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Portrait of a Survivor: The Long and Eventful Life of Mary Draper Ingles

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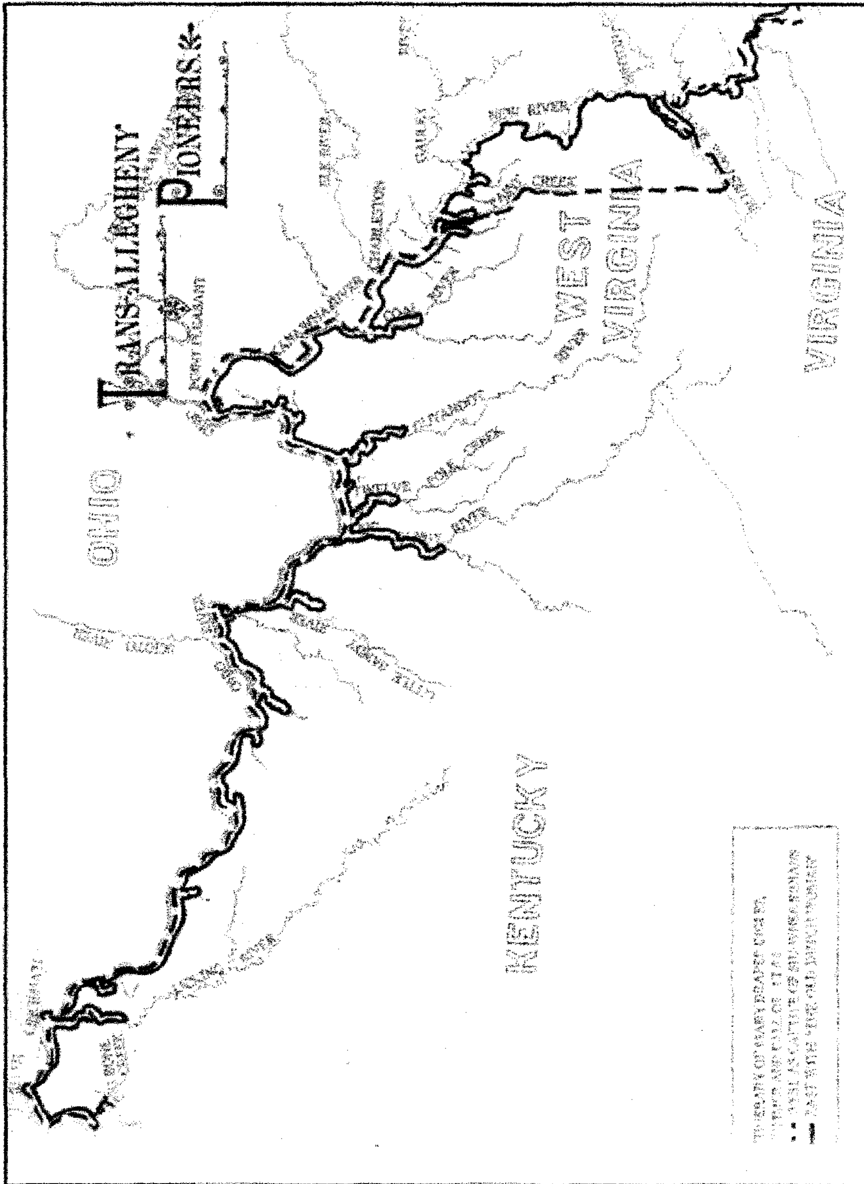
In a previous edition of The Smithfield Review *(Volume VII), the author traced the historiography of literature concerning the life of Mary Draper Ingles, attempting to sort out the facts from the fiction. In this article, she explores the life of Mary Ingles further, posing a different set of questions concerning the meaning and significance of her story.*

Mary Draper Ingles's long life provides us a window into a remarkable period of American history, and our attempts to understand her suffering, her fears, and her courage help us to understand the birthing process of our nation. We know enough about Mary's life to piece together a fairly complete biography, and in the process of painting her portrait we may reach a deeper understanding of the lives of other women, men, and children who lived in Virginia's backcountry during the colonial period.

American audiences have become accustomed to such portraits through the work of Ken Burns, the documentary film maker. His documentaries serve as an introduction to social history, especially of the Civil War period and, moving back earlier in the nineteenth century, of the Lewis and Clark expedition. It should be possible to extend the dates back even further to the period between 1745 and 1775, when Virginia's backcountry began at the Blue Ridge and extended as far as the Mississippi. It is hard for denizens of the twenty-first century to imagine the dangers, hardships, and challenges these people had to endure.

Mary Draper Ingles survived a grueling physical ordeal when, as a young woman, she and a German woman escaped from a Shawnee camp in Kentucky and walked hundreds of miles through the wilderness, reaching Virginia after a journey of at least forty days. These two



Mary Draper Ingles' itinerary, from Drapers Meadows, Blacksburg (upper right) traveling west with the Shawnee (dotted line) as far as their camp on the Ohio River near present-day Cincinnati; and her return east following rivers and creeks (solid line).
(map by William H. Chappell, from the dust jacket to Trans-Allegheny Pioneers, *3rd ed., by John P. Hale [Radford, Va.: Roberta Ingles Steele, 1971])*

women, emaciated and scantily clad, struggled through a hostile landscape. Since there were no eyewitnesses, other than themselves, to the events of their journey, all we have left today are a few bits and pieces of documentary evidence. Mary's story has become legendary, and, like all legends, its facts have been obscured over time. We can read about her in the manuscript (*Escape from Captivity*) penned by her son, John Ingles; in the "historical sketches" (*Trans-Allegheny Pioneers*), written by her great grandson, John Hale; in a novel (*Follow the River*) by James Alexander Thom; or in the play (*The Long Way Home*) by Earl Hobson Smith.[1] These writers have tended to emphasize the early chapters of Mary's life, with all the dangers and incredible hardships she endured. Another very different story could be told featuring her life experiences — as a wife and mother and as a woman caught up in the tumultuous events of a nation's founding.

At the end of Mary's wilderness ordeal, after she and her husband were reunited, William and Mary did not ride off into the sunset and live "happily ever after." Women in the backcountry were expected to keep the home fires burning, the crops growing, and the wolf from the door, even when their husbands left on militia assignments for months at a time. We have a rare opportunity here to consider the life of a quintessential pioneer woman and to find examples of her strength and courage throughout the many seasons of her life.

Homecoming – 1755 –
Physical and Emotional Exhaustion

Mary's homecoming, in November 1755, however joyful, must have been tempered with sadness and anxiety. The Ingleses' sons — Thomas and George — remained in captivity, and their home at Drapers Meadows had been completely destroyed. Most of the neighboring families had abandoned their homes and moved away. Mary's physical health had been severely impacted by starvation, exposure, and exhaustion. Several accounts record that she had lost weight, that several of her teeth were loose, and that her hair had turned white. It must have shocked William to see her in this frail condition, and he may have wondered if her former health and energy would ever be restored.

Mentally and emotionally, Mary may have suffered from the phenomenon we call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. From the scattered

evidence, it is difficult to know how well she recovered from the trauma she endured. She certainly had good reason to be fearful. According to various sources, she believed that the Shawnee would renew their attacks on the colonial settlements. In the summer of 1756, while Mary and her husband, William, were seeking shelter at Fort Vause, she is said to have had a "premonition" that Indians were in the vicinity and preparing to attack. She persuaded William to pay attention to her fears, and they soon left the fort and headed eastward to another fort near the Peaks of Otter. Fort Vause was attacked just hours after they left, and all of the inhabitants were either killed or captured.

Mary insisted on living in Bedford for several years, even though William stayed in the backcountry, protecting and securing his claims to several parcels of land. William apparently provided a good home for Mary in Bedford and did everything possible to ensure her comfort and safety. The birthdates of their next three children are uncertain, but she probably had a rest from bearing and raising children for two or three years, allowing her body to gradually regain strength.

Recovery — Mary Returns to the New River in 1761

Mary apparently made a full recovery, for she seems fit and feisty in this account of an Indian attack made about 1761 at Ingles Ferry.

> Mrs. Ingles remained in the settlement below the Blue Ridge until there seemed a better prospect of peace and security at the frontier; she then returned to New River, where her husband and she permanently established themselves at "Ingles Ferry."
>
> William Ingles built here a Fort for the security of his own family and others who were now settling about him, and several times afterwards the neighbors were gathered in this fort for safety and common defense, when Indian attacks were made or threatened.
>
> Once, when there was no one at the house or Fort but William Ingles and his wife, she discovered, stealthily approaching the house, nine armed warriors in their war paint. She gave the alarm, and William Ingles at once posted himself in a position of defense, but discovered that he had but one bullet, and that in his gun. Mrs. Ingles soon got the lead

> and the ladle, however, and molded bullets as fast as he fired.
>
> Having failed to take the place by surprise, as they had evidently expected, the Indians, after a few rounds, fired without effect, abandoned the attack and left.[2]

Shared Experiences – Reunion with Bettie Draper

During those years in Bedford, we have no way of knowing if Mary found anyone to talk with about her experiences among the Indians. Many of the women living nearby may have viewed her with awe and respect, but they could not fully appreciate what she had endured. Imagine Mary's great joy, in 1761, to be reunited with her sister-in-law, Bettie Draper, who had been released after six years in captivity. The two women could offer one another a special sort of sympathy and understanding.

Most of Mary's neighbors probably had little first-hand knowledge of Indian beliefs or behavior. They could only think of them as savages. Mary Ingles and Bettie Draper had lived among the Shawnee long enough to see them as human beings and to have some respect for their culture. John Draper had several cross-cultural encounters as he tried to locate his wife and negotiate for her release. William Ingles, too, had frequent contact with the Indians as he made trips to Ohio in an effort to find his son. On his last trip, William Ingles made the mistake of taking along a barrel of rum as a form of barter:

> A very unwise move on the part of William Ingles ... came very near costing him his life. Knowing the fondness of the Indians for strong drink, he had taken with him a keg of the "firewater," in addition to some money, and goods and trinkets, for trading, hoping, by one or the other, or all of these, to induce the Indian father to sell him the boy...
>
> While waiting the return of the absentees, he was trying to make "fair weather" with the Indians at Scioto, and, thinking to conciliate them, he gave some of them his rum. He very soon saw the mistake he had committed, but it was too late to correct it.
>
> The Indians, having their appetite inflamed by the small allowance, determined to have more. They seized his rum,

> drank it all, and were soon wildly and uproariously drunk. They threatened to kill him, and were about to put their threats into execution, but this time the squaws came to his relief, and, no doubt, saved him from a terrible death. They secreted him and kept him secreted until the Indians got over their drunken debauch, and came to their sober senses.[3]

In a very real sense, the Draper and Ingles families lived in a border country between two warring worlds. Mary and Bettie had a shared experience that their friends and neighbors could scarcely understand.

No records survive of Bettie's homecoming, after six years in captivity, or of the social or emotional difficulties she may have faced. Her adjustment back into the rhythms of European life could not have been easy. She and John eventually moved about twenty miles south of Ingles Ferry, where they had seven children. The two families maintained close ties, so the survivor stories of both women may have become intermingled over time. Unfortunately, neither woman left any written accounts of her remarkable life.

A Visitor's Journal Entry — 1779

One contemporary description of Mary Ingles has survived, however, in a journal written by Lord Henry Hamilton, a captured British governor. Lord Hamilton spent the night at Ingles Ferry in 1779, on his way, under guard, to Williamsburg. One evening during his stay, Mary told this British stranger her story, some twenty-four years after her ordeal. In his journal, Hamilton remarked about the Ingleses' home and hospitality, but he took particular note of Mrs. Ingles — of the amazing details of her experience and of her melancholy mood. This is how he described the scene:

> A beautiful girl, his [William Ingles's] daughter, sat at the head of the table and did the honors with such ease and gracefull simplicity as quite charmed us. The scenery about this home was romantic to a degree. The river was beautiful, the hills well wooded, the low grounds well improved and well stocked. Mrs. Ingles in her early years had been carried off with another young woman by the Savages and tho carried away into the Shawnee country had made her

> escape with her female friend & tho exposed to unspeakable hardships, and having nothing to subsist on but wild fruits, found her way back in safety from a distance of 200 miles. However, terror and distress had left so deep an impression on her mind that she appeared absorbed in a deep melancholy, and left the arrangement of household concerns & the reception of strangers to her lovely daughter.[4]

It is interesting to speculate about why Mary might have been so sad that evening. She could have been thinking about her little son, George, who had been just two years old at the time they were captured. He had been separated from his mother and sent to live with a Shawnee family. Mary eventually learned that he had died soon after they were separated.

Or perhaps she was thinking about the infant she may have born, soon after leaving Drapers Meadows. We do not know for certain whether she was indeed far advanced in pregnancy at the time of the attack, or whether she was even pregnant, but the stories persist. If she did give birth on the trail and if she did later decide to leave her healthy baby behind in captivity, knowing it could never survive the long journey home, surely these were painful memories. Any woman would have vivid memories of such a birth — in the woods; surrounded by terrifying strangers; not knowing if they would kill her or the child; and having only the assistance of Bettie Draper, who had a broken arm.

Mary could have been thinking about her son, Thomas, who had, in 1768, returned from captivity, married, and had children of his own. Perhaps she feared that history would repeat itself and that her son and his family, who were living in Abb's Valley, might suffer the same ordeal. Perhaps she had another premonition, for there was, in fact, just such an attack at Burke's Garden in the summer of 1781. [Thomas and his wife Eleanor had three children — William, Mary, and Rhoda — and were living in an idyllic spot, far from any paths frequented by Indian war parties. Thomas was working in the field one day when Shawnee attacked his home and carried off his family. Although Thomas was able to collect a large contingent of neighbors and militiamen to chase after them, their attempt to attack the Indian's encampment went terribly wrong. The two oldest children, William and Mary, received mortal wounds, but the baby escaped unharmed.

Eleanor Ingles, another woman with an amazing survival story, received a tomahawk blow to the head and lay close to death, yet she recovered and lived for many years.]

It is also possible that Mary's emotions were conflicted by the presence of this British officer, knowing that Virginia was now at war against the British and also knowing that this man held the nickname of "scalp-buyer." She would have known that the British were encouraging their Indian allies to attack colonial settlements, offering a reward for each scalp. The French, of course, had used the same tactic against the English settlements in 1755. For William and Mary Ingles, the violent nightmare of border warfare had still not ended.

Divided Loyalties — William Ingles a Tory?

By 1779, many (perhaps as much as fifty percent) of those living in Montgomery County were reluctant to break their allegiance to Britain, and many of them were tried as Tories. William Ingles, although a signer of the Fincastle Resolutions and one of the most wealthy and respected citizens, was accused of being a Tory and put on trial in 1781. Although the trial ended without producing sufficient evidence against him, he was required to post an incredibly high bond — 100,000£! There is no document to indicate whether he ever paid the fine, and by November of the following year, he was dead.

Now, after more than two centuries have passed, his guilt or innocence may never be fully determined. During the 1780s, his loyalties were probably a matter of much public debate. We can only wonder how this affected Mary, as the war ended and as she became a widow. She and her children were not forced to move to Canada, nor were they forced to give up any of their possessions. With William's reputation under a cloud, Mary may have faced some degree of disapproval from her neighbors. She probably coped by busying herself with work and with the needs of her growing family. Thomas, Rhoda, and Susannah were all married by the time of William's death, and daughter Mary found herself a husband in 1786.

Free Spirit

In the 1790s, long after the threat of Indian raids had passed, John, the youngest of the Ingleses' children, acquired a wife and built a spacious home near Mary's cabin. He invited his mother to move in, but she refused to leave her cabin, perhaps because of her happy associations and memories there. It is interesting that she wished to remain in such a modest home, especially considering the fact that by the time of his death in 1782, her husband had become one of the wealthiest men in the region. Apparently Mary had worked out her own set of priorities.

Some of the existing descriptions of Mary leave a lively and animated impression. Her children and grandchildren passed along quite a few anecdotes that speak to her independent spirit, fierce loyalty, and deep attachment to family. In a passage from *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers*, written by Mary's great-grandson in the 1880s, we learn that she remained vigorous and agile well into her later years:

> She retained a large amount of physical vigor and mental clearness to the last. Mrs. Governor John Floyd, who lived near her and knew her well, writing about her in 1843, speaks of meeting her (Mrs. I.) at a religious association, or convention, which she had attended on horseback, thirty miles from home, her figure erect, and her complexion florid and healthy, though her hair was white as snow.[5]

By the time Mrs. Floyd wrote the preceding passage in 1843, good roads were becoming more common in this part of Virginia, and old women were less likely to travel by horseback. Around 1800, however, horses were still the predominant form of transportation, even for the elderly. John Ingles operated a store on the Pulaski side of the New River around 1800, and saddles and bridles were among the most popular items of merchandise.[6] Mary's love of riding is confirmed in several stories, such as this one, about her brother:

> About this time, some one started a rumor that her brother, John Draper, who was two years older than she, and the second time a widower, was about to marry a young girl. She was very much worried by the report, and, fearing that it might be true, determined to go to her brother's, about twenty miles distant, and learn the facts for herself.

> She ordered her favorite saddle horse, "Bonny," and started, although it was late in the afternoon. When her son, John Ingles, with whom she was living, or rather, near whom, for she kept up her separate establishment as long as she lived, having her own house and garden, servants, horses, cows, etc. — came to the house and learned what had occurred, he was very much disturbed about it, ordered another horse saddled immediately, and started his son, Crockett Ingles, in pursuit, to assure the old lady that it was all a joke, and to bring her back; but Crockett could not overtake her. She got to Draper's Valley after dark, and, satisfying herself that she was the victim of a practical joke, she started back early next morning, and was at home to dinner. Crockett, having failed to overtake his grandmother the night before, stayed all night at a farm-house by the way, and joined her and returned home with her next morning. [7]

After having lived for many years surrounded by danger, it is not too surprising that Mary had learned to be level-headed in a crisis. She knew just what to do one day when she accidentally stepped on a snake, according to another family story:

> Illustrating her wonderful nerve and cool presence of mind, it is related of her that once, when walking in her kitchen garden, among the cabbages and other vegetables, she stepped upon the neck of a large black snake, before seeing it. Instantly the snake, writhing in its pain, coiled itself about her leg. She appreciated the situation at once, but instead of screaming, or fainting, or running away, she stood perfectly still, her weight holding the snake firmly in place, until she called to her cook to fetch her the butcher knife, with which she soon released herself by cutting the snake in two.[8]

Mary's seemingly boundless supply of energy and her inability to sit idly are the sort of practical habits that would have been essential in a frontier home. A woman's work was never done, and Mary kept spinning until the last:

> In her youth, Mrs. Ingles had learned to spin on the "little wheel," a most useful and valuable accomplishment in those days, and especially on the frontier, where the pioneers raised their own flax and wool, and where most of their clothes were of home manufacture.

> Stores were then very remote, and "store clothes" almost unattainable. She kept up her habit of spinning to her last years. Her temperament was so restless and active that she could not and would not be idle. When she found nothing else to do, instead of sewing or knitting, as most old ladies do, she would get her wheel and put in her time at spinning, often despite the remonstrance of her family, who would have preferred to have her spend her declining years in restful quiet.
>
> Once her wheel got out of order, and she had asked her son, more than once, to send it to a workman and have it repaired. He had neglected to do so, probably intentionally, in order to discourage her spinning efforts; but when he was away from home one day, she ordered her favorite "Bonny" saddled, took the wheel in her lap, rode eight miles to a carpenter, or wheelwright, had it repaired and brought it home; after which the spinning went on as usual, though she was then over eighty years of age.[9]

Growing up a Tomboy

It seems fair to say that Mary was especially well suited to life on the Virginia frontier. Although she may not have attended school or learned much reading or writing, she knew about practical things. As a girl, Mary Draper spent much of her time in the out-of-doors with her older brother, John. According to family tradition,

> Mary Draper, having no sister, had spent much of her time in her girlhood days with her only brother, in his outdoor avocations and sports. They played together, walked together, rode together. She could jump a fence or ditch as readily as he; she could stand and jump straight up nearly as high as her head; could stand on the ground, beside her horse, and leap into the saddle unaided; could stand on the floor and jump on a chair back, etc., etc.[10]

In addition to her physical prowess, she seems to have mastered all the usual skills expected of young women in those times. She was a good seamstress, and later told her children that, while in the Shawnee village, she made shirts for Indian warriors out of calico provided by a French trader. She knew about edible plants and herbs and about how

to make a poultice for her sister-in-law Bettie's arm. She apparently knew how to dig in the ground to find edible roots, worms, and insects.

Mary must have had a good sense of direction and a good memory for detail. We do not know if she had ever seen a map of Virginia (a territory that extended all the way to the Mississippi), but she knew how to follow the course of the rivers (the Ohio, the Kanawha, and the New) and find her way home. During the final leg of her journey, when her energy was almost completely drained, she found her path blocked by nearly insurmountable cliffs. She knew she had to be near home, but how could she get past these cliffs? The Shawnee had taken a different route after leaving Drapers Meadows — one better suited to travel by horse.[11] Mary's daring plan — to follow the river until she reached home — could not have anticipated the final hardship posed by the steep banks of the New River Gorge.

Chutzpa

The Shawnee had no reason to suspect that these captive white women might ever try to escape. Several years later, perhaps when John Draper was visiting the nation to negotiate for the release of his wife, the Indians were amazed to learn that Mary Ingles had walked all the way home to Virginia. John Hale pieced together the following account, based on stories told by William Ingles and others who visited the Shawnee,

> ... when they failed to return to the camp at or later than the usual time, the Indians became uneasy, thinking they had strayed too far and lost their way, or else had been killed by wild beasts. Some of the Indians went some distance in the direction they had started, but which course they had reversed so soon as out of sight, and fired guns to attract their attention if they should be lost. They gave up the search that night, however, and did not renew it the next day. Their conclusion was that the women had been destroyed by wild beasts, and gave themselves no further concern about them. They did not at all suspect that the women had attempted an escape.[12]

The Shawnee would probably have been just as amazed at the "chutzpa" of Mary's bold idea as by her feat of survival.

Doubting Toms

There was really no way for anyone to verify the accuracy of Mary's account, especially within the first few years after her return. No one knew for certain if she had traveled 100 miles, 200 miles, or more. Later, after more captives had returned from the villages in Ohio and after Daniel Boone and others had explored Kentucky, the pieces of Mary's story could have been reassembled and scrutinized. But in 1755 not many individuals had traveled the same terrain. George Washington was one of the few colonials with some knowledge of the Shawnee villages. According to some accounts, Washington was somewhat skeptical that Mary could have made such a long journey. One newspaper account, published in February 1756, stated that Mrs. Ingles had survived *fourteen days* in the wilderness, instead of forty.[13] Within months of her arrival home, as news of her amazing story began to spread, the facts of Mary's ordeal began to blur and to assume legendary proportions.

William Ingles traveled to Williamsburg immediately after Mary's return and told Governor Dinwiddie about his wife's journey and of her concerns that the Shawnee were planning to renew their attacks on the western settlements. The royal governor found William's arguments persuasive and soon ordered all able-bodied men, under the command of young Major Andrew Lewis, to launch an offensive campaign against the Shawnee. Surely, he reasoned, a small force of well-provisioned men could travel to these villages, make successful raids, and bring peace and stability to the western lands. Dinwiddie considered the Shawnee to be "Banditti," and he found it difficult to understand why so many settlers were giving up "their Families and Interests to a barbarous Enemy without endeavoring to resist them."[14] This campaign, known as the Sandy Creek Expedition, was the only offensive during the French and Indian War. It was doomed from the start. In 1756, the backcountry settlers had not had much practice in the skills of frontier warfare or survival. Suffering from poor leadership and planning, the exhausted and hungry men did not even reach the Indian villages. Many of them did not make it back alive. Those who did return had learned valuable lessons about survival and warfare in this wild land.

One could argue that the women may have had better survival skills in the wilderness than their male counterparts. Without the

benefit of rifles, provisions, or guides, our heroines walked further and survived longer than the men of the ill-fated Sandy Creek Expedition. In the twentieth century, several enthusiastic historians have attempted to walk along the route taken by the women as they journeyed home. Because they could not swim, the women had to follow each stream and tributary until they found a place to ford them. The generally accepted view today is that they walked about 850 miles — in just over forty days.

Motivation, Faith, Sense of Purpose

One has to wonder what motivated Mary to attempt this impossible journey, and what kept her from giving up along the way? She must have been self-confident, independent-minded, and full of restless energy. As she surveyed her prospects, considering what the Indians might expect of her, and knowing that she might never see her sons again, she apparently felt she had to try to escape, even though there could be no turning back.

Mary's decision becomes a bit more amazing and complicated if one considers that she may have had to leave behind a two-month-old child. This part of her story is cloaked in mystery and in controversy since Mary never spoke a word to her children or grandchildren about having a baby during captivity. If she did choose to abandon her baby, for whatever reasons, social pressures would have made it to her advantage to keep that part of her story hidden for all time.[15]

If Mary was pregnant at the time of her capture and did deliver her child in the forest during the journey to the Shawnee village, such an experience adds considerably to the long list of her extraordinary feats of courage and resilience. If she later decided to abandon her baby, knowing that it would not survive the long trip home, her ordeal assumes even more wrenching and terrible proportions. It would explain her state of melancholy, when, years later, she told Hamilton about her ordeal. Of all the details concerning Mary's life, the possibility that she had — and then abandoned from necessity — a baby remains the most difficult event to absorb, yet the most inspiring, too.

Every year, when the leaves begin to fall and the nights turn cold, I think of Mary's journey and marvel that she could have found the strength to keep going. Each step of the way, she moved further from her children but closer to her husband. She had no way of know-

ing that she would live to have four more children and at least thirty grandchildren. She certainly did not know that she would become famous or that future generations would write books and plays about her ordeal. She could not have imagined her life at Ingles Ferry, the crossing place of the New River where she and William would build a cabin, a fort, a tavern, a blacksmith shop, and a store. She could not imagine that she would see her son Thomas again, after thirteen years living among the Shawnee. And, she could not know that her friends and neighbors would one day decide to fight a war of independence against Great Britain.

For anyone who can claim to be a descendant of Mary Ingles, there is good reason to feel pride. Her story is a reminder, however, of something significant and powerful all of us have inherited from Mary and her generation of pioneers — her spirit. That's the great revelation that comes from delving into history: one encounters people who lived their lives so powerfully and so well that they remain an inspiration to future generations.

Endnotes

1. The books referenced are 1. *Escape From Indian Captivity* by John Ingles, Sr., edited by Roberta Ingles Steele and Andrew Lewis Ingles (Radford, Va., 1969); 2. *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers* by John P. Hale (Cincinnati: Graphic Press, 1886); 3. *Follow the River* by James Alexander Thom (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981); 4. *The Long Way Home* by Earl Hobson Smith (1970).
2. Hale, 96.
3. Hale, 117-118.
4. *Colonial Days in the Land that Became Pulaski County*, by Conway Howard Smith (Pulaski: B. D. Smith, 1975), 97.
5. Hale, 144.
6. Ferry Hill Ledger (1797–1804), Virginia Tech Special Collections.
7. Hale, 144-145.
8. Ibid., 145.
9. Ibid., 146.
10. Ibid., 27.
11. See Illustration – Map from the jacket cover of *Trans-Allegheny Pioneers*.
12. Hale, 52-53.
13. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, February 26, 1756.
14. Smith, 25-26.
15. "What Really Happened at Drapers Meadows? The Evolution of a Frontier Legend," by Ellen Apperson Brown, *The Smithfield Review*, Vol. 7 (2003), 5-21.

Figure 1. A photograph of Saltville taken from the overlook east of town on Route 107.