

The Discovery of the 1747 Property and Home Site of

John and Esther Houston Montgomery

Augusta County, Virginia

By J. Russell Montgomery and Andrea Montgomery Adams

During a July 2009 visit to Augusta County, Virginia, Russell Montgomery visited the old home place of his ancestors, John and Esther Houston Montgomery. His visit concluded a search that had spanned nearly 4 years and many hours of genealogy research involving many friends and family members.

The story of this search first began for Russell shortly after his sister submitted an application for membership on their Montgomery line to the DAR based upon information from a family book that was published in 1969 by a distant cousin. Upon review, the DAR staff discovered an error and disapproved her application because they had determined that one of her ancestors had been incorrectly assigned to the wrong family thus making most of her lineage incorrect. By the time the error was discovered, nearly 40 years had elapsed and the trail had gotten cold. Since Russell's family had believed all those years that the family book was correct, there had been little, if any, new genealogy research in his family. The DAR revelation now meant that the search to establish the identity of his real ancestor had to start from scratch.

After several years of research by he and other family members¹, his correct Montgomery lineage was traced to John and Esther Houston Montgomery via their son Alexander Montgomery and finally the mystery was solved. Now, this story skips forward to the present day when this long and intensive search has culminated with the attempt to locate the original property that John and Esther Houston Montgomery had purchased and settled in 1747 in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. For this task, Russell had elicited the help of Andrea Montgomery Adams and others, who he had gotten to know through their mutual genealogy research concerning various Montgomery families. With Andrea's research experience coupled with her mapping expertise, the property was located in March of 2009.

The remainder of this article is divided into 4 parts:

- Part I** John and Esther and the role of their descendants in the history of our country
- Part II** How John and Esther's property was discovered.
- Part III** Visit to the John and Esther property and the discovery of the home site
- Part IV** Description of the John and Esther home and the chain of ownership

¹ Hoffman, Susan Montgomery et al, *The Discovery Of Our Ancestry Using Genealogy Research and Scientific Means*, The Blount Journal, Fall 2008, pgs. 46-50.

Part I John and Esther and the role of their descendants in the history of our country by Andrea Montgomery Adams

John Montgomery and his wife Esther Houston Montgomery settled in Virginia in the 1740's. They faced trials and tribulations like all other pioneers. However, I find them interesting because they have a long reach that encompasses a lot of Montgomery's.

Descendants of this Montgomery couple are in the DNA study. And there are not just a few of them that match; a lot of Montgomery's carry his DNA. Is it a coincidence that his descendants have the propensity to get DNA tested, or is there just a lot of descendants? Then there are other Montgomery pioneers that connect with him. Esther Houston Montgomery was the great Aunt of General Sam Houston. Sam Houston would go to the Battle of Horseshoe Bend with Lemuel Montgomery (of the Hugh Montgomery of Salisbury, NC family). And Sam Houston would become a sub-Indian Agent serving the Cherokee Nation headed by U.S. Federal Indian Agent Hugh Lawson Montgomery (of the James Montgomery of Lancaster, SC family). Sam Houston would also go to the Battle of San Jacinto with 7 Montgomery cousins. The DNA of William Montgomery of Lincoln County, KY matches this John Montgomery. This is the William Montgomery that pioneered KY and produced Mark Twain

Through either DNA results or historical documents, this Montgomery family ties to the original pioneers of the Montgomery's who settled PA, VA, NC, SC, TN, AL, and TX. John Montgomery and his descendants would participate in the battles that made our country. Not only did they participate in the French and Indian War, the Revolution, and the War of 1812, but also San Jacinto. San Jacinto was the battle that General Sam Houston won that gained Texas her independence. Because John Montgomery and Esther Houston Montgomery graced us with so many descendants and because they helped lay America's foundation, I wanted to honor them by finding their original Virginia farm.

Part II How John and Esther's property was discovered by Andrea Montgomery Adams

In 1747, John Montgomery bought 247-1/2 acres in the Borden Grant that lies in Augusta County, VA. His 1747 plat exists in the early Virginia records. In addition, we know that the land lies three miles south of Dutch Hollow Cemetery.

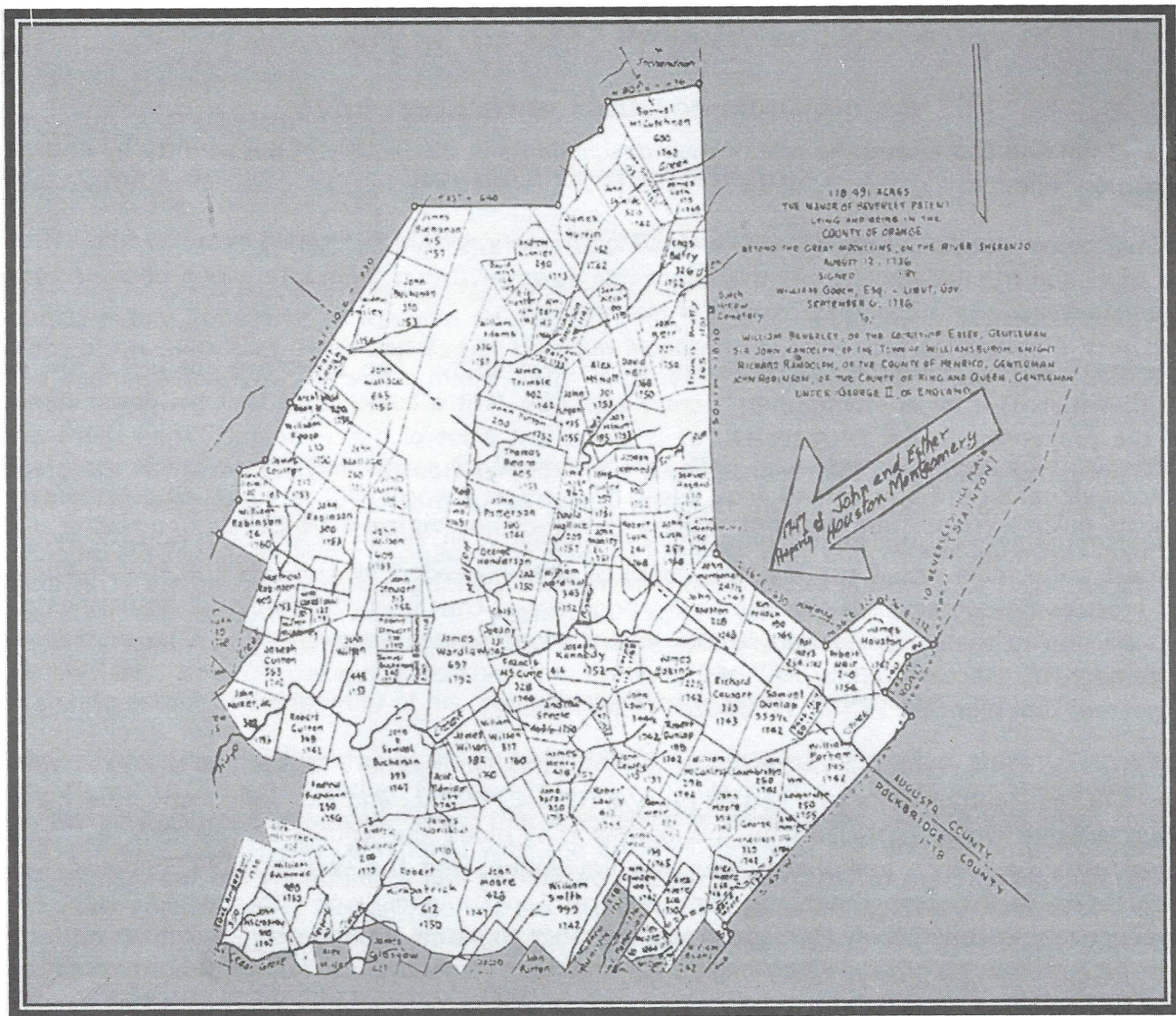


Figure 1: Shows a section of an old map of the Borden Tract and the location of the property purchased in 1747 by John and Houston Montgomery

I was able to re-create the plat by drawing it on Google Earth, three miles south of that cemetery. After I drew the plat on Google Earth, the fun really started. Using Google Earth, I recorded all the street names that ran through the land that was once John Montgomery's land in 1747. Then I went to the "white pages" on the computer and did a "reverse" look up. That let me enter the street names, which in turn, the computer told me the names of the people that live on those streets. In addition to the names, "white pages" listed their phone numbers. So, the Google Earth map told me that Lyles Road was on John and Esther's 1747 property. Then the "white pages" told me that Nellie Harris lived on Lyles Road. I called Nellie Harris and told her that the computer told me that she was living on property that was once owned by John Montgomery and Esther Houston Montgomery in 1747. You can imagine what she was thinking since she did not use a computer. I then explained that there was a DNA test going on which had many participants matching the landowner that formerly lived on her land. She gave permission for all of us to visit her land. But she did not have documentation that John Montgomery owned the land. All we had to go on was the Google Earth map.



Figure 2: Satellite photo/Google Map showing the John and Esther property outlined in red. The red "X" in the upper right corner of the map denotes the location of the Old Providence Church. The blue wavy line across the bottom right corner of the map depicts a stream bed that originated where their house used to sit.

Prepared by Andrea Montgomery Adams, March 2009

Margaret Montgomery Nathe is one of the DNA participants that match the DNA of John Montgomery. She submitted her brother's DNA sample in order to participate. Margaret lives in Virginia and she worked with me on finding the plat on a current map of Virginia. In other words, we needed something to anchor the plat to. That is the trick to drawing the plats on Google Earth. We had to find something that existed both today and in 1747 in order to draw John Montgomery's plat. In this case, we found the county line and a cemetery called Dutch Hollow. They exist on both today's map, and the maps of 1747. We knew John Montgomery's location to both, thus we were able to draw the plat on a map. Then we drew the plat on Google Earth. Most computers come with a feature called "Paint" that lets you draw on anything you want. In my case, after Margaret pointed me in the right direction and gave me the correct county map, etc., I was able to pinpoint on Google Earth where John Montgomery lived. Once we found the land, Margaret went out to visit the location and met Nellie Harris. The land was beautiful, but we still did not get anywhere. Nellie Harris did not have any land documents for us, and all we had for her was a plat drawn on Google Earth.

Russell Montgomery descends from John and Esther Houston Montgomery. Russell and I met through the DNA study and worked this line on and off for a few years. I gave the Google Earth map with my outline of the plat to Russell and he went to visit Nellie Harris. His find was extraordinary.

Part III Visit to the John and Esther property and the discovery of the home site by J. Russell Montgomery

My wife and I just returned from a visit on July 6-9, 2009 to the Shenandoah Valley of Augusta County, Virginia. We had made a special trip there for the purpose of locating the property that had once belonged to my Scotch-Irish ancestor, John Montgomery and his wife Esther Houston, which they purchased from Benjamin Borden on the 20th day of August 1747. After finding and visiting the property, I also decided to do a quick search for any information about these ancestors at the Washington and Lee University library in Lexington, Virginia.

Sometimes in life, there are moments or events that seem surreal. For me, such a moment occurred when I was preparing to wrap up my routine 4 hour visit to the Washington and Lee University library. I had finished making copies of various documents and was about to leave when the librarian asked me if I had tried to locate my ancestor's home. Unknown to me, she was referring to the search of a relatively new computerized file about historical homes that had recently been converted from microfilm. Almost immediately I replied "I am sure that his home is long gone because, after all, he lived back in the early 1700s". But luckily, I then added "let's see what we can find since there is nothing to lose." Using her computer terminal, the librarian proceeded to access the 'online catalog' at the Library of Virginia and the Survey Reports of old Virginia homes compiled as a part of the Historical Inventory Project of the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A) back in the 1930's. A search using my ancestor's name produced the file of the old home that had originally been built in 1747 by my ancestor, John Montgomery. The documents constituting the file had been compiled by James W. McClung on September 16, 1936 and contained both the house photo and a narrative description of the home that was originally built about 1747. As I quickly scanned the document, I knew I had found something very special to our family. I also knew it was one of those rare moments that occur infrequently when something new and very interesting is discovered.

My John Montgomery was listed as the first owner/builder of the house in 1747 when he purchased the property from Benjamin Borden. Mathew Houston, the younger brother of Esther Houston Montgomery, was listed as the second owner who purchased the house from him in 1768. Later, Mathew Houston sold it to James Rowan in 1779 where it remained in the Rowan family up until the history of the house was compiled in 1936 by James W. McClung for the W.P.A. Historical Inventory Project.



Figure 3: Photo showing the property of John and Esther Houston Montgomery as it appeared July 6, 2009. Photo taken by J. Russell Montgomery



Figure 4: Photo of the house that John Montgomery built on his Virginia property in 1747. The picture was taken in 1936 by James W. McClung as part of the Historical Inventory project of the Works Progress Administration. Photo courtesy of the Library of Virginia.

After leaving the Washington and Lee University library in Lexington, I drove back out to the Raphine area (exit #205 off I-81, Raphine Road) and to Old Providence Road where John Montgomery had once owned his property. I went back to the home of Mrs. Nellie Harris with whom I had visited earlier that day when I was first visiting the former Montgomery property. Mrs. Harris is the 94 year old owner and current resident of the farm which John Montgomery originally purchased back in 1747. Mrs. Harris readily recognized the house in the photo and pointed out the location where it had once stood. She told me that she was not aware that the house had once been owned by the Montgomery family. She knew the house as 'Rowan Manor' and told me how the house had burned down in 1941. She said that a fire started in the chimney when the wife of her late husband's uncle was baking pies in the kitchen oven. After the house burned, the property where the house once



Figure 5: Photo taken on July 7, 2009 of the site where the home built in 1747 by John and Esther Houston Montgomery once stood. Photo taken by J. Russell Montgomery. [GPS site coordinates: N 37, 57', 01.7" W 079, 14', 05.7"]

stood was enrolled into the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Restoration Program due, in part, to a natural spring that emanates from the land where the old house once stood.

With the discovery of the extensive information about the John Montgomery home and its location, I knew I had far exceeded my expectations when I had begun my trip to Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley to locate my ancestor's farm. I had gone there with the simple intentions of viewing the area and getting to see the property where my Montgomery ancestors had lived and raised their family. However, I had discovered something much more tangible and meaningful and had come away with a powerful emotional connection I had not anticipated. I had discovered their home now preserved forever in memory through the excellent documentation contained in the records of the W.P.A. Historical Inventory Project. Now, 8 generations and more than 250 years later, one of their descendants had returned to visit their farm and view their home site where it all began. What a powerful and unexpected feeling that was. The discovery of the house documents and home site provided me with a sense of realism about their lives and who they were. After all, this was their home. This was where they lived, worshipped, raised their family, and participated in the building of our nation. Wow, what a special moment!

Part IV Description of the John and Esther home and the chain of ownership

The following description is provided in the WPA Historical Inventory Project file² for the home that was built by John Montgomery in 1747:

"The old home was built in two sections; the first by John Montgomery in 1747 and the second in 1793, by James Rowan.

The first section was built of logs, and was a two-story structure with an attic in the top section. It was about 30 feet long and 18 or 20 feet wide. This section had a chimney at each end, built into walls, and one of them had a large fireplace on the ground floor.

The second section, built by James Rowan in 1793, was built of stone, with about the same dimensions as the log structure, and it also had a large chimney built in the wall. At this time the entire structure, both log and stone, was covered with stucco. A frame addition was added later, in the shape of an "L", and this has been used as a kitchen and for other purposes. This building, the original, has not been changed or modified in the least since 1793, with the exception of the "L".

It does not have a basement or cellar, and that precludes the idea that it may have been used, in some way or manner, as a fort or fortification against attack by the Indians; but there is a house about two hundred yards distant, in which there was a fort or some kind of protection against attack by the Indians, and tradition tells us that the neighbors gathered there when an alarm was given. This house belonged to a man by the name of Wilson, but he had no connection with the Rowan property."

² Library of Virginia, *Virginia Historical Inventory Report 118*, Works Progress Administration, James W. McClung, September 16, 1936, Photo VHI/P/24/0383.

The Chain of Ownership of the Property (as of September 1936):

- In 1739, Benjamin Borden obtained a grant from Governor Gooch for 92,100 acres lying for the most part in Rockbridge County today but then was Augusta County, Virginia. The grant is recorded in the Land Office at Richmond, Virginia in Book 18, page 360.
- Per the terms of his Will dated November 21, 1753, Borden's estate passed to his son, Benjamin Borden, the "Younger".
- Benjamin Borden, the "Younger", sold the land on which the house stood to John Montgomery, on August 20, 1747, Deed Book 1, page 361.
- John Montgomery sold it to Mathew Houston, brother to his wife Esther, on March 15, 1768, Deed Book 14, and page 216.
- Mathew Houston sold it to James and Agnes Rowan, on September 17, 1779, Deed Book 23, page 376.
- At the death of James Rowan, by the terms of his Will dated April 25, 1824, the "home place" was left to his son, James Rowan (2nd). Recorded in Will Book 15, page 376.
- In 1876 James Rowan (2nd) died without a Will and his estate passed to his heirs as recorded in Deed Book 97, page 572. The home place was deeded to Baxter S. Rowan, Fannie A. Rowan, Ellie C. Rowan, and Damarius Rowan.
- On July 12, 1884, Deed Book 101, page 246 Fannie A. Rowan transferred her interest to Baxter S. Rowan.
- Baxter S. Rowan became the sole owner of the land when Damarius Rowan transferred her interest to him and Ella C. Rowan willed her interest. When Baxter S. Rowan died on January 13, 1889 without leaving a will, his widow and his three children--Baxter S. (the Younger), Ellie, and Lois Rowan became its owner.
- Baxter S. Rowan and his wife, Grace Frye Rowan, sold their interest to Ellie Rowan Harris (wife of Walter M. Harris) on January 21, 1936, Deed Book, 274, page 394.
- On April 21, 1936, Deed Book 274, page 394 Lois Rowan McCormick sold her interest to Ellie Rowan Harris and Walter M. Harris.

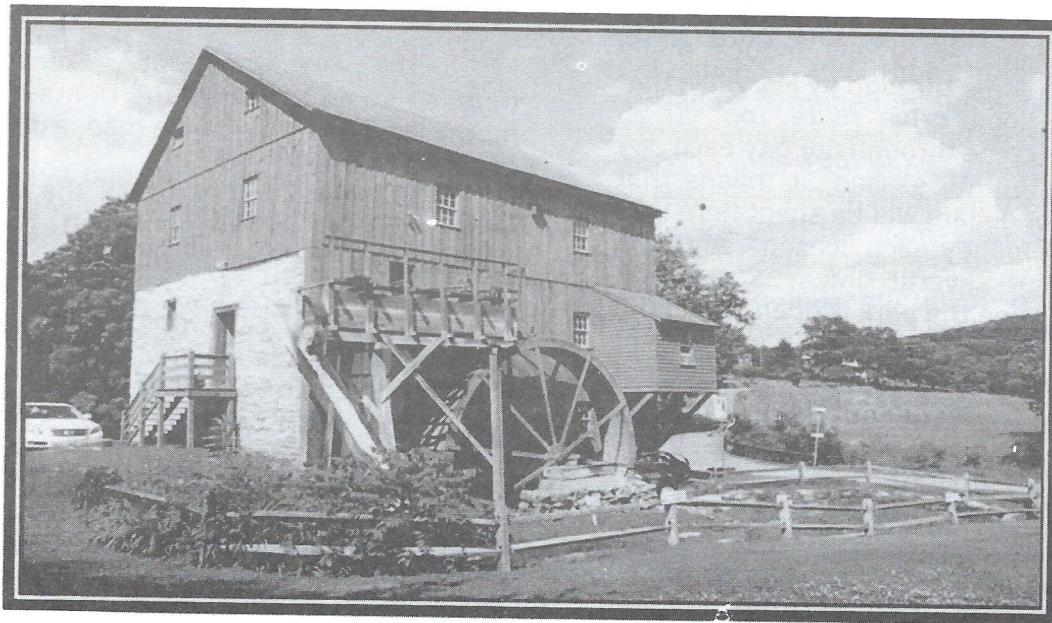


Figure 6: Photo of the Kennedy-Wade's Mill (circa 1750) in Rockbridge County, Virginia just off Raphine Road to the West of the John and Esther property. Photo taken July 7, 2009 by J. Russell Montgomery