



THE DIARY OF JOHN PETER SALLING: EARLY ROCKBRIDGE ADVENTURER

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Not much is known for sure about John Peter Salling except that he was among the first settlers in Rockbridge; went west to explore Unknown America; was captured and held prisoner for more than two years — and has a mountain near Glasgow named for him. Fantastical myths rose up about him, but few of these stand up to scrutiny. He was known to have kept a journal during his journey west, but well into the twentieth century the journal was assumed to have been lost (which fueled the rise of the legends). But the journal wasn't lost; rather, it was buried in a 1922 article published in a scholarly magazine and then forgotten.

The article was "The Virginians on the Ohio and the Mississippi in 1742," by Fairfax Harrison, a businessman, lawyer and longtime leader of the Virginia Historical Society, and published in the society's official magazine.*

This "Epilogue" begins with an introduction (based on Harrison's) and reprints the Salling diary in full as it ap-

* To be exact, the document reprinted here is a transcript of a recollection. Salling's original diary was confiscated during his imprisonment, and he re-created it after his release. This transcript was copied from the original by Joshua Fry, a mapmaker who relied on it in his cartography.

peared in the 1922 article. We have generally kept Salling's original punctuation and spelling. Except where noted, footnotes are summaries of Harrison's original notes, which are filled with lengthy digressions.

INTRODUCTION

IN 1737, JOHN HOWARD, a frontiersman, sought and was granted a commission from the Virginia government to lead a "wilderness journey" to explore the "Lakes & River of Mississippi."¹ John Peter Salling,

1 Fairfax Harrison, "The Virginians on the Ohio and the Mississippi in 1742," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* (Richmond, Virginia Historical Society), Vol. 30, No. 2 (April 1922), pp. 205. The quotes are from records of the day.

Above: Excerpt from the so-called Gilham map, 1860, showing Sallings Mountain and (bottom) the property of "Mrs. Salling," located at present-day Glasgow, where the North River, now the Maury, meets the James. Courtesy of Library of Congress.

JOHN PETER SALLING (1706–55)

Johan Pieter Salling was born in Alsace, Germany. With his family he emigrated to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, in 1733 and moved south to Augusta County, Virginia, around 1740. (Rockbridge was not carved out until 1777.) Salling received a grant in July 1741 of 400 acres at the first fork of the Fluvanna River, now the James, at what is now Glasgow.

In March 1742, Salling departed in the company of four other men to explore the American west. The expedition was under the leadership of John Howard, then residing in another part of western Virginia. The state of Virginia promised each of the men 2,000 acres of land in the new territory. This was

the first European-led exploration into the Ohio River valley region and beyond and is often considered as a model for the later Lewis and Clark expedition.

During this trip Salling kept a journal in which he recorded numerous firsts. He provided the first description of the Natural Bridge and of coal deposits in what is now West Virginia. He and his companions were the first to explore what is now West Virginia and Kentucky and the first expedition under the English crown to explore the Mississippi River. While traveling along the Mississippi, the Howard-Salling company were captured by a band of French, Blacks and Indians and taken to New Orleans in July 1742. Here they

were accused of being British spies and held in prison for more than two years. Salling escaped prison in October 1744 and arrived back home in May 1745.

Salling's journal was influential in Virginia and England during the 1740s and 1750s. It became a basis for the Jefferson and Fry map of Virginia with its "back settlements" and of John Mitchell's 1755 map of North America. Both the journal and the maps were well known to the British government and were used by the British in their confrontations with the French along the frontier during that time. The tensions between these imperial rivals soon led to the French and Indian Wars.

— *Neely Young* *

or Salley, joined Howard. They traveled "down the rivers New, Coal (which Salley named), Kanawha, Ohio and Mississippi and led to their capture by the French, and imprisonment at New Orleans." In 1742, Howard, Salling and their companions were captured on the Mississippi by "seventy Frenchmen" and brought to "a town called New Orleans" and arraigned before LeMoyne de Bienville, governor of French Louisiana. While in prison there, Howard drafted a petition to King George II that was intercepted by Bienville's successor as governor, the Marquis de Vaudreuil, but later recovered in which he described being "grievously accused that our purpose had been to spy out the way for an army to come to destroy them [the French settlers] and their country. Nothing appearing against us to support this charge, except weak suspicions, we hoped to be put at liberty, but on the contrary were condemned to three years in prison. And I verily believe that [if left to their mercies] we will not be released until death has pity on us. To that fate we have indeed already been very near, partly by reason of the darkness of our dungeons and partly by reason of the bad food given us. But God having pity has restored our strength. And yet up to this moment we have

no hope for our deliverance except in the Wisdom and Charity of your Majesty, our lives being as a sacrifice in the hands of cruel men."

As the diary describes, Salling, escaped. (Howard did not and was sent to France.)

Against that background, here is the transcript of the journal Salling (Salley) kept in 1742–45.

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**A BRIEF ACCOUNT
OF THE TRAVELS OF
JOHN PETER SALLEY,
A GERMAN WHO LIVES IN THE
COUNTY OF AUGUSTA IN VIRGINIA.**

IT MAY BE NECESSARY before I enter upon the particular passage of my Travels, to inform my Reader, that what they are to meet with in the following Narrative, is only what I retained in my Memory; For when we were taken by the French we were robbed of

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all our papers, that contained any writings relative to our Travels.

1740

In the year 1740, I came from Pennsylvania to that part of Orange County now called Augusta; and settled in a fork of James River close under the Blue Ridge of Mountains on the West Side, where I now live.

1741/2

In the month of March, 1741/2, One John Howard came to my house, and told me, that he had received a Commission from our Governor to travel to the westward of this Colony, as far as the River Mississippi, in order to make Discovery of the Country, and that as a reward for his Labour, he had the promise of an Order of Council for Ten Thousand Acres of Land; and at the same time obliged himself to give equal Shares of said Land to such men as would go in Company with him to search the Country as above. Whereupon I and other two men, Viz [John Poteat] and Charles Sinclair¹ (his own Son Josiah Harwood having already joined with him) entered into Covenant with him, binding ourselves to each other in a certain writing, and accordingly prepared for our Journey in a very unlucky hour to me and my poor Family.

On the sixteenth of March, 1742, we set off from my House and went to Cedar Creek about five miles, where is a Natural Bridge over said Creek, reaching from the Hill on the one side to the Hill on the other. It is a solid Rock and is two hundred and three feet high, having a very large Spacious arch, where the Water runs thro', we then proceeded as far as Mondongachate, now called Woods River,² which is eighty-five Miles, where we killed five Buffoloes, and with their hides covered the Frame of a Boat; which was so large as to carry all our Company, and all our provisions and Utensels, with which we passed down the said River two hundred and fifty-two

1 In the diary, the name before Sinclair's is left blank, Harrison added Poteat's name because it appears on the Howard petition seeking the commission to explore.

2 Noted here in the margin: "The New River."

miles as we supposed,³ and found it very Rocky, having a great many Falls therein, one of which we computed to be thirty feet perpendicular and all along surrounded with inaccessible Mountains, high precipices, which obliged us to leave said River. We went then a south west course by Land eighty five Miles, where we came to a small River,⁴ and there we made a little Boat, which carried only two men and our provisions. The rest travelled by Land for two Days and then we came to a large River, where we enlarged our Barge, so as she carried all our Company, and whatever Loading we had to put into her. We supposed that we went down this River Two Hundred and Twenty Miles, and had a tolerable good passage; there being only two places, that were difficult by reason of Falls. Where we came to this River the Country is mountainous, but the farther down the plainer in those Mountains, we found great plenty of Coals, for which we named it Coal River. Where this River and Woods river meets,⁵ the North Mountains end, and the Country appears very plain and is well water'd, there are plenty of Rivulets, clear Fountains and running Streams and very fertile Soil. From the mouth of Coal River, to the River Alleghany we computed to be ninety two miles, and on the sixth day of May we came to Allegany which we supposed to be three Quarters of a mile [broad]⁶ and from here to the great Falls⁷ on this River is reckoned four hundred and forty four Miles, there being a large Spacious open Country on each side of the River, and is well watered abounding with plenty of Fountains small streams and large Rivers; and is very high and fertile Soil. At this Time we found the Clover to be as high as the middle of a man's leg. In general all the Woods over the Land is Ridgely, but plain, well timbered and hath plenty

3 Salley's distances do not bear critical analysis. One can understand that they seemed greater to him than they do to a traveler in a Pullman car. [*Harrison's note*]

4 Northeast fork of the Coal River.

5 The confluence that creates the Great Kanawha, below Charleston, West Virginia.

6 At Point Pleasant, where the Kanawha meets the Ohio River.

7 The falls of the Ohio at Louisville.

of all kind of Wood, that grows in Common with us in this Colony (excepting pine). The Falls mentioned above are three miles long in which is a small Island, the body of the Stream running on the North side, through which is no passing by reason of great Rocks and large Whirlpools, by which we went down on the south side of said Island without much Danger or Difficulty and in time of a Fresh in the River, men may pass either up or down, they being active or careful. About twenty Miles below the Falls the Land appeared to be somewhat Hilly the Ridges being higher, and continued so for the Space of fifty Miles down the River, but neither Rocky nor Stony, but a rich Soil as is above mentioned.

Joyning this high Land below is a very level flat Country on both sides of the River, and is so for an Hundred and fifty Miles, abounding with all the advantages mentioned above, and a much richer Soil; We then met with a kind of Ridge that seemed to Extend across the Country as far as we could view and bore North and South. In Seven Miles we passed it, when we found the Country level (as is mentioned before), but not having such plenty of running Streams, yet a richer Soil. On the seventh day of June we entered into the River Mississippi, which we computed to be five miles wide, and yet in some places it is not above one mile over, having in most places very high Banks, and in other places it overflows. The current is not swift but easy to pass either up or down, and in all our passage we found great plenty of Fish, and wild fowl in abundance. In the River Mississippi above the mouth of Allegany is a large Island¹ on which are three Towns inhabited by the French,² who maintain Commerce and Trade both with the French of Cannada, and those French on the mouth of the said River. In the fork between Allegany and Mississippi are certain Salt Springs, where the Inhabitants of the Towns mentioned above make their Salt. Also they have there a very rich Lead Mine which they have opened and it affords them

1 Kaskaskia.

2 Salling apparently learned this while a prisoner, as the expedition did not go up the river.

a Considerable gain. From the Falls mentioned above in the River Allegany to the mouth of said River is four Hundred fifty Miles, from thence to the Town of New Orleans is One Thousand four Hundred and ten Miles, and is Uninhabited excepting fifty Leagues above New Orleans.³ It is a large spacious plain Country endowed with all the natural Advantages, that is a moderate healthy Climate, Sweet water, rich Soil, and a pure fresh Air, which contribute to the Benefit of Mankind.

CAPTURE

We held on our passage down the River Mississippi [until] the second day of July, and about nine o' the Clock in the Morning we went on Shore to cook our Breakfast. But we were suddenly surprised by a Company of Men, Viz. to the Number of Ninety, Consisting of French men Negroes, & Indians, who took us prisoners and carried us to the Town of New Orleans, which was about one Hundred Leagues from us when we were taken, and after being examined upon Oath before the Governor [Bienville] first separately one by One, and then All together, we were committed to close Prison, we not knowing then (nor even yet) how long they intended to confine us there. During our stay in Prison we had allowed us a pound and half of Bread a man each Day, and Ten pound of pork p month for each man. Which allowance was duly given to us for the space of Eighteen Months, and after that we had only one pound of Rice Bread, and one pound of Rice for each man p Day, and one Quart of Bear's Oil for each man p. Month, which allowance was continued to us untill I made my Escape. Whilst I was confined in Prison I had many Visits made to me by the French and Dutch who lived there, and grew intimate and familiar with some of them, by whom I was informed of the Manner of Government, Laws, Strength and Wealth of the Kingdom of Louisiana as they call it, and from the whole we learned, that the Government is Tyrannical, The Common Peo-

3 A league is an approximate measure of distance, generally accepted as about three miles.

ple groan under the Load of Oppression, and Sigh for Deliverance. The Governor is the Chief Merchant, and inhances all the trade into his own hands, depriving the Planters of selling their Commodities to any other, but himself, and allowing them only such prices as he pleases.¹ And with respect to Religion, there's little to be found amongst them, but those who profess any Religion at all, it's the Church of Rome. In the Town are nine Clergymen four Jesuits and five Capuchin Friers. They have likewise one Nunnery in which are nine Nuns. Notwithstanding the Fertility and Richness of the Soil, The Inhabitants are generally poor as a Consequence of the Oppression they meet with from their Rulers, neither is the Settling of the Country, or Agriculture in any Measure encouraged by the Legislature. — One thing I had almost forgot, Viz. we were told by some of the French who first settled there, that about forty years ago, when the French first discovered the place, and made attempt to settle therein, there were then pretty many English settled on both sides of the River Mississippi, and one Twenty Gun Ship lay in the River, what became of the Ship we did not hear, but we were informed that the English Inhabitants were all destroyed by the Natives by the Instigation of the French.

1 All this seems to be mere gossip derived from Salley's fellow prisoner the disaffected creole Baudran, whom we are soon to meet. [Harrison's note]



The governors of Louisiana who oversaw Salling's imprisonment: Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, left, who ruled until 1742, and his successor, Pierre François de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil-Cavagnal.

I now begin to speak of the strength of the Country, and by the best Account I could gather I did not find, that there are above four Hundred and fifty effective Men of the Militia in all that Country, and not above one Hundred and fifty Soldiers under pay in and about the Town of New Orleans, 'tis true they have Sundry Forts in which they keep some men, but they are so weak and despicable as not worth taking notice of, with regard to the Strengthening of the County, having in some of them only six men, in others Ten men, the strongest of all those places is at the Mouth of the Mississippi In which are thirty Men, and Fifty Leagues from thence is a Town called Mumvell² nine Leagues from the Mouth of a River of the same Name in which is a Garrison, that Consists of Seventy Soldiers.

ESCAPE

AFTER I HAD BEEN CONFINED in close Prison above two Years, and all Expectation of being set at Liberty failing, I begun to think of making my Escape out of Prison, one of which I put in Practice, and which Succeeded in the following Manner. There was a certain French Man,³ who was born in that Country, and had some time before sold his Rice to the Spaniards for which he was put in Prison, and it Cost him six Hundred Peices of Eight before he got clear. He being tired with the Misery and Oppression under which the poor Country People Labour, formed a Design of removing his Family to South Carolina. Which Design was discovered, and he was again put in Prison in the Dungeon, and made fast in Irons, and after a formal Tryal, he was condemned to be a Slave for Ten Years, besides the expence of seven Hundred peices of Eight. With this Miserable French Man I became intimate & familiar, and as he was an active man, and knew the Country he promised, if I could help him off with his Irons, and we all got clear of the Prison, he would conduct us safe untill we

2 Margin note: Mobile.

3 Baudran.

were out of Danger. We then got a small file from a Soldier wherewith to cut the Irons and on the 25th day of October, 1744 we put our Design in Practice. While the French man was very busie in the Dungeon in cutting the Irons, we were as industrious without in breaking the Door of the Dungeon, and Each of us finished our Jobb at one Instant of time, which had held us for about six hours; by three of the Clock in the Morning with the help of a Rope which I had provided beforehand, we let our Selves down over the Prison Walls, and made our Escape Two Miles from the Town that night, where we lay close for two days.¹ We then removed to a place three Miles from the Town, where one of the good old Fryers of which I spoke before, nourished us four Days. On the Eighth Day after we made our Escape, we came to a Lake² seven Leagues from the Town but by this Time we had got a Gun and some Ammunition, the next Day we shot two large Bulls, and with their Hides made us a boat, in which we passed the Lake in the Night. We tied the Shoulder Blades of the Bulls to small sticks, which served us for paddles and passed a point, where there were thirteen men lay in wait for us, but Thro' Mercy we escaped from them undiscovered. After we had gone by Water sixty miles we went on Shore, we left our Boat as a Witness of our Escape to the French. We travelled thirty miles by Land to the River Shoktare,³ where our French man's father lived. In this Journey we passed thro' a Nation of Indians, who were very kind to us, and Carried us over two large Bays. In this place we Tarried Two Months and ten Days in very great Danger, for search was made for us everywhere by Land and Water and Orders to Shoot us when found. Great Rewards were promised by the Governor to the King of the Indians to take us, which he refused, and in the meantime was very kind by giving provisions and informing us of our Danger from time to time. After they had given over Searching

1 A dispatch sent by the new governor of Louisiana, Philippe de Rigaud, Marquis de Vaudreuil, on December 29, 1744, confirmed the fact of the escape.

2 Pontchartrain.

3 The Pearl River. Shoktare = Choctaw.



Extract from map showing the start of the "Path to Virginia by way of Cape Fear," near Georgetown, South Carolina, which Harrison suggests Salling followed on the final leg of his journey back to Rockbrige. From the Bulletin of the Historical Commission of South Carolina, 1917.

for us, and we having got a large Periaugue⁴ and other necessary things for our voyage, and on the 25th of January our French man and one Negro boy (which he took to wait on him) and another French man and we being all armed and well provided for our Voyage, we set off at a place called the belle Fountain (or in English fine Spring)⁵ and Sailed fifty Leagues to the head of St. Rose's Bay,⁶ and there left our Vessel and travelled by Land Thirty Leagues to the Fork Indians,⁷ where the English trade. Then there were three with them, and there we stayed five Days. The Natives were to us kind and generous, there we left the two French men and Negro boy,

4 Pirogue: A small dugout boat, usually from a single log.

5 Between Biloxi and the mouth of the Pascagoula.

6 East of Pensacola; now known as Choctawhatchee Bay.

7 Creeks who lived in the fork of the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers and traded with Carolina.

and on the tenth of February we set off and Travelled by Land up the River Giscaculfufa or Biscaculfufa,¹ one Hundred and thirty five Miles, passing several Indian Towns the Natives being very hospitable and kind, and came to one Finlas an Indian Trader, who lives among the Ugu Nation.² On the first of March we left Mr Finlas, and on the sixteenth we arrived at fort Augustus in the Province of Georgia.³ On the nineteenth instant we left fort Augustus and on the first of April we arrived at Charles Town, and waited on the Governor,⁴ who examined us Concerning our Travels &c. and he detained us in Charles Town eighteen Days, and made us a present of eighteen pounds of their Money, which did no more than defray our Expences whilst in that Town.

I had delivered to the Governor a Copy of my Journal, which when I asked again he refused to give me, but having obtained from him a Pass we went on board of a small Vessel bound for Virginia. On the Thirteenth of April, the same Day about two of the Clock we were taken by the French in Cape Roman and kept Prisoners till eleven of the Clock next Day, at which time the French after having robbed us of all the Provisions we had for our Voyage or Journey, put us into a Boat we being twelve men in Number, and so left us to the Mercy of the Seas and Winds.

On the fifteenth instant we arrived again at Charles Town and were examined before the Governor concerning our being taken by the French. We were now detained three Days before we could get another Pass from the Governor, we having destroyed the former, when we were taken by the French, and then were dismissed, being in a strange Place, far from Home, destitute of Friends, Cloathing, Money and Arms, and in that deplorable Condition had been obliged to undertake a Journey of five Hundred Miles, but a Gentleman, who

1 The names appear on no known map, but Harrison identifies it as the Chattahoochee River.

2 Ugo Nation presumably refers to the Yuchi tribe, sometimes spelled Uchee, who lived in today's southeastern United States.

3 Augusta, on the Savannah River.

4 James Glen, a Scot. [Harrison's note]

was Commander of a Privateer, and then lay at Charles Town with whom we had discoursed several times, gave to each of us a Gun and a Sword, and would have given us Ammunition, but that he had but little. On the Eighteenth Day of April, we left Charles Town, the second time, and travelled by Land,⁵ and on the seventeenth Day of May, 1745 we arrived at my House, having been absent three years Two Months and one Day, from my family, having in that time by the nicest Calculation I am able to make, travelled by Land and Water four thousand six hundred and six Miles since I left my own House till I returned Home again.

John Peter Salley.

5 It seems probable that they followed the "Path to Virginia by way of Cape Fear," as marked on George Hunter's map of South Carolina in 1730. [Harrison's note] The map notation is at Georgetown, South Carolina, sixty miles northeast of Charleston. Cape Fear is centered about Wilmington, North Carolina, another 110 miles northeast by land.



The John Peter Salling house in Glasgow, built about 1815.

