and Kanawha. Breckinridge undoubtedly welcomed his salary of \$450 and a commission of one percent.⁵⁶ He particularly welcomed the receipt of hard money, after a decade of Revolutionary deflation and depression, because he had only recently acquired a bride.

⁵⁴Harrison, John Breckinridge, p. 25.

⁵⁵F. B. Kegley, Kegley's Virginia Frontier, The Beginning of the Southwest: The Roanoke of Colonial Days, 1740-1783 (Roanoke: The Southwest Historical Society, 1938). Hereinafter cited as Kegley, Kegley's Virginia Frontier, pp. 409-411.

⁵⁶George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, Mar. 15, 1791, quoted in The Writings of George Washington, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (39 vols., Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), XXXI, 329.

James Breckinridge and Ann Selden were married on New Year's Day, 1791. By marrying the daughter of Cary Selden of Elizabeth City County,⁵⁷ Breckinridge won acceptance of his family by long-established tidewater families, who often were inclined to disparage men from beyond the mountains. The marriage ceremony was performed by the Reverend James Buchanan, the rector (1785-1822) of St. John's Church, Richmond. The Seldens long had been associated with St. John's, where their kinsman the Reverend Miles Selden had been rector of Henrico Parish from 1756 to 1785 and had been a prominent Revolutionary leader as Chairman of the Henrico Committee of Safety.⁵⁸

The young Breckinridges set up housekeeping in Fincastle and soon witnessed the birth (on August 26, 1791) of their first child, Letitia. Their family increased almost annually and caused father James to return to the legislature to help provide for his growing family.

Thus, at twenty-eight years of age, James Breckinridge could look back upon an exciting youth that might have led him into the life of a Kentucky speculator, but which saw him combine an education for a Virginia career in law and politics with the high jinks of a young blueblood. The prosperous state of the nation in 1791 permitted Breckinridge to look forward to wealth and station in Botetourt, Virginia, and perhaps the nation.

⁵⁷Mary N. Standard, "James Breckinridge," Dictionary of American Biography, ed. Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone (22 vols., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928-1958), III, 5.

⁵⁸Brydon, Virginia's Mother Church, II, 434, 450.

CHAPTER II

CAREER IN THE VIRGINIA HOUSE OF DELEGATES

For thirteen sessions, during the years 1789-1824, James Breckinridge served as a member of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia. He was first elected in 1789, the year of George Washington's inauguration, as an ambitious young man just out of the College of William and Mary. He and his neighbor, Robert Harvey, were selected to make the trip to Richmond to represent the citizens of Botetourt County. The following year he was accompanied by Martin McFerran to the General Assembly.⁵⁹

Around 1790, when Virginia had a population of only 691,737,⁶⁰ annual elections to the legislature were decided on a personal basis and differed little from those for the House of Burgesses a generation before. A candidate's qualifications for office were his personal character and his integrity as a citizen as well as his record of potential for public service. As befitted an aristocrat seeking the favor of small freeholders, he usually treated the voters on election

⁵⁹E. G. Swem and J. W. Williams, A Register of the General Assembly of Virginia: 1776-1918 (Richmond: Public Printing, 1918). Hereinafter cited as Swem, Register of the General Assembly, p. 30.

⁶⁰U.S. Department of Commerce, Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1957). Hereinafter cited as Historical Statistics, p. 13.

day to a rum punch or other drink.⁶¹ That Breckinridge regularly was elected to a Virginia office before 1800 proves that he was a well-liked and well-off young man. His election neither marked him as a doctrinaire Federalist politician, nor did it attest to the popularity of Federalist principles.⁶²

When Jay's Treaty was ratified in late 1794 by a sharp partisan cleavage in Congress, it may have marked the real beginning of political parties in the United States.⁶³ Certainly it hurt Virginia Federalists in the Tidewater because it aided British merchants in collecting pre-Revolutionary debts, but it did not provide means whereby Tidewater planters could recover the value of their slaves that had been stolen by the British.⁶⁴ However, it was more popular in the western part of the state, where many hoped that British evacuation of the forts which commanded the south shore of the Great Lakes would bring peace to the Ohio Valley, where westerners either possessed or hoped to acquire land titles.⁶⁵

⁶¹Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., The Jeffersonian Republicans: The Formation of Party Organization, 1789-1801 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957). Hereinafter cited as Cunningham, Jeffersonian Republicans, pp. 249-250.

⁶²Harry Ammon, "The Jeffersonian Republicans in Virginia," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, LXXI (Apr., 1963), 153-167.

⁶³John C. Miller, The Federalist Era: 1789-1801 (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Hereinafter cited as Miller, Federalist Era, p. 172.

⁶⁴Charles H. Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia from 1776-1861 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910). Hereinafter cited as Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 64.

⁶⁵Lisle A. Rose, Prologue to Democracy: The Federalist in the South, 1789-1800 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968). Hereinafter cited as Rose, Prologue to Democracy, pp. 120-121. See also Norman K. Risjord, "The Virginia Federalists," p. 502.

In the flood of such sentiment in Botetourt, an agricultural area of proven Federalist strength, James Breckinridge was again elected. He and Thomas Madison were both elected in 1796 from the Botetourt district. In 1797, 1798, and 1799, he was accompanied by John Miller to Richmond.⁶⁶

By 1800, elections were characterized by more campaigning and were associated with party cause rather than personal ambition and qualification.⁶⁷ A Richmond paper commented that the election "is not a mere contest between favorite individuals, but a contest between principles."⁶⁸

That year Breckinridge offered himself as a Federalist presidential elector for the district comprising the counties of Bath, Botetourt, Rockbridge, Greenbrier, Kanawha and Monroe.⁶⁹ He won the annual election to the House of Delegates in that year and in 1801, as did his neighbor, William McClanahan.

In the annual assignments to committees of the House of Delegates, James Breckinridge usually was placed on the Committee for the Courts of Justice, the Committee of Privileges and Elections, and the Committee of Propositions and Grievances, which were standing committees.⁷⁰

⁶⁶Swem, Register of the General Assembly, pp. 45, 48, 50.

⁶⁷Cunningham, Jeffersonian Republicans, p. 251.

⁶⁸Virginia Argus, Mar. 12, 1799. Hereinafter cited as Argus.

⁶⁹Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser, July 18, 1800. Hereinafter cited as Gazette.

⁷⁰For committee assignments, see the opening of each session in the Journals of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Richmond. Hereinafter cited as Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates; 1789, p. 1; 1790, p. 15; 1796, p. 1; 1798, p. 6, 1799, p. 4; 1800, p. 1; 1801, p. 4; 1806, p. 52; 1807, p. 2; 1819, p. 9; 1820, p. 18; 1823, p. 13.

His service in the House from the beginning of George Washington's presidency to the end of Thomas Jefferson's second term enabled Breckinridge to observe the success of the federal government. The most pressing problem of the new nation in recovering from the long postwar depression was assuring its own sources of revenue in consolidating war debts of both the central and state governments.

By 1790 Virginia had reduced her war debt by half through a combination of sternness in setting the rate of land taxes, resolute payment of her debtors in depreciated paper money, and by selling her Kentucky land. Not surprisingly, her representatives at first opposed the Assumption Bill. It is likely that Breckinridge relieved, as did most Virginians, that the federal government was enough in debt to the state of Virginia to cancel the state debt of \$3,000,000. In reality, Virginia owed \$100,000.

Breckinridge probably thought that when Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton wanted the federal government to assume all state debts, he meant that through payment of federal excise taxes and customs duties Virginia would help to pay off the debts of those northern states that had not geared themselves to such austerity. To provide an equitable resolution, James Madison proposed that the central government assume Virginia's debts as they were in 1783; that is to say, six instead of three million dollars. After an impasse threatened to disrupt the new government, Hamilton made his famous bargain with Thomas Jefferson to locate the permanent capital of the United States on the banks of the Potomac, a site very favorable to Virginia.⁷¹

⁷¹Miller, Federalist Era, pp. 41-48.

Assumption was popular in Tidewater and northern Virginia, since it was a means of making settlers who had emigrated west from these sections help to pay for the war.⁷² But as a rule, the funding and assumption bill was quite unpopular in Virginia. In November, 1790, the legislature had considered sending a resolution to Congress protesting that assumption was "repugnant to the Constitution of the United States" and that the funding system was "dangerous to the rights and subversive of the interests of the people." The resolution was defeated by a vote of 47-88. As a good Federalist, Breckinridge voted "no" in this only official record of his opinion of the funding and assumption acts.⁷³

In a letter to his brother John, James commented that the resolution had been introduced by Patrick Henry. Much had been said for both sides, he continued, but "it is very doubtful what will be the fate of the resolution, the members are so equally divided in sentiment."⁷⁴

In December, 1796, in what must have been a follow-up to Jay's Treaty, Breckinridge voted "aye" in a 123-9 vote for "An act for suquestering British property, enabling these indebted to British subjects to pay off such debts, and directing the proceedings in suits where such subjects are partisan."⁷⁵

Later that month, Breckinridge voted for a bill which would alter the time of the annual meeting of the General Assembly from mid-October

⁷²Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 61.

⁷³Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1790, p. 35.

⁷⁴James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Oct. 30, 1790, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁷⁵Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1796, p. 58.

to the beginning of December.⁷⁶ However, he voted in the majority against a bill calling a convention for a new constitution.⁷⁷

In an early display of states' rights, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison introduced in 1798 their famous Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, in response to the Federalist Alien and Sedition Acts. A considerable minority in the Virginia Assembly were opposed to the resolutions and asked John Marshall to outline a protest.⁷⁸ However, Marshall referred to the alien and sedition laws as "useless and calculated to create unnecessary discontent and jealousies." But he further stated, as a good Federalist, that Jay's Treaty "should be preserved" as it might be helpful to have British aid against France whose relations with the United States had soured.⁷⁹

In December, 1798, Breckinridge voted in the minority for a bill allowing those accused of violating the Alien and Sedition Laws to petition the Congress to repeal the said laws because they were "unconstituational" and "an invasion of their rights."⁸⁰ Of course, this bill was not thoroughly consistent with Federalist doctrines, but it shows that Breckinridge, like John Marshall was an ideological realist. In effect, they argued that relief from unintentional injustice wrought by the Acts should come from the Federal, not the State government.

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 96.

⁷⁷Ibid., 1797, p. 78.

⁷⁸Miller, Federalist Era, p. 240.

⁷⁹Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 76.

⁸⁰Journal of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1798, pp. 31-32. The first vote was 68-96; the second, 60-104.

In 1797 a Republican majority had nominal control of the Virginia General Assembly; but rumors of impending war with France won for the Federalists many legislative victories in 1798, and they created a large Federalist minority in the House of Delegates.⁸¹ Federalist strength shifted from the Tidewater and Potomac regions to the Shenandoah Valley and the area southwest of the James River. There was "little concrete evidence available," for this shift, but the Adams administration's maintenance of an army was popular with the westerners who, although they no longer feared for themselves, retained memory of atrocities a generation earlier and were thus responsive to the dangers faced by their kin in the Ohio country.⁸² Besides, leaders of western Virginia, as well as their kinsmen who had removed to Kentucky, possessed some military warrants to land in Ohio.⁸³

In the spring of 1799, the election in Virginia of members both to the federal congress and to the state legislature marked a sharp distinction between the tactics employed by the Federalists and the Republicans. With the elections approaching, the Federalists gave first priority to Congress, but they also "were determined to campaign for a majority in the Assembly of 1799 and to repeal the Resolutions of 1798."⁸⁴ They ran their best men, even bringing some out of retirement.

⁸¹Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, pp. 65-67.

⁸²Lisle, Prologue to Democracy, pp. 191-193. See also Manning J. Dauer, The Adams Federalists (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1953). Hereinafter cited as Dauer, Adams Federalists, p. 30.

⁸³George G. Shackelford, "Smithfield Plantation," typescript, Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

⁸⁴Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 75.

Former President Washington took a determined role in persuading John Marshall to run for the House of Representatives against a Republican incumbent in the Richmond district and in persuading the aged Patrick Henry to come out of retirement to seek the congressional seat for the Charlotte district. Washington also was instrumental in getting General Henry Lee elected, riding ten miles himself to cast his parole ballot. In fielding as prominent candidates as possible, not all Federalists agreed with Washington and Henry in declaring the Alien and Sedition Acts "good and proper" and the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions offensive. For Henry it was his final victory as death soon followed. Marshall won by the slim margin of 108 votes, but only after he avoided endorsing the Sedition Act in its entirety. If the Federalists placed their emphasis on the national Congress, the Republicans placed theirs on the state legislature, which remained "strongly Republican."⁸⁵

Writing to his Republican brother John, Federalist James noted that:

Our state is much convulsed by party & I confess I am much alarmed for the consequences. The Government party has gained in addition of four members in their Congressional Representation & several in the State Legislature. . . . Marshall, Lee, Powell, Goode, Gray, Page, Evans, and Parker. Mr. Madison & Henry are elected for our Assembly;

⁸⁵Henry S. Randall, The Life of Thomas Jefferson (3 vols., New York: Derby & Jackson, 1858). Hereinafter cited as Randall, Life of Jackson, II, 491-495. See also Albert J. Beveridge, The Life of John Marshall (4 vols., Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), II, 416-417.

The latter is in so ill a State of Health that his situation is deemed very critical.⁸⁶

In 1799 it was rumored in Virginia that the state had begun military preparations. It is true that the Commonwealth had armed the militia and begun construction of an armory at Richmond to resist the Federal government.⁸⁷ The Speaker of the House requested James Breckinridge to serve in December, 1798, and in January, 1799, on a special committee to draw up a bill for procuring arms and otherwise defending the state. The legislature was careful to state that its motive for this bill was not in reaction to the Alien and Sedition Acts, but was preparation for any possible contingency which might develop out of the poor relations with France.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Breckinridge's personal role discounts intimations that the Virginia Militia's force was intended to be used for political ends. Happily, President John Adams won a pacific settlement of U.S.-French differences, and the Alien and Sedition Acts were allowed to expire after Jefferson was elected President in 1801.

One of the unpleasant duties of Breckinridge during the 1799 session was to wear a badge of mourning for the deceased George Washington.⁸⁹

⁸⁶James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, May 25, 1799, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁸⁷Miller, Federalist Era, p. 241.

⁸⁸Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1798, pp. 28, 77. In Jan., 1800, Breckinridge voted in the minority (102-49) for a resolution to continue trade with France.

⁸⁹Argus, Dec. 20, 1799.

Even though Patrick Henry had become a Federalist, Breckinridge voted against a bill to appropriate money for a marble bust of the Orator.⁹⁰

In the Virginia General Assembly, the December, 1799, election of the Governor by both its Houses was hotly contested. James Breckinridge was a Delegate when he accepted the Federalist candidacy. James Monroe had not been in public service since he was recalled in disgrace from his legation to France in 1797, but the attorney and small farmer from Albermarle was nominated by the Republicans for the first magistracy of the commonwealth and was elected on December 6, 1799, by what appears to have been a strict party vote of 101-66. The Richmond Virginia Federalist declared that December 6 ought to be "a day of mourning," because it is "Virginia's misfortune [that] Monroe is elected."⁹¹

It was unusual that, as the presidential election of 1800 approached, James Breckinridge wrote to his Republican brother John a long political letter. After first acknowledging Johnny's election as Speaker of the Kentucky Assembly, the Botetourt Federalist commented that the election of the President depended on South Carolina's vote, which, according to reliable sources, would be cast for Adams and Pinckney. John replied that he was excited about the increasing certainty of Jefferson's

⁹⁰Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1799, p. 22.

⁹¹Daniel C. Gilman, James Monroe: In his Relations to the Public Service During Half a Century, 1776-1826 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1883), p. 32. See also John A. Carroll and Mary W. Ashworth, George Washington: First in Peace (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 619n.; Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 77.

election.⁹² This was unusual. Correspondence between the two usually lacked political discussion which might arouse bad feelings.

Breckinridge had the unpleasant task, he wrote to John, to travel with Dr. James McClurg to Hampton to settle the affairs of the deceased Joseph Selden, who was the brother of their wives.

In 1801, James Breckinridge did not reveal his opinion whether the Virginia General Assembly should, as was suggested, seek a referendum to decide whether to call a constitutional convention to revise and amend the state constitution of 1776;⁹³ but he approved of such a program some fifteen years later when the movement for a new constitution was more mature.⁹⁴

In January, 1802, the Delegate from Botetourt was designated to prepare a bill to incorporate the Mutual Assurance Company, which specialized in fire insurance. Perhaps this investigation led him to insure his home Grove Hill with this company.⁹⁵

Breckinridge was not elected in 1803-1805 due in all probability to the tranquility of the times, the strength of the Republican political machine, and the popularity of the Louisiana Purchase.

⁹²James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Dec. 6, 1800; John Breckinridge to James Breckinridge, Dec. 21, 1800, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁹³James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Jan. 3, 1802, *ibid.*

⁹⁴See Chapter IV.

⁹⁵Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1801, p. 67.

However, when Jefferson's embargo policy turned the favor of the electorate against the Republicans, he was returned to the legislature for the 1806 and 1807 sessions. One area of the Federalists' chief strength in the years 1800-1812 lay west of the Blue Ridge. Some historians have suggested that when the Embargo deprived western farmers of wheat and flour markets, western Virginians were strengthened in their Federalist beliefs.⁹⁶ It is also true that as much, or more, wheat was grown in other parts of the state and that hemp was a valuable commodity more exclusive to the west. Since westerners already were largely Federalists (according to their own fashion), the old explanations of western Federalism geared to the opposition of wheat-growers to the Embargo seem a little oversimplified.

Breckinridge did not expect any serious consequences from American misunderstandings with Great Britain and Spain during the Napoleonic Wars, claiming that Great Britain would relax her belligerent claims against U.S. neutral shipping in order to retain her commercial benefits.⁹⁷ On January 5, 1808, he voted in the minority (157-13) against Pope's anti-British resolution which pledged Virginia's support of the national government in seeking to maintain an honorable peace and at the same time to avenge the honor of the United States,⁹⁸ so humiliatingly besmirched six months before in the Chesapeake affair.

⁹⁶Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 87. See also Norman K. Risjord, "The Virginia Federalists," Journal of Southern History, XXXIII, No. 4 (Nov., 1967). Hereinafter cited as Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, p. 506.

⁹⁷James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Feb. 2, 1806, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁹⁸Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1807, p. 58.

Not far from the Virginia Capes, HMS Leopard had overhauled USS Chesapeake, demanded that she deliver several seamen alleged to be British deserters, fired upon her when she did not submit, and boarded her to remove three men. Although Breckinridge voted in 1812 against the Declaration of War, in 1807-1808 he undoubtedly believed Jefferson's profession, "Peace is my passion," to be a pusillanimous and unworthy response to America's outraged honor.⁹⁹

During his tenure in the Assembly, Breckinridge was particularly interested in internal improvements for the state of Virginia. Coming from an agricultural region where farmers were concerned with getting their products to market, transportation was an important issue. Roads were poor; but goods from his constituency usually went up the Shenandoah River to the Potomac River and thence to the ocean.¹⁰⁰ It is not generally recognized that before the War of 1812 the residents of Botetourt and western Virginia were interested in developing an all-water route from Richmond to the Ohio. This route could be realized by improving the navigation of the James and Kanawha Rivers and joining them by a canal.¹

Breckinridge consistently voted in favor of the James and Kanawha River measures in the Virginia Assembly and in the U.S. Congress. On January 21, 1802, he presented a resolution to explore the possibility.

⁹⁹Marshall Smelser, The Democratic Republic: 1801-1815, (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Hereinafter cited as Smelser, Democratic Republic, p. 158.

¹⁰⁰Dauer, Adams Federalists, pp. 18-22.

¹Charles S. Sydnor, The Development of Southern Sectionalism: 1819-1848 (Baton Rouge: L.S.U. Press, 1948). Hereinafter cited as Sydnor, Southern Sectionalism, p. 83.

of constructing a road from the James to the Kanawha River and for allotting a blank sum of money for this purpose. A week later, on the 28th, his Kanawha bill passed.²

On December 23, 1806, Breckinridge, Francis Preston of Washington County, and Thomas Madison of Botetourt arrived at Richmond for the 1806-1807 session. Their late arrival was presumably due to the death of James' brother John. He was immediately placed on a committee to study a James River bill, which passed four days later.³ In December, 1807, he was on a committee with his Preston cousin to study the Governor's communication on a road between the James and Kanawha. The bill resulting from this study was passed on December 29, 1807.⁴

Breckinridge was also interested in improving other waterways. In December, 1797, he was on a committee to study improving the navigation of Quantico Creek in Prince William County. The following month he was studying navigation on the Rappahannock. In January, 1808, he was in a group studying a bill establishing a turnpike over the Blue Ridge Mountains at Rockfish Gap.⁵

As a Revolutionary War veteran, Breckinridge was interested in the military aspects concerning the state. He usually managed to be on committees studying defense or militia bills. As was previously

²Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1801, pp. 76, 86. No vote was registered.

³Ibid., 1806, pp. 52, 62. No vote was registered.

⁴Ibid., 1807, pp. 17, 43.

⁵Ibid., 1797, pp. 44, 78; 1807, p. 46.

mentioned, he was on a committee in 1798 to study Virginia defense in case of trouble with France. In December, 1801, he studied the internal police of the different Virginia counties. He studied the distribution and preservation of the public arms during January, 1807, and 1808.⁶

Usually Breckinridge resided alone in Richmond during the legislative session. His wife Ann and their young children remained at home. But on at least one occasion, part of his family accompanied him to the capital. Although the cost of living was higher,⁷ Richmond offered such benefits as public inoculation against smallpox,⁸ from which Breckinridge's family, black and white, had suffered at least once. At the age of forty, Breckinridge himself was plagued with the measles.⁹ Since medicine was not yet advanced, the Breckinridges, like their contemporaries, had to rely on physical stamina for recovery. After Breckinridge lost a newborn son in the summer of 1806, he took his ailing wife to the Sweet Springs to recuperate. This spa in adjacent Greenbrier County was a favorite of the Breckinridges and their relatives who often journeyed there to enjoy the healing waters.¹⁰

⁶Ibid., 1798, p. 28; 1801, p. 9; 1806, p. 74; 1807, p. 79.

⁷James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Nov. 16, 1799; James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Dec. 7, 1801, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

⁸Gazette, May 2, 1800.

⁹James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Feb. 19, 1798; James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, Jan. 23, 1803, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

¹⁰James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge, June 29, 1806, Breckinridge Papers, DLC. See also Frances Logan, The Old Sweet: Biography of a Spring (Roanoke: Old Sweet Springs, 1940), pp. 1-2.

James maintained his frequent correspondence with his brother John in Kentucky, although their responsibilities as planter, public officials, and heads of families made each more serious than in college days. Rarely political, their letters usually concerned their family's claims, law suits, surveying, and other aspects of land speculation.¹¹

As the presidential election of 1808 approached, Virginia Federalists led by James McClurg of Richmond, and the Quids, led by John Randolph of Roanoke, proposed to back Monroe against Madison. Although Monroe at first was not anxious to contradict party unanimity, the compliments soon appealed to his wounded pride. On the intra-state sectional level, Monroe was assured the backing of those Tidewater delegates who hoped for better relations with England. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, the official Federalist candidate, received votes in the central Valley, an area that was also favorable to Madison.¹² Although Madison had been his hero during the Ratifying Convention of 1788, it is certain that Breckinridge voted for Pinckney rather than Monroe who had earlier defeated him in the gubernatorial contest. Monroe drew off and the proposed Quid-Federalist alliance died aborning. In the election, Virginia awarded twenty-four electoral votes to Madison and none to Pinckney. She also elected the Republican, John Tyler, as Governor.¹³

¹¹See the Breckinridge Papers, DLC, and the Breckinridge Papers, ViU.

¹²Harry Ammon, "The Election of 1808 in Virginia," William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd series, XX (Jan., 1963), 33-56; Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, pp. 88-90. See also Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, 508.

¹³Gazette, Dec. 16, 1808.

Breckinridge received a letter in February, 1807, from a John Campbell of Lexington, who was writing on behalf of local Federalists who urged Breckinridge to become a candidate in the 1808 Congressional election. They promised the votes of influential men, but warned that it was not proper to declare one's candidacy before March Court.¹⁴

Breckinridge did declare himself as a candidate and was properly elected in a year when the whole Valley showed Federalist strength, almost in a united action against Jefferson's embargo. Breckinridge enjoyed four terms in the United States House of Representatives, ending in 1817.

A maverick who usually disdained party discipline, Breckinridge enjoyed a legislative career in which he sometimes appeared to be a Federalist, Quid, or even a Republican. Whether James Breckinridge was a man of high principle or a chameleon, only the federal Congress could provide him with a suitable forum.

¹⁴John W. Campbell to James Breckinridge, Feb. 21, 1807, Breckinridge Papers, ViU.

CHAPTER III

JAMES BRECKINRIDGE, MEMBER OF CONGRESS

In 1808 James Breckinridge reached what might be called the high plateau of his long political career by winning election to the Eleventh United States Congress as the Representative of Virginia's Fifth Congressional District, because it had long been, and was to be, centered about that county. The district also included the county of Rockbridge to the northeast and the counties of Greenbrier, Monroe, and Kanawha to the west.¹⁵ The incumbent between 1804 and 1809 had been a Republican, Alexander Wilson of Rockbridge, who appears not to have stood for reelection. It was remarkable that Breckinridge, the Federalist from Fincastle, was not opposed by any known Republican aspirant during his four terms in Congress and that he declined renomination in 1816. In the Botetourt District, it is clear that party structure and sentiment were weaker than the heritage of leadership by the frontier aristocracy.

A panoramic view of the House of Representatives over the years 1809-1817 reveals that James Breckinridge was a true son of the generation of which John Randolph of Roanoke and Henry Clay are perhaps the best-known exemplars. This was a generation that often deserved the adjectives Revolutionary, Romantic, and Quixotic. Posterity often

¹⁵Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1802, pp. 80-90.

has viewed Randolph's erratic course as the product of a disordered mind and considered Clay's gyrations to be sheer political opportunism. Granting that there is some truth in such assertions, one must admit that the times did not permit very stable political ideology or consistency in alliances. James Breckinridge was not so great a man as Clay or Randolph. He was neither so opportunistic as the former nor so erratic as the latter. On balance, one could say that he was less consistent and more pragmatic than either. Indeed, he comported himself as a natural, frontier aristocrat--not as a brilliant, but flawed, scion of the Tidewater nabobs. Without making a parade of his good education, he was better equipped than Clay to guide his little rural world into the brilliance of an enlightened, agrarian republic in which the Revolution's liberty and pursuit of material happiness might be secured.

When the forty-six-year-old Breckinridge took his seat in the old hall of the House of Representatives in 1809, that body numbered 140 members. Virginia then had twenty-two Representatives. She gained another as a result of the Census of 1810, but this did not effect the composition of the Fifth District.¹⁶

Capitol hill today is one of the more beautiful spots in the tourist's paradise of the nation's capital. In Breckinridge's time, shrubs and trees in their uncultivated state covered areas that are presently the sites of the Rayburn Building, the Library of Congress,

¹⁶Historical Statistics, pp. 13, 692-692.

and the Supreme Court Building. A wide plain extended from the foot of the hill to the banks of the Potomac, which in 1807 boasted only an occasional wharf.¹⁷

The Capitol structure was according to William Thornton's contest-winning design. Interior work was executed by Benjamin Latrobe, and President Madison in 1817 commissioned Charles Bullfinch to "redesign the portico and to achieve a better unity between the wings." During Breckinridge's tenure, two-awkward-looking wings stood unconnected and without the familiar dome. Murals of classical abstractions served both to decorate the halls and to muffle excess sounds.¹⁸

In 1808, four Virginia Federalists were elected to the House with Breckinridge, Jacob Swope of Staunton, James Stephenson of Martinsburg, Daniel Sheffey of Wythe County, and Joseph Lewis of the Loudoun-Fairfax District. On the surface it appeared that their victories signified secure and solid Federalist control of the Valley of Virginia, plus an appendix reaching along the Potomac River almost to Alexandria.¹⁹

For several years Virginia Federalists were able to maintain their strength in the federal legislature both because they had aroused Valley

¹⁷ Gaillard Hunt, ed., The First Forty Years of Washington in the Family Letters of Margaret Bayard Smith (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1965), p. 10.

¹⁸ John Burchard and Albert Bush-Brown, The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1966), pp. 21, 29.

¹⁹ Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 90. Because Daniel Sheffey later moved from Wythe County to Staunton, some writers mistakenly identify his congressional district as the one centered about Augusta, when in fact it was that embracing Montgomery and Wythe.

residents against the Embargo Act of 1807, and because they convinced their constituents that, despite James Madison's pacific intentions, the Republican President's policies would lead to war with Great Britain. Another and new political party displayed strength in the Virginia elections of 1808: the Tertium Quids. These negativists were led, mainly in spirit, by the former Republican stalwart, John Randolph of Roanoke, who had broken with President Jefferson several years earlier and who had unsuccessfully tried to enveigle Monroe into allowing himself to be nominated for the Presidency in opposition to Madison. The Federalists and Quids made common cause in opposing the Madison Administration's efforts both to maintain peace and to secure respectful treatment of America's maritime trade. No matter whether one was for a bellicose armed neutrality or for tame submission to Britain, they formed neutrality or for tame submission to Britain, they formed a tactical alliance to oppose the Administration. Generally, Virginia Federalists joined with the Quids in opposing commercial retaliation; but, unlike the Quids, they were usually supporters of defensive military preparations, such as fortifying harbors and maintaining the navy.²⁰

James Breckinridge was a true Virginia Federalist, if judged by these criteria. He consistently voted against creating or maintaining a large regular army; but he just as consistently supported legislation to provide for the militia of the several states and for the nation's naval forces.

²⁰Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, pp. 509-510.

The Federalist congressman from Fincastle was reelected in 1810, along with Daniel Sheffey and Joseph Lewis. Hugh Caperton succeeded Swope in the Augusta District, and Francis White replaced Stephenson in the northernmost part of the Valley.²¹ In the 1812 election many Quids were defeated, most notably John Randolph by John Wayles Eppes, a war Republican and Jefferson's son-in-law. The Virginia Federalists did not suffer the same fate. In and out of Congress, they clamoured for vote-getting local issues with success which does not justify the contempt many historians have poured upon that party. Indeed, their chances in 1812 were not so dismal as hindsight often has painted them. They were predicated upon a three-point program: they advocated internal improvements; they urged not only that state banks were less oppressive than a central bank, but that there should be more of them; and they declared their support of white manhood suffrage in place of the federal ratio whereby three-fifths of the slave population was added to the white population in computing the number of representatives each state was entitled to send to Congress. Furthermore, the Federalists opposed such unpopular measures as floating new federal loans and increasing taxes, both of which might finance an invasion of Canada. With the War of 1812, many of that party's members of Congress failed to gain reelection. This was not true in 1814 of James Breckinridge and his Valley cohorts, albeit the Federalist Magnus Tate replaced his fellow Federalist, White, in the northernmost Valley district. Of

²¹Ibid., p. 510.

course, no one knew that the war was coming to an end. Nor did anyone know whether ultra-Federalists in New England would adopt or reject consideration of secession. In the Fourteenth Congress, the remaining Federalists opposed measures to grant a charter to a Bank of the United States and to increase customs duties on imported goods.²² Alexander Hamilton must have turned in his grave.

That Federalism was dying out as a national party was proved by the 1816 elections, after which it remained only in random local pockets of conservatism such as the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Logically, federalism should have persisted in the Valley of Virginia, but it did not. At the age of only fifty-three, James Breckinridge decided against running for a fifth term in the national Congress. His retirement from politics extended only to the national level, however, because he consented to accept election to the Virginia House of Delegates only two years later. Undoubtedly, Breckinridge, a military man as well as a politico, delighted in Jackson's victory at New Orleans and in the Peace of Ghent which ended the war with Britain.

He may have felt chagrin, if not contempt, for the New England Federalists, and did not care to associate with them further. At any rate, he seems never again to have ventured outside the Old Dominion. Quite likely, General Breckinridge determined that the scramble for favor and for place in Washington did not merit the inconvenience of his attending Congress. A younger man should really take up the burden

²²Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, pp. 93-97. See also Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, p. 511.

of representing the Botetourt District, and John Floyd, Jr., was of the proper age. He was a Republican, it is true, but he was a conservative one. More to the point than party labels was the fact that young Floyd was a kinsman of Breckinridge.²³

In 1809, however, as he set out upon the commencement of his congressional career, James Breckinridge looked forward to active participation in the direction of national affairs.

Breckinridge was not in Washington on March 4, 1809, for the inauguration of James Madison. By midmorning 10,000 spectators had surrounded the Capitol while more important personages filled the House gallery to witness the little President who was dressed in an American wool suit take his oath of office.²⁴

The Congressman from Botetourt did arrive at the Capitol in time to be present for the opening of the extra session of the Eleventh Congress on May 22, 1808.²⁵ In this session the Federalists and the Quids "united to oppose the administration." Without success they attempted to repeal the non-intercourse act which had been substituted for the Embargo in the last days of the previous administration; they

²³Norman K. Risjord, The Old Republicans: Southern Conservatism in the Age of Jefferson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp. 180-181.

²⁴Gazette, Mar. 7, 1809. See also Irving Brant, James Madison: The President, 1809-1812 (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956), pp. 12-13. For the inaugural ceremonies, see The First Forty Years of Washington Society ed. Hunt, pp. 58-63.

²⁵Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States (42 vols., Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1834-1856). Hereinafter cited as Annals, XX, p. 53.

voted against defense measures and the dismissal of the British minister Erskine. They opposed measures leading to war, although there was popular sentiment for activities against England.²⁶

In Congress Breckinridge was one of the small group of Federalists led by Josiah Quincy of Boston, "a man who cared little for a nation that rejected his ideas." The "icy-stiff" James Breckinridge from the Valley of Virginia was also in the company of "business-like" William Reed, the "gloomy" Abijah Bigelow, the "corpulent and stern" Reverend Samuel Taggart, "dapper" James Emott, and the "personable" Harmanus Bleeker of New York. They were often allied with the Quids Richard Stanford of North Carolina, Daniel Sheffey, an "able and frequent speaker" also from the Valley, and the "moonstruck" Randolph of Roanoke.²⁷

The biggest issue that confronted Congress during Breckinridge's four elected terms was the War of 1812 and the events leading up to it.

From a partisan viewpoint, the embargo, the non-intercourse act, and the war were Republican measures. Being a member of the loyal opposition, it was Breckinridge's duty to oppose such measures. It was also his duty to represent his constituents, inasmuch as he hailed from an agricultural district which had lost its markets because of the Republicans' economic coercion. Virginians beyond the Alleghany Mountains favored a capable military defense, and it may be disputed that their ire was directed more against the Indians than the British.²⁸

²⁶ Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 90.

²⁷ Bernard Mayo, Henry Clay: Spokesman of the New West (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1937). Hereinafter cited as Mayo, Henry Clay, pp. 407-408.

²⁸ Henry Adams, History of the United States (10 vols., New York: Antiquarian Press LTD., 1962), VI, 414.

Breckinridge's cohort in opposition, Daniel Sheffey, made a speech after the war had begun that probably expressed Breckinridge's views. Declaring that the anti-administration coalition of Federalists and Quids would loyally support national defense, Sheffey insisted that, although the Republicans went to war to win a Canadian empire, his fellow Federalists took seriously the protection of American national rights. Asserting that impressment could be prevented by not allowing British seamen to work on American ships, Sheffey suggested that the United States abandon insistence upon absolute immunity of the American flag, saying that it stimulated the British to enforce their blockade and continue war with Napoleon.²⁹

No matter how logical the Federalists and Quids were, the momentum of the war party was gaining. Speaker Henry Clay, metaphysician John C. Calhoun, and the cultivated William Lowndes led a group known as the "war hawks" that favored a war for expansion. Other prominent hawks were Langdon Cheves and David R. Williams of South Carolina, Felix Grundy of Tennessee, Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky, and Peter B. Porter of New York. Such a group suggest that the war efforts were supported by the southern and western sections of the country and that New England was adamantly opposed. The twelfth Congress was one quarter Federalist, many of whom "felt safe in going along with" the Republicans in supporting the war.³⁰

²⁹Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, p. 509.

³⁰Smelser, Democratic Republic, pp. 208-209.

On June 1, 1812, Madison sent his war message to Congress for discussion, although he did not count on it passing in the Senate. Senator Gregg of Pennsylvania concurred in the President's opinion on grounds that the United States was so unprepared that it should delay until autumn any bellicose action. For the time being Congress should issue letters of marque and reprisal against the British and maybe the French.³¹

Discussion of the war bill began in the House after much debate over whether the public should be admitted or not. Clay and Calhoun, proponents of an open-door policy, plus Grundy had an interview with Madison, who decided that the discussion should be private.³² To settle the matter formally, Randolph made a motion on June 3 for open discussion. It was defeated 45-77, although the Virginia Federalists and Quids voted in favor.

On the following day, Randolph motioned to reject the bill. With Breckinridge voting in favor, the bill passed in the negative 45-76. Randolph then asked that the bill be postponed until October. Breckinridge again voted for the Quid's measure; again it was defeated, 42-81. The final vote on the bill was 79-49 on June 4, with Breckinridge voting nay.³³

³¹Mayo, Henry Clay, pp. 518-523.

³²The Congressional Globe, Containing Sketches of the First Session of the Twenty-Seventh Congress (Washington: Blair & Rives, 1841), X, p. 215.

³³Annals, XXIV, 1631-1637.

The Senate passed the bill 18-14 on June 17, 1812, and returned it to the House, where Randolph again employed his stalling tactics. Breckinridge voted for his postponements, but they were defeated. On June 18, the House and Senate agreed that a state of war existed between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and her dependencies and the United States of America and her territories. President Madison signed the bill on the same day, thus initiating the war.³⁴

Prior to the war, Breckinridge voted for defense measures such as fortifications for the frontier which would have been appreciated in his district. He also voted in the majority for the retention of the Washington Navy Yard and to build and equip ships for the navy. Breckinridge voted with fellow Federalists to increase the salaries of the Secretaries of War and the Navy, a motion that was defeated, 50-66. But shortly before that, he had voted against a \$40 bounty to spur enlistment into the army.³⁵

As a Federalist, Breckinridge voted against increasing the national military force, but as a member of the Virginia militia he voted for a bill to organize volunteer military corps. On February 4, 1812, he voted for a bill to establish a uniform militia throughout the United States to provide for the arming and equipping of this militia.³⁶

³⁴Ibid., XXIII, 297-298; XXIV, 1681-1682.

³⁵Ibid., XX, 256; XXI, 1978; XXV, 443, 955, 471.

³⁶Ibid , XXII, 691, 800, 1021.

As somewhat of a defense measure, Breckinridge was promoted to brigadier general in the Virginia militia--even though he was a Federalist. For the most part, he was stationed at Camp Mitchell outside Richmond and missed the opening of the last session of the Thirteenth Congress. He arrived at the Capitol on December 5, 1814, after being absent from the first forty-nine votes.³⁷

In non-military matters, Breckinridge voted in the minority against "an act concerning the commercial intercourse between the United States and Great Britain and France." He was generous enough to allow President Madison some discretion in his public communications concerning details on the French repeal of the Berlin decree. He also voted in January of 1814 in a minority of 49-74 to modify the embargo.³⁸ Breckinridge voted consistently against resolutions for war taxes. However, on two occasions he voted for resolutions which said that the taxes would not go into effect until the war actually began and would not continue once the war had ended.³⁹

Many Republicans viewed the War of 1812 as a "divine mission" to punish the British for their sins, while many Federalists accused the Republicans of servility to Napoleon. With the exception of sporadic outbursts, Federalists viewed the war with reserved acceptance.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., XXI, 1931; XXV, 1151; XXVI, 1252.

³⁸ Ibid., XXVIII, 750.

³⁹ Ibid., XXIII, 1153-1154.

⁴⁰ Smelser, The Democratic Republic, pp. 218-219.

The nation wanted a war and the Republicans started one; the nation tired of the war and the Republicans ended it. So the Federalists lost on both counts, and, as a general rule, the election returns mirrored the gratitude of the war hawks and ex-war hawks.

One of the first orders of business for the third session of the Eleventh Congress in December, 1810, had been a resolution to investigate General James Wilkinson's role in the Burr conspiracy. A committee was appointed to discover whether Wilkinson had "corruptly received money" from Spain or whether he had been "concerned with . . . Aaron Burr, in a project against the dominions of the king of Spain, or to dismember these United States." After Breckinridge voted for the resolution (which passed by a vote of 79-35), he and Sage, Wilson, and Troup of Georgia were appointed to this investigating committee.⁴¹

On February 26, 1811, Ezekiel Bacon, who had been added to the committee, reported for the committee that it proposed to present to the President its findings and the "immense mass" of documents which it had assembled. At once objections were raised. Desiring that all the report become public, the Federalists and Quids declared that they did not wish to shirk their responsibility to pass upon or delete unedited evidence before submitting it to the President. When, in an effort to prove his independence of Jefferson and Madison, John Wayles Eppes moved to refer the report on Wilkinson to the Committee of the Whole, he declared that when he had voted for the investigation, he had no intentions of shifting responsibility from the House. The promptness

⁴¹Annals, XXII, 432-449.

with which John Randolph seconded this motion betrayed the administration's desire to forestall oratorical condemnation by the Quid leader. After some debate Eppes' motion was defeated by a vote of 43-81, with Breckinridge in the majority. It is not unlikely that either he, most of his colleagues, or the administration really desired to open a full-fledged inquiry. This conjecture was given added strength when the House, by a vote of 76-42, agreed to send the report on Wilkinson to the President for whatever action he might deem appropriate. Breckinridge, probably not wanting to become further involved in a delicate situation, voted in favor of the motion.⁴²

The first session of the Twelfth Congress saw Clay, the Cock of Kentucky, elected Speaker of the House and Breckinridge appointed to the Committee on Public Lands. This committee presented a resolution calling for the federal government to appoint commissioners to work in conjunction with those from Virginia in determining the western boundary line of the Virginia military tract reserved when the Old Dominion ceded the Northwest Territory to the federal government. This land referred to the area between the Scioto and Little Miami Rivers.⁴³ On March 17, 1812, this committee studied the claims of the Virginia veterans of the Revolutionary War who wanted land in the above mentioned area of Ohio. Breckinridge voted against the resolution to award to these soldiers

⁴²Ibid., 1030-1032. There is no record of this report, possibly to avoid publicity at that time. In subsequent action, Wilkinson was subjected to a trial, acquitted, and continued his military career.

⁴³Ibid., XXIII, 329, 333, 559-560.

their bounty land in Ohio which they had not claimed in about twenty-five years. However, on February 3, 1813, the resolution passed 66-41.⁴⁴ Again voting against awarding land free, Breckinridge was in the majority which defeated two-to-one a bill to give land to settlers as a means of frontier protection.⁴⁵ No doubt James Breckinridge viewed this measure as merely the thin edge of a trend which, when broadened, would become a homestead act, bestowing free land on anyone. His adverse vote was, therefore, a vote to protect his own land interests in Virginia by maintaining land prices everywhere. At the other extreme, he showed his dislike of speculation land companies which made unconscionable profits by resale of land they bought from the federal domain. On March 18, 1816, he voted in favor of an unsuccessful amendment to the Land Act which would have limited claimants to the purchase of public lands in the Mississippi Territory.⁴⁶

In action prior to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, three states were admitted to the Union during Madison's administration. Breckinridge voted with the 79-23 majority on March 20, 1812, to admit Louisiana. On March 30, 1816, he inconsistently voted in favor of the Indiana Territory and against that of Mississippi in allowing those states to form a constitution and state government, and being admitted "into the Union on an equal footing with the original states."⁴⁷ As a Federalist, he

⁴⁴Ibid., XXIII, 1214; XXV, 959.

⁴⁵Ibid., XXVII, 2016.

⁴⁶Ibid., XXIV, 1222.

⁴⁷Ibid., XXIV, 1227; XXIX, 1300.

undoubtedly was influenced by knowledge that George Poindexter, the non-voting representative from Mississippi, was a doctrinaire Republican.

Breckinridge was a fiscal Conservative, opposing any bill that would spend money, even to fight the war of 1812. In 1813 he was against issuing more Treasury notes. In July, 1813, he voted in the minority (94-63) against assessing and collecting direct taxes and internal duties. A week later he again voted in the minority (97-70) against a "bill for laying and collecting a direct tax within the United States." Virginia's assessed share of \$369,018.44 was second only to New York.⁴⁸

Breckinridge was understandably inconsistent in voting on tariffs; but if his district was to benefit, he did not hesitate to vote "yea." A sign of his general dislike was his minority vote against a bill which passed by a two-to-one margin (102-52) "to provide additional revenues for defraying the expenses of Government and maintaining the public credit, by laying duties on various goods, wares, and merchandise, manufactured within the United States." On December 19, 1814, Breckinridge voted again in a minority against a bill which passed by about the same margin (102-46) to levy a personal property tax "on household furniture, or horses other than draught horses . . . and on gold and silver watches."⁴⁹ The Virginia Federalist was perhaps influenced by his possession of furniture, fine horses, and a watch, but it is more

⁴⁸Ibid., XXV, 920; XXVI, 382, 412.

⁴⁹Ibid., XXVIII, 950, 957.

likely that he voted "no" to return to the Republicans their complaints of the 1790's against similar measures.

The need was urgent to raise funds for the young warring country, and a flood of bills were introduced to collect revenue by means of new or increased taxes. Breckinridge voted against duties on carriages, banks, bank notes, bonds, and bills of exchange, and duties on imported salt. He also voted in a minority of 118-13 to retain the existing lower excise duties on spirits distilled within the United States.⁵⁰

Almost never did James Breckinridge vote with the majority of Representatives during his years in that House. Twice he voted with the majority, but this was after the conclusion of the War of 1812. In January, 1816, he voted for an act which placed a duty on bank notes, commercial paper, and on sugar refined in the United States. In February, he voted for the repeal of duties on liquor distilled in the United States and its territories.⁵¹

During the Thirteenth Congress, the House considered a bill to purchase the library of Thomas Jefferson. The bill passed 81-71, but Breckinridge voted in the negative. "Those who opposed the bill, did so on account of the scarcity of money, and the necessity of appropriating it to purposes more indispensable than the purchase of a library." Furthermore, the complaint was made that the former President's library was "almost exclusively literary" and contained too few legal documents to benefit congressional lawyers.⁵²

⁵⁰Ibid., XXVI, 420, 468; XXIX, 693, 1233.

⁵¹Ibid., XXVI, 443; XXIX, 746, 951.

⁵²Ibid., XXVIII, p. 1105.

Shortly after the war, Henry Clay began to formulate his American System, which incorporated tariffs, central banking and internal improvement. Although Breckinridge and Clay were personal friends, the Virginian could not support the first two parts of Clay's program.⁵³

When the United States ended its war with Great Britain, her finances were in a sad state. The first Bank of the United States had been allowed to expire in 1811 because of the opposition from state banks. During the war the country almost suffered financial collapse. Unchecked inflation spiraled from notes issued by state-chartered private banks. The bankrupt Treasury of 1814 convinced President Madison of the necessity of a second Bank. Madison had argued during Washington's administration against the lack of constitutional authority for the first Bank, but he signed the Bank bill on April 10, 1816.⁵⁴ Calhoun introduced the controversial bill into Congress on January 8, 1816, with "purely formal" opposition from the Federalists and Quids. However, when the House passed the bill on March 14, 1816, it did so by the slim margin of 80-71. Breckinridge and others who preferred the state banks noted in the minority. Supporters and opponents of a central bank in 1816 had reversed their roles since 1790. Now the

⁵³George Dangerfield, The Awakening of American Nationalism: 1815-1828 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965). Hereinafter cited as Dangerfield, American Nationalism, pp. 11, 107.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 8. See also Smelser, Democratic Republic, p. 230. See also Robert V. Remini, Andrew Jackson and the Bank War (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1967), pp. 24-26.

South and the Republicans favored central banking, while the North and the Federalists opposed it.⁵⁵

Breckinridge's special interest in Congress was internal improvements, a subject of vital interest to the western area of the young country. Improved transportation and communication would provide more markets and would induce more settlers into the area and result in a more industrious and cosmopolitan frontier. Roads and canals seemed to be the best ways of improving local transportation in the beginning of the nineteenth century rather than interstate highways and subways.

In the Valley of Virginia, Breckinridge's neighbors had to send their products up the valley to the Shenandoah and Potomac Rivers, where they floated to the port cities in search of a market. This route served the north-south traffic, but the interior districts of Virginia were in need of an east-west route. The most facile method of transportation from Richmond to the Ohio was an all-water route which could be accomplished by improving navigation on the James and Kanawha Rivers and joining them by a canal.⁵⁶ Since the canal would run through his voting district and benefit his constituents, Breckinridge was keenly interested.

On February 2, 1811, the Virginia House of Delegates adopted a resolution to appoint five commissioners

⁵⁵Annals, XXIX, pp. 494, 1219. See also Dangerfield, American Nationalism, p. 11.

⁵⁶Dauer, Adams Federalists, p. 21. See also Sydnor, Southern Sectionalism, p. 83.

to view the James River from the upper end of the canal to the highest point of navigation at the mouth of Dunlop's Creek; to mark the most practicable route from Dunlop's Creek to Greenbrier River; and to view that river to its mouth, as well as the New River to the Great Falls of the Kanawha.

As a member of Congress, Breckinridge was one of five prominent Virginians appointed to the commission. William Carruthers, Andrew Donolly, Jr., Wilson Cary Nicholas and W. J. Lewis were the other members. Most of the commissioners met on July 19, 1811, in Lexington, where they authorized the construction of a suitable boat and the hiring of suitable persons to navigate it in their exploration of the existing water routes. Each commissioner advanced \$50 to cover the initial costs, but the committee failed to act further, no doubt owing to the public engagements of Breckinridge, Carruthers' illness, and an accident suffered by Nicholas.⁵⁷

On February 15, 1812, the Virginia House appointed a new commission with John Marshall as its head and James Breckinridge as an active member.⁵⁸ Because Congress was in session, Breckinridge was probably not actively interested until its adjournment on July 6.

The committee met September 1, 1812, in Lynchburg to view the James River. They proceeded up the river to Dunlop's Creek, which was then the head of navigation; from there they marked a turnpike

⁵⁷Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1811, p. 8. See also Wayland F. Dunaway, History of the James River and Kanawha Company (New York: Columbia University Press, 1922). Hereinafter cited as Dunaway, James River and Kanawha Company, pp. 49-50.

⁵⁸Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1812, pp. 83-89.

road over the Alleghanies to a navigable point on the Greenbrier River, which they reached on September 28. On September 29, they entered the New River. As Breckinridge and his company had problems with the swift currents and river falls, they went only as far as the point where the Gauley and New Rivers united to form the Great Kanawha.

On December 26, 1812, Breckinridge signed the committee's report that was presented to Governor James Barbour. It concluded that the Greenbrier and James were navigable, but that it was not safe to go over the falls of the New and Kanawha Rivers. They proposed to dig canals around the falls and to use steamboats on the New River if there was enough traffic to justify the expense. The committee submitted estimates ranging from \$190,000 to \$600,000 to cover the costs of the river improvements and the twenty-eight-mile turnpike. The report was received favorably in the General Assembly, but the outbreak of war prevented any progress on this project.⁵⁹

Interest revived after the war; and in 1816, the Virginia General Assembly created a fund for internal improvements and established a Board of Public Works. For the years 1816-1826, the Virginia government spent \$1,230,000 of borrowed money on the James and Kanawha Rivers project. However, the volume of traffic on the incomplete canal did not pay for its continuance.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Dunaway, James River and Kanawha Company, pp. 50-58.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 59. See also Sydnor, Southern Sectionalism, p. 84.

On the national level, Breckinridge's direct concern for internal improvements revolved around consideration of Calhoun's Bonus Bill. The bill received sectional, rather than partisan, support. Most New Englanders, already possessing relatively good roads, and fearing emigration of citizens to the west, voted against the bill. Southern Representatives appear to have feared that other areas would receive more benefits. The West had mixed reactions, while New York and Pennsylvania gave unanimous support and hoped to obtain financial aid for the Erie Canal.⁶¹

In Virginia, James Breckinridge's valley district favored the bill, hoping to receive aid for the Kanawha canal. Breckinridge and Sheffey were Federalist supporters of this Republican bill,⁶² although Breckinridge, as a "lame-duck" Congressman, was absent from the March 1, 1817, vote. The bill passed the House, 86-84,⁶³ but was vetoed by Madison on March 3, the last day of his Presidency. Even though Madison claimed lack of constitutional authority, it was a rather embarrassing outcome for the bewildered Republican Calhoun.⁶⁴

In the new capital the Breckinridges were much in demand during the social season. Since some of the family servants accompanied Mr. and Mrs. Breckinridge to their Alexandria home, the Breckinridges presumably did much entertaining. Undoubtedly, they attended many

⁶¹Dangerfield, American Nationalism, pp. 18-19.

⁶²Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, pp. 98-99.

⁶³Annals, XXX, p. 1061.

⁶⁴Dangerfield, American Nationalism, p. 19.

soirées during Breckinridge's tenure as a congressman. On one occasion, they received an invitation to a ball at Crawford's Hotel in Georgetown in honor of Mrs. Madison. However, since the ball was to be held on March 6, 1817, and Breckinridge was absent from the House on March 1, it is questionable whether they attended.⁶⁵

The most dramatic, and at the same time pleasant, incident of Congressman Breckinridge's career also involved the sociable Mrs. Dolley Madison. Breckinridge was one of Mrs. Madison's party on board a schooner sailing up the Rappahannock River, when a low tide stranded the vessel far from the shore. The schooner could furnish no small boats to negotiate the shallows. Proving his chivalrous gallantry as well as his muscular prowess, Breckinridge suggested that each gentleman take a lady and wade through the water. He promptly took Mrs. Madison in his arms and carried her safely to the shore. Unfortunately, the other men were unable to follow his example.⁶⁶ Evidently politics were not allowed to disrupt sociability in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Thus James Breckinridge ended his career in Congress, a career that paralleled the presidency of the Republican Madison, whom Breckinridge had admired in his younger days. During Madison's reign the office yielded much prestige to Congress, and especially to the House. But Madison had "led a third-rate power through an unprecedented national war with only local disasters." The reserved little President

⁶⁵Invitation in possession of Mrs. English Showalter.

⁶⁶Houston, "Early Days in Fincastle."

did not suppress newspapers or civil liberties during the war and thus "ended his administration with more popularity than when he began."⁶⁷

Breckinridge, like Madison, was a quiet man concerned with the welfare of his country. Neither man liked the limelight, and Breckinridge was even referred to as a "quiet backbencher" who rarely, if ever, expressed his opinion in Congress by a means other than the roll-call vote. Breckinridge was a forerunner of the Byrd fiscal policy for Virginia in that he voted for "economy and even retrenchment."⁶⁸ Among the Virginia Federalists, Breckinridge and Sheffey "alone achieved any sort of stature in Congress," even though most of Breckinridge's votes were cast in silence.⁶⁹

"Courtly, almost stately in manners," Breckinridge "possessed in an eminent degree, those qualities of mind and heart calculated to win the esteem and affection of the people of those times. A discriminatory judgment gave wise direction to a vigorous and cultivated intellect."⁷⁰

⁶⁷Smelser, Democratic Republic, pp. 318-319.

⁶⁸David H. Fischer, The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 383. The Annals for 1809-1817 contain no speech of any length by Breckinridge. However, not all votes or speeches are registered, so it may be presumed that the representatives from the Fifth Virginia District made at least one speech in his eight years in Congress.

⁶⁹Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, p. 509.

⁷⁰Houston, "Early Days in Fincastle."

Breckinridge cannot be dismissed so lightly. He was not one of the "beautiful people" who went to Congress on the merits of his social position and then sat in the legislature as a nonentity. He continually worked on committees, both in the Virginia and U.S. houses, and he was active in so many fields throughout his life that it is almost impossible to justify the term "backbencher."

Breckinridge was somewhat of a political enigma. He was a Federalist from his youngest days, but a Federalist whose Republican brother was Jefferson's attorney general, a Federalist whose niece was married to Peter B. Porter, a prominent Republican, and he was a personal friend of Henry Clay. In Congress he was allied with the Quids. Randolph of Roanoke, leader of the anti-administration Republicans, referred in a letter to Harmanus Bleeker, a New Yorker whose voting record was similar to that of Breckinridge, to Breckinridge as "our sometime fellow-labourer."⁷¹

Yet rather than classify Breckinridge as a Federalist, a Quid, or a Republican, he was an independent Virginian, not a states' rights democrat, but a nationalist dedicated to the welfare of Virginia within the framework of the federal government.

⁷¹Russell A. Kirk, John Randolph of Roanoke: A Study in American Politics (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964), p. 227.

CHAPTER IV

THE INDIAN SUMMER OF A FEDERALIST: 1816-1824

It is a mark of the men of the Revolutionary generation that they persisted throughout their lives to maintain and secure those things for which they had declared independence, fought the British, and embarked upon our national existence as a Republic. Americans turned to Washington and Jefferson as their hero figures, but men of lesser attainments served in their declining years as the counsellors of a rising generation. James Breckinridge was not referred to as the Sage of Grove Hill, but during the Era of Good Feelings the old Federalist from Fincastle emerged into a kind of Indian summer in which the partisan passions of the previous decades were submerged. It was for him also a kind of golden age, because he, unlike the young men on the way up, foreswore political advancement for himself. He did not, however, forswear all political office.

In the fall of 1816, when Breckinridge went to theitol for the last time to complete the second half of his fourth term in Congress, he had already decided not be stand for reelection. Instead, he looked forward to the pleasures of supervising his plantation, playing with his grandchildren, and enjoying the other attributes of an honorable retirement. In March, 1817, he returned to what John Randolph of Roanoke called his "spacious & opulent establishment" in Botetourt County.⁷²

⁷²Kirk, John Randolph of Roanoke, p. 227.

Complete abstinence from political affairs proved to be impossible, however, even if it had been his intention; and his fellow citizens insisted that their respected leader play a role in securing a redress of the political inequality suffered by the part of the state west of the Blue Ridge. It is possible that the state's Constitution of 1776 had been unjust when it gave each of Virginia's counties two members to the House of Delegates, since there were so many more counties in the Tidewater portion of the Old Dominion. It had become a certainty during the first Jefferson Administration that the counties of both Tidewater and Piedmont were losing population and thus becoming increasingly overrepresented in the House of Delegates. Around 1800, Breckinridge had been alert to this political issue as an opportunity and he gave evidence of wishing to capitalize upon it. But the rising tempo of events between 1807 and 1812 imposed an enforced delay in achieving electoral reform in Virginia. Within a year after the Peace of Ghent, western Virginians called a convention to meet at Staunton on August 19-23, 1816, to consider ways and means to secure such electoral reforms that would do justice to their part of the state. James Breckinridge was drafted first to represent Botetourt and then to preside over this convention.

The convention was the result of meetings at Harrisonburg and Winchester which demanded white male suffrage and representation based on population. Sixty-five delegates from thirty-five western counties attended the sessions and discussed the grievances of the western part of the state. The delegates were bipartisan, but the Valley Federalists

were the most prominent. They wanted the General Assembly to call a constitutional convention and initiate electoral reform. The interested members addressed a memorial to the Assembly and "showed how it was possible for 204,766 white inhabitants residing in the small counties east of the Blue Ridge, a number 72,183 less than one-half the total white population of the state, to control the action of the Assembly."⁷³

Thomas Jefferson "outlined the early reform movement of 1799 and suggested many changes in the fundamental law."⁷⁴ Thomas Ritchie "warned the conservatives that they courted danger by running counter to public opinion."

The convention concluded with a compromise by which the "west obtained a representative in the Senate based upon white numbers in exchange for a law equalizing land values for purposes of assessment."⁷⁵

He had served his constituency in Virginia since he was seventeen years of age, first in the Revolutionary militia, then in the House of Delegates, and most recently in the federal Congress. Such length of service could only be matched by a Monroe, a Marshall, or a John Quincy Adams, but the Federalist from Fincastle was willing to forego complete retirement to serve his fellow citizens. It is not improbable that he considered that it would be a greater contribution to them and to posterity for him to work in the accomplishment of a more democratic

⁷³Risjord, "Virginia Federalists," JSH, p. 514. See also Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, pp. 94-95.

⁷⁴Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kersheval, July, 1816, quoted in Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 95.

⁷⁵Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia, p. 96.

Virginia than to participate in the personal political factions that seemed to characterize Washington in the immediate postwar years. The Staunton Convention was abortive, so far as immediate results were concerned. It can only be said to have borne fruit after another decade of gestation and several false childbirths. But it did lead to the Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1829-1830, and the latter's solution of the east-west disagreement over the inequality of representation.

It was to promote the purposes of the Staunton Convention that James Breckinridge agreed once again to represent Botetourt in the Virginia House of Delegates in the years 1819-1824. He served in 1819 with Jesse Rowland, in 1820 with Thomas N. Burwell, and in 1823 with Allen Taylor.⁷⁶

The biggest concern of Breckinridge during these three sessions of the Assembly was the new University of Virginia, which is discussed in a subsequent chapter. The James and Kanawha River projects were still of much interest, and he voted in favor of measures clearing the rivers for improved navigation in February of both 1820 and 1821.⁷⁷ In January, 1824, he voted in favor of an act incorporating the Chesapeake and Ohio canal company; the following month, he voted for an act authorizing a loan for internal improvement.⁷⁸

⁷⁶Swem, Register of the General Assembly, pp. 100, 103, 111.

⁷⁷Journals of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1819, p. 171; 1820, p. 195.

⁷⁸Ibid., 1824, pp. 126, 181.

On December 16, 1820, he helped to count the votes that elected Thomas Mann Randolph as governor.⁷⁹

In these years, Breckinridge seemed to vote with the majority more often than he had done in earlier years--both in the Assembly and in Congress. Because the revival of Federalist fortunes between 1809 and 1815 did not prove lasting, Breckinridge was freer to do as he had generally done--to vote his convictions rather than to maintain a strict Federalist vote.

After his 1823-1824 term in the Virginia House of Delegates, Breckinridge finally retired from elected offices, but he had a pet project in the new University of Virginia to hold his interest. Breckinridge was now sixty-one; and with the exception of an occasional trip to Charlottesville, he remained at his Fincastle residence. From time to time he visited his nearby relatives and his valley neighbors. He particularly enjoyed the company of Mr. & Mrs. Lewis Burwell, who resided at "Rustic Lodge" in Botetourt.⁸⁰ Judging from family correspondence, Breckinridge and his wife entertained their neighbors and their family, who came to visit for weeks at a time, often accompanied by their in-laws.⁸¹

An event most pleasing to the patriarch was the wedding of his daughter, "the accomplished Miss Matilda," to Henry Bowyer, Jr., the son of his lifelong friend. The Reverend Robert Logan performed the

⁷⁹Ibid., 1820, p. 48.

⁸⁰Stoner, A Seed-Bed of the Republic, p. 397.

⁸¹Breckinridge Papers, Roanoke Historical Society.

ceremony on October 12, 1820.⁸² The following spring, Breckinridge congratulated his son Cary for his election as first lieutenant in the Virginia militia.⁸³

Not being rushed by life in the capital cities, Breckinridge had time to survey his domain--to make material improvements and to enjoy nature in its unteinted state. On August 27, 1821, he served notice in the local paper that his property was posted and that unlawful hunters would be prosecuted.⁸⁴

Land to Breckinridge was a sign of status, and as private property it was a sacred right. To his ancestors the ownership of land was worth the hardships of an ocean voyage and an overland trek to the Valley of Virginia, fighting Indians, and the daily toil for subsistence living.

It was the Virginia militia that guaranteed the existence of such pockets of civilization as Grove Hill. Breckinridge realized the necessity of the protection and maintained a lifelong interest in the militia.

⁸²Fincastle Herald of the Valley, Oct. 16, 1820.

⁸³Ibid., May 27, 1821.

⁸⁴Ibid., Aug. 27, 1821.

CHAPTER V

A MILITIA CAREER, 1780-1815

To James Breckinridge, his participation in the militia was as important as managing his extensive lands--and more important than serving in Congress. In reality, the militia allowed his estate to enjoy a relatively safe existence. During his childhood on the frontier, it was the militia that had served as protection first against the Indians and then against the British troops and their American Loyalist collaborationists. In the War of 1812, it was militia action against the British that gained Breckinridge his rank of brigadier general.

As a boy on his family's frontier farm, the threat of Indian raids was very real. Although there was no recorded instance of the Breckinridge family having any encounters with the Indians, the Cloyds, Flemmings and many of their other neighbors were not so fortunate.⁸⁵ During the Revolutionary War, the opportunity of fighting British regulars provided the frontiersmen with what was almost a diversion from the Indians. As a young squire, James Breckinridge was a patriot, but some of his backwoods neighbors remained Loyalists and more were potentially so.

⁸⁵1843 diary of Letitia Preston Floyd, typescript, Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute. See also Thomas D. Clark, Frontier America: The Story of the Westward Movement (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959). Hereinafter cited as Clark, Frontier America, pp. 124-125.

Perhaps to answer his country's call to arms, or perhaps to seek adventure, Breckinridge joined his Uncle William Preston's company of rangers, which first organized after Braddock's defeat. Preston's company was one of riflemen, for whose ranks the seventeen-year-old Jaimy was fully qualified as at least a decent marksman because of much experience at shooting squirrels and other small game.

Between 1778 and 1880, British seizure of Savannah and Charleston permitted the penetration of the Piedmont of the Carolinas and the organization of Loyalist units against the Patriots. Fortunately for the Americans, this process was checked on the border of North and South Carolina. In the battle of King's Mountain, fought October 7, 1780, a patriot force of 1,400 frontier militia completely overwhelmed an equal number of Loyalists under British Major Patrick Ferguson. In this ferocious battle, Colonel William Campbell of Virginia was the patriot's commander, seconded by Isaac Shelby and John Sevier of the Watugua settlement in Tennessee.⁸⁶ General Nathaniel Greene, who was in command of the American forces below the Potomac, hoped to enlist the services of the patriot force and invited Campbell to organize a force of one thousand volunteers for duty east of the mountains. Campbell agreed and began searching for Virginians to take the place of the Tennesseans.

Towards the end of February, 1781, Campbell's Washington County militia recruits, and those of Botetourt and Montgomery Counties (under the command of Colonel William Preston), met at the Lead Mines near

⁸⁶Department of the Army, American Military History: 1607-1953 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1956). Hereinafter cited as American Military History, p. 90.

the present town of Wytheville. From there they marched to meet General Greene in North Carolina. General Greene's reorganization of the Army of the Southern Department was characterized by audacious strategy and strategic skill which enabled him to divide his inferior forces, live off the country, trap the British into small engagements and move rapidly. "This general had an amazing record of losing battles but winning campaigns," and of "always inflicting greater losses on the enemy than he suffered himself."⁸⁷

General Greene had called for reenforcements by other Virginia militia units from the eastern part of that state. For various reasons, these could not arrive for several days after Preston's and Campbell's companies. Realizing that Cornwallis would not allow him time for the two forces to meet, Greene stationed Preston and Campbell, along with the cavalry of "Light Horse Harry" Lee, between the advancing militia and Cornwallis. On March 6, 1781, Cornwallis tried to intercept the militia, but effective intelligence had enabled Colonels Preston, Campbell and Williams to reach their destination of Reedy Fork before the British. Breckinridge, with his uncle's riflemen, was stationed in front of the ford across Reedy Creek. When the advancing British were eighty yards away, Preston's and Campbell's men fired effective volleys which slowed the enemy ranks.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Samuel E. Morrison, Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Hereinafter cited as Morrison, Oxford History, p. 260.

⁸⁸Robert H. Lamb, "Colonel Preston's Command at the Battles of Whitsill's Mill and Guilford Court House," typescript, Virginia Polytechnic Institute. Hereinafter cited as Lamb, "Colonel Preston's Command," pp. 1-3. See also Morrison, Oxford History, p. 260.

Although the patriots were victorious, Colonel William Preston suffered a mishap when thrown from his horse. He was carried from the field and his 300 riflemen were assigned to Colonel Campbell's command.⁸⁹

After almost two weeks of maneuvering and chasing, Greene chose his ground and prepared to meet Cornwallis's attack. The site selected was at Guilford's Court House in North Carolina; the date was March 15, 1781. Greene had a force of 1,500 regulars and 3,000 militia to face the 1,900 British. Although the British won because of superior artillery, it is true that all of Greene's militia and one of his regular regiments "panicked." Cornwallis's force suffered heavy casualties and loss of supplies, while the militia remained in relatively good shape.⁹⁰

The Guilford Court House battle was a tactical victory for Cornwallis, but at the same time it was a strategic defeat because he was forced to head northward toward Yorktown.⁹¹ Greene marched southward into South Carolina to destroy interior British forces while Colonel Preston led young Breckinridge and his fellow riflemen back to their homes, which they had left exposed to Indian raids.⁹²

After the American victory at Yorktown, there was no assurance that the British would not mount a new invasion of the Old Dominion.

⁸⁹Floyd, "Diary," p. 9.

⁹⁰American Military History, p. 94. See also Morrison, Oxford History, p. 260.

⁹¹Lamb, "Colonel Preston's Command," p. 8.

⁹²American Military History, p. 95.

Taking advantage of the moment of calm after battle, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law calling for troops to serve for three years or the duration of the war. At an August 31, 1782, meeting of the Botetourt County field officers, Breckinridge was appointed clerk.⁹³ Apparently this office, which in peacetime has the supervision of county records, was in wartime invested with extraordinary powers of a quasi-military variety. A clerk aided the county's senior military officer, the County Lieutenant, and operated as a kind of one-man draft board.

The militia was selected from districts. Part of Botetourt was designated as the state's 40th District, from which Captain Robinson's Company was raised. James Breckinridge and his cousins, Francis Smith and Thomas Preston, and his friend, Michael Cloyd, belonged to this company. His brothers John and William were in the 41st District.⁹⁴

The remainder of Breckinridge's Revolutionary service appears to have been limited to desultory drills and garrison duty for frontier defense. Like many young men such as John Marshall, James Breckinridge remained in the militia after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War. As a young squire in a frontier area where his family were accepted leaders, advancement came rapidly and steadily.

On August 16, 1787, he was appointed Ensign in Captain Cartmill's Company; on April 14, 1790, he became Captain of the Militia and took his oath at Botetourt County Court House; and on July 14, 1795, he was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and Commandant of the Botetourt militia.

⁹³Stoner, A Seed-Bed of the Republic, p. 122.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 129.

Breckinridge was serving his second term in Congress when the War of 1812 commenced. He was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General of the 3rd Brigade of the Virginia militia and placed in charge of all the forces in southwest Virginia.⁹⁵

Congress was not in session from April 18 to September 19, 1814,⁹⁶ and Breckinridge was most likely viewing events from Botetourt when he heard the horrifying news that British Regulars on August 24, 1814, had routed the American forces defending Washington and captured and burned the Capitol and Executive Mansion.⁹⁷ Breckinridge hastily summoned his militia brigade, which like most Virginia units was placed outside the city of Richmond. From August 31 through December 14, 1814, General Breckinridge and his men awaited a British invasion that never came.⁹⁸

Records show that Breckinridge was with the 3rd Brigade at Camp Mitchell outside Richmond from September 6 through October 19, 1814.⁹⁹ His outfit marched to Washington in the middle of October. Instead of battles, wounds, and patriotic gore, Breckinridge's company suffered from more humble civilian ailments such as heat prostration and sore feet.²⁰⁰

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 278.

⁹⁶Annals, XXVII, 2030; XXVIII, 301.

⁹⁷Smelser, Democratic Republic, pp. 268-271.

⁹⁸Records from the Adjutant General's Office, National Archives, Dec. 21, 1814. Breckinridge was paid \$708.98 for three and a half months of service.

⁹⁹American State Papers, I, "Military Affairs," (Washington, D.C., Gales & Seaton, 1832), p. 641.

²⁰⁰Military Records, National Archives, 1814.

On September 15, he ordered 12 frying pans, 20 hammers, 48 axes, 48 spades, and three pair of steelyards. Usually Breckinridge was concerned with ordering edible supplies and sometime horses. On October 7-10, he was concerned about obtaining extra rations for cavalry temporarily attached to his brigade.¹

The General issued several orders for dispatching troopers to pursue deserters. Stationed at camp outside Richmond, deserters took off to spots as distant as Edinburg in the lower end of the valley. The dispatches did not comment on the success of the pursuits.²

Breckinridge reappeared in Congress on December 5, but his periodic absences during the remainder of the month may have been caused by military reasons.³

In a eulogistic speech, on June 20, 1873, presented by Thomas D. Houston, Breckinridge, as the head of an infantry brigade, was referred to as "cool and self possessed in the presence of the enemy, he displayed that same talent for commanding men under fire, which distinguished some of his lineal descendants fifty years later."⁴ Judging from the military records, General Breckinridge spent most of his time chasing deserters and ordering supplies.

Militia service was an important aspect in Breckinridge's life. Certainly his early participation was due to an honest desire to maintain

¹Ibid., Sept. 15, 1814; Oct. 7, 1814.

²Ibid., Sept. 19, 1814; Sept. 29, 1814.

³Annals, XXVIII, 750.

⁴Houston, "Early Days in Fincastle."

peace and safety on the frontier. Action against the British was patriotic duty even though it was limited. Breckinridge was usually addressed as "General," which he undoubtedly appreciated; and because of his aristocratic frontier status, the rank might possibly be considered a social calling card. But Breckinridge learned early in life the values of a militia; and even though it had possible side benefits, it was an honest interest throughout his life.

CHAPTER VI

JAMES BRECKINRIDGE AND THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Although Thomas Jefferson is traditionally credited with founding the University of Virginia, he took pains to avoid charges that its establishment was his project alone.

In 1817, the former president enlisted the aid of Madison, Cabell and several others from Albermarle and adjacent Piedmont counties to found at Charlottesville a Central College. They secured a charter from the legislature and raised about \$40,000 to commence the institution. They bought a site and, on October 6, 1817, President Monroe laid the cornerstone of the first building. In 1818, the General Assembly appropriated \$15,000 to establish a state university and authorized Governor James Patton Preston to appoint a Board of Commissioners numbering one for each of the twenty-four state senatorial districts to select the university's location. Four who were selected from the Tidewater region did not serve, presumably because of their loyalties to the College of William and Mary. The active commissioners were James Breckinridge of Botetourt, William Brockenbrough of Henrico, William H. Cabell of Buckingham, Nathaniel H. Claiborne of Franklin, W. A. G. Dade of Prince William, Hugh Holmes of Frederick, John G. Jackson of Harrison, Thomas Jefferson of Albermarle, James Madison of Orange, A. T. Mason of Loudoun, Philip C. Pendleton of Berkely, Peter Randolph of Dinwiddie, Spencer Roane of Hanover, Archibald Rutherford

of Rockingham, Philip Slaughter of Culpeper, Archibald Stuart of Augusta, Creed Taylor of Cumberland, James M. Taylor of Montgomery, Henry E. Watkins of Charlotte, and Thomas Wilson of Monongahela.

Although Jefferson was eager to plan the university, he sought ex-Governor William H. Cabell's opinion on whether he should be a commissioner because so many in the General Assembly considered him "a rawhead and bloody bones" that he might jeopardize the Central College's chance of winning the \$15,000 and designation as the state's university. The Governor quieted the doubts of the seventy-six-year-old former president.

In order to attend the August 1, 1818, board meeting at Rockfish Gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains, Breckinridge traveled about one hundred miles by carriage. The meeting site was chosen because it was located on the dividing line between the eastern and western sections of the state. It was the Board's duty not only to select the site of the university, but also to plan for its construction, to decide upon what subjects would be taught, to elect a faculty, and to execute provisions for the institution's organization and government. Breckinridge, Judge Roane, Madison, Stuart and Dade were selected to serve on a sub-committee to draw up the plans for the institution under Thomas Jefferson's leadership.⁵

⁵Philip A. Bruce, History of the University of Virginia: 1819-1919 (5 vols., New York: Macmillan Co., 1921). Hereinafter cited as Bruce, History of U.Va., I, 209-212. See also Thomas P. Abernathy, Historical Sketch of the University of Virginia (Richmond: Dietz Press, 1948), pp. 2-11; Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, VIII (1901), p. 125.

Since the former president already had composed a rough outline of the projected school, the committee was content to listen. There is no record of their suggesting any amendment of his scheme for ten pavillions and six hotels connected by four long ranges of dormitories about a central lawn and a large building "in the middle of the grounds."⁶ Without anyone raising a contrary voice, Jefferson's proposed curriculum was endorsed: mathematics, moral philosophy, including belle lettres, fine arts, political economy, and history; natural philosophy, including astronomy, chemistry, biology, geology, and physics; ancient and modern languages; law; and medicine.⁷

In selecting a site for Central College, the commissioners were not so acquiescent. The men from east of the Blue Ridge were satisfied with the location of Charlottesville, yet Stuart of Augusta and Wilson of Monongahela preferred Staunton, while Breckinridge, Pendleton of Berkely, and Taylor of Montgomery advocated Lexington. The Tidewater and Piedmont commissioners were more numerous, but divided support for Staunton and Lexington insured that neither western site would be chosen. Charlottesville was the choice of the majority, the remainder nodded their approval, and the meeting adjourned on Tuesday, August 4.⁸

After the Rockfish Gap meeting, Jefferson traveled a rough hundred miles across mountains and valleys with Breckinridge to Warm Springs,

⁶Bruce, History of U.Va., I, 212-220.

⁷Ibid., I, 223.

⁸Ibid., I, 221.

which was at that time a popular spa whose mineral waters had a healing effect on Jefferson's rheumatism. Being more familiar with the area, the General guided the former president but did not persuade him to follow the example of his daughter, Mrs. Thomas Mann Randolph, who had recently visited "Grove Hill."⁹

When the concept of Central College was enlarged on March 29, 1819, to constitute the University of Virginia, Jefferson was appointed its Rector. The institution then possessed no buildings, no students, no professors, and about \$40,000; but its founder had drawn ambitious plans for whose accomplishment he was assembling artisans and materials. As was the case of the commissioners at the Rockfish Gap Conference, the members of the newly appointed Board of Visitors posed no real opposition to Jefferson's plans. By 1824, more than half of the buildings were ready.¹⁰

To the first Board of Visitors, Governor James Pleasants, Jr., appointed Jefferson, Madison, Breckinridge, William H. Cabell of Buckingham, John H. Cocke of Fluvanna, Chapman Johnson of Augusta, and Robert B. Taylor of Norfolk. Jefferson's preference for men from his vicinity, such as Madison, Cocke and Johnson, was balanced geographically

⁹Thomas Jefferson to Martha J. Randolph, Aug. 14, 1818, quoted in Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson (ed. Edward M. Betts and James A. Bear, Jr., (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1966), p. 425. See also Perceval Reniers, The Springs of Virginia: Life, Love, and Death at the Waters, 1775-1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), p. 54.

¹⁰Gilbert Chinard, Thomas Jefferson: The Apostle of Americanism (Ann Arbor: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1966), p. 509.

by the selection of Breckinridge and Taylor. Not only could Breckinridge conveniently attend meetings at Charlottesville on his way to take part in the General Assembly at Richmond, but the sponsorship by such a Federalist of higher education was invaluable.¹¹ Besides Breckinridge and Johnson, George Loyall, General Samuel Blackburn of Bath, Philip Doddridge of Brooke County, R. M. T. Hunter of Essex County, and William C. Rives were other leaders in the Virginia Senate and House of Delegates who could be "relied upon to use their influence with their colleagues to insure the passage of any measure that was favorable to the interests of the University."¹²

Much of the correspondence between Joseph C. Cabell and Jefferson showed their appreciation of Breckinridge's efforts in the House to advance the interests of the University. Often the Rector exhorted his cohorts, writing that he hoped that Cabell, Breckinridge, and Johnson "would stand at your posts . . . until everything was effected, and the institution opened."¹³ Jefferson's efforts were so persuasive that Cabell wrote that the former's letter had "kindled great zeal in Gen. Breckinridge." Not only was the latter flattered by such confidences, but other legislators could not fail to be influenced in favor of the University when the ex-President's letter was passed around by

¹¹Bruce, History of U.Va., I, 236-238.

¹²Ibid., I, 290. See also William H. Gaines, Thomas Mann Randolph: Jefferson's Son-in-Law (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p. 121.

¹³Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, Jan. 31, 1821, quoted in Roy J. Honeywell, The Educational Work of Thomas Jefferson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931). Hereinafter cited as Honeywell, Educational Work of Jefferson, p. 261.

the Federalist from Botetourt. Jefferson was tireless in writing such letters to Breckinridge and other key legislators to provide them with periodic reports on the university's progress. Astutely, the Sage of Monticello expressed concern that Virginia boys who attended northern colleges acquired questionable opinions and principles. To provide the state with young men who were both educated and democratic, said Jefferson, Virginia needed a first-rate institution. As best he could, the Rector of the budding university attempted to quiet complaints that its support left little of the existing revenues for the public primary schools. Adept in the arts of propaganda for almost half a century, Jefferson was flattering in his attention to the members of the legislature, humble in his address, and unremitting in employing his favorite means of expression--the letter written to one individual, but calculated to reach the eyes and hearts of many others. In this plan, he had a willing confidant in Breckinridge.¹⁴

Joseph Carrington Cabell was keenly aware of the important role played by the Delegates from Botetourt. Cabell wrote Jefferson that "our great friend in that House is Gen. Breckinridge. He is, in truth, a powerful friend, and you must insist on his remaining in the Assembly."

Alarmed at rumors that Breckinridge intended to retire from political life after long and honorable service, Cabell declared that

¹⁴Joseph C. Cabell to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 8, 1821; Thomas Jefferson to James Breckinridge, Feb. 15, 1821, quoted in Honeywell, Educational Work of Jefferson, pp. 261, 263. See also Randall, Life of Jefferson, III, 460; Thomas Jefferson to James Breckinridge, Sept. 30, 1821, Jefferson Papers, University of Virginia.

the General was "the only man that could keep the Western delegation correct; and is worth more than all the rest of us put together." He entreated Jefferson and Madison to write to Breckinridge to persuade him to remain in the Assembly.¹⁵

In the House of Delegates on February 23, 1820, Breckinridge made a motion that he and Messrs. Crump, Graves, Rives, Chamberlayne, Gordon, Archer, Yancy, Miller and Everett be given leave to draw up a bill "authorizing Visitors of the University of Virginia to borrow money for finishing the buildings thereof." They worked quickly; the bill was passed the following day; Breckinridge then secured the Senate's concurrence.¹⁶ He was not always so successful. In February, 1821, one of his bills favoring the University barely escaped postponement by a 68-75 vote. It then was amended, defeated, 77-78, reconsidered, and finally passed, 86-77.¹⁷ On January 23, 1824, Breckinridge voted in favor of another bill, which passed 105-83.¹⁸

Although Breckinridge retired from the House for two years (1822-1824), he remained a Visitor until his death in 1833. When he attended the Board meetings, he usually stayed at Monticello until Jefferson's death in 1826. When his own health began to fail in 1827, Breckinridge found it difficult to attend Board meetings.¹⁹ The aged Visitor at a

¹⁵Joseph C. Cabell to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 25, 1821; Joseph C. Cabell to Thomas Jefferson, March 10, 1821, quoted in Honeywell, Educational Work of Jefferson, p. 262.

¹⁶Journal of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1819, pp. 206-207. No vote was registered.

¹⁷Ibid., 1820, pp. 205, 212-214.

¹⁸Ibid., 1823, p. 127.

¹⁹Bruce, History of U.Va., II, 44-45.

meeting of the Board of Visitors in July, 1828, joined in authorizing the faculty to "enforce vigorously the enactments prescribing uniforms, limiting pocket money, etc."²⁰

Jefferson had been the guiding light of the new university, but he needed political help in the legislature to gain appropriations which would make his dream a reality. Recalling the uncertainties of his own student days, Breckinridge was predisposed to aid in furthering the progress of the Commonwealth of Virginia generally and its higher education in particular. The fact that Breckinridge was, after John Marshall, the best-known Federalist in the Old Dominion, and that he was still an able and energetic leader in its legislature, enabled Jefferson to claim that his own scheme for a true university commanded bipartisan support. Since Breckinridge had been more of an independent than a doctrinaire Federalist, their bipartisan was more persiflage than fact. If Breckinridge's aid was not indispensable, it was to achieve a happy result that he joined hands with his Republican colleagues Jefferson, Madison and Monroe.

As the aristocratic Virginia of their day permitted, their absence of partisan disagreement typified the Era of Good Feelings. In the protracted Indian summer of the Revolutionary generation, these elderly gentlemen insured for their Commonwealth the greatest blessing of liberty--the privilege of acquiring knowledge.

²⁰Alumni Bulletin of the University of Virginia (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1908), Third Series, #1, p. 25.

CHAPTER VII

LIFE AT GROVE HILL

Today the Town of Fincastle has been fortunate in retaining much of its early nineteenth-century appearance. Undoubtedly its surrounding forests are less grand, but its rolling hills, fertile crop fields, verdant meadows, and clear streams remain unspoiled by post-Civil War industries or urban sprawl. The whole town has been declared a Virginia Historic Landmark.

In 1772 the Virginia General Assembly incorporated the town of Fincastle and designated it the site for the Court House of Botetourt County, which had separated from Augusta County two years before. The Court House boasts Jeffersonian design. Most of the town's streets are those laid out by the county surveyor and land magnate, William Preston, in 1770. From the beginning, much of the town has been surrounded by fertile farms. In James Breckinridge's time, the farmers improved their residences from log houses with stone chimneys into substantial dwellings of wood, stone, or brick elements that belong more to the Federal than antebellum style, even though some later acquired Greek Revival porticos.

The growing town supported three schools after 1800,²¹ although the more wealthy residents still hired tutors for their children or packed

²¹Frances J. Neiderer, The Town of Fincastle, Virginia (Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1965). Hereinafter cited as Neiderer, Fincastle, pp. 1-4.

them off to a boarding school. Breckinridge enrolled his daughters Letitia and Elizabeth in Miss Ann Smith's boarding school in Georgetown, where their uncle, Senator John Breckinridge of Kentucky, could check on them from time to time.²²

The early settlers raised wheat and corn and dotted the countryside with small orchards, but their first prosperity came with the cultivation of hemp.²³ Hemp and the destiny of a stronger central government were two of the factors that made Botetourt federalist-minded in 1788 and kept her Federalist until world peace in 1815. Throughout the years and afterwards, hemp fibers were, of course, used also for a coarse fabric for bagging. With the ever-increasing export of cotton, such bagging for cotton bales created a good demand after the 1790's,²⁴ but Fincastle was too landlocked to achieve much of a hemp market in the cotton country. Instead, its hemp followed the course of other trade up the Valley of Virginia to Philadelphia's and Baltimore's naval centers. But even slight consideration of Fincastle's hemp culture and trade between 1790 and 1825 show that it was the determining factor in the area's economy.²⁵

Interested in military warrants and land speculation in Kentucky, the younger sons of the wealthy went west, as did James Breckinridge's

²²John Breckinridge to James Breckinridge, Apr. 28, 1806, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

²³Neiderer, Fincastle, p. 28.

²⁴Eugene D. Genovese, The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South (New York: Vintage Books, 1965). Hereinafter cited as Genovese, Political Economy of Slavery, p. 185.

²⁵Fincastle Herald of the Valley, Sept. 7, 1822.

older brother John. This ultimately required a distribution of the Breckinridge patrimony, which happily was accomplished without any large sale of property by James to satisfy his brother's interest. There was both an accumulation of principal and an annuity of money resultant from a cash-crop, hemp, all of which made for a monetized economy to permit the extension of credit. When smaller farmers than John Breckinridge left for Kentucky, they could do so more easily both because they had a small amount of cash laid by and because a local magnate, such as James Breckinridge, could buy their freeholds and thus aggrandize his estate.

As good land around Fincastle became available by reason of the westward emigration, the Botetourt deed books show that James Breckinridge made considerable land purchases for almost every year from 1791 to 1833, especially in the period 1795-1808.²⁶

Breckinridge had begun his career as a landed proprietor in 1772 at the age of nine, when his father died and left him 400 acres of his estate,²⁷ located about twenty miles south of Fincastle. The young Breckinridge called this property "Cloverdale," from which the present village derives its name. In 1794, ten years after he attained his majority and came into full possession of his patrimony, he sold an expanded Cloverdale to Jacob Carper, Samuel G. Adams and Carter Beverly, who, with Robert Harvey, started a charcoal-fired iron furnace at the

²⁶Deed Books IV-XX, Botetourt County Records, Botetourt County Court House, Fincastle. Hereinafter cited as Botetourt Records.

²⁷Will Book A, 1770-1801, *ibid.*, p. 36.

site of the present village. The price for the land was £ 1200, payable over a period of years. Breckinridge promptly reinvested in parcels of real estate which he consolidated into what became his 1400-acre homestead. His first purchase (from Jacob Carper) was ninety acres located between Fincastle and Catawba Creek, and it is probable that it was timed to offset Carper's part of the £ 1200 owed for the Cloverdale tract.²⁸ In 1797, Breckinridge paid Robert Harvey £ 4000 for a 930-acre tract on Catawba Creek which included the Brunswick Forge and Slitting Mill. Breckinridge's purchase of 380 acres from the Van Meter heirs in 1803 completed the extent of his estate, "Grove Hill."²⁹

No one knows the identity of the architect of the mansion that James Breckinridge erected on his Grove Hill estate in 1802. The plans may have been Breckinridge's own, but he was not noted as an architect. Even though Jefferson sent Breckinridge drawings for the Botetourt Court House in 1818,³⁰ they were not intimate at that time. Moreover, the President was too busy with his official duties to devote much time to his architectural pursuits. The fact that Grove Hill was constructed in the Federal style, which was not a favorite of Jefferson's, does not dismiss the vague and unsubstantiated local opinion that Mr. Jefferson

²⁸Roanoke World News, Apr. 7, 1962. See also James Breckinridge to Mrs. Letitia Breckinridge, Mar., 1794, Breckinridge Papers, DLC. The payment was divided into three installments due on the first of April in 1794, 1797, and 1800.

²⁹Ibid. See also Deed Books, Botetourt Records, V, 68; VI, 389; VIII, 234. See also Kegley, Kegley's Virginia Frontier, p. 490.

³⁰Neiderer, Fincastle, p. 30.

may have given at least some advice on the planning of the mansion. From old pictures, Breckinridge's house bears some resemblance to that of his cousin John Brown's house in Lexington, Kentucky, for which Jefferson provenance has been claimed.

Actual construction on the site began in the spring of 1802, after Breckinridge returned from the General Assembly in Richmond. Because he had busied himself assembling materials long in advance, he hoped to have the house almost finished by the first of November so he could move his family, now numbering seven, into this new home of twenty-six rooms.³¹

Situated on a knoll in the Catawba Creek area two miles northwest of Fincastle, the two-and-a-half storied mansion at Grove Hill was an excellent example of the Federal style. The brick walls of the fifty-by-sixty foot edifice, laid in Flemish bond, were two-and-a-half-feet thick about massive stone foundations that girded a "seller the whole size of the house." Stone steps led to white wooden porches. Not only was the entrance portal surmounted by a fanlight, but the regular rectangular fenestration of the dwelling was enlivened by a Palladian window in the second story. The attic was lighted by a semi-circular window in the pediment. Only four attic rooms were not heated by fireplaces whose flues were accommodated by four large chimneys in each corner of the house.

³¹James Breckinridge to John Breckinridge Mar. 17, 1802, Breckinridge Papers, DLC.

Interior woodwork of the Grove Hill mansion was restricted to mantelpieces, moldings, and staircases, all of which were costly and elaborately carved.³² Such furnishings as dining room chairs and huge gold leaf mirrors in the Federal style were correspondently elegant. Silver pieces in the possession of Breckinridge descendents, and a 1798 inventory of purchases, reveal the builder's good taste.³³ Traditional accounts that the mirrors and some other furnishings were selected by Thomas Jefferson for Grove Hill complete the mythology of one of the great houses of Virginia.

A two-story kitchen, twenty-one by forty-seven feet, was attached to the main building. In the rear were a brick storehouse, an office, and a wooden stable for Breckinridge's twenty-four horses.³⁴ That quarters for his forty-nine slaves were built of brick in the same general design as his mansion permits considerable interpretation.³⁵ Conspicuous spending impressed the local small landowners that the Breckinridges were enlightened humane and lords of the manor.³⁶

³²Neiderer, Fincastle, p. 18.

³³Furnishings in the home of Mr. & Mrs. English Showalter and in the collections of the Virginia Historical Society. List from Deed Book, Botetourt Records, VIII, 396,

³⁴Neiderer, Fincastle, pp. 16-18.

³⁵Family typescript in the possession of Mrs. English Showalter, Roanoke.

³⁶Genovese, Political Economy of Slavery, pp. 18, 28.

According to an 1804 Mutual Assurance Society policy at Richmond, Breckinridge valued his mansion at \$10,000, his kitchen at \$2,000, and his stable at only \$100.³⁷

Grove Hill was a self-sufficient plantation. Family records allude to a grist mill, saw mill, tannery, brickyard, and tool-making shops.³⁸ Letters of John Preston of nearby Greenfield Plantation prove that the General's neighbors often utilized his mills, forge and iron-works on the basis of barter or exchange of services.³⁹ Breckinridge also advertised, as a subscriber, that he had erected a rolling and slitting mill and that sheet iron and nail rods were available in exchange for cash, bar iron or produce.⁴⁰

It is safe to assume that the Breckinridges raised the same crops as their neighbors in the valley. James Breckinridge's forty-nine slaves no doubt increased and helped in the disagreeable process of cultivating hemp. Their brick quarters bespeak good treatment and suggest contented service.⁴¹ Family correspondence establishes both

³⁷"Fire Destroys Landmarks," Journal of the Roanoke Historical Society, ed. George Kegley (Winter 1970), VI, 29. Grove Hill was destroyed by fire on October 24, 1909, while Judge George W. Breckinridge and his family were at church.

³⁸Breckinridge Family Papers, Mrs. English Showalter.

³⁹John Preston to James Breckinridge, July 11, 1799. Copy of letter in Newman Library, Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

⁴⁰Gazette, Apr. 12, 1797.

⁴¹William W. Gilmer to Peachy R. Gilmer, Aug. 28, 1831, Breckinridge Papers, Roanoke Historical Society.

the presence of an overseer and Breckinridge's personal supervision of the diverse activities at Grove Hill.⁴²

Although the town of Fincastle began to decline soon after Breckinridge's death,⁴³ Grove Hill retained its elegance and served as the family seat for many years.

⁴²Henry Clay to James Breckinridge, n.d. Letter in possession of Mrs. English Showalter.

⁴³Fincastle's 1835 population was 703; in 1960 it was 403. Neiderer, Fincastle, p. 33.

CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF A FRUITFUL LIFE

After a long and full life, Gen. James Breckinridge died May 13, 1833, at his Grove Hill home. A constant rain set the mood for his grieving family; and not withstanding the weather, his three o'clock funeral was attended by a "concourse" of friends and neighbors. He was buried with full military honors.

Family and associates paid their respects and made their tributes. His daughter-in-law wrote: "Poor old gentleman, we miss him sadly, and shall for many a year to come."⁴⁴ The Botetourt County Court passed the following resolution.

The Court being informed that Genl. James Breckinridge, long a distinguished member of this Bar and a most valued citizen, departed this life on this morning, and deeming it right and proper to show their affection for his faithful services in the many public offices to which he has been called by his fellow citizens, do therefore, order this Court be adjourned until tomorrow morning, 9 o'clock.

And on motion, resolved that the members of the Court and Bar, and the officers of the Court will wear crepe upon their left arms for one month.

Order, signed by Thomas N. Burwell & Charles B. Penn.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Emma Breckinridge to Lucy W. Gilmer May 21, 1833, Breckinridge Papers, RHi.

⁴⁵Stoner, A Seed-Bed of the Republic, p. 279.

Breckinridge was survived by his wife Ann and five children: John and Cary Breckinridge of Botetourt, Mrs. Henry Bowyer of Botetourt, Mrs. Edward Watts of Roanoke, and Mrs. Robert Gamble of Florida.⁴⁶

In his will and testament, he named his sons and Edward Watts as executors. Breckinridge provided that his Negroes and stock be retained and that his estate be managed according to his plans for seven years for the benefit of his wife. At the end of this time, the estate was to be divided among his five children in whichever equitable manner they chose. He specifically noted that the children of his deceased son Robert should not be awarded any portion of his estate.⁴⁷

Although his will does not include an inventory of his estate (and none appears to have been made subsequently), Breckinridge died a wealthy man. By the end of his seventy years, the General had amassed a land empire in Botetourt and adjoining countries and he owned an elegant mansion furnished in the best styles of the day.

In other areas he practiced law as "an intellectual pursuit," rarely charging over ten shillings (less than \$2), which was the proper pocket change for a gentleman.⁴⁸ Breckinridge was an adept surveyor, but this occupation often provided an excuse for him to explore new western lands that he might purchase. He was always interested in

⁴⁶Joseph A. Waddell, Annals of Augusta County Virginia (Richmond: William Ellis Jones, 1886), p. 141.

⁴⁷Botetourt County Records, Will Book E, p. 372.

⁴⁸Roanoke World News, Apr. 7, 1962.

furthering education, whether he was serving as the Smithfield tutor or maintaining a seat on the Board of Visitors of the new University of Virginia.

The Virginia militia was most important to the existence of frontier settlements, often being the only means of protection. Advancing through the ranks to brigadier general provided social status on the frontier and possibly satisfied the cavalier notions of a would-be military hero. The militia, however, did remain a life-long interest of Breckinridge.

Politically, Breckinridge has been labelled a Federalist. More properly, he was a Virginia independent--sometimes a Federalist, sometimes an ally of the Quids, and sometimes a backer of Republican measures, especially when they benefitted his constituency. He was completely expedient in politics and his ambitions were satisfied in working for the welfare of his state and Botetourt constituency.

Throughout his life James Breckinridge was a frontier aristocrat. In his long life he enjoyed the good fruits of the Revolution he had helped fight as a youth. The scope of his interests was limited largely to what was practical, although his education at William and Mary exposed him to advantages surpassed by no American institution. His travel and marriage into the Tidewater aristocracy gave polish to his frontier roughness. He was a keenly interested participant in American government at a time when political ideologies were forming the basis of the present system, first in the Virginia House of Delegates and then in the United States House of Representatives. His role in

political life after 1815 was equivocal insofar as the expansion of democracy was concerned, as he displayed a genuine interest in gaining more equal representation for his section of Virginia.

All writers eulogize their subject, but James Breckinridge was overshadowed by the more dynamic statesmen of the Revolutionary War era. Breckinridge was great only in the sense that he was a satisfied individual in a world of unhappy stereotypes. He was a privileged person to have the capacities and abilities to satisfy his many interests.

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THE BRECKINRIDGE FAMILY

Alexander Breckinridge
m. Jane Preston

↓
Robert
Judge, Botetourt County, Virginia

1st m. Sarah Poage

2nd m. Letitia Preston

Robert
Speaker
Ky. House of Reps.

Alexander
m. Mrs. Jane B. Floyd

↓
James Douglas
House of Reps.

John
m. Mary Cabell
Senate
Attorney General

↓
Letitia
1st m. Alfred Garyson
2nd m. Peter B. Porter
House of Reps.
Sec. War

Joseph Cabell
Speaker, Ky.
Ky. House of Reps.

John Cabell
House of Reps.
Senate
Vice-Pres.

James
m. Ann Seldon
House of Reps.
Va. House

↓
Letitia
m. Robert Gamble

Elizabeth
m. Edward Watts

Cary
m. Miss Gilmer

Mary Ann

Matilda
m. Henry Bowyer

James

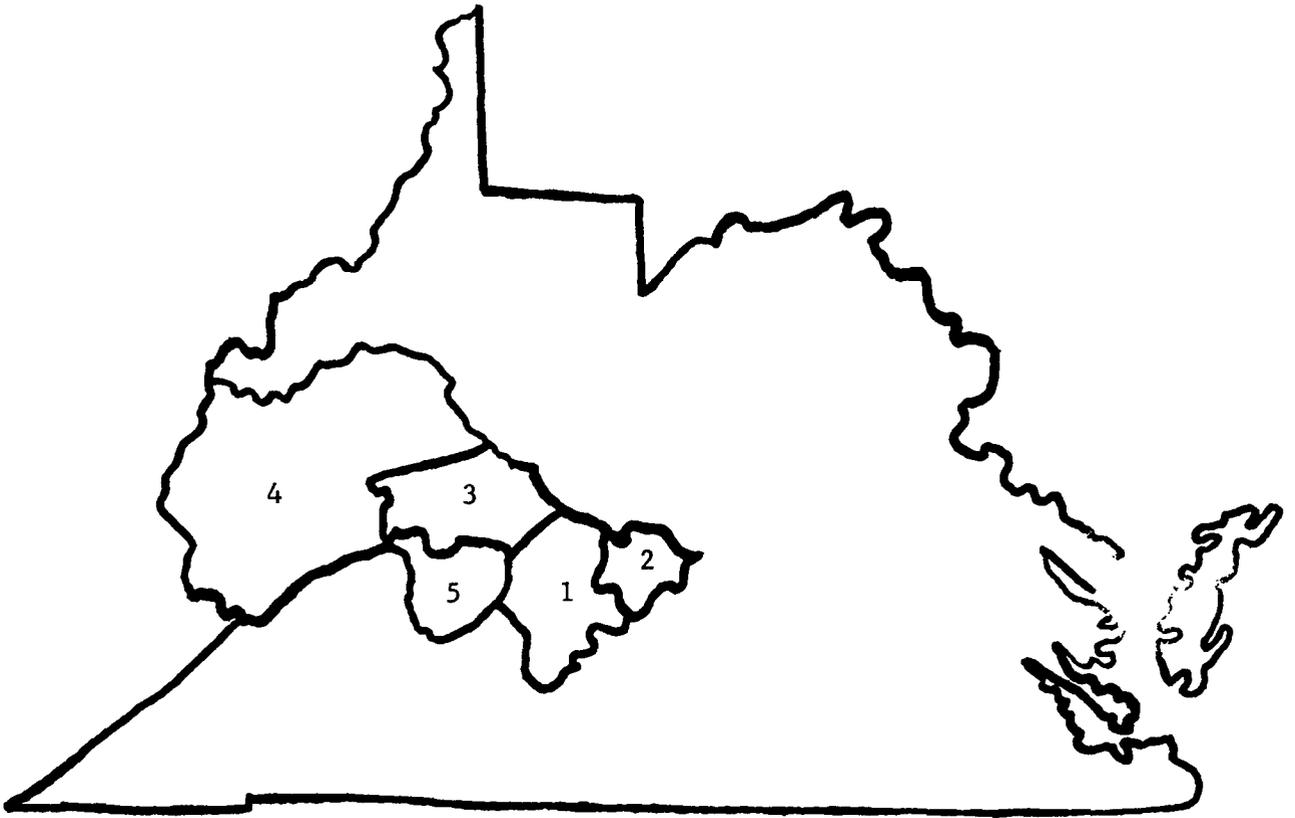
Robert

John

Wilson Cary

John

THE FIFTH CONGRESSIONAL,
OR BOTETOURT DISTRICT, OF VIRGINIA
REPRESENTED BY JAMES BRECKINRIDGE
1809-1817



1. Botetourt 2. Rockbridge 3. Greenbrier
4. Kanawha 5. Monroe

Source: Journal of the Virginia House of Delegates, 1802,
pp. 80, 90; 1813, p. 77.

	<u>SAMPLE VOTES</u>	<u>FOR</u>	<u>AGAINST</u>
1809	defense fortifications of frontier	M*	
1810	relief of Mrs. Hamilton	M	
1810	Post Office improvements	M	
1810	individual state banks	M	
1811	additional military force		m*
1811	volunteer military corps	M	
1812	defense preparations	m	
1812	admission of Louisiana	M	
1812	higher duties on imported goods		m
1812	military pay raise		m
1812	build and equip four ships	M	
1813	disallowing drawbacks		M
1813	authority for issuing Treasury notes		m
1813	salary increase, Secs. Navy and War	m	
1813	bounty land for Virginia soldiers		m
1813	U.S. direct tax on state		m
1813	duty on sugar refined in U.S.		m
1813	duty on carriages		m
1813	duty on licenses for wines, liquor	m	
1813	additional three regiments	M	
1814	free land to settlers		M
1814	duties on furniture, watches		m
1815	purchase of Jefferson library		m

* M - majority vote; m - minority vote

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JAMES BRECKINRIDGE

Katherine Kennedy McNulty

Abstract

James Breckinridge, frontier aristocrat, was active in the Virginia House of Delegates during the formation of the United States under the new Constitution. He was a member of Congress from 1809-1817, a time when the young nation was beginning to stand on its own and develop internally and internationally. Bearing the Federalist label, Breckinridge's career fluctuated with Republican mistakes. But he was more of an independent politician than a doctrinaire Federalist. He voted with expediency to benefit his state and his agricultural section of Virginia. Genuinely interested in developing education and transportation in Virginia, he served on a James and Kanawha River canal commission and he worked with Thomas Jefferson in initiating the new university of Virginia.

Of great significance to Breckinridge was the Virginia militia of which he was a member from his boyhood days during the Revolution until the War of 1812, when he attained the rank of brigadier general.

But it was Breckinridge's estate, Grove Hill, that gave him the status of frontier aristocrat. Breckinridge amassed a land empire in the Valley of Virginia at a time when land could be bought almost for the asking.

Soldier, surveyor, lawyer, educator, politician, and planter, Breckinridge led a full and interesting life and can lay claim to being another of Virginia's outstanding citizens.