

Patriot Profile:

Dr. Thomas Walker, Jr.

(1715-1794)



Physician, Explorer, Patriot, and Surveyor

Dr. Thomas Walker, Jr., was born January 15, 1715, in King and Queen County, Virginia, the son of Major Thomas Walker and Susannah Peachy. The Walker family had come to Virginia from Staffordshire, England, around 1650, making them among the early settlers of the Virginia Colony.

Thomas Walker was raised in a family active in the affairs of colonial Virginia. His father was a prominent public figure who represented Gloucester County in the Colonial Assembly in 1662. The elder Walker also became involved in the colony's efforts to establish a silk industry. In 1663, he reported planting approximately 70,000 mulberry trees to support silk production. After a committee verified his efforts, he was rewarded in 1667 with 20,000 pounds of tobacco.

Physician and Frontier Explorer

Thomas Walker studied medicine under his brother-in-law, Dr. George Gilmer, and eventually established a medical practice in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He became a respected physician while also pursuing business interests, including operating a general store and participating in import and export trade.

In 1741, Walker married Mildred Thornton Meriwether, born March 19, 1721, in Louisa County, Virginia. She was the daughter of Colonel Francis Thornton and Alice Savage and the widow of Nicholas Meriwether III. Thomas and Mildred Walker had twelve children.

Through his marriage, Walker acquired an extensive estate in Albemarle County known as Castle Hill, comprising approximately 11,000 acres. The original wooden residence was completed in 1765 and faced the mountains to the northwest. Castle Hill remained Walker's home for the rest of his life.

Walker's interests extended well beyond medicine and agriculture. In 1749, he became chief agent of the Loyal Land Company, which had received a grant of approximately 800,000 acres in western Virginia. The following year, Walker led an expedition to explore the company's lands.

On April 17, 1750, his party passed through the mountain gap he called "Cave Gap," now known as the Cumberland Gap. Walker's expedition helped open the region to later European-American settlement and provided valuable information about the geography, wildlife, and natural resources of the western frontier.

Walker kept a detailed journal of the expedition, providing one of the earliest surviving European accounts of the region that would later become Kentucky. His observations also reflected his encounters with Native American peoples who had inhabited and traveled through the area for centuries. Walker himself acknowledged that he was not the first European to pass through Cumberland Gap.

Service During the French and Indian War

Walker's knowledge of the frontier and his organizational abilities brought him into public service during the French and Indian War. In 1755, he served as Commissary to the Virginia troops under George Washington. His responsibilities involved supplying and supporting Virginia's military forces.

Walker was later accused of fraud in connection with his duties as commissary. He vigorously defended himself and was ultimately acquitted of the charges.

His public service continued into the Revolutionary era. Walker served on Virginia's Committee of Safety, an important body responsible for overseeing military and civil affairs during the struggle for independence.

In 1777, Walker and his son, Colonel John Walker, were appointed to travel to Pittsburgh to meet with Native American leaders and seek their support for the American cause. The assignment reflected both Walker's experience with frontier affairs and the importance of Native American alliances during the Revolutionary War.

Castle Hill and the American Revolution

Castle Hill also became associated with one of the more dramatic episodes of the Revolutionary War in Virginia.

On June 4, 1781, British Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton and his troops stopped at Castle Hill during their campaign through Virginia. According to tradition, Mildred Walker deliberately delayed Tarleton and his men. The delay gave Jack Jouett of Louisa County time to continue his famous nighttime ride to warn Thomas Jefferson and members of the Virginia legislature that the British were approaching.

Jouett's warning enabled Jefferson and other Virginia leaders to escape before Tarleton arrived. Although details of the Castle Hill episode have been preserved through historical tradition, the story remains an intriguing connection between the Walker family and the struggle for American independence.

Castle Hill also served as a meeting place for Native American leaders traveling to Williamsburg. Walker took advantage of these encounters to learn about Native American cultures and to gather information concerning the western frontier, including its wildlife, geography, and survival techniques.



The Walker Line

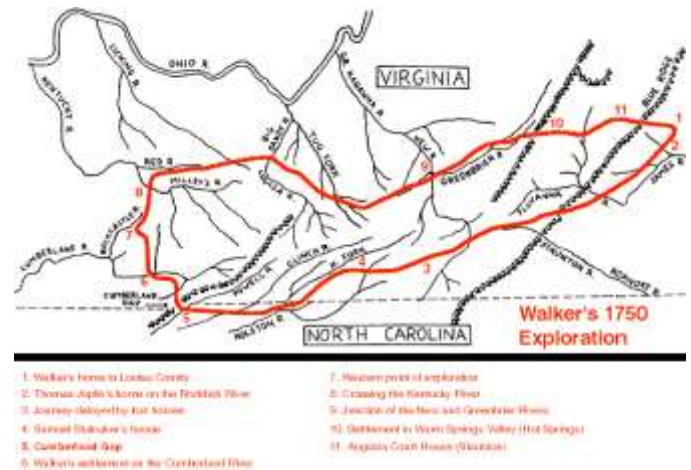
One of Walker's most enduring contributions came through his work as a surveyor.

In 1779-1780, Walker was appointed to survey and extend westward the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. Working under difficult frontier conditions, his surveying party traveled through dense forests and mountainous terrain with limited equipment.

The resulting boundary became known as the Walker Line. The survey, however, was not perfectly accurate and placed portions of the boundary farther north than the intended line of latitude, creating a dispute that would continue for decades.

When Kentucky became a state in 1792 and Tennessee followed in 1796, the location of their common boundary became a significant issue. Kentucky argued

that the intended boundary was latitude 36°30' and that Walker's line had deprived the state of territory. Tennessee, meanwhile, maintained that the established Walker Line should remain in place, particularly because settlers had already established communities in the disputed region.



Several attempts were made to resolve the disagreement. Surveys and joint commissions in 1799, 1820, and 1821 sought to establish an acceptable boundary, but the competing interests of the two states prevented a final settlement.

The dispute was finally resolved in 1859, when commissioners from Kentucky and Tennessee conducted a comprehensive resurvey. Much of Walker's original line was retained in the eastern portion of the boundary, while the 36°30' latitude line was adopted farther west. Stone markers were placed along the boundary from the Mississippi River toward Cumberland Gap.

Thus, a surveying expedition undertaken nearly eighty years earlier by Thomas Walker continued to influence the geography and political boundaries of the region long after his death.

Later Years and Legacy

Walker continued to expand his landholdings throughout his lifetime. In 1772, for example, he received an additional 226-acre land grant in Albemarle County from Lord Dunmore.

He remained at Castle Hill until his death on November 9, 1794, at the age of 79. His wife, Mildred, had died earlier, on November 16, 1778, at the age of 57. Both are buried in the Castle Hill family cemetery, located in a wooded area near the base of the mountain and enclosed by a brick wall.



After Walker's death, Castle Hill passed to his son, Francis Walker, who had previously managed the estate under power of attorney. Francis retained ownership until his death in 1806. Later, Walker's granddaughter, Judith Rives (1802-1880), and her husband, Senator William C. Rives, lived at Castle Hill.

The original Castle Hill residence survives today, although it has been expanded and renovated over the years.

Dr. Thomas Walker's life encompassed many of the defining experiences of eighteenth-century Virginia. He was a physician, businessman, landowner, explorer, military administrator, public servant, patriot, and surveyor. His exploration of the Kentucky frontier, his service during the French and Indian War and American Revolution, and the boundary survey that bears his name left a lasting mark on the history and geography of the early United States.

For members of the Sons of the American Revolution, Walker's story is particularly noteworthy as an example of a Virginia patriot whose contributions extended well beyond the battlefield. Through his public service, military support, diplomatic efforts, and work on behalf of the emerging American cause, Thomas Walker played a significant role in the turbulent years surrounding the founding of the nation.