

BAKER'S FLATS

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Baker's Flats is a plateau located in Virginia, but touching the Kentucky state line. It is where Black Mountain, Indian Mountain, and Pine Mountain come together, and is the take off for Roger's Ridge, which separates Roaring Fork from Black Creek. It is about a mile north to south, its long dimension. It overlooks the origins of Roaring Fork, Guest's River, and both the South and North Forks of the Pound River at Fox Gap and at Flat Gap. Just off its northern edge, and into Kentucky, the head spring of the Poor Fork of the Cumberland River starts at the head of Robert's Branch Hollow. The spring is just under the level of the flats.

A few hundred yards to the east, after having passed the state line back into Virginia, is the start of the South Fork of the Pound River, one of the head waters of the Big Sandy River. It also starts in a spring coming from a coal seam lying under Baker's Flats, in this instance at the head of Phillips' Creek. There is a massive ancient rock house built into the face of the bluff by the spring. Baker's Flats, and the land under the bluff, have been heavily strip mined, but the bluff has not been disturbed because of its massive near vertical positioning. The spring and the rock house have thusly been preserved.

Access to Baker's Flats is best obtained by way of Roaring Fork in Virginia. From Business US 23 pick up State 603 at Kent Junction and proceed to the old mining camp of Roaring Fork, and proceed north off of the paved road that turns to the left, and go up the dirt mining road officially called The Roaring Fork Road. Many people today have come to refer to this road as the Pine Branch Road. Staying as close to the creek as possible, follow the road to the headwaters of the creek, and then follow the road up the face of the mountain toward the current wind gage in the center of the flats. To get to the rock house, proceed north on ATV trails not suitable for 4-wheel drive highway vehicles, and go to the edge of the strip mine. You will have to poke around a bit to find the spring and rock house, but there is an ATV trail that comes up from Phillips' Creek Hollow that accesses Baker's Flats that you can follow from the Flats to the rock house and spring.

Before it was strip mined, the flats were the site of active farming well into the mid Twentieth Century. The name "Baker's Flats" is widely known in the community of Flat Gap, and formerly so among the people of Dunbar. No one recalls a family of Baker's having lived there, and the name of the place seems to go back to forgotten times.

Roaring Fork was much favored by long hunters, as were the other long sheltered hollows on both sides of Black Mountain. Buffalo, elk, and deer spent their summers in the open meadows on top of the mountain, and sought shelter in the deep hollows in the winter. Access from Virginia was gained by coming up the Big Stoney Creek trail and over High Knob and across Little Stone Gap to the top of Little Stone Mountain, where the trail dropped off to Kelly View and current Kent Junction, where the mouth of Roaring Fork is.

The name Pot Camp Creek is a living testament to the long hunters having frequented the current locations of Dunbar and the former Pardee. Bold Camp, near Pound, Virginia, was settled primarily by people coming up Roaring Fork and dropping down into the head waters of the South Fork of the Pound River, which they followed to the mouth of Bold Camp.

Just who were Baker's Flats named after? The most likely candidate is Captain John Baker, who was a documented long hunter from Ashe County, North Carolina. Ashe County is a very common site of origin for the earliest inhabitants of far southwest Virginia, especially the region about Black Mountain. These settlers came down the New River through Mouth-of-Wilson.

Baker was born in 1758. In 1769 at age 11 he joined a party of about 40 long hunters led by James Knox. Following common operating procedure, the party went as a group before dispersing at Flat Lick just west of present Pineville, Kentucky. All that is documented is that they were gone for over a year before they met each other again at Flat Lick, and then returned to Ashe County.

It would seem likely that Baker followed the Cumberland River to its head spring, and there found his own private mountain top meadow filled with game. He built a combination blind and living quarters over the major spring used by the game, and just waited for dinner to come to him.

The presence of the many carefully placed large stones within the structure of the rock house show that its builder was there for a long time.

Modern DNA evidence has shown that this 'historic' John Baker really was more than one individual of that name. Assignment of the various bits of information to a particular one of them is still a work in progress.

However, quite by accident, a land grant (LO 110-665) on file at the Library of Virginia, and available on line, has been found, and which contains an 1853 survey call for a line that is identified as "passing Baker's Rock House". This proves that the structure in the accompanying photograph, and which is known traditionally locally as 'Baker's Rock House', is the same one identified by this survey.

This grant is of further historic interest for several reasons, among them is the fact that the recipients of this grant were William Carnes and Loring Tyler. Carnes had also bought a grant in this vicinity in partnership with William D. Duff. Duff was the son of Robert Duff and his wife Polly. Polly was the niece of Fannie Scott. Fannie Scott was the famous survivor of the Chief Bob Benge's raid at Scott's Station at the head of Wallen's Creek on the Wilderness Trail of 1779 in which her children and husband, Archibald, were murdered. The Duffs had acquired all the Scott land after that massacre.

The calls of LO 110-665 also note that the last survey corner was "70 poles north of Gabriel Church's house". This comes to about 300 yards. This notation is remarkable in its uniqueness of calling attention to a house located at that great a distance from the survey. Church (1802-1875) was a well known character in what was to become Wise County. He was born in Wilkes Co., North Carolina, and was highly regarded as a musician. He lived on Gabe's Branch, which was named after him. It was said to be a tributary of Roaring Fork, but its exact location has been lost to record. This survey call places it on the eastern slope of Fork Ridge just to the west of the southern end of Baker's Flats.

Church was well known for having written the ballad "Poor Goins" about the murder of Alexander Goins at Mud Lick on Callahan Creek in 1844, which is on the western side of the Nine Mile Spur directly across from Gabe's Branch. It is intriguing that Goins' sister, Elizabeth Jane, lived with her husband Michael Peter Craiger one hollow to the east of Gabriel Church, on Black Creek. Craiger served with the "Yankee Catchers" in the Civil War. This group was one of the Confederate bushwhacking outfits. Elizabeth Jane's descendant who wrote about her says that the Goins and Craiger families were from Wallen's Ridge in Lee County, Virginia.

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The stone wall to the left is part of the original structure. The sawed lumber frame in the front is from the more modern era when the shelter was still inhabited. The head spring of the Cumberland River is to the right of and down about 20 feet from the structure.

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WILLIAM CARNES
LO 110-665
2,000 ACRES
NOV. 1, 1854

BAKER'S ROCK HOUSE

GABRIEL CHURCH'S HOUSE