

# The Land of Connected Men: A New Migration Story from the Early American Republic

Marion Nelson Winship  
*University of Pennsylvania*

What follows is a migration story based on the experience of an ambitious man named John Breckinridge, who moved from Virginia to Kentucky in the spring of 1793.<sup>1</sup> Breckinridge and his kin have attracted historians because they were prodigious document-savers who participated in the sweeping trans-Appalachian migrations of the Early Republic.<sup>2</sup> They did not see themselves as part of that mass movement, however, and on that score, it turns out that their perception was sharper than that of their historians. It is true that they shared some of the experiences and personal traits customarily ascribed to early trans-Appalachian migrants. The way to Kentucky was difficult and still sometimes dangerous.<sup>3</sup> The move did demand personal qualities of pluck and perseverance. But what characterized the migration of men like Breckinridge—and there were hundreds of men like John Breckinridge—was not the separation and hardship of the legendary pioneer journey, nor the individual fiber of the movers, but, rather, the abundant and effectual connections that they established and maintained over the distances of the early republic.

It is worth getting this alternative migration story right. Investigating how men like Breckinridge worked their Virginian and western ways of connection can clarify the limits and possibilities for personal success in the trans-Appalachian West. And tracing the life-in-action of these powerful early westerners introduces a fresh perspective on the expansive new republic itself—a perspective from which it makes considerably less sense to speak, as historians commonly do, of “American policy makers” looking west “with mingled expectation and anxiety,” or of “the gentry’s national hierarchy...pulled taut across the United States.”<sup>4</sup> In spite of their physical distance from eastern centers of power, these men would be central to the binding and shaping of a dynamic and expansive new republic.

The defining features of this new migration story follow. Born in a Virginia bounded to the west only by the Mississippi River, these men learned western land speculation at the knees of their fathers, uncles, and guardians.<sup>5</sup> Growing up, they accompanied older kin on western surveying expeditions and often themselves learned the skill. By the time they began to think of marrying and establishing their own families, they had interests, opportunities and connections on both sides of the mountains. Whether they migrated west or ultimately stayed in Virginia was as much a matter of contingency as of determination. If they did migrate, they moved with the company of kin and

connections and the labor of black dependents, either enslaved or—for destinations north of the Ohio River—newly freed. Many of the most talented and politically ambitious of these men were lawyers who anticipated a lucrative western practice. Although they developed western plantations, sometimes referring to the process as “establishing a Seat,” it was always possible that they might move on, and it was probable that their “posterity” would do so. Their migration was not a single, irrevocable journey; instead, it was one episode perfectly consistent with their lifelong habits of movement and circulation. Migration did not remove them from this circulation but expanded it to a larger field.

### **The Virginia Experience of John Breckinridge**

John Breckinridge was born in 1760 and raised in frontier and recently-frontier western Virginia counties.<sup>6</sup> His Scotch-Irish parents and grandparents had landed on their feet in Augusta County around 1740 and the family had been buying and selling western land ever since. In spite of his seemingly remote situation, JB grew up at a nexus of local and long-distance information; that is, in the home of a local office-holder, also licensed as a tavern. After his father's death, JB entered the care and training of his uncle William Preston who, as an official surveyor and dealer in western lands, was a master of the manipulation of power over distance. JB studied in schools organized by uncles, clerked and surveyed for William Preston, and tutored his younger brothers and cousins before studying law at William and Mary and serving during the same years as a delegate from the southwestern counties of Botetourt and Montgomery to the Virginia Assembly. He began his law practice by traveling the circuit of western Virginia county courts. He married well, and his father-in-law provided a substantial farm in Albermarle County.

While Breckinridge appeared to be settling down, establishing a law practice and trying out his political ambitions, he and his kin and peers were also surveying and speculating in the trans-Appalachian Virginia counties that composed the Kentucky country. In 1783, his uncle William Preston left JB five hundred Kentucky acres. His brothers provided other locations on his behalf. By the late 1780s, JB had determined to move to the Kentucky District (though he preferred for the time being to keep his intentions quiet).<sup>7</sup> In the spring of 1789, he made a successful trip to “fix upon a place of residence” on the choice cane lands of Fayette County, Kentucky.<sup>8</sup>

### **Operating in Pairs**

With a strong hint of disapprobation, Kentucky historian Patricia Watlington observed of men like JB that, “Because it was impossible to locate land except by going to Kentucky, speculators often operated in pairs.”<sup>9</sup> Other historians have been more openly scathing.<sup>10</sup> Without coming to the defense

of these speculating men, one can appreciate the ways in which their habits of movement and connection perfectly fitted them to work the Virginia land system.<sup>11</sup>

Early in the 1780s, several of JB's brothers who were already surveying "on Beargrass" included him in their operations.<sup>12</sup> James Breckinridge sent JB, who was then in Richmond, detailed instructions for buying up military warrants in Virginia and sending them out to Kentucky. These warrants were the basis for claiming the land that the Breckinridge brothers (and many others) were busy locating, surveying, and dealing in the Kentucky country. Perhaps in return for JB's services in Virginia, his brothers procured Kentucky land for him in the process. James Breckinridge wrote in 1784 that he thought three or four of JB's entries near the Ohio would be "valuable in time." Alexander Breckinridge also reported from Kentucky that he had located a "pretty good piece of land" which he would survey for JB.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, JB also corresponded with his older cousin John Brown, who had begun to practice law in Kentucky. JB sent law books to Brown; in return, he had a source of advice on Kentucky law, land, and politics.<sup>14</sup> For a while in 1784, JB had four brothers and at least two cousins in Kentucky, all writing to him about Kentucky land and urging him to join them.

In the fall of 1783, JB himself went surveying on the Ohio River west of the Kanawha. At the time, the trip was disappointing. (As he grumbled to his mother, "There has gone such a Train of Surveyors, Collectors & Tax-gatherers before me, that they have drained, I believe, every farthing the poor people had".) But JB had surveyed at least one piece of land that could, with timely information, prove valuable. In good time, JB got that information. He had received half the land he had surveyed for one William Ward. Five years later, Ward wrote to inform JB that, the "lands on Guyandotte platt which you has of me," "being on the road to Greenbrier Courthouse," were soon "likely to be important." Ward gave "this notice of it," he wrote, because he thought it possible that JB could "make use of" the information, as he said, "to *our* advantage (my emphasis)." In exchange, Ward requested a crucial piece of information of a kind which JB, the former surveyor turned Virginia lawyer, surely possessed—"whether our title to the lands holds good."<sup>15</sup>

Letters exchanged during the eighties between JB and his brother James illustrate the intricacy of communication and the quality of the knowledge communicated among these western movers. James was surveying in Kentucky in 1786 when JB wrote to him from Virginia:

Kentucky is the greatest field for Speculation, I believe, in the World. Thus I am satisfied there never existed so many ideal fortunes anywhere. The whole mystery in amassing there, seems to be this only; *Do not grasp at too much—secure what you do aim at, and*

*never warrant titles.* [Even] if you even think your title the best in the Country if you grant it away; have this clause, "*The Title to which Land I do by no means bind myself, my heirs,....*"

Several pages of explanation followed, in which the older brother expounded on Kentucky land, law, and judges ("I know them all...."). JB finished by reiterating the crucial advice, which, significantly, was a legal point: "grasp at what Quantity you will, and let the titles you hold be as deficient as they may be preserve the last part of the caution, *never warrant titles* and you'll be safe."<sup>16</sup>

JB would continue to appreciate Kentucky as the world's greatest field for speculation, but by the summer of 1788, he had also begun to think of a Kentucky home. For this new purpose, long-distance co-operation was equally crucial to success. JB asked James Breckinridge to inform him of any good tracts of Kentucky land owned by non-residents. James, who had returned from several years of western surveying and was studying law in Williamsburg, quickly replied with just the sort of information JB required; that is, news of several likely tracts whose owners were for one reason or another unaware of the true value of their land. One owner was probably a fellow-student at the College; James noted that he was "still an infant," though "not for long." Then there was a "capital bargain": a widower who had inherited land from his late wife was "somewhat alarmed" about the validity of the claim. He "would sell cheap to any person who would take it without a warranty." And if JB would check the will in question, James was sure he would find the claim good.<sup>17</sup>

This last exchange illustrates an important feature of how men like JB operated. Their expertise flowed not only from east to west, nor from west to east. Instead, it *circulated*, just as the men who possessed and shared it were already in the habit of circulating. Thus, when JB needed information about good western land available at bargain prices, he might as naturally look east as west to get it. And his "eastern" informant would be a man who knew Kentucky land and land offices, who had a good eye for a legal loophole (in this case, a lawyerly eye trained in part by JB himself), and who had close contacts with land-holding Virginians in Williamsburg and Richmond. The kind of opportunity in western lands that John and James Breckinridge pursued would only be visible to men who were well-versed in the land and the law in both Kentucky and Virginia. Property-holding in early Kentucky was a great mess of overlapping and conflicting claims, so that most Kentucky settlers were plagued by the nasty circumstance that even the best land was only as good as its title. In contrast, men like JB could live with, live on, and even make a fortune from the tangles of the Virginia-Kentucky land system.

JB traveled to Kentucky in 1789 equipped not only with superb inside information but also with plenty of connections to make his information work.

He made the outward journey in useful company, joining a party which included his older brother Robert, who by then had lived for years on Beargrass and who had just spent several months in Richmond on land business. One of their young Preston cousins (just beginning his own Virginia-Kentucky education) joined the party as well.<sup>18</sup> JB also traveled with a saddlebag full of Kentucky business to transact for himself and friends, including a full power of attorney to handle the sale of Fayette County lands for Samuel Meredith, the father-in-law of JB's sister Betsy. Furthermore, JB carried a request from Annie Henry Christian, an early Kentucky settler who had returned to Virginia as a widow, and who asked JB to collect money from the Kentucky estate of her husband. As JB carried out these errands, he would renew and extend his ties to the leading men of the Kentucky country.<sup>19</sup> In the process, he would gain the finest information from the best western sources on the Kentucky lands and their titles.

Soon after JB arrived in Kentucky, he wrote home, "I have been generally in motion and feasting myself with the view." But acquiring choice Kentucky land required more than taking in the view, and this is where men like JB could succeed where others could not. Finding that it would not be easy "to procure a spot well situated," JB ended up buying the land that he had been empowered to sell for his connection Samuel Meredith. JB claimed the bargain was "not very advantageous" and even hinted that he had sacrificed his own interests for his sister's sake. Nevertheless, he had acquired a fine tract in Fayette County a few miles from Lexington where he would likely have his only sister as a neighbor, and he had also managed to buy an adjoining 600-acre tract.<sup>20</sup> He began to improve the land, though not in the pioneer-settler sense of the term.

Back in Virginia, JB wrote to ask a complicated favor of William Russell, an old friend already settled "on Elkhorn" who had offered to manage the new Kentucky property. JB was "extremely desirous" of Russell's opinion on the 600-acre tract that he had added to the Meredith purchase. This piece of land had originally been half of an estate. JB had bought his half from one heir while a Parson Todd had bought the other half from the other heir. JB had apparently been tormenting himself with the thought that Todd had gotten the better half of the original estate. Explaining that he had "some notion that a redivision of it might be brought about" to his advantage, JB asked that Russell view the whole estate "critically." Then, in case JB's land was inferior, he asked Russell to approach the two original heirs, "without incurring suspicion," to find out whether they had ever "considered the land divided in Quantity & Quality," as the law required. JB also gave detailed instructions as to where Russell should place tenants on the land so that the settlement requirements of the land law would be satisfied even if the land were later to

be redivided.<sup>21</sup>

JB was himself experienced in doing the kind of favor he asked of his friend William Russell. When his brother Robert wished to buy a Kentucky tract owned by a Mr. Stuart in Virginia, JB agreed to help. First, he met with Stuart; then, when Stuart "did not seem disposed to sell," he promised to mention the subject again whenever he saw Stuart in future. Like the favor that JB had asked of Russell, this errand also involved subterfuge. JB reported that Stuart did "not from his Conduct seem to know any thing" of a sale of adjacent land that would soon raise the value of his Kentucky tract. JB did not enlighten Stuart on the subject.<sup>22</sup>

These examples of speculators expertly "operating in pairs" between Kentucky and Virginia are not at all surprising—once the barrier of the Appalachian Mountains, so prominent in common sense and tradition yet so minimal in the operations of JB and his peers, is circumvented. There are sufficient practical, cultural, and even geographic reasons to expect that these partnerships between Virginia and Kentucky would come quite naturally. The connections to Philadelphia that men like JB developed during the 1790s were, in a way, just as unsurprising—and they promised to be just as efficacious for the men who worked them.

Naturally, men who had nurtured their ambitions in an expansive Virginia would follow the dynamic prospects of the new republic with relish. They would appreciate that, just as their Virginia ambitions had depended on maintaining effective ties to Williamsburg or Richmond, new opportunities would require connections to the seat of the new government.<sup>23</sup> Having hankered after the promising lands north of the Ohio through most of the 1780s, men like JB and his brothers now watched and waited with avid interest for Congress to establish land offices for the Northwest Territory. No wonder it was common at this time for Virginians like JB to make a winter visit to Philadelphia to "superintend for awhile the proceedings of Congress!"<sup>24</sup>

JB made such a trip in 1791. With some Virginia friends he had embarked on a "scheme of purchasing from Congress a quantity of land." He arrived in Philadelphia, armed with useful introductions from a well-connected Virginia partner, intending to interest men with "the command of money" in the scheme, and hoping perhaps even to "make them answerable for the first payments" on the land.<sup>25</sup> JB attended congressional debates and no doubt visited every possible contact in the general government. These included James Madison, James Monroe, and probably Thomas Jefferson.<sup>26</sup> When JB was ready to return home, Madison entrusted him with a variety of Virginia errands. From Madison's annotation to one letter, one can plot out JB's homeward itinerary and imagine the sorts of connections he made along the way:

Honored by Mr. Brackenridge who is requested to leave it with

Mr. Maury or Mr. James Blair in Fredericksburg, unless he should find that the Assembly will not be adjourned before he will be in Richmond, in which case he will be so good as to hand it in to W. Madison, of the House of Delegates, or in his absence, to Mr. Burneley of the Council.<sup>27</sup>

After JB returned to Virginia, Senator James Monroe kept him informed of the Congressional action on Western lands "since you were here."<sup>28</sup>

Virginians could conveniently and comfortably conduct business at the very centers of power in Philadelphia. Question: How would such men pursue the same interests from Kentucky, which, as even its most enthusiastic boosters had to admit, was 700 miles from Philadelphia?<sup>29</sup> Answer: just about the same. JB himself had hardly arrived in Kentucky before he got involved in a western land scheme much like the one that had taken him to Philadelphia two years earlier. This time Robert McAfee, an early Kentucky settler who was also an old acquaintance from Botetourt County, did the traveling, setting off on a borrowed bay horse for Philadelphia "to obtain from Congress a grant of land N. W. of the Ohio on the waters of White River." But it was JB who encouraged McAfee to "engage in this enterprise, and agreed to go partners with him." While in Philadelphia, McAfee "had also the aid of John Brown" (JB's cousin, then Senator from Kentucky). McAfee stayed in Philadelphia "attending Congress several weeks." He had no immediate results, but he "obtained promise from many of the members to aid his views." When McAfee returned to Kentucky, JB "agreed to pay him twenty shillings for every Thousand acres he would survey," and McAfee and five friends set out for the Northwest Territory.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, this example goes beyond Watlington's formulation of "operating in pairs," since it suggests both how Kentuckians could deal with congressmen at an eastern seat of power and how, at the same time, they would "operate in pairs" westward across the republic.

Still, Watlington's phrase is a good one. Not only does it perfectly describe the Kentucky-Virginia connection, but in a more general sense it suggests a parity of eastern and western roles. Historians commonly write of relations between eastern speculators and their western agents, always assuming that the power and initiative flowed from the East. That, of course, is not at all how the situation appeared to JB and his friends. For them, power, information, and expertise criss-crossed from one man to another and from one place to another. In their operations, there was effectively no east or west; and even, in spite of the obvious need to transact business at Philadelphia as well as on Beargrass, no center or periphery.<sup>31</sup> The possession of these habits and attitudes defined a group of men who, once they decided to migrate, would be ideally suited for western success. But not all of them would make the move.

## Movers and Stayers

The “private lives of the mobile majority,” John Mack Faragher noted in his study of an early western community, are “largely lost to us.” It follows that historians’ inquiries are often penned within bounds that justify their focus on the “recoverable histories of those who persisted.”<sup>32</sup> My study of western success stories, based on the experience of some extraordinarily well-documented “movers,” endeavors to counter that common bias towards place, settlement, and stasis. But it risks a different circularity, the reverse of the problem that plagues community studies. To avoid this problem I have found it instructive, while tracing the long-distance connections of the movers, to keep an eye on those who stayed put.

Among ambitious young men like John Breckinridge and his connections, the movers and stayers had a great deal in common; so much, in fact, that except in retrospect, it is impossible to tell them apart. JB’s younger brother James, for example, has gone down in history as a “stayer.” After studying law at William and Mary, he represented Botetourt County in the Virginia House of Delegates in sessions ranging over forty years. He ran unsuccessfully for Governor of Virginia in 1796, was in the running several times for the United States Senate, served four sessions in Congress, and participated in the founding of the University of Virginia. While practising law from his base in Fincastle, he established mills, an iron works, and a plantation, “Grove Hill,” from which descendants would dominate the society of southwestern Virginia for the next century.<sup>33</sup>

In 1784, just turned twenty-one, James joined his older brothers in Kentucky, took surveying trips out from headquarters on Beargrass, and even proposed to “Get one or two Indians to Pilate” himself and a partner through the dangerous but already-enticing country north of the Ohio. He returned to Virginia but was back in Kentucky in 1786, surveying and now declaring that he no longer intended to sell his own Kentucky land; he had “fallen in love with the country.” He tried that year to buy land on Beargrass Creek for his “seat.”<sup>34</sup> The next winter, James headed east to study law at William and Mary, a move that surprised his Kentucky friends, who had thought him “too much engaged in Business to retire or confine” himself “to a Sedentary life.”<sup>35</sup> He spent the next year and a half in Williamsburg and Richmond.

Meanwhile, James was receiving regular field reports on the prospects for young Kentucky lawyers. In 1787, James Brown, a classmate and cousin who had gone on to Kentucky, wrote asking James Breckinridge, “How soon may I expect you out here,” and urging him to get his license soon. A year later, Brown reported again that when he considered Kentucky “as unconnected with” his interest as a “professionalist,” Brown wrote, “I admire it...as a second Paradise. But when I consider it as the Country in which I am to Support myself by the practice of Law, I execrate, I abhor, I detest it.”<sup>36</sup>



These dramatics did not deter James Breckinridge. The next year, when his brother JB declared himself “firmly fix’d” on migration, James was delighted to hear it, since he himself intended “to bury [his] bones there!” After “staying so long in Williamsburg,” however, James would first have to practice law in Virginia for a year or two in order to “leave the eastern country free of difficulties.”<sup>37</sup> James, meanwhile, announced to his older cousin John Brown that he meant to leave Williamsburg the next spring and to “be settled” in Kentucky eighteen months later. John Brown advised him to hurry or there might be “scarcely room to receive you especialy if the migration of Attorneys continues till then as great as for the year past.”<sup>38</sup>

Still James Breckinridge persisted: though he married in Richmond in January, 1791, and cancelled a western visit that spring, he declared that he would remove to Kentucky in two years at most.<sup>39</sup> But when that time arrived, James stayed in Virginia while JB migrated to Kentucky, carrying with him the paperwork for “a great deal” of his brother’s Kentucky land business. Although JB reported James’s land “very valuable,” the claims were “in great confusion & darkness.” JB promised to do everything in his power to clear them, and with his help, James continued to buy and sell Kentucky land.<sup>40</sup> When in 1796 James made a particularly fine purchase, JB wrote to convince his brother to keep the land, first warning of Kentuckians scheming to buy the lands from him (“under the impression that you are a stranger to their value”), then assuring James that this purchase would “be an estate for all the children...whether legitimate or illegitimate,” that James could get.<sup>41</sup> His Kentucky kin had expected James to come out during the summer of 1795, but he did not make the visit.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps he never again traveled to Kentucky. His bones are buried in Botetourt County, Virginia, not far from where he was born.

Literally hundreds more profiles could be pieced together to show the contingent and even happenstance nature of migration for young men of similar circumstances and prospects. Among them would be the pre-eminent Virginians of the early republic—men who, like the “stayer” James Breckinridge, pursued western investments, considered western futures, and, virtually without exception, were close kin to men who moved west. The young James Madison, for example, considered “several projects” which promised an alternative to his probable future as a Virginia lawyer-planter-politician. A Kentucky friend wrote that, though perhaps he would smile “at the Idea of being politically buried in this Wilderness,” Madison ought to consider Kentucky. Madison replied that he did *not* smile at the idea. He did not expect to make the move, but had “no local partialities which can keep me from any place which promises the greatest real advantages....”<sup>43</sup> It is that spirit which, during the 1780s and 90s, animated so many young movers and shakers—including those who would become known as the “*Virginia* dynasty” of the Early Republic.

Commonplace as it was at the time, this phenomenon of movers who were stayers and vice versa has since been obscured by layers of historical writing calcified around the eventual outcomes. For men of the "Virginia dynasty," the quality of movement has been lost entirely. For second-line figures like John and James Breckinridge and their kin, this historical sedimentation has had a somewhat different effect. In life, these were men of powerful mobility, many of whom eventually worked their ambitions in a national and even imperial arena; in death, they have been settled and shrunk to icons of local and state pride.

There is a further advantage to keeping the stayers in mind as well as the movers, and to recognizing in consequence how little the difference between them has to do with their most passionately-declared (and quotable) intentions: doing so, we can begin to thwart the teleological tendency that so often distorts migration studies. The problem is a subtle one. It is not, for example, that scholars have ever taken JB for a frontiersman. His modern biographers have been quick to establish that JB was no "buckskin-clad pioneer who fought off Indians with one hand while erecting a crude log cabin with the other."<sup>44</sup> But whenever a historian writes—"The way had been long but at last John Breckinridge was a Kentuckian"; or "The trek had ended"; or "Moving, at last over the Mountains"—the teleological narrative (figuratively clad in buckskin) steals back in.<sup>45</sup>

### **"Mr. Brackinridge on his way to Kentucky"**

For several years after his 1789 trip to Kentucky, JB attended, long-distance, to his Elkhorn land while, at the same time, energetically pursuing his legal and political ambitions in Virginia. JB continued the arduous life of the young lawyer on circuit, but his legal reputation was growing. He began to practise more on appeals in the new district courts, he was asked more than once to do battle with Patrick Henry, and he was entrusted with some of John Marshall's legal business.<sup>46</sup> On his return from Kentucky in 1789, he launched an all-out (but unsuccessful) campaign for the clerkship of the Virginia Assembly.<sup>47</sup> The next year, JB was honored to author a welcome-home address to Thomas Jefferson from the citizens of Albermarle County.<sup>48</sup> In February, 1792, he was elected to the United States Congress for a term that would end in March, 1793.<sup>49</sup> Though, he did not actually take the seat, the election demonstrates JB's interest in national office. Apparently he shared a Virginia friend's opinion that he might hope to be "called on by the foederal councils," where he would "acquire honor & be of real service."<sup>50</sup>

As JB developed his legal and political careers, he also worked on his plans for migration. In 1792, he reported as "considerable progress" that he had obtained "more willing concurrence" from his wife Polly. Soon after, he arranged to send nineteen of his slaves ahead to Fayette County.<sup>51</sup> In the spring

of 1793, in a company of friends, relatives, and the remaining Breckinridge slaves, JB set out for "Redstone," whence the company would proceed by flatboat down the Ohio River to Kentucky.<sup>52</sup>

The Breckinridge journey to Kentucky began with an emotional family farewell—a set piece from the pioneer migration story—but there the resemblance to the old story ended. Far from setting off into wilderness isolation, the party stayed in contact along the way, both with family left behind and with the friends and relatives who awaited them in Kentucky. After hearing that they were under way, for example, William Russell dispatched a Mr. Lindsay to deliver some "business of importance" to JB when he arrived at Limestone. Mr. Lindsay, in turn, would let Russell know which road JB planned to take to Fayette County, so that Russell and JB's Kentucky kin, by 1793 including JB's mother and sister, could meet the family with "a Carivan of horse as an escort" to the house near Lexington that had been leased for them.<sup>53</sup>

To places where the company was expected to stop along the migration route, Kentucky friends and strangers alike sent urgent notes to JB. The letter writers asked JB to consider himself engaged for them in pending lawsuits, or, at least, not to join the other side until they could talk with him. They made use of an impressive variety of strategies to make speedy contact with someone who was still, after all, on his migration journey. For example, a letter directed to JB at "Captain West's," in Bourbon County, through which JB would pass just before reaching Fayette, bore a note on the envelope asking Captain West to oblige the sender by "delivering this letter to Mr. Breckinridge *as soon as he reaches Bourbon* (my emphasis)."<sup>54</sup>

Even the arc of JB's ambition towards politics on a national scale—and the kind of connection that would make it achievable—can be glimpsed in a vignette from the migration journey itself.<sup>55</sup> Returning to Virginia in the spring of 1793 after the congressional session, James Madison and James Monroe actually encountered the Breckinridge party making their way toward Redstone. From every stop on their way south, either Madison or Monroe had been posting a report to Jefferson, who was in Philadelphia eagerly awaiting the results of recent Congressional elections. Thus, when the two congressmen "fell in with Mr. Brackinridge on his way to Kentucky," Madison recounted their conversation to Jefferson. "Mr. Brackinridge" had "adverted to Greenup's late vote with indignation and dropped threats of its effect on his future pretensions." Translation: disgusted that a Kentucky congressman had defected from the Jeffersonian position on a recent vote, JB declared that he might run for Congress against the defector. Two weeks later, Jefferson had received and responded to Madison's letter. In other words, while the Breckinridge company were still traveling west, the the news was going around even in Philadelphia. Moreover, it was not simply the news that JB was "on his way to Kentucky," but the significant information that JB meant to use his migration well,

demonstrating his (partisan) loyalty to republican principles as he entered the national arena.<sup>56</sup>

### Pioneers and “Separated Men”

Above all, the migration story of John Breckinridge is a narrative of movement and connection. There were separations and dislocations, of course, but, to a remarkable extent, men like JB could maintain old ties, while, at the same time, through migration, they formed and strengthened new bonds of the same kind and quality, drawn from the same sources as the old. With time-tested strategies and style, they also used their mobility to clear new paths to wider connections and larger success.<sup>57</sup>

This new migration story is almost too copiously documented, since the evidence for it consists of the paperwork that enterprising men like JB generated in the course of their daily operations. Even so, as an American migration story, this one may not stick. In American history, migration stories run deep, and, in spite of the wonderful variety of the migrants, a single migration narrative runs deepest of all and easily overruns the rest. It is the most cherished version of this story—that is, the pioneer saga—that so often obscures the many other migration stories of the early republic, including that of men like JB.

The most important modern version of “the” American migration story is Oscar Handlin’s, *The Uprooted*. To Handlin, the history of immigration was “a history of alienation and its consequences.” For his immigrants, with their “old ties snapped,” America was “the land of separated men.”<sup>58</sup> Like the pioneer story, the “uprooted” narrative has been challenged, refined and revised; like the pioneer story, it has great staying power, historiographical assaults notwithstanding. In fact, the “uprooted” narrative has recently surfaced in some of the most influential early American histories.<sup>59</sup>

In a chapter called “Loosening the Bonds of Society,” Gordon S. Wood declared “the growth and movement of people” to be “the basic fact of early American history.” Wood, as it happens, cited the clan of John Breckinridge to illustrate how migration “strained and broke apart households, churches, and neighborhoods”; how it caused families to become “less involved with the larger society”; and how “extended lines of kinship frayed and snapped.” Within a few generations of their migration to Virginia, Wood wrote, the clan was scattered. Even “someone as established as William Preston...uprooted and replanted himself and his family three times in his lifetime, excited by the desire to sell high in one place and buy cheap in another.”<sup>60</sup>

No doubt many hundreds of migration stories could illustrate the disintegrating effects of rapid and incessant movement across the early republic. It is important to recognize, however, that the migration story of JB and his kin is not one of them. William Preston’s sons and nephews dispersed across the republic, but they maintained and sometimes even strengthened their

kinship ties. They did not become "less involved with the larger society"; instead, they and their descendants would be obvious and successful candidates for state and federal office.

For JB and his kin, the early republic was not a "land of separated men" but, above all, a land of *connected* men. This circumstance was understandably crucial to the personal success of these men. It was also critical to the success of the early republic. These men were masters of mobility—they could make things happen at a distance and even use distance to make things happen. With such men scattered over the trans-Appalachian West, there would be (to put it in Handlin-esque terms) no need to send "*legati*" to the "far periphery." Men like JB were already there, busily and successfully demonstrating that to them it was no far periphery at all but simply a new, somewhat logistically challenging, center of operations.<sup>61</sup> If one hoped to run an expansive republic (or a republican empire!), much of it over newly-occupied territory, with neither a monolithic general government nor much of an infrastructure in place, these were certainly the men one would want to maintain it. And to a remarkable extent, these migrating, western, Virginian, and Jeffersonian movers and shakers were the men who did.

## Notes

1. My dissertation, "Power in Motion: Western Success Stories of the Jeffersonian Republic," works outward from the careers of three ambitious migrants: John Breckinridge, Thomas Worthington, and William C. C. Claiborne.

2. Lowell H. Harrison, "A Virginian Moves to Kentucky," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 15 (April 1958): 201-13; Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *To Western Woods: The Breckinridge Family Moves to Kentucky in 1793* (Rutherford, N.J.: 1991), 165-83; and Todd Barnett, "Virginians Moving West: The Evolution of Settlement and Slavery in Kentucky, 1785-

1815," unpublished paper presented at the conference in May 1996 to honor Richard S. Dunn. My own analysis of such men as "portable planters" is summarized in David Hackett Fischer and James C. Kelly, *Away, I'm Bound Away: Virginia and the Westward Movement* (Richmond: 1993; and reprint, Charlottesville: forthcoming), 95-96.

3. For those who had little personal control over the move, the adversities could loom foremost and formidable. For these migration experiences, see Gail S. Terry, "Family Empires: A Frontier Elite in Virginia and Kentucky, 1740-1815" (Ph.D. diss., The College of

William and Mary, 1992), 112-87; and "Sustaining the Bonds of Kinship in a Trans-Appalachian Migration, 1790-1811: The Cabell-Breckinridge Slaves Move West," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 102 (October 1994): 455-76.

4. Peter S. Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington, Ind.: 1987), 1; and Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York: 1984), 131.

5. The "greater Virginia" which these men inhabited was, in significant ways, much like "greater Pennsylvania," but the similarities—convergences, really—have received little attention from historians. A geographer provided what is still the springboard text (Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* [Charlottesville: 1971]).

6. The major source for John Breckinridge (hereinafter, JB) is the voluminous Breckinridge Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereinafter, BFP). The standard biography is Lowell H. Harrison, *John Breckinridge, Jeffersonian Republican* (Louisville, Ky.: 1969); also see James C. Klotter, *The Breckinridges of Kentucky, 1760-1981* (Lexington, Ky.: 1986), 3-35.

7. JB, Charlottesville, to James Breckinridge, Williamsburg, 17 August 1788, BFP.

8. JB, Albermarle, to Mrs. Fish, New York, 15 December 1788, BFP.

9. Patricia Watlington, *The Partisan Spirit: Kentucky Politics, 1779-1792* (Chapel Hill: 1972), 20-21. Virginia operated on a land system commonly called "indiscriminate," in contrast to the later federal grid system, because land warrants did not specify the location of the land to be claimed. Making the location, then, depended on the services, expertise, and good will of western surveyors and land officers.

10. For scathing commentary, Thomas Perkins Abernethy set the standard (*Western Lands and the American Revolution* [New York: 1937]). And see Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: 1996); Fredrika Johanna Teute, "Land, Liberty, and

Labor in the Post-revolutionary Era: Kentucky as the Promised Land" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1988); and Ellen Eslinger, "The Great Revival in Bourbon County, Kentucky" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1988).

11. In my own defense as a student of such men and their operations, I will only follow my mentor, who once addressed this problem in a mere third of a Richard Dunn sentence. As Richard wrote of his work on the West Indian planter class, I would like to say that tracing the success stories of speculating lawyer-planter-politicians is a "shabby task in many ways," yet it is, I believe, "an illuminating one" (Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713* [Chapel Hill: 1972], xv).

12. "Beargrass" was a creek name used to designate the fine cane lands around Louisville. Similarly, "Elkhorn" denoted the fine Fayette County land near Lexington to which JB would migrate.

13. Alexander Breckinridge to JB, 4 March 1784; James Breckinridge to JB, 23 May 1784; and 18 November 1784; Alexander Breckinridge to JB, 3 August 1784; and William Breckinridge to JB, 9 August 1784, BFP.

14. John Brown to JB, 20 September 1784, BFP.

15. JB, "old Mr. Thompson's," to Lettice Breckinridge, 9 February 1783, BFP; William Ward to JB, 15 February 1788, BFP; and Survey for William Ward and JB, 2 November 1783, Preston Davie Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

16. JB, Albermarle, to James Breckinridge, Beargrass Jefferson, 29 January 1786, James Breckinridge Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia (hereinafter ViU).

17. JB, Charlottesville, to James Breckinridge, Williamsburg, 17 August 1788, and James Breckinridge to JB, 29 August 1788, BFP.

18. JB, Albermarle, to Mrs. Fish, New York, 15 December 1788; James Breckinridge, Botetourt, to JB, Albermarle; and Robert Breckinridge to JB, 6 March 1789, BFP.

19. Annie Christian was sister to the wife of Samuel Meredith as well as to Patrick Henry. Her request sent JB to two prominent

Kentuckians who were her husband's Kentucky executors, John Brown (JB's cousin) and Caleb Wallace. The errand also enriched JB's Virginia ties by involving him in friendly conversation with Patrick Henry, whom JB had previously known only as a political and professional rival. Henry would ask JB, "Will you inform me how you like Kentucky? And what are the prospects in that Quarter?" (Annie Christian, Winton, to JB, 25 June 1789; and Patrick Henry to JB, 3 July 1789, BFP).

20. Samuel Meredith, Winton [Amherst County], to JB, 19 March 1789; and JB, Mercer County, to Lettice Breckinridge, 7 May 1789, and 5 January 1790, BFP. When Samuel Meredith sold his Kentucky lands, he had kept two tracts for his sons, one of whom was Betsy Breckinridge's husband.

21. Prince Edward Court, to Col. William Russell, 8 April 1790.

22. JB, At Home, to James Breckinridge, 10 August 1789, Box 839, BFP.

23. For the Virginia connections, see Sarah S. Hughes, *Surveyors and Statesmen: Land Measuring in Colonial Virginia* (Richmond: 1979); and Turk McCleskey, "Rich Land, Poor Prospects: Real Estate and the Formation of a Social Elite in Augusta County, Virginia, 1738-1770," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 98 (July 1990): 449-86.

24. John Marshall, Richmond, to Archibald Stuart, 27 March 1794, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2d ser., 2 (October 1925): 286-87.

25. Robert Rives to JB, 25 September 1791; Wilson Cary Nicholas to JB, 17 November 1791, BFP; Richard Bland Lee, Philadelphia, to Philip Fendall, Esq., 11 December 1791, BFP; and Robert Smith to Wilson Cary Nicholas, 10 January 1792, Wilson Cary Nicholas Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

26. Having favorably impressed Jefferson in Albermarle County the year before, JB would surely have followed up by calling on the Secretary of State (Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Cabell Breckinridge, 12 June 1815, Ethelbert Dudley Warfield, *The Kentucky Resolutions of 1798: An Historical Study*, 2nd ed. (New York: 1894), 55).

27. JB was also charged with "a trinket for Fanny," to deliver at Richmond, and with "a

number of surveys" for a General von Steuben. On the last business, Madison wrote that he had "acquainted [JB] with a state of the business" as far as he had been able to "collect it" himself (James Madison, Philadelphia, to James Madison, Sr., Dec. 10, 1791, Robert A. Rutland et al, eds., *Papers of James Madison* [Charlottesville: 1983], 14:146).

28. James Monroe, Philadelphia, to JB, 8 April 1792, BFP. Monroe had to inform JB that Congress had taken no action since JB's visit and was unlikely to do so, since St. Clair's defeat had thrown "such a gloom over western affairs."

29. In 1794, Englishman-turned-booster Harry Toulmin admitted the distance but at the same time issued a challenge: "But why are we to calculate the distance of every place on the continent from Philadelphia? It is true, we are seven hundred miles from the people of Philadelphia, but is only seven hundred miles from men like ourselves. We are as much in the busy scenes of life as the people of Philadelphia are" (Harry Toulmin to James Leigh, Winchester, Virginia, 19 May 1794, in Harry Toulmin, *The Western Country in 1793: Reports on Kentucky and Virginia*, Marion Tinling and Godfrey Davies, eds., (San Marino, Cal.: 1948), 134).

30. Robert B. McAfee, "Life and Times of Robert B. McAfee and his Family and Connections," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 25 (1927): 123.

31. In rhetoric, of course, as opposed to actual business, those who became "western men" would make dramatic and effective use of the distance and disaffection between west and east.

32. John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: 1986), 60.

33. Mary Newton Stanard, "James Breckenridge," *Dictionary of American Biography*; Alicia L. Cole, "Guide to the Papers of James Breckinridge, 1789-1904," n.d., ViU; Norman K. Risjord, *Chesapeake Politics, 1781-1800* (New York: 1978); Mary D. Robertson, ed., *Lucy Breckinridge of Grove Hill: The Journal of a Virginia Girl, 1862-1864* (Kent, Oh.: 1979); and archival collections cited below.

34. JB, Albermarle, to James Breckinridge, Beargrass, Jefferson, 29 January 1786, James

Breckinridge papers, ViU; and James Breckinridge, Lincoln, [Kentucky], to JB, Albermarle, 8 March 1786, BFP.

35. John Brown, New York, to James Breckinridge, Williamsburg, 17 December 1787; and from Danville, 25 February 1787, James Breckinridge Letters, ViU.

36. James Brown to James Breckinridge, William and Mary, 13 August 1787; and James Brown, Mercer County, to James Breckinridge, Williamsburg, 12 May 1788, James Breckinridge Letters, ViU.

37. JB, Charlottesville, to James Breckinridge, Williamsburg, 17 August 1788, James Breckinridge Letters, ViU; and James Breckinridge to JB, 29 August 1788, BFP.

38. John Brown, Danville, to James Breckinridge, 28 October 1788, James Breckinridge Letters, ViU.

39. Betsy Breckinridge Meredith to Lettice Breckinridge, 1 March 1791, BFP.

40. James Breckinridge, Botetourt, to JB, 19 March 1793, BFP; and JB, Lexington, to James Breckinridge, Fincastle, 10 March 1794, James Breckinridge Papers, ViU. When JB made the move to Kentucky in 1793, he carried powers of attorney and other documentation to do land business for many other "stayers" besides his brother James. The ease with which these men "operated in pairs," in other words, was one factor that allowed them to continue for years without foreclosing either their Virginia or their Kentucky futures (letters from Henry Banks, Richmond, 6 March; James Wood, 23 March; Charles Irving, Albermarle County, 30 March; Charles Wingfield, 1 April; Hudson Martin, Amherst, 8 April 1793, BFP).

41. There was a sharp point to JB's brotherly jocularly; James had an illegitimate daughter in Kentucky (JB, Frankfort, to James Breckinridge, Botetourt, 11 May 1796, James Breckinridge Papers, ViU). Back in Botetourt County, James's third legitimate child (first son) was born in 1796. The family was settled on 520 acres with eight slaves (Richard R. Beeman, *The Old Dominion and the New Nation, 1788-1801* [Lexington, Ky.: 1972], 266; and Cole, "James Breckinridge").

42. JB, Frankfort, to James Breckinridge, Botetourt, 11 May 1796; and 29 July 1796, James Breckinridge Papers, ViU.

43. Drew R. McCoy, *The Last of the Fathers:*

*James Madison and the Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: 1989), 229-33 (quote on 230); Caleb Wallace, Lincoln County, Kentucky, to James Madison, Orange County, 12 July 1785; and Madison to Wallace, 23 August 1785, Robert A. Rutland et al, eds., *Papers of James Madison* (Chicago: 1973), 8:323 and 350.

44. Harrison, "A Virginia Moves to Kentucky," 201; and see, Harrison, *JB*, 22.

45. Harrison, "A Virginian Moves to Kentucky," 213; Klotter, *Breckinridges of Kentucky*, 6; and Dicken-Garcia, *To Western Woods*, 165-83.

46. James Breckinridge, Botetourt, to JB, 18 August 1790; Thomas King, Botator [i.e., Botetourt], and John Quin, Bedford, to JB, n.d. [before 20 February 1790], vol. 6, BFP; John Preston, Smithfield, to JB, n.d. [before August court, 1790, vol. 6, BFP; and John Marshall, Charlottesville, to JB, two letters, n.d., vol. 7, #1046-48; and 28 March 1790, BFP; and Stephen Sampson, Goochland, to JB, 12 March 1791, BFP.

47. JP considered the office an advantageous one which would place a man "at the Source of Information, & at the Centre of Government." After preparing a circular letter for his candidacy, JB relied on his brother James to advise the western politics of his campaign: should he send the letter out to the Virginia legislators in the Kentucky counties, or "would it be more proper to deliver letters" to them as they passed through Botetourt County on their way to Richmond for the next session? (JB, At Home, to James Breckinridge, 10 August 1789, Box 839, BFP).

48. [JB], "The Holy Cause of Freedom: Address of Welcome by the Citizens of Albermarle . . .," n.d., Julian P. Boyd, ed. *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: 1961), 16:167-80.

49. The special election was set when Virginia gained additional representatives. JB thought he might as well serve "one Winter in Congress," rather than spend "that Winter idly at home" (JB, At Home, to Archibald Stuart, 14 February 1792, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2d ser., 5 [October 1925], 295-6).

50. Archibald Stuart, Staunton, to JB, 25 February 1792, BFP. Stuart cautioned, probably unnecessarily, against JB's getting involved in Kentucky political wrangles. JB



had never been tempted by the appeals from Kentucky friends urging him to join them: "Now is the time we stand most in Kneed of such characters" (William Russell, Mt. Brilliant, to JB, 19 May 1792, BFP).

51. JB, At Home, to Archibald Stuart, 14 February 1792, BFP; and *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2d ser., 5 (October 1925), 295-6; G. Thompson, Broken Islands, to JB, 2 March 1792, BFP; and JB to George Thompson, 29 March 1792, Thompson Papers, Clements Library, University of Michigan. A few months later, however, JB had to report that the resistance of family and friends to the move still made "dreadful impediments" (JB, to Lettice Breckinridge, 19 August 1792, BFP).

52. Redstone Old Fort on the Monongahela, at present-day Brownsville, Pennsylvania, was a common place of "embarkation on the western waters." From Limestone (now Maysville) on the Ohio, they would travel by land to Lexington (Harold B. Gill, Jr., and George M. Curtis III, eds., "A Virginian's First Views of Kentucky: David Meade to Joseph Prentis, August 14, 1796," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 90 (1992), 122).

53. Joseph Cabell, (Jr.), to Polly Breckinridge, n.d. [May, 1793], vol. 9, #1461; "Articles of agreement for a country seat advertised in the *Kentucky Gazette*, 2 March 1793," Samuel Meredith, Jr., and William Russell with Peter January, 9 April 1793; and William Russell, Mt. Brilliant, to JB, 1 May 1793, BFP.

54. James Brown to JB, 20 April 1793, BFP. Also, letters from John Bradford, "At Mr. Meredith's," 5 May; J. Hite, 10 May; John Edwards, 6 May; and William Henry, Scott County, 6 May 1793, BFP.

55. Because of the distance and because Kentucky would be an outpost of Jeffersonian opposition (much of it led by JB!), this arc toward national government and towards its 1790s capital at Philadelphia seems counter-intuitive. I address this problem in "Kentucky in the New Republic: A Study of Distance and Connection," Craig Thompson Friend, ed., *Escaping the Long Shadow: Essays on the Kentucky Eden, 1750-1830* (Lexington, KY.: forthcoming 1998).

56. James Madison, Orange County, to Jefferson, 12 April 1793, John Catanzariti, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: 1992), 25:533 and 619; and Thomas A. Mason et al, eds., *Papers of James Madison* (Charlottesville: 1985), 15:7.

57. Nicholas Canny suggests a similar phenomenon for Scots in seventeenth-century Ulster ("Fashioning a British Atlantic World," in this volume).

58. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migration that Made the American People* (New York: 1951), 4-5; and 305.

59. Handlin himself first translated the "uprooted" narrative to early America ("The Significance of the Seventeenth Century," in James Morton Smith, ed., *Seventeenth-Century America* [Chapel Hill: 1959], 3-12). The recent histories are Bernard Bailyn, *The Peopling of British North America* (New York: 1986), and *Voyagers to the West* (New York: 1986), 495-638; and Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: 1991).

60. Wood, *Radicalism*, quotes on 125 and 129.

61. Bailyn, *Peopling*, 89-90; and, for the same image, see Handlin, "The Significance of the Seventeenth Century," 11.