

What Really Happened at Drapers Meadows? The Evolution of a Frontier Legend

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Virginia history can lay claim to one of the most dramatic and inspirational captivity stories of all time — that of Mary Draper Ingles' escape from the Shawnee, in the autumn of 1755, and her long walk home through the wilderness. The events of the Drapers Meadows Massacre and of Mary's ordeal have become legendary, establishing her as Virginia's premier colonial heroine. Most of the information we have today about the events at Drapers Meadows comes from two nineteenth century accounts, based on oral history passed down in the Preston and Ingles families. In the 1830s John Ingles, son of William and Mary Ingles, wrote a history of his family based on his parents' accounts. Similarly, in 1843, Letitia Floyd, daughter of William and Susanna Preston, wrote an account of the stories she had heard as a child.

These two family histories differ substantially in content and style, yet both have been generally regarded as authentic and reliable sources of information. After closely examining these two sources, however, we may find it necessary to question their reliability, and wonder if we can ever know what really happened. Although it is certain that Col. James Patton was killed on the day of the attack, there is disagreement about some of the circumstances surrounding his death. We don't know why he was visiting the settlement or whether he had any rangers with him. According to some reports, eight people died, but we have no names for four of them. The Mary Draper Ingles story — of her captivity, her escape from the Indian village in what is now Kentucky, and her long walk home through the wilderness — has been based largely on these two family histories. Although historians generally agree that Mary Ingles *was* captured by the Shawnee and *did* survive a long walk home, most of the other details of her story are in dispute. The cause of much of the confusion can be traced back to the two accounts mentioned above.

When John Ingles began his narrative, this is what he wrote as an introduction:

At the repeated solicitations of my relations and friends of which letters in my possession are sufficient evidence, I have consented to write the following short history The application has been made to me as I am the only branch of my Fathers family now in existance, who knows of the defficulties and sufferings my fathers own family had to undergo at that early day, in attempting to settle this Western World. Though the greater part of the transactions to which allusion is made happened long before I was born yet having heard them so frequently repeated by my father and mother in my early days they made such deep and lasting impressions on my youthfull mind that they will never be forgotten by me as long as I live and I believe are as fresh in my memory at this day as they ever was, I will therefore endeavour to give a short but correct narative of the scens through which they had to pass in their first settling on the Western Watters of Virginia so fare as my recollection serves me at this time that a record of them may be preserved for the gratification of our friends and rising generation, However fabulous or romantick the narative may appear in some of its parts to many persons they are stubborn facts that could have been abundantly established by many witnesses at an earley day it been required. ¹

Letitia Preston Floyd, in a letter to her son in 1843, explained her reasons for writing down the family history:

My dear Rush:

From the extreme rigor of the winter and diminished vision I have postponed answering your letter of Dec. 30th, enclosing one from Mr. Lyman C. Draper of Buffalo, N. York. The object of Mr. Draper's letter is to collect material for a work: "Sketches of the Pioneers". Would it be irrelevant in reply to repeat the traditions I have so often interested your childhood with and the facts of the life and death of Col. James Patton?²

These two accounts, by John Ingles and Letitia Floyd, both offer descriptions of the attack at Drapers Meadows and of the experiences of Mary Draper Ingles during her captivity and her journey home. Except for a few scattered references to these events in contemporary reports and letters, Ingles and Floyd were the first to put the events of 1755 into

written form. The differences in the two narratives suggest that the Ingles and Preston families had developed distinct oral traditions. By the late nineteenth century, the information from the two families began to merge and become indistinguishable, forming a basis for an ever-expanding legend.

The Preston and Ingles families came into contact at many points throughout the colonial period, with the Preston family eventually settling on land near the Drapers Meadows site, and the Ingles family establishing a home about twelve miles away, at Ingles Ferry, where the Wilderness Road crossed the New River. William Preston and William Ingles both held military and governmental offices during the various stages of county organization, from Augusta to Fincastle, Botetourt and Montgomery, and they both engaged in land speculation in conjunction with the Loyal Land Company. By the early nineteenth century, the children of both families had married and started families of their own. These two family histories offer insights into how the children of Virginia's frontier settlers interpreted their parents' struggles during the French and Indian wars.

First, just to review the basic and fairly indisputable facts, here is a description of the attack at Drapers Meadows, as it appears in a highly respected late twentieth century volume of frontier history:

In the summer of 1755 the Indian depredations begun the fall before, continued along the waters of New River. The settlements on Holston, Reed Creek, and the New River had all been ravaged and it did not seem likely that the group at Draper's Meadows would escape. On July 30, 1755 the Ingleses' cabin was attacked and burned, and Colonel James Patton who was visiting there was killed. Mary Ingles and her children, Thomas and George, became prisoners. Her sister-in-law, Bettie Draper, was wounded and also taken prisoner. Her mother-in-law, Eleanor Draper, and John Draper's infant child were killed. Casper Barger, a neighbor, was killed, and James Cull wounded. Henry Leonard was taken prisoner. William Ingles and John Draper escaped the attack, not being home at the time.³

Here is a portion of John Ingles' manuscript concerning the attack at Drapers Meadows:

...there had been severale parteyes of the northern Indians, to wit, the Shawneys passed by where my Grandfather lived on their way to the South and wood Commit depredations on the

Cawtauba Indians but was still friendly to the Whites at that time however this happy state of things did not last long the Indians found out that they [M.S. faulty] gratify their Heathan thirst for bloodshed and plunder much nearer Home and at length commenced a warfair on the fronteer settlements & at a time it was little expected a party of Shawneys fell in upon my fathers family and an uncles family John Draper which lived at the same place and killed severale and took the balance prisoners, to wit, my mother and her two children Thos. 4 yrs. & George 2 & Aunt Draper & others. My grandmother Draper being a widow at that time & livin with my father was killed by [M. S. faulty] Col. Patton who was there had a large claim of land in [Blot on M.S.] waters was killed, also, & some other persons not recolected. My mother and her two children, Thos. the older 4 years old, and George abot 2 years old was taken as prisoners also my Aunt Draper who was wounded in her arm and Broke by a Ball which was shot at her in attempting to escape & severale others it so happened they made the attack on their harvest day and although there were severale men at the place the Indians took advantage of attacking the Hows while the men [M.S. faulty] at their work in the harvest field and the field being some distance [M.S. faulty] the howse new nothing of the attack until it was Intirely out of Their power to render any survice to the family My father when Hearing the allarm run up verry near to the howse thinking perhaps he might render some survice in some way although entierly unarmed the Indians discovering him two stout active Indians took after him with their tomehocks expecting to outrun him and kill him with their tomehocks & was very near affecting their purpose & nothing but a providential act saved him while the Indians were persuing him & gaining on him very fast one on each sid at some distance running through the woods where it was a little thick with brush & undergrowth, fortunately in jumping over a logg fell. The Indians being so eager in persuit over run him my father on rising amediately Tacked back the other way and by that means made his escape as there was no chance for what white men that was there to render any releaf to the prisoners The Indians securing all the guns they had which was in the howse & so few settlers in the country and them so fare distant apart that They had to abandon all Idea of any farther persuit after them. The Indians went

off entirely unmolested they gathered up their prisoners & plunder and started & steered their course down the New River...⁴

Notice that John does not go into much detail about the Indians' brutal killings, but he does describe how his father was chased by two warriors and barely escaped being killed. William Ingles would have wanted his son to know that he tried to rescue his family, and he would have also tried to explain, as best he could, about why they had not been better prepared for this attack. John does not describe the death of Col. Patton.

Letitia Preston Floyd describes the Drapers Meadows attack as part of a bigger narrative covering events in the life of her father, William Preston, and of her great uncle, James Patton:

...on the 8th July 1755 it being a Sunday a party of Indians came up the Kenawha, thence to Sinking Creek, thence to Strouble's Creek — Inglis & Draper, brothers in law, were living at Solitude, the present seat of Col. Robert T. Preston. The Indians came to Barger's (1/2 mile nearer the Mountain) & cut his head off & put it in a bag; Barger was a very old man then came to Inglis' and Drapers, and killed *old* Mrs. Draper, two children of Col. Inglis', by knocking their brains out on the ends of the Cabin logs — took Mrs. Inglis and her son Thomas, a boy of ten years of age, prisoners, as well as her sister-in-law Mrs. Draper Jr., who was trying to make her escape with her infant in her arms, but she was shot at by the Indians, who broke her arms by which means the infant was dropped — the Indians picked the infant up, & knocked its brains out against the Cabin logs — Col. Patton that morning having dressed himself in his uniform, and getting his nephew William Preston to sew up in the fob of his small clothes thirty English guineas, told him to go to Sinking Creek to get Lybrook to help take off the harvest, which was then ready to cut; Preston went very early — After breakfast, Col. Patton sat down to write, the Indian war whoop was heard and five or six of them surrounded the cabin to set it on fire — The Col. always kept his sword on his writing table — he rushed to the door with it in hand and encountered the Indians — Patton was almost gigantic in size — he cut two of the Indians down — in the mean while another warrior had levelled his gun and fired & killed the brave old pioneer — After Patton fell the Indians ran off in the thicket and made their escape before any pursuers

could be brought together – Lybrook & Preston came through the mountains by an unfrequented route, having arrived at Smithfield they found Col. Patton, Mrs. Draper (the mother of Mrs. Inglis) & the (three) children, (and) buried (them); The whole settlement was destroyed; The Indians on their return stopped at Lybrook's, and told Mrs. Lybrook that they had killed two men, one woman and three children, and requested her to look in the bag that they had brought with them, and she would see an old acquaintance, she did so, and immediately recognized the head of Philip Barger who was a very old man — Mrs. Inglis, her oldest son a lad of ten years of age, & Mrs. Draper her sister-in-law, were taken to the Indian towns on the other side of the Ohio River, they travelled down the Kenawha or as it is sometimes called New river, & through the North eastern part of Kentucky.⁵

According to Letitia Floyd, Thomas Ingles was ten years old when he was captured. John Ingles says that Thomas was four, and that his younger brother George was two. Letitia describes the violent manner in which the Indians killed the Drapers' infant, by dashing it against the cabin wall, a detail omitted by John Ingles. Two other children (supposedly children of Capt. Inglis) were killed in the same fashion. She also describes Col. Patton's uniform, his writing desk, and his sword, yet these details do not appear in the Ingles account. Col. Patton's heroic attempt to fight off several warriors is another item that appears only in Floyd's account.

These details suggest that Letitia's knowledge of this important event can be traced (almost exclusively) back to her father. William Preston was present at Drapers Meadows on the morning of the massacre and would have known how his uncle was dressed, although he might not have been sure of the names and ages of the Ingles' children. He did not witness the massacre nor could he have seen William Ingles being chased by two Indian braves. Later that day, he probably did see the dead bodies, so could have described how they had been killed.

Preston died in 1783, when Letitia was only a child of four years. Susanna Preston, Letitia's mother, probably carried on a tradition of storytelling within the Preston family after her husband's death, but she was not a first-hand witness to any of the events. If William Preston thought that three children were killed, who could they have been? George Ingles was carried into captivity along with his brother Thomas. John Ingles

mentioned the death of the Draper baby, but he did not describe any other children being killed.

As far as we know, none of the survivors ever wrote down a detailed description of the attack. The news of the massacre and of the death of Col. Patton, however, spread quickly throughout Virginia and beyond, causing many families to flee to safety. An article appeared in the *Virginia Gazette* on August 8, 1755, announcing that “eight men, women and children” were killed in the massacre and that Colonel Patton “was beset by 16 Indians, who killed and stripped him and then made off with his horse.”⁶

Within two weeks of the massacre, Governor Dinwiddie wrote a letter to Col. John Buchanan in which he tried to find someone to blame for the troubles on the frontier:

It is a real Surprise to me that the few Indians who have been in Augusta should have gone to so great Lengths in robbing & murdering Yr. People, when I consider Yr. Numbers, which if they had acted with Spirit and Resolution I think they could have destroyed them all, & protected Yr. Women and Children, but I fancy there has been a general Panick over the whole county, I am sorry the Men you sent after the murderers did not come up with them...

I have done all in my Power for the Service of Yr. County, but if Yr. People will dastardly give up their Families & Interests to a barbarous Enemy without endeavoring to resist them, they cannot expect to be protected, without their own assistance, against these Banditti...⁷

In September of 1755, a London publication (*Gentleman's Magazine*) published a description of Patton's death. According to this unidentified reporter, Patton:

...rode a little out of the way to see some friends, proposing to overtake the convoy at the end of a few miles, but such was his misfortune that he fell into the hands of some Indians, who had just murdered his friends and their families, and not discovering his danger till it was too late, he was also inhumanely murdered on the spot.⁸

News from the Virginia frontier continued to appear in various publications. In February of 1756, *The Pennsylvania Gazette* informed its read-

ers about the miraculous escape of a Virginia woman from Indian captivity:

In a letter from Fort Cumberland, dated the Fifteenth Instant, there is Advice, that two considerable Bodies of French Indians have been lately down there, and had picked up several of the Men belonging to the Fort, but that the Commanding Officer there had detached Parties immediately in Pursuit of them, which obliged them to retreat precipitately, and thereby prevented their going among the inhabitants.

It is further added, that one Mrs. Inglis, who was taken Prisoner by the Shawanese when Col. Patton was killed, had made a wonderful Escape from the Lower Shanoë Town, and that she was fourteen Days in the Woods on her Way home, was naked all the Time, and lived on Chestnuts, &c. The Particulars of what Discoveries she made while among them, was not then come to hand.⁹

The *Pennsylvania Gazette* article is proof that news of Mary's long walk through the wilderness circulated widely throughout the colonies. For a brief time she became a celebrity, especially since she brought back vital information about wilderness geography and about the Shawnee. According to the author of this letter, Mary's trip only lasted two weeks. Other evidence suggests that her journey took 42 days. The key to understanding these inaccuracies lies in discovering their source. If we return to the narratives by John Ingles and Letitia Floyd, we can continue to find significant factual differences. This is how John Ingles described the events following the attack:

The Indians went off entirely unmolested they gathered up their prisoners & plunder and started & steared their course down the New River They made but slow progress in getting on as their way was much Impeded by the thickness of the forrest & undergrowth which covered the whole country However on striking New River they persued on down it. The Indians having several Horses along packed with their plunder which they Had taken & the prisoners mett with considerable Defiqualty in getting on & the prisoners very roughly treated. However from some cause [M.S. faulty] my mother said that they always treated her with more respect [M.S. faulty] aney of the other prisoners and permitted her to ride on one of the horses the greater part of the rod and to carry her children

though my Aunt Draper who had her arm broke was principally put under her care and my mother had to dress her wound and to procure stuff to dress it and would frequently send her off by herself into the woods to Hunt the wild comphisey to put to the broken arm and would be gone a considerable time and said she might had frequent oppertuniteys of leaving them but could not think of leaving her children still Harboured a hope that they might be persued or they might all be released together in some way or Other They still worked on in this way untill they got down some little Distance above the mouth of the great Kanawa They came to a little salt spring in the Bank of the river the Indians stoped there and rested for a day or two there & with what kittles they Had with them boiled & mad some salt They then started on from there & persued this journey until they got to the nation where the Indians lived which was at the mouth of the Bigg Sioto & which took them about one month to performe from the time they were taken untill they arived at the nation.¹⁰

John is retelling here his mother's story. Many of these details have become incorporated into her legend. Letitia Floyd's story, however, does not include much information about the captives' trip to the Shawnee villages. William Preston probably did not know anything about that journey, nor did he ever hear Mary Ingles tell about it, so he did not try to describe it to his family. Floyd limits her account of the journey to just one sentence:

Mrs. Inglis, her oldest son a lad of ten years of age, & Mrs. Draper her sister-in-law, were taken to the Indian towns on the other side of the Ohio river, they travelled down the Kenawha or as it is sometimes called New River, & through the North eastern part of Kentucky.¹¹

Her lack of information about the captives' journey is not surprising, since her source, William Preston, had no way of knowing what happened after the Indians left Drapers Meadows. There is one very curious detail, however, that does get included in the Preston version of the story. William Preston apparently told his family something about Mrs. Ingles that John Ingles never mentioned. According to the Preston narrative, Mary was pregnant at the time of the attack. If Mary was indeed pregnant, all sorts of questions come to mind. When did she deliver her child? Did it survive? Why did she never mention it to her children and grand-

children? Might she have chosen to abandon her child, knowing that it could not have survived the journey back home?

If William Preston was visiting at Drapers Meadows the morning of the attack, he might have noticed that Mary was expecting a child. Later, he could have mentioned it to his family. This is what Letitia Floyd says about the baby:

In three months after her captivity Mrs. Inglis gave birth to a daughter; her sister-in-law had been traded off to another tribe of Indians as was her son. Three months after the birth of her child Mrs. Inglis determined to run away from the Indians, who were dreadfully cruel to her; another impulse was her great desire to see her husband, which made her undertake a journey unparalleled in the incidents of a Pioneer's life; She and a Dutch woman¹², who was taken from the upper part of Ohio, determined to escape together from the Indian towns; Mrs. Inglis left her child asleep in a bark cradle, although she was aware that according to Indian character the child would be killed as soon as its mother was missed.¹³

Then Letitia continues with a description of the journey home through the wilderness:

A series of remarkable events occurred to them on the route – Mrs. Inglis keeping up on the water Courses, when she got to the Ohio river, she and the Dutch woman tied logs together with grape vines, thus making a raft on which the two crossed the Ohio river; they were frequently near famishing with hunger, living on blackberries, sassafras leaves, frogs, etc., and in one instance eating a snake they found dead and a raccoon they found in a great state of decomposition – All means failing a proposition was made that they should cast lots [lots] to see which should be eaten by the other; the lot fell upon Mrs. Inglis; who understanding her travelling companion's temper, promised her a sum of money to refrain from killing her; Col. Inglis was a very rich man & this proposition had the desired effect – Mrs. Inglis stepped off, leaving the Dutch woman to find her way as best she could – after many weeks travelling Mrs. Inglis arrived at Inglis ferry on New River the residence of Col. Inglis – She was afterwards the mother of a highly respectable family, who have always been distinguished for bravery and honesty – her grand children live on the place which she made such efforts to return to. These transactions took

place in the year of Braddock's defeat. Mrs. Inglis lived to a very great old age; I remember to have seen her fifty years ago at a large Baptist Convention, thirty miles from her home, she was then (eighty) years old, looked florid and erect.¹⁴

Notice that Letitia introduces several controversial topics. She says that Mary and the Dutch woman drew straws to see which one would eat the other, and she asserts that Mary chose to abandon her baby, knowing it would probably be killed after she was gone. These two details add to the drama and excitement of a good story, but they tend to portray Mary in a less than flattering way. Many "respectable women" reading this account in the nineteenth century would probably have found Mary's decision, not to mention her courage and independence, somewhat disturbing. What sort of woman would decide to abandon her baby and attempt such a long journey – with no map, no provisions, and very little hope of success? How could anyone be so desperate as to draw straws to see which person would eat the other? Notice, too, that Mary offered a bribe to avoid being eaten. It is hard to miss the fact that Letitia described William Ingles as a wealthy man. Perhaps there was a long-standing rivalry between these two families, for Letitia seems to describe Mary as a notorious character rather than someone to admire.

As far as we know, Mary Ingles never spoke to her friends or her children about having a baby during her captivity, so how did this abandonment story come about? Floyd's rendition does not seem very convincing, especially since the evidence does not agree with her facts. If Mary had a baby after three months in captivity and then chose to escape some three months later, she would have returned to Virginia in late January or early February in 1756. Several other documents prove that Mary arrived home in late November, 1755.

If Mary was **not** pregnant in July of 1755, then Letitia may be responsible for inventing the story to add a little drama and controversy to her tale. If Mary was pregnant, and William Preston noticed, then Letitia (or someone else in her family) is perhaps responsible for embellishing the pregnancy possibility with a plausible, yet scandalous, story line. There are only a few other individuals who would have known whether Mary was pregnant at the time of the attack. William Ingles would have certainly known, as would Bettie and John Draper. It is possible that Mary and William decided to keep silent and never mentioned the baby, but Bettie Draper, who returned to Virginia after six years in captivity, could

have told stories to her own family, including all the details about the trip to Ohio. This is a mystery that might not ever be resolved.

All we can say for certain is that Letitia Floyd mentioned the pregnancy in her letter to Lyman C. Draper, a historian who collected documents of frontier history. Copies of this letter were made and circulated to a wide audience. In 1850, the Rev. William Henry Foote published *Historical and Biographical Sketches of Virginia* in which he describes "The Captivity and Escape of Mrs. Ingles in 1756." Foote borrows heavily from John Ingles' account, but he apparently was not familiar with Floyd's manuscript and made no mention of the baby. Unfortunately, Foote did not list his sources, so we cannot know what letters and other written documents he used.

By 1886, one of Mary Ingles' great-grandsons, John P. Hale, published a book about frontier history, entitled *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers: Historical Sketches of the First White Settlements West of the Alleghenies, 1748 and After*. Hale names several of his sources, including the Rev. Foote and Letitia Preston Floyd, and he mentions the difficulties he faced in trying to find documents concerning frontier history:

As so few facts and dates have been preserved in relation to the Ingles-Draper frontier settlement, owing, in great measure, to the fact above stated, that but few records were written in those days, owing to disinclination and the disadvantages under which they labored, and to the additional fact that, a few years later, their houses were burned, and all books, papers, and documents of every sort were destroyed, every collateral fact that helps to fix dates, or throws other light upon the subject becomes of interest.¹⁵

One of the sources he cites is Mrs. Governor John Floyd, and he particularly credits her with information about the "ill-fated babe":

The particulars of the eventful history of this ill-fated babe I get from a short sketch of Mrs. Ingles' captivity, together with facts relating to the early settlements of the Pattons and the Prestons, written by Mrs. Governor John Floyd, nearly a half century ago. Mrs. Floyd was a Preston, born and reared at Smithfield, so that she and Mrs. Ingles were near neighbors, and it is probable that she received the facts related, from Mrs. Ingles direct.¹⁶

This is how John Hale described the attack at Drapers Meadows:

On the 8th of July, 1755, being Sunday, and the day before Braddock's memorable defeat, near Fort Du Quesne, when all was peace, and there was no suspicion of harm or danger, a party of Shawanees, from beyond the Ohio, fell upon the Draper's Meadows settlement and killed, wounded, or captured every soul there present, as follows:

Colonel James Patton, Mrs. George Draper, Casper Barrier and a child of John Draper, killed; Mrs. John Draper, James Cull, wounded; Mrs. William Ingles, Mrs. John Draper, Henry Leonard, prisoners.

Mrs. John Draper, being out of doors, a short distance from the house, first discovered the enemy approaching, and under circumstances indicating hostile intent.

She ran into the house to give the alarm and to get her sleeping infant. Taking the child in her arms she ran out on the opposite side of the house and tried to make her escape. The Indians discovered her, however, and fired on her as she ran, breaking her right arm, and causing the child to fall. She hastily picked it up again with her left hand and continued her flight. She was soon overtaken, however, and made a prisoner, and the child brained against the end of one of the house logs. The other Indians, meanwhile, were devoting their attention to other members of the families and camp, with results in killed, wounded, and captured, as above stated.¹⁷

John Hale relates that Mary was "nearly approaching a period of maternity," and that she gave birth to a child three days after leaving Drapers Meadows:

On the night of the third day out, the course of nature, which waits not upon convenience nor surroundings, was fulfilled, and Mrs. Ingles, far from human habitation, in the wide forest, unbounded by walls, with only the bosom of mother earth for a couch, and covered by the green trees and the blue canopy of heaven, with a curtain of black darkness around her, gave birth to an infant daughter.¹⁸

Like Letitia Floyd, Hale believed that Mary chose to abandon her baby, assuming it could not survive the long journey home. This is his passage from *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers*:

Mrs. Ingles had been tried as few women are, but now the supreme moment of her life was upon her. To try to escape, she

had determined; but what was to be done with her child? She knew well that if she attempted to take it with her, its cries would betray them both to recapture and death. And, even if she should possibly escape recapture, she knew too well what she would have to encounter and endure to suppose for a moment, that it was possible to carry the infant and succeed in her effort. Clearly there was but one thing to do, under the circumstances, and that was to abandon the unhappy little sufferer to its hard fate.

Who can conceive of the agony of a young mother compelled to decide such a question, and to act, with such alternatives before her? But Mrs. Ingles was a woman of no ordinary nerve. She did decide and act, and who will say that she did not decide wisely? Certainly, in the light of subsequent events, her decision and action were wise and fortunate.

She nestled the dear little babe as cosily as she could in a little bark cradle, gave it her last parting kisses and baptism of tears, tore herself away, and was gone, never to see it again in this world, and knowing, or having every reason to believe, that it would be murdered so soon as it was known that she was gone.¹⁹

Hale's book was a huge success in the late nineteenth century, perhaps in part because the public was becoming interested in romantic versions of colonial history. *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers* has been embraced by many as the authentic source for Mary Draper Ingles' story. Only a few historians in the twentieth century have remained skeptical about Hale's narrative, preferring to depend on John Ingles as the most reliable source. The great majority of storytellers, however, have found the baby episode hard to resist, and they have incorporated many of Floyd's contributions, including her description of Col Patton's heroic struggle with the Shawnee braves. Many historians assert the reliability of their information by citing both John Hale and Letitia Floyd as evidence of their thorough research.

For thirty years in Radford, Virginia, audiences have seen the Drapers Meadow Massacre reenacted in the outdoor drama *The Long Way Home*, by Earl Hobson Smith, assuming, but not knowing for certain, that the story being told is historically accurate.

In 1981, James Alexander Thom published the story in the form of a historical novel entitled *Follow the River*. This is a book that is hard to put down, and it has become required reading in the West Virginia eighth

grade curriculum. In Thom's novel, Mary demonstrates her courage and spirit early in the story, as the Indians make their violent attack:

In that awful silence the warrior, pirouetting triumphantly and holding the baby high overhead, its smashing skull dribbling blood on him, turned to find another white woman, this one big with child, standing on a doorstep five feet from him with a cocked rifle aimed straight at his eyes. He froze. His mouth dropped open. Baby blood was spotting the ochre and blue paint on his face.

Mary pulled the trigger.

The hammer clicked. The gun did not fire.

She remembered then that Will always left the barrel loaded, but the firing pan uncharged, when he hung up the gun.

"No," she groaned.²⁰

Follow the River, even though it does not claim to be historically accurate, creates an incredibly convincing narrative, replete with dialogue and many new characters. Thom makes good use of his familiarity with and respect for the Shawnee culture. Few people can read Thom's book without becoming convinced that Mary had a baby. In this closing scene, after William and Mary have been reunited, the novel offers an explanation why Mary never told her children about their little sister. Soon after Mary returns to Virginia, she and William are talking over what has happened:

And then he said: "Now, Mary, y'know there's one big matter y've not told me yet. Let's get it over with, while there's just us two t'hear it."

She leveled her gaze at him and set her jaw and squinted against the wind and the winter sun behind him, or against whatever would be in his eyes when she told him. "She was born on th' ground three days after th' massacre," Mary said. She saw his eyes moisten and saw his lips forming the silent word she. "I toted an' suckled 'er three months. Then..." Her gaze fell and her brow knitted.

"What?" he said. He thought the wind had blown her words away.

"...Then," she said, looking defiantly at her husband, braced for whatever he might say, "...then I had to leave 'er with a nurse squaw. Or she'd 'a perished, as y' can see by th' sight o' me." There. She had dared to say it.

A blast of wind buffeted her ears and the hood of her cape and Will had to reach up and hold his hat to keep it on his head.

He stared at her, and finally he said:

“And did y’ give this girleen a name?”

“Aye. But you oughtn’t t’ know it. I intend to forget, quick as I can.”

He sat there and looked at her. She did not know how he was going to take this. Finally, he said:

“As it should be.” His mouth was firm and the tears in the corners of his eyes could as well have been from the cold gale.²¹

For the sake of any historians who may still be trying to put this controversy to rest, there is one more intriguing bit of evidence to add to the debate. In 1984, a man named William Waddell wrote a letter to Roberta Ingles Steele (a descendant of Mary Draper Ingles) and told her about a copy of a book he owned, one of the first editions of *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers*. He explained that Mrs. Malinda Charlton, one of Mary’s grandchildren, and a child of John Ingles, had written a note inside the cover of the book, in which she objected to Hale’s inclusion of the baby,

...saying that she had heard her Grandmother tell the story “times without number” and “never as much as a hint of such an occurrence.” About the birth of the baby girl she says, “There is no reference made to any such event in the sketch written by my father.”²²

Each succeeding generation interprets history differently, influenced by changes in politics and culture. To understand the history of events 250 years ago, a historian must be a good detective and consider all the possible ways that stories can become distorted over time. The Preston and Ingles family histories both offer intriguing evidence that the original storytellers had distinct points of view and were influenced by different motives. The Drapers Meadow Massacre is an unusually interesting example of history as an evolving story, and a reminder of the difficulties historians (and eye-witnesses) face in trying to give accurate and unbiased reports.

Endnotes

1. John Ingles, *Escape from Indian Captivity: The Story of Mary Draper Ingles and Son Thomas Ingles as told by John Ingles, Sr.*, eds. Roberta Ingles Steele and Andrew Lewis Ingles (Radford, 1969), 5. This passage preserves the spelling and punctuation found in John Ingles’ manuscript, as transcribed in 1934 by Dr. Virginia Hudson.
2. Letitia Preston Floyd, “Letter to her son Rush, February 22, 1846.” Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

3. Mary B. Kegley and F. B. Kegley, *Early Adventures on the Western Waters*. Vol. I: *The New River of Virginia in Pioneer Days, 1745–1800* (Orange, Virginia: Green Publishers, 1980). 352.
4. Ingles, 7-9.
5. Letitia Preston Floyd, "History of the Preston Family," *The Smithfield Review*, vol. 1 (1997): 7-8.
6. Patricia Givens Johnson, *James Patton and the Appalachian Colonists* (Verona, Virginia: McClure Printing Company, 1973), 204.
7. Conway Howard Smith, *The Land That is Pulaski County* (Pulaski, Virginia: Pulaski County Library Board, 1980), 25-26.
8. Patricia Givens Johnson, *The New River Early Settlement* (Pulaski, Virginia: Edmonds Printing, Inc., 1983), 117.
9. *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 26, 1756, in Accessible Archives Search and Information Server, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, item #19248, under <http://srch.accessible.com/accessible/text/gaz2/00000192/00019248.htm>
10. Ingles, 9-10.
11. Floyd, 8-9.
12. The woman was actually German, but many Virginians lumped German-speaking people together under the term "Dutch."
13. Floyd, 8-9.
14. Floyd, 9.
15. John P. Hale, *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers: Historical Sketches of the First White Settlements West of the Alleghenies, 1748 and After* (Cincinnati: The Graphic Press, 1886), 25.
16. Hale, 36.
17. Hale, 29-30.
18. Hale, 35.
19. Hale, 44.
20. James Alexander Thom, *Follow the River* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), 10.
21. Thom, 386.
22. Malinda Charlton, note inscribed in *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers*, c. 1886: copy of letter is property of Roberta Ingles Steele, of Radford, Virginia.