Map of the general area of Fleming's travels through western Virginia and the Kentucky and Ohio territories in the Revolutionary War period.

William Fleming, Patriot

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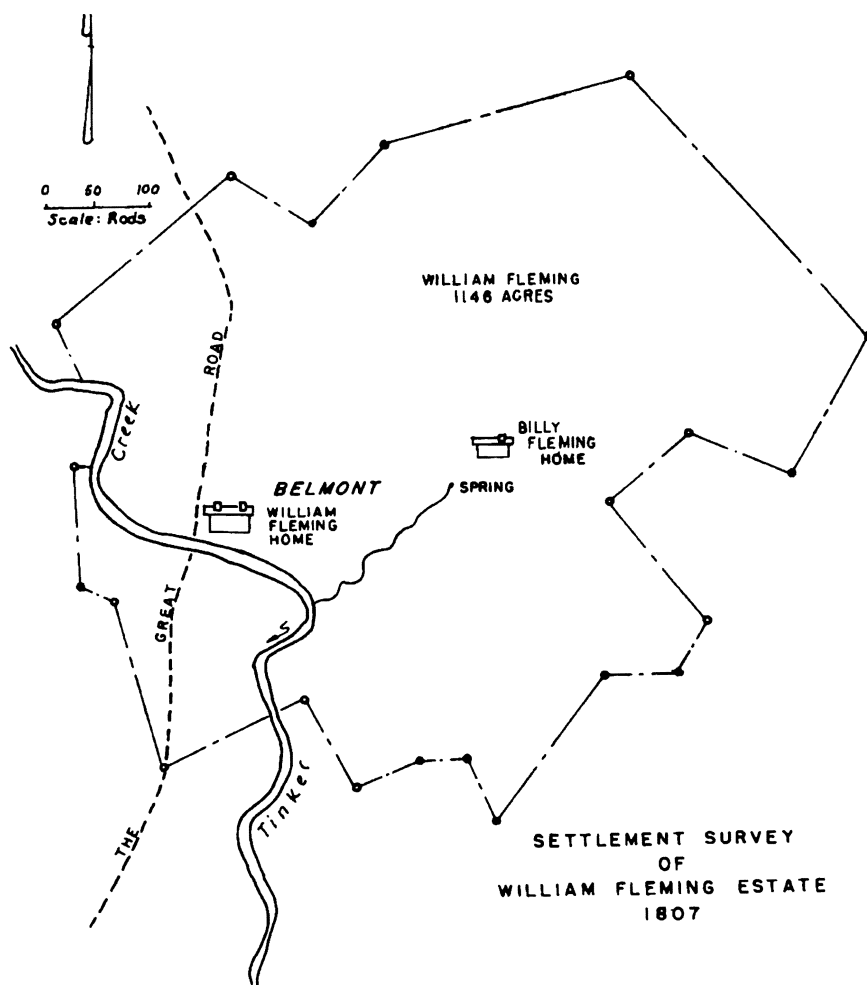
Back in 1982 when the Roanoke Historical Society (now the History Museum and Historical Society of Western Virginia) was asked to produce a history of Roanoke for its 100th anniversary, I, a new society member and recently retired from *The Roanoke Times*, was assigned the job. In the course of that research I stumbled across William Fleming, one of the early settlers of this region about whom I knew very little. I found nobody else knew much about him either, although Edmund Goodwin, first president of the Historical Society, had written a small book on the subject. An 18th century log house on a golf course in the outskirts of Roanoke was purported to have been Fleming's. Despite these connections, the man remained something of a mystery, as did much of what had gone on in the Roanoke Valley during his lifetime. To my delight and astonishment, I found this neglect was not due to lack of material.

As was the custom in the 18th century, the families of Southwest Virginia kept family papers, a fact discovered by a researcher from the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Lyman C. Draper, in the mid 1800s when he came through the area in search of documents to be used in a proposed history. Draper found volumes, particularly in the archives of the Preston family whose forebear, William Preston, had been very active in the affairs of the region. The papers in those collections provided information about Preston's time and on his compatriots, including his good friend William Fleming. Saying he would return said papers in due time, Dr. Draper borrowed the lot. The papers were never returned, but the University of Wisconsin eventually published them all and they remain a marvelous resource, all the more welcome as some of the houses in whose attics the papers had been kept were burned over the years. The papers would have been lost had they not been safe in Wisconsin.[1] In addition, a cache

of Fleming papers was found in the library of Washington and Lee University. Anne, daughter of William Fleming, married a future president of that school and gave her father's papers to the library there.[2] Also, further research in the archives of Scotland, Fleming's native land, produced records of the Fleming family. I found plenty of sources for the historian.

The more I got to know of William Fleming, the more I became convinced he had been allowed to drop through some kind of gap that removed him from his rightful place in history. My recently published book, *William Fleming, Patriot,* is the result of that conviction.



Home of William Fleming, on Tinker Creek near what became Roanoke, Virginia (from Settlement Survey of William Fleming Estate, *1807, p. 298).*

William Fleming's life is contained within the 18th century. Born in 1728 in Jedborough, a small lowland town in Scotland, he was the son of a tax collector, a gentleman who, as Fleming said, had lost property and been forced to find work. Fleming grew up in the neighboring town of Dumfries, then a busy port on the Solway Firth. Thanks to a renowned school in Dumfries, he got a fine "classical" education and later studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. During this time he was a witness to the attempt of Bonnie Prince Charlie to claim the throne of Scotland.[3] A gap occurs here in his history. After finishing his medical training, he went to sea — it would seem in some connection with the slave trade — was captured by Spaniards, and spent some time in a Spanish jail. We find him next in America in 1751, in Nansemond County, Virginia, where he set himself up, successfully, as a doctor.[4]

When the colonies were forced to attempt a military organization after Gen. Braddock's disastrous defeat in 1755, Virginia's Gov. Dinwiddie's call for volunteers found Dr. Fleming in the first line of recruits. He was made an ensign, told to recruit eight men and go immediately to the Virginia frontier. Fleming made his way to a half-constructed fort in the mountains west of a village that would become Staunton. Here he began his service of some eight years in what became known as the French and Indian War.[5]

A frontier war in the mountains of Virginia was a far cry from warfare as Fleming or any other European might have known it. He was to spend most of his time connected with a remote fort far from amenities or even supplies, and always suffering from communication problems with higher commands, so that the men far afield were left to their own devices.

Soon after unpacking his medical supplies, Fleming was sent out on a typical excursion for the frontiersmen. Gov. Dinwiddie, whose knowledge of the frontier was abysmal, decided the quick way to defeat the Indians menacing that part of the colony was to send an army against them to their camp near the Ohio River. He knew nothing of the terrain to be covered or the supplies needed and he accepted advice from none except a few Indians themselves anxious for assistance. The only wise move the governor made was to appoint experienced Indian fighter Andrew Lewis to lead this effort. He neither informed nor consulted George Washington, the man he had chosen to head up the army of colonists. The result of this ill-advised excursion, known as the Big Sandy Expedition for the river used as its path, was a disaster; both men and horses

starved in a wild, mountainous country void of game. Almost two months after starting out, the remnants of that army straggled home, most of them sick as well as discouraged.[6]

It was on this march, however, that William Fleming and William Preston got to know each other, to the extent of borrowing books from each other. Preston's mother lived in Staunton, and Fleming, as a gentleman, could well have met her when he stayed there. Furthermore, both were educated men and, as such, rather scarce on the frontier. They were also of similar backgrounds. Fleming was a lowland Scot and Preston was Scots-Irish. Actually, Fleming had landed in a veritable nest of Scots-Irish who, seeking an independent life on abundant land, had brought their families to western Virginia. And it was they who, threatened with the loss of that land, were prepared to fight for it.[7] The two men were now as close as neighbors were apt to be on the frontier, Preston at his home, "Smithfield," in what is now Blacksburg and Fleming at "Belmont" in the Roanoke Valley.

Most of the coming years for both Fleming and Preston were taken up with minor skirmishes in their own neighborhoods until the end of the French and Indian War, when another Virginia governor, John Murray Dunmore, devised a plan even more grand and ill-advised than the Sandy River Expedition. In late summer 1774, Dunmore ordered Andrew Lewis, then a Burgess, to lead an expedition to the Ohio River, at the mouth of the Kanawha River, there to exterminate the increasingly severe Indian menace — a menace that had widened thanks to the thoughtless murders of Indian neighbors by frontiersmen. Preston, with his wife ill at home, did not join the militia for the trip to the Ohio, but Fleming did. The resulting Battle of Point Pleasant, which secured Virginia's western border at the Ohio River, also changed Fleming's life forever.[8]

At Point Pleasant, Colonel Andrew Lewis was in command with Fleming second, along with Lewis's brother Charles. The Virginians, a thousand strong, moved down the Kanawha River to its confluence with the Ohio. There, on October 10, they found the Shawnees. First to meet the enemy were two men who had set out before daybreak up the Ohio to hunt for deer. They had gone two or three miles when they ran across "above five acres of land covered with Indians, as thick as they could stand one beside another," as one of them reported.[9] The Indians opened fire, killing one of the two men as the other raced back to camp. Lewis immediately ordered out two detachments, one under his brother Charles

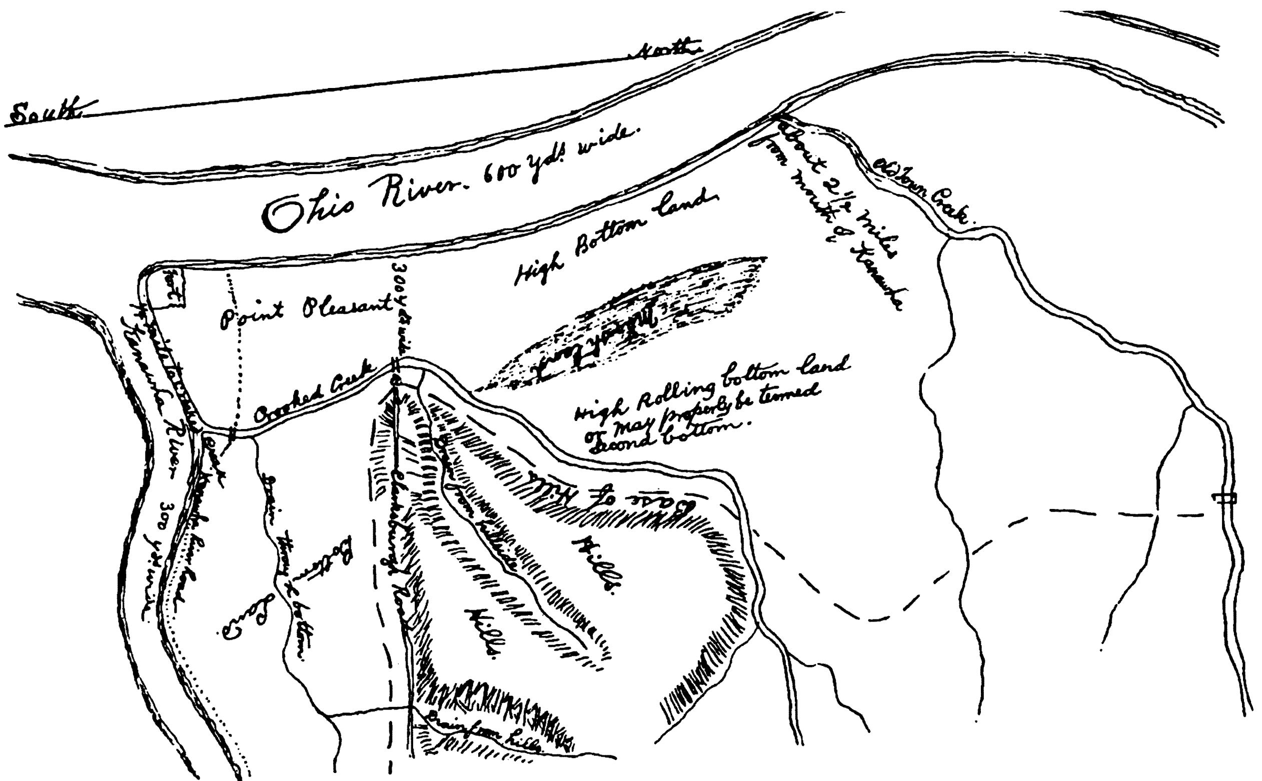
A sketch of the Battle of Point Pleasant, October 10, 1774.

and the other under Fleming. John Stuart, serving as a captain under Fleming, reported later that:

> ... the detachments marched out in two lines, and met the Indians in the same order of march about four hundred yards from our camp.

As day broke, both sides opened fire. Both Charles Lewis and William Fleming were hit early in the battle. Charles was helped back to his tent where he died. Fleming was shot twice in the arm but, according to Stuart's account, "continued to give his orders with coolness and presence of mind, calling loudly to his men, 'Don't lose an inch of ground! Try to outflank the enemy! Get between them and the river!'" Finally, a third shot hit him in the chest and he was carried from the field.[10]

The battle continued along a mile-long front for most of the day until the Indians retreated from the field. In retrospect, it was thought that Lewis's having launched a small flanking movement about 4 p.m. caused the Indians to think he had been re-enforced and therefore prompted them to withdraw. Although neither side could be said to have won the battle, which matched approximately equal numbers, the Indians' retreat gives an edge to Lewis. Of the 900 men in Lewis' force, about one fourth were killed or wounded. The Indians probably suffered more casualties.[11]



The Battle of Point Pleasant, October 10, 1774, was fought where the Kanawha joins the Ohio River. (from Clare White, William Fleming, Patriot *(Baltimore, Md.: Gateway Press, 2001), p. 153)*

Fleming somehow continued to function despite the severity of his wounds. Three days after the battle he managed to write a letter to William Bowyer, his brother-in-law in Staunton, giving his own account of the battle. He and Charles Lewis marched to battle, he said, "little imagining ... that we were to engage the whole United force of the Enemy Ohio Indians." The Indian attack started on the right, where Charles Lewis was fatally injured, and soon afterward "I received three balls, I find one of them is lodged in my Arm. A third entered my breast ... and is lodged somewhere in the Chest ..." He asked Bowyer "if it is not too much trouble, (to) write particularly to my wife." [12]

A week after the battle, though barely on his feet, Fleming was left commanding the Point Pleasant encampment while Andrew Lewis led his main force on across the Ohio. Of the 288 men under him in the encampment, more than 100 were wounded.[13]

It was late November, following a painful and laborious trip back through the wilderness, before Fleming could write in his diary from Belmont, "Reach'd home in safety being just 3 months gone. Praise be to God."[14] His wounds caused severe pain and disability for the rest of his life.

By the time Fleming reached home, the first Continental Congress was meeting in Philadelphia, and revolution was in the air.[15] With the Revolution, Fleming began, and continued until his death, another kind of service to the emerging government of his new country. Despite debilitating wounds that plagued him constantly, Fleming held all the highest offices that service had to offer. Just four years before the Battle of Point Pleasant, the county of Botetourt had been formed. Fleming was one of the founders and became a Justice of the county, a post he held until more pressing affairs emerged.

Fleming's first involvement in the coming revolution was his appointment as Lieutenant Commander of the Botetourt militia. As Botetourt County at that time covered a vast territory reaching to the Mississippi River and the Great Lakes, that thankless job covered a wide area, with, as it turned out, a variety of commanders under whom Fleming must work. In 1777, it must have been a relief to be elected for a three-year term as Senator for the five western counties of Botetourt, Washington, Montgomery, Kentucky, and Greenbrier, although that job did involve week-long journeys on horseback to the capital. In 1779, Fleming was sent on his first journey to the county of Kentucky to settle some land

claims, a planned month-long winter excursion that took six months to conclude. He then became a member of the State Council, the eight-member Governor's advisory board, the highest post in the colony, second only to the governor.[16]

In 1781, when Virginia's Assembly members were threatened with capture and its government with collapse, Fleming, the only member of the Council still present and its senior member, stepped in and served as governor until a successor to Thomas Jefferson, the retired governor, could be elected.[17] Under continuing threat from advancing British troops, Gov. Jefferson, his Council, and the General Assembly had abandoned Richmond for Charlottesville, then Charlottesville for Staunton, and were about to abandon Staunton for Warm Springs when finally they realized that was not necessary. Fleming escaped from Charlottesville with the state's papers only half an hour before the British arrived. In the midst of all this, Jefferson's one-year term as governor expired and he went home.

When the members of the Assembly arrived in Staunton, Virginia was without a government. There was no governor, no Council, no legislature. Some House members were present but not enough senators to form a Senate. Even the election of a new governor required the joint vote of Assembly and Senate. All there was in Staunton to represent an operating government was William Fleming.

According to the *Journal* of the Council of the State of Virginia, "His Excellency (Jefferson) and William Fleming" met and adjourned on Saturday, June 2, 1781, in Charlottesville; on Monday the 4th, Fleming was alone at Council in Staunton and no business was noted. He continued to be the only representative on the books until Tuesday, June 12, when another Council member joined him. Finally, beginning June 19, five Council members were present.

When the House of Delegates met on June 7th, according to the record, "the speaker laid before the House a letter from William Fleming, a member of the Privy Council or Council of State stating certain matters for the consideration of the General Assembly." Fleming gave orders for these matters although he thought he might have "perhaps exceeded the powers invested in any one member of the Council Board, however necessary for the preservation of the State."

During his brief reign as acting governor, Fleming issued orders calling out militia to support General Lafayette as acting Governor and di-

recting the movement of prisoners from Virginia to Massachusetts and Maryland.

Finally, on June 12, 1781, the House of Delegates and the Senate elected General Thomas Nelson, Jr. as Governor of Virginia, and steps were taken to return Virginia's government to more normal operation. On the 23rd, still in Staunton, the legislature approved a resolution indemnifying Fleming, because "It appearing to the General Assembly that Col. William Fleming being the only acting member of the Council for some time before the appointment of a Chief Magistrate, did give orders for the calling out the militia and also, pursued such other measures as were essential to good government ..." [18]

That was Fleming's last major service. In the fall of that year, he retired from Council as physically unable to continue. His left arm was useless and he carried a bullet in one lung as a result of that battle on the banks of the Ohio River almost ten years earlier. Meanwhile, illness had struck his old friend Andrew Lewis, who had been active in the Council in Richmond under Nelson after Fleming's departure. In mid-September, Lewis started for his home on the Roanoke River, complaining of the "bilious fever" that had felled so many American troops. He reached Buford's Gap, near today's Montvale, where he died September 25, 1781, at the home of a Capt. Talbot. Before Lewis died, the Talbots were able to send for Fleming, who hurried to the home with Lewis' two sons, Thomas, 27, and Andrew, 22. They found Lewis unable to speak, and he died a short time later.[19]

Fleming was soon cheered by his appointment as a judge in the burgeoning state of Kentucky, where he had long hoped to move. Just two weeks later, however, a letter came reversing the assignment, citing the fact that it would be unsuitable for him, so recently in Kentucky to settle legal claims, to take a position possibly covering the same problems.[20]

For the first time in his life William Fleming was too discouraged to continue. In the end, in 1782, he accepted the commission to go once again to Kentucky, this time to investigate the debts incurred by George Rogers Clark in the course of his conquest of the Mississippi and the Northwest Territory. Clark had been sent on that errand by Virginia Governor Patrick Henry and had received virtually no money in support of the venture. He had borrowed from everyone available and had signed his own life away in the course of his lengthy but successful venture. It is my belief that it was those mismanaged financial affairs that not only ruined

Clark's reputation, but left Fleming in a historical gap for future generations. Fleming and his commission not only heard hundreds of cases, but brought the evidence back to Virginia's Assembly, which heard and approved their work.[21] And that was the end of that. None of those papers was heard of again, until 1913 when they were found in an attic in Williamsburg. Clark's debts were not paid; he was held responsible for them and died destitute, accused of being an irresponsible drunkard.[22] As for Fleming, I think he must have been an embarrassment to Virginia from then on. He had promised the men of Kentucky payment of their debts; instead, the whole matter had been put on the back burner — forever.

Fleming went twice more to Kentucky, once in 1784 to apportion lands, during which time he served as the president of Kentucky's first convention towards becoming a state, and again in 1789 in an effort to untangle his own claims to thousands of acres there.[23]

He also once more served Virginia in a special capacity that reflected the esteem in which his Botetourt neighbors held him. He was sent to the 1788 Ratification Convention as a representative of that county. At that special convention, he was proud to vote for the Constitution of the United States, an act of patriotism that was a fitting culmination to his entire life's work.[24] He died quietly at his Roanoke Valley home, Belmont, in 1795.

Endnotes

1. Grigsby Papers, Mssl 987925 5807, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.
2. Fleming papers, University Library, Washington & Lee University, Lexington, Va.
3. Grigsby Papers.
4. Vestry Books of the Upper Parish, Nansemond County, Va., 1745–1793.
5. W. W. Abbott, Papers of George Washington II, Oct. 28, 1755 to Nov. 26, 1755.
6. Preston's Diary, Draper Collection 1 QQ123.
7. Journal of the House of Burgesses 1755–1758.
8. Reuben Gold Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, eds., *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774*, compiled from the Draper Manuscripts, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, 1905.
9. John Stuart, "Memoirs of Indian Wars and Other Occurrences, Eyewitness Accounts of the American Revolution," *The New York Times*, 1971, pp. 11-12.
10. John Hale, *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers* (Charleston, West Va.: Kanawha Valley Publishing, 1931), p. 107.
11. Willis de Hess, *History of the Early Settlement and Indian Wars of West Virginia, 1751–1758* (H. Hoblezell, 1851, reprinted 1980).

12. Fleming to Bowyer, Oct. 13, 1774, Draper Collection, 2ZZ7.
13. Fleming's Orderly Book, *Dunmore's War*, pp. 349-351.
14. Ibid., pp. 356-360.
15. Alf Mapp, *Virginia Experiment* (LaSalle, Illinois: Opeb Court, 1957), pp. 350-353.
16. Fleming's Journals, Washington & Lee University Library.
17. Journal, June 1-26, 1781.
18. Journal, Council of Virginia.
19. Patricia Givens Johnson, *General Andrew Lewis* (Blacksburg, Va.: Walpa Publishing, 1994).
20. Journal, Virginia Council III, pp. 118, 126.
21. Journal of Western Commissioners 1782–1783, Illinois Historical Collection, pp. 393-401.
22. Walter Havinghurst, "A Sword for George Rogers Clark," *American Heritage*, Oct. 1962, vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 63-64.
23. Fleming's Journals.
24. Hugh Blair Grigsby, *The History of the Virginia Federal Convention of 1788.* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969).