

Western Kentucky University

TopSCHOLAR®

Kentucky Library Research Collections

Library Special Collections

1903

Tragedy of the Lost City: A Story of the Pioneer Days of Martinsville

Kentucky Library Research Collections

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/dlsc_kl_non_mat



Part of the **History Commons**

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kentucky Library Research Collections by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.

"The Tragedy of the Lost City"
A story of the pioneer days of Martinsville

By Victor Moulder.
Smiths Grove, Kentucky
1903.

Toward the close of the year 1799, a little company gathered about the only inn of the thriving village of Martinsville on Barren river. The inn, a tavern, was owned and operated by Hut Martin, the first white settler of the now extinct, but historic town. He was also proprietor of the only store and warehouse in the village and was considered one of the most important personages in the entire community. Martin was a native of North Carolina and came to Kentucky with Daniel Boone in 1775. In 1794 he, with a score of other families, came across the wilderness to "the Barrens" and settled on Barren river, founding the town which bore his name. His first house was a rude log cabin, but a few years later he erected a large four-roomed brick mansion which was called "the inn". He was a man of great sagacity and industry and accumulated a small fortune. His family consisted of himself, wife, two sons and a daughter - Elsie.

The occasion for the gathering of the company about the inn was "Miss Elsie's birthday." She was twenty and the neighbors far and near, young and old, had been invited to attend the celebration and participate in the festivities that were to follow. Corn whiskey and genuine frontier hospitality flowed freely among the congenial friends and visitors. A grand ball was billed for the occasion which had brought out the young folks in force. The spare room was cleared and decorated and a hundred lights flashed from a hundred silver candlesticks. Wreaths, myrtle, mistletoe, cedars and evergreens hung about the walls. The young folks vied with each other in "fixin' up" and "gettin ready" for the great event. The ladies were decked in dresses of the brightest plaids and hues, wrought upon their own looms; the young men were attired in the latest patterns of "homespun" suits and a happier band of "lads and lassies" never met in a more brilliant or cheerier home.

The gayest and most beautiful of them all was Elsie Martin. She fluttered here and there lending her aid to her less fortunate companions and encouraging the giddy. Her presence was an inspiration; her kind words and witching smiles rousing the faintest heart. When the soul-stirring peals from the string band struck up, a score of young men clamored about her begging her for the first set. But Elsie refused them all until each young lady in the company had "found a pardner." Tom Merton, a young farmer from across the river, was honored the hand of Elsie for the first set. Merton was an ardent admirer of Elsie Martin and was greatly elated at his fortune on being her "first pardner." At 10 o'clock the music pealed out and the dance began, Elsie and her companion leading off the in the dizzy whirl.

Dozens of couples followed and the dance was on in earnest, the dancers whirling about the great room, keeping perfect time to the mellow music from a thousand strings.

Round after round was called by the prompter, and hour after hour sped away, unheeded by the joyous dancers. One, two, three - a dozen young men had been honored with Elsie's hand in the ring. Midnight brought the banquet. At 1 o'clock the dancing began again. Silas Drake was awarded the first dance with Elsie. Silas, too, loved her, adored her, and she in turn, it was whispered, loved Silas. With beating hearts and happy thoughts, with eyes drinking love from eyes and soul speaking to soul, they clasped hands and joined the dancers and danced "as never man and lady danced before."

With folded arms and bated breath one man stood outside the ring and followed the pair about the room with "an eye of fire and a look of rage." The man stood staring and the dance went merrily on.

In an adjoining room the old folks listened to the music, watched the dancers and talked of "ye olden times."

"Reminds me of days in North Carolina in '69," said an old settler.

"Many a time have I tripped the toe to that music in old Virginia," said another.

"That's just like her name," said a third. "Hut Martin's daughter."

with me in old Virginia at Steve Sloan's in '70?"

"Course I do, Brice", replied the lady, "and do you remember what happened that night?"

"Lemme see; you run away with Hut and got married, I do 'bleve."

"Yes, and what else?"

"Dan'l Boone kin in from Kain-tuc-kee; same night Wash Marsh was killed."

"And Dan'l is here tonight."

This statement so startled the old settler that he could hardly believe what he heard. But Mrs. Martin assured him that "Dan'l was in the mess-room with Hut", whereupon Brice hurried out to seek the old pioneer. Others joined him and sure enough they found Boone toasting his venison and warming before the mess room fire. The great Kentucky pioneer was talking slowly and earnestly to the master of the house. Friend after friend gathered about the old hunter and drank in his every word.

(* In 1799 Boone made a trip into the "Barrens" and hunted on Barren river. On a beech tree some hundred yards above Martinsville is found this inscription, "D. Boone 1799 - killed a bar." At the Indian House, four miles above Martinsville, there is a rock in the cliff on which is this inscription, "Dan'l Boone, May 17, 1800." This shows that on two occasions Boone was on Barren river.)

"Twenty-nine years ago tonight, Hut," said he, "I dropped in on ye at a dance just like this at old Steve Sloan's in Virginia. You and Moll war married that night, and Wash Marsh was waylaid and killed. It's strange that—"

A shot rang out.

Instantly the company was silent as death. Martin sat motionless staring at Boone. Then men grasped their weapons and rushed toward the ball room. The women shrieked. In the ball room all was confusion. A man lay prostrate on the floor, the blood spurting from a gaping wound in his side. It was Silas Drake. The young ladies screamed with terror; young men stood as if paralyzed at the awful deed. Slowly Boone pushed his way through the throng to the wounded man's side.

"Who done this, Silas?" he asked the dying man.

"Tom Merton!"

"Tom Merton? And where is Tom Merton?" he asked, sweeping the crowd with his keen eye.

All eyes turned to the spot where, gun in hand, the assassin had stood a few minutes before. He was gone; vanished, as it were, from the midst of the assembly, no one knew where.

"Jealous!"

"Who was he jealous of?" asked Martin.

"Of Silas Drake and your daughter, sir," was the reply. "Merton had danced several sets with Miss Elsie and he demanded her hand in this last one, but she refused him and went through it with Silas. Merton stood near, keeping his eyes on the couple all the time. At the close, he set his teeth hard and cussed, 'Damn him, I'll kill him if she dances with him again.' Just as Elsie and Silas were stepping into the ring the second time, the shot was fired."

"Murder!" came from a hundred voices. "Hunt him down. Hang him. Burn him!"

Two-score men, heavily armed and determined, started at once in all directions to search for the assassin. Silas Drake expired in a few moments. Elsie was completely overcome with grief at the death of her lover. The company broke up, each heavy hearted, returning to their homes. Boone tarried with his friend until morning then departed as silently as he had come. The assassin's victim was buried in the village cemetery two days later, and Elsie wept on alone and uncomforted. Diligent search failed to reveal Merton's hiding place, and in a few days the hunt was dropped. In a month the affair was history. Fights, killings, and murders were common in those days. When a man

passed from the scene of action he was soon forgotten. So with Silas Drake, fatherless, motherless, alone in the world, his name became only a memory to all the world save the bright-eyed maiden who had loved him. So with Merton, the slayer of Silas. He buried himself in the wilderness and was never seen more by the hardy pioneers of Martinsville. Elsie wept the fountains dry and ceased to weep, the busy village hummed on as before and forgot, the purling spring beneath the hill sang the story over until time snapped the chord. Winter spent his force and gentle spring came again, and all was quiet and happy along the beautiful river.

Six months later, in the fresh bright month of May, a little canoe with a single occupant, drifted slowly down the waters of Barron river. The person in the boat was a man, habited as an Indian, yet closely scrutinized, was not what he seemed to be, but a white man. Slowly the boat drifted down the river on the tide, first in the middle of the stream, then with a few noiseless strokes, nearer inshore. Thus hugging the northern bank the boat and man glided, silently through the waters. The mouth of a creek was left behind, the bend was passed and nearer and nearer to the shore crept the silent craft. The man scanned the shore along the river and the top-line of cliffs above with his keen eyes. Heavy timbers and the jagged bluffs shut off a view of the busy village several hundred feet above. Down, down the stream, nearer and nearer inshore, under the shadow of the trees and cane, glided the tiny boat with its silent mysterious occupant. A few yards below, the waters from the spring above poured into the river. Keener looks the man with his jet, piercing eyes for some object above. Rising slowly erect he looked intently upward, then settled back into the boat. A few strokes of the paddle turned the nose of the boat landward and noiselessly it struck the shore. The man cautiously stepped off, secured his boat and crept forward along and up the bluff. Who was he? What did he mean?

Two miles further up the river was another canoe, somewhat larger than the first, which was moving rapidly down the stream. In this boat were two men, one of them was a white man, clad in semi-savage fashion. A powder flask was strapped about his neck and shoulders, a rifle lay across his lap. His eyes glittered as stars beneath a cloud of grey. The face was passionless and immovable, the body was somewhat bent, yet firmly set. Earnestly, steadily, unerring his eyes swept the river and line of cliffs far ahead. Half aloud he would frequently mutter, "It is he, it is there," at which his companion, a free-born son of American soil would grunt with satisfaction. And swifter went the paddles and faster shot the boat down the stream.

"Pull, Logan, pull!" urged the white man, "He has landed at the spring."

"Ugh!" grunted the Indian as he splashed the waters viciously, "Me know devil, me get him yet."

The white man was none other than Daniel Boone, the great Kentucky pioneer. The Indian was Logan, chief of the Mingos, son of old chief Logan. A strange pair in a strange place, yet with the same end in view. Each seemed to know where they were going and what would happen in the end. The sound of distant voices warned them that the village was near and gradually the speed of the boat was lessened, the purling waters from the spring was heard, and in the in the cane-brake the smaller boat was spied. "His boat," said Boone. "Ugh," said the Indian.

Noiselessly they anchored their boat alongside the other, stepped ashore and followed the trail of the other man up the bluff towards the spring. Another tragedy, more horrible than the first was about to be enacted in the precincts of historic Martinsville.

On this same lovely May morning, lithesome, beautiful Elsie Martin, pail in hand, tripped down the hill to the spring. She was even more lovely than the months agone; only on her face could be detected a trace of sadness. The birds were humming their glad carols about her, and the daisies were bowing and kissing her feet as she sped by them. In the distance the whir of a woodman's ax was heard. Soft, mellow notes from a violin far away floated through the air and caught her ear. A smile, as the blush of spring, flitted across her fair, sweet face. Though not as bright and ruddy, not as joyous and free as when last we saw her a half year ago, yet on that face was written a calm, peculiar beauty which defied the artist's brush. A draught from the cool waters of the spring brought a blush to her face and as she faced the breeze and looked far away across the river, the faintest smile swept over her face. But the blush went out and the smile passed away as she stood there gazing into the wilderness beyond. The warm sun came out and kissed her cheek, and the newly made leaves fluttered above. Nature, not content, worshipped her beautiful child. Seemingly content and happy in this her favorite spot, Elsie sat down on a large stone near the spring, buried

her face in her hands and dreamed on. Looking up, her lips parted and seemed to say, "Here we met and whiled many happy hours away." Silas had been sleeping so long, so long. "Oh, if he were here now how happy would I be. Oh, Silas, Silas, why were you taken from me?" Then a voice seemed to answer back, "He is at rest yonder," and she cried out in anguish, "Give him back to me, Oh, God!" And then again she bowed and wept. Alone in nature's arms wept only as the brokenhearted. "Oh, God," she cried, "Take me to him." "Poor, lonely, beautiful Elsie, arise and fly, ere it is too late. See a monster creeps nearer and nearer, fly home, sweet child, before he comes. Arise and fly!"

Half an hour passed unheeded. Still Elsie sat, meditating in solitude beneath the deep shade at the brink of the rippling stream from the purling Martinsville spring. Slowly she rises to go, but alas, too late! As if by magic and from a great distance a voice rang out,

"Elsie Martin, I have come back."

Was it the voice of the dead? Startled at the strange sound and fully disarmed, she turned and faced the speaker.

"Tom Merton!" she knew him, "Why here? Begone!"

"It is I, lassie, be not alarmed, not yet must I go. I have come back for you. Come with me to my lovely bower, far away, sweet Elsie."

"Not yet, my lady, not yet," he returned gently, gazing intently into the depths of her beautiful face. "I love you and cannot go. Oh, my little lass, how I have suffered, how I have toiled, day and night, for your sake. I killed Silas for the love of you; slew him because you smiled upon him, because he had won from me what I prized more than life. I love only you, hated him to his death. Months have I battled away his ghost. Night after night I have fought him away. I could not sleep for his upturned, dying face was ever with me. I would have killed myself but for you. Forgive me and love me once again, my Elsie."

"Never, villain, blacker than the blackest night. I hate you, loathe you. Leave me alone and go your wicked way." She turned to flee up the hill to the village - to fly from the brute who had murdered the one she loved.

"Too late, Elsie; too late."

"Stop!" he commanded, "or by the fires of the infernal, I plunge this dagger into your heart, stay yet one moment," and he reached out his long, strong arms and seized her.

"Help, help!" she cried, "Let me go!"

His rough hand closed about her mouth, and a strong arm clasped her slender waist and thus he held her close to his side. "Hear me, Elsie," he hissed, "Unless you go away with me, here I will kill you. See this blade. It shall suck the warm blood from your heart. That heart which should be mine. And the fountains of it shall mingle with the fountain of this spring forever. Will you go?"

She struggled in vain; in vain she battled with the heartless man with her frail arms. She fought with a hopeless desperation to free herself from his grasp. She tried to scream, she stamped the cold earth in terror, she prayed but to no avail. Oh that someone would come to her rescue. Oh, that Silas lived and were near. Her soul cried out in anguish, "Father, Mother, save your child. Oh, God in heaven, have pity." But none heard save him who looked down in pity on a defenseless tortured soul. Secure her assailant held her, even kissed the pleading upturned face.

"I love you Elsie, be mine," he said, "be merciful to me, and I will show you mercy. On the river below us waits the boat. In the wilderness far away a bower. Yield to me and all is well. There you shall reign a queen, free as the birds of the air. Hear me, unless you go you shall die." Elsie heard him, heard his bitter words, his threats. Once again she struggled to be free, her arms became numb, her body weak, her head swam round and round, a faintness seized her and totally overcome, she sunk hopelessly down into the tightening arms of Tom Merton unconscious.

For a moment he looked down on her, then as if seized with some dread, he rushed to the spring for water and bathed her burning face with the cold water. Slowly she recovered her bewildered senses and again struggled to be free.

Bending over her, his face to hers, the villain said, "Love me, Elsie, and all is well." Faintly she whispered, "Never." Then he raised her up, lifted his knife on high above the prostrate maiden, and said "Then you die." Up went the knife. A shudder shook the frame of hapless Elsie Martin. A look of intense hatred passed over his visage, his eyes sparkled as fire. Slowly the knife descended. Would he strike?

Silently Boone and his companion crept up the bluff towards the spring. They saw Merton standing over the maiden, saw him bathe her face, saw him stoop over her then raise up, knife in hand. Once the Indian raised his gun to fire. At a touch from Boone he lowered it. "Wait." "Me no wait," said the Indian, "much more." "Hurry," urged Boone. Closer, closer, only 50 yards away, would they be in time. Once Merton turned and looked their way but saw nothing, heard not a sound. Flat upon the earth man and Indian crawled up, up the tangled vine-clad hill. The assassin still stood over the girl. Would they be in time? "Me shoot," hissed the Indian. "To miss would be fatal," whispered Boone, "Wait." They saw the hand begin to fall. Only 25 yards away, they heard him speak, saw her struggle.

"Now, Logan, is your time, creep up behind and be avenged; go quickly."

Softly as the tread of a cat and swift as lightning the Indian dashed to the open space towards the pair. Boone raised his gun slowly, aimed surely at Merton's heart, ready to shoot if Merton's hand should fall before the Indian reached his prey.

Logan cleared the space in ten seconds. In 60 seconds reached Merton's side, gave a yell, such as an Indian only can give, lifted his war-ax on high and struck. Boone lowered his gun and whispered, "Another account squared," and slowly advanced to the scene of Martinsville's second tragedy.

"You struck home that time, Logan," said Boone as he looked upon Merton's caven skull, "But the maid bleeds."

"Drop his knife, struck her side; not much hurt," grunted the warrior as he proceeded to scalp his victim. "He no strike squaws more."

"It's only a flesh wound, she will soon revive; bring me water, Logan."

"First heave him in the river; see's my squaw's and papoose's scalp; evil."

And with a shove, drag and vigorous kicks, Logan worked Merton's body to the edge of the cliff and with a huge effort shoved it over, a splash in 40 foot water told the last tale of Merton's earthly career.

Together Boone and the Indian lifted Elsie up and bore her up the hill to her parents' home. A few brief words to Martin explained all that had happened. Elsie recovered in a few days, lived many years, but the bloom was gone from her cheek. The laughter from her heart. Boone and the Indian were feted and honored as heroes by the settlers, but to each alike, praises fell upon deaf ears. They had done duty, one was avenged of an outrage, the other had brought justice home to a brute and saved a friend's life. Merton had gone into the wilderness to the Indian's home, had betrayed a friendly Indian, outraged and slain a chieftain's squaw and child, had fled back to Martinsville, followed closely by Boone and the outraged husband and father — Logan, son of chief Logan, the Indian. In a few days the two travelers left in their canoe and drifted on, on far down the beautiful Barren river and out into the great wilderness west.

(* Note: Logan was a son of Chief Logan. His squaw and child were murdered by Merton.)

The blood from Elsie's wound trickled into the waters of the spring, mingling as it went with the blood of Merton. The water ran red for months and no amount of "baling out" and "finkering" affected the color. When in later years the water became clear once more and sweet to the taste, a horror worse than death lurked in the depths. After their

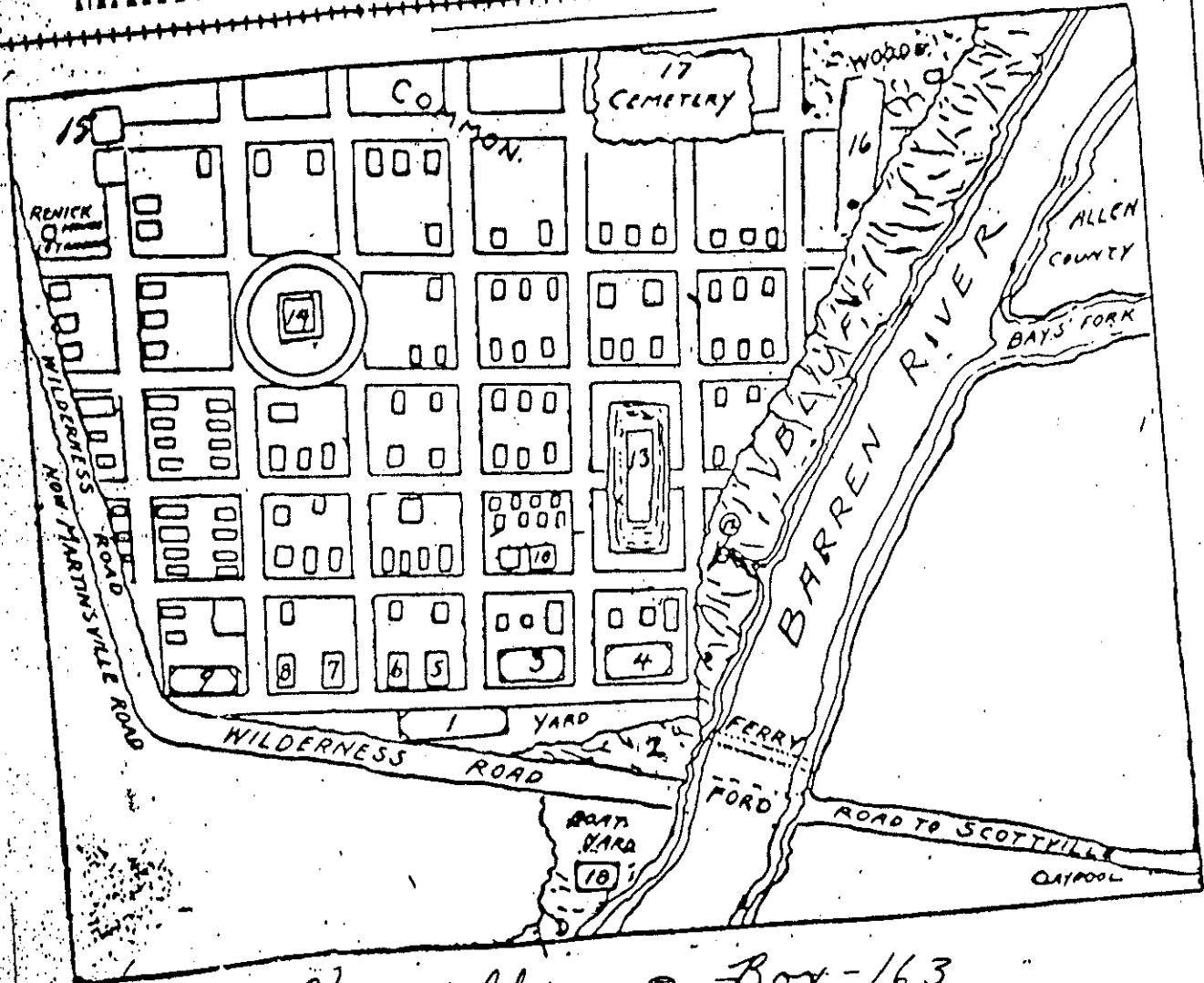
constant use, men sickened and died, just as the white robed angel! Elsie sickened and died twenty years after. When she was laid to rest beside Silas Drake, the graveyard, once so empty, began to fill rapidly. The white city grew larger and the village grew less as the years rolled by. By and by the town was deserted entirely and today not a stone marks the site of the once bustling and populous village on the banks of Barren river.

The peculiar sweet taste of the deadly waters of the purling spring beneath the hill will forever perpetuate the memory of the tragic life of Elsie Martin.

Not only is the town extinct but there is a superstition in the vicinity that the spring and the old town-site are haunted. The waters of the spring are sweet to the taste, but have a deadly effect after constant use. In 1860, its waters were red like blood and for weeks the "spring boiled blood." In 1900 the spring again, "boiled blood" for a week. This "running of blood" from the spring is a sure "sign" of war or some great calamity.

THE END

MARTINSVILLE, THE LOST CITY OF KENTUCKY



Ken Adkisson Boy-163
Downs St. 61736

My G G G Grandfather Andrew Adkisson left Martinsville around 1842 and settled in Knox Co Illinois. Some of the other families that lived around Martinsville and were related by marriage were Lomax, Howa Crow, Pool, Hayes, Herndon, Hiatt, Todd. Some of these families ended up in Montgomery Co Mo
Dear Mr. Mrs. Hayes

Map references:

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) McFaddin's Warehouse | (13) First Log Cabins |
| (2) Boat Landing | (14) Race Track |
| (3) Johnson's Warehouse | (15) Renick Old House |
| (4) Old Warehouse | (16) Prize Shooting Yard |
| (5, 6, 7, 8) Storehouses | (17) Cemetery |
| (9) Packinghouse | (18) Distillery |
| (10) Martin's Residence | |
| (12) Martinsville Spring | |

We have read stories how in ancient times cities were obliterated and their identity lost, but in our new and progressive America very few places that grew to any size have been entirely deserted and their very existence almost forgotten. So far as the modern history of our State is concerned there is only one place in Kentucky, which reached the proportions of a city, that has passed from the memory of man -- Martinsville.

This city at one time could boast of her three hundred residences, her fleets of flat boats that plied the river, her great warehouses and immense shipping and her ten hundred souls within her limits. With overflowing storehouses and surrounded by thousands of scores of the most fertile farming lands in the world, this ill-fated city declined and gradually passed from the shores of the quick into the haven of the dead.

Martinsville was founded in the spring of 1785. It was located on the north bank of Barren river, in Warren county, some twenty miles east of Bowling Green. The place was first settled and took its name from Hut Martin, a hardy pioneer accustomed to the vicissitudes of frontier life. He was a native of Virginia, came to Kentucky in 1777 and settled at Boonesboro. He was a friend and companion of Daniel Boone and materially aided that great explorer in conquering the wilderness and opening to civilization a vast domain of untold wealth.

In the fall of 1777, Boone, Martin, McFadden and others left the infant settlement at Boonesboro and set out on a journey into the wilds of the unexplored west. They crossed the divide, passed through what are now Green, Adair, Cumberland and Barren counties and came to the Indian house on Barren river to Warren county. From that point they scoured the larger part of Warren and Allen counties in quest of game. In December they returned to the settlements, where on account of the hostility of the savages, they were compelled to remain for some time. During the interim Martin kept his mind's eye on the fertile valley down on the beautiful Wah-ri-he (Barren) river, determined to journey thither as soon as the disturbed state of the natives would allow.

Accordingly in March, 1785, he put his resolutions into effect and set out with his family and possessions in a caravan train for the shores of the Wah-ri-he. With him came Andrew McFaddin, Stephen Claypool, Charles Dabney and fifteen other families. McFaddin settled on Barren river, four miles east of the present city of Bowling Green. His place was known as "McFaddin's Station" and was located on the farm now owned by Mr. Emmet Logan. Ruins of this old station are still visible. Claypool settled on the south side of the river one mile from Martinsville. Dabney took up land in the "the Bend" four miles above Martinsville. In all seventeen grants were issued to settlers on Barren river, in the "County of Kentucky," by Patrick Henry, who was then Governor of Virginia, in the year 1785.