The Scotch-Irish of Rockbridge County
and their recreational activities
of the eighteenth century

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received unacknowledged aid
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During the middle of the 18th century, many Scotch-Irish Americans settled the regions of Virginia including present-day Rockbridge and Augusta counties. The Scotch-Irish pioneers brought with them a religious fervor as a result of the Reformation and Protestant movement. Their strong belief in the Protestant teachings, more specifically Presbyterian teachings, is what shaped the mind and character of the early Scotch-Irish Americans. Their Presbyterian faith affected their recreational activities along with their everyday activities of life.

In order to understand the Scotch-Irish settlers of Rockbridge County and their recreational activities, it is necessary to see how their religious fervor came about and how they were before the new religion appeared. James G. Leyburn noted that the Scots had only rarely shown any deep concern for religion before 1559 in Scotland (Leyburn, 47). Their recreational activities, consequently, reflected their lack of religious zeal. Before the middle of the sixteenth century, the occasion for real festivity for the Scots occurred at fairs, held in the burghs, the centers of trade in Scotland. Farmers would come with their families and dispose of their surplus goods while buying the goods they needed. At the fairs, farmers sold their crops and animals while merchants displayed their goods as well (Leyburn, 28). The fun, excitement, and gaiety of the fairs was a relief from the isolation and loneliness of farm life. The fairs offered taverns, sideshows, shooting galleries, and a "motley of freaks", according to Dillion, a scot describing the July Fair in the royal burgh of Ayr. (Leyburn, 28). Local
singer, harpists, and pipe-players also entertained the Scots. Scots were also rich in folk tales, and dances often drew neighbors together. Weddings were also occasions of rough festivity, including a feast, dancing, and ribaldry. The Church, after the Reformation, did its best to change these wedding practices (Leyburn, 30).

The Reformation during the sixteenth century did, however, bring many changes to the activities and beliefs of the Scottish people. The first accomplishment of the Protestant movement in Scotland was winning the awe, admiration, and intense affection of the people. The movement also instilled into the Scottish people a devotion to education, set about the reform of their morals, and introduced a measure of democracy in church government (Leyburn, 56).

Around 1610, James VI, the King of England, planned a settlement of Northern Ireland by English and Scottish peoples. Economic stress in the Lowlands of Scotland and economic opportunities in Ulster made the migration attractive to the Lowland Scots. For the next fifty years, Scottish settlers, along with some English settlers, made the migration in hopes of better economic opportunities, which was their chief incentive. Thereafter, religious difficulties in Scotland provided the incentive to make the move (Leyburn, 101). At the time of the Scottish migrations to Ulster, Scotland was, according to Leyburn, "at fever heart with religious zeal." (Leyburn, 47).

The settlement of Ulster proved to be quite successful,
especially for the Scots. The Scottish population in Ulster dominated the English contingent, and several generations of some Scottish families lived in Ulster. Over that time, differences developed between the Ulster Scot and his cousins in Scotland. First, social distinction had changed the Ulster Scot’s character. Also, the Ulster Scot's loyalties were now centered in Ulster rather than Scotland. Last, the Ulster Scot’s religion had subtly hardened. (Leyburn, 140)

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Ulster Scots became discontented with their living conditions. Many Ulster Scots saw emigration to America as the only way to get away from the poverty and religious grievances of Northern Ireland (Dickson, 25). After the reign of the Stuarts ended, English rule turned against the Protestants, including the Presbyterian Ulster Scots, and persecuted their following. Between 1718 and 1720, thousands of Ulster Scots emigrated to America. Ten years later, an even larger number of Ulster Scot emigrants came to America, bringing their strong Presbyterian faith and values. Ulster Scots poured into ports in Pennsylvania and Maryland and filtered through the valleys of Virginia and the Carolinas.

Life of the Scotch-Irish, or the Ulster Scot emigrants, on the American frontier was not as much a shock to them as to other emigrants. They had endured the hardships of starting homes in Northern Ireland, so they were able to adapt well to the frontier. The pioneer Scotch-Irish, although presbyterian in faith, were not as puritanical as the later Scotch-Irish
communities, as evidenced by their recreational activities.

Long accustomed to the use of whisky in Scotland and Ireland, the pioneers quickly learned how to turn their corn, a new crop for them, into whisky. The Scotch-Irish settlers found in whisky their first product that was easily marketable and easily conveyed in compact form to trading centers. With no voice yet raised against drinking and with plentiful supplies of whisky in every home, many of the pioneers became hard drinkers (Leyburn, 264). Frontier sports among the Scotch-Irish were popular, also. Men enjoyed wrestling, competitive shooting for a mark, and racing. Women, on the other hand, had quilting parties, co-operative work at the men’s house-raising, corn-husking, and harvest times to enjoy each other’s company. (Leyburn, 264) Hunting and tracking game, which had been necessities for survival at first, soon became favorite pastimes. Scotch-Irish settlers learned Indian methods of forest crafts as quickly as they earned the Indians’ methods of fighting. Many of the men became expert hunters, and some became so addicted to hunting that they preferred life in the woods to village life. (Leyburn, 266). Weddings were also big occasions for the pioneer Scotch-Irish in America. The occasion generally began with the young men racing for a bottle of whisky, the winner having the right to be the first to kiss the bride. The wedding ended with the "bedding" of the couple, accompanied by good wishes for the beginning of a large family. The crudity of the recreational activities of these pioneer Scotch-Irish was explained and
justified by the youth of the pioneers and their need for uproarious relaxation after a day's or week's steady and monotonous labor on an isolated farm. Such social rites would, however, change as the settlements grew and became communities (Leyburn, 266).

By the middle of the eighteenth century, Scotch-Irish settlements developed into civilized communities. According to Leyburn, communities developed by: first, the building of a church and school, if possible, and securing a minister; second, the appearance of a tavern or general store; third, the bringing of the community under jurisdiction of a Court (Leyburn, 260). Nevertheless, Central Virginia attracted one of its first large populations of settlers after Governor Gooch of Virginia granted a half a million acres in his issuance of a patent to Benjamin Borden. The land grant to Borden included land of present-day Rockbridge and Augusta counties. Having secured the grant, Borden extended an invitation to a large number of Scotch-Irish families to settle the land which is present-day Rockbridge County. Consequently, an influx of Scotch-Irish Americans settled the area with hopes of better economic opportunity and education.

With the construction of Liberty Hall in 1779 in Rockbridge County, the Scotch-Irish Americans, under the leadership of presbyterian ministers, put order into their community. The establishment of a church and Liberty Hall Academy, therefore, led to more puritanical lives for the Scotch-Irish. With the
exception of solemn festivals in the autumn and spring and weekly meetings at church, families had little social intercourse, except occasional visits and the occurrence of marriage feasts (Howe, 454). Morton noted that dancing lay under ban and that the "cavalier" vices of Tidewater, Virginia did not flourish within the mountains (Morton, 39). Howe stated that careful and religious education of the children was one of the most important features of their domestic policy (Howe, 454). Leyburn notes that the Scotch-Irish settlers of Rockbridge County had the rigorous standards of Presbyterians and Puritans, teaching children that it was sinful to dance, to play cards, to attend the theater, to break the Sabbath by any diversion, and to engage in frivolous pastimes. (Leyburn, 322). Students at Liberty Hall Academy were forbidden to play cards; dice, or other "unlawful games" or to indulge in any form of gambling. They were not to be found in any tavern at "unseasonable" hours nor allowed to "be intoxicated upon occasion nor engage in any dancing school nor any debauching revel whatever" (McDaniel, 23).

According to Dr. Ruffner, the Liberty Hall students' amusements were not remote from the modern tastes of students: cards, backgammon, flutes, fiddles, and even marbles (Howe, 455). Evidence shows that some of the strict rules of Liberty Hall were not totally obeyed. The discovery of a large number of ceramic marbles suggests game playing. A bone die and bone gaming board suggest that gambling may have occurred, even though the trustees opposed gambling vigorously. Smoking was popular, as indicated
by the discovery of 313 pipes or parts of pipes found at the Liberty Hall site. A jews harp gives evidence of an interest in music. Few firearms and other arms-related artifacts suggest that guns were used primarily for hunting rather than for defense. (Liberty Hall, 33) According to Dr. Ruffner, the sports of the students were mostly gymnastic, both manly and healthy. Among the sports named were leaping, running, wrestling, pitching quoits, and playing ball. (Howe, 455)

Early records show that hunting was popular sport of the Scotch-Irish during the second half of the eighteenth century in Rockbridge County and Virginia as a whole. According to Morton, a poll tax was authorized to provide a fund for paying wolf bounties. In one month of 1752, 225 wolfheads were brought to the Augusta Court House. In 1790, forty wolf-heads were presented to the magistrates of the county, the bounty being one hundred pounds of tobacco for a grown animal and fifty pounds for a cub. Deer were protected by law. A statute of 1792 made it illegal to kill deer with a bell or collar on its neck (Morton, 39). In a study of cartridge cases and shells found on sites in the Rockbridge area, the evidence shows that none of the sites maintained an inventory that would indicate that hunting was a primary economic orientation of the residents (Archaeological Interpretation, 198). Robert Mitchell notes that even as early as the 1740s and 1750s, only one estate in eight in the upper Shenandoah Valley had guns or trapping equipment. (McDaniel, 28) The Scotch-Irish Americans of Rockbridge County, therefore, were
probably not dependent on their hunting for food to live on but probably hunted for recreation.

Other evidence suggests that smoking was a recreational activity of the Scotch-Irish people in Rockbridge County during the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. Numerous pipes and pipe parts have been found on the Bobby Moore’s Barn excavation site in addition to the Liberty Hall site. Also, tobacco was the major crop of Virginia and was a main export for colonial American. Advertisements for pipes are numerous in the *Virginia Gazette*. In the June 11, 1767 issue, a list of imports of the James River from Madeira included thirty-eight pipes, along with rum from Barbados and wine from Madeira. The August 25, 1768 issue of the *Virginia Gazette* listed exports of ten pipes along with tobacco and Madeira wine, to Aberdeen, Scotland.

Other recreational activities of the area during the eighteenth century are apparent because of other advertisements. The *Virginia Gazette* in its November 29, 1770 issue had an advertisement by John Carter for the sale of playing cards. Matthew Anderson placed an advertisement for, among other things, a jews harp in the August 16, 1776 issue. Marbles seems to have been a popular game during the eighteenth century in the Rockbridge County area. In addition to findings of marbles at Liberty Hall, a number of marbles have been found at the Moore’s excavation site. The popular game of the Scotch-Irish might have been Taws, an adult marbles game. (McDaniel, 14) The game calls
for players to put one or two marbles in a ring and shoot at them alternately with other marbles, and the player who obtains the most marbles by beating them out of the ring is conqueror. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 679) An advertisement by Mary Hill in the January 24, 1771, issue of the Virginia Gazette announces the sale of, among other products, marbles from England.

During the late eighteenth century in Rockbridge County, the Scotch-Irish Americans dedicated their lives not only to economic well-being but more importantly education. The education, although not liberal in its variety, was taken seriously and was necessary to teach the Scotch-Irish children the principals and values of the Presbyterian Church. The Scotch-Irish people did, however, find time for recreation. Recreational activities included: playing marbles and cards, hunting, music, and smoking. Drinking was also a recreational activity even though authorities of the Presbyterian Church preached against over-consumption. Their Presbyterian authorities did, consequently, discourage many of their recreational activities but did not totally prevent them.
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