

# Before Daniel Boone, There Was Daniel Harrison

Most people know the name Daniel Boone — the famous pioneer who carved a path through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. But a generation before Boone began his journey west, another explorer was already helping open the American frontier: Daniel Harrison.

My Keep Going Keep Loving project explores the life and legacy of Daniel Harrison, an early settler, explorer, road builder, soldier, and my 7th great-grandfather. His story is closely connected to Fort Harrison and the Great Wagon Road that carried thousands of settlers through the Shenandoah Valley during the 1700s.

Before 1730, most colonists lived and farmed near the Atlantic coast. The Blue Ridge Mountains and Appalachian Mountains formed a difficult barrier that discouraged settlement farther west. Daniel Harrison, along with his father and brothers, became some of the first settlers to cross into the Shenandoah Valley.

In 1737, the Harrison family blazed a trail through Thornton Gap, cutting a passage through the mountains into the valley beyond. There were no roads, no bridges, and no guarantees of safety. The family faced isolation, disease, harsh weather, and the unknown as they searched for fertile soil and fresh spring water.

During this difficult journey, tragedy struck. Daniel Harrison's father died from malaria before the family had even selected their permanent homesites. He was buried near the Shenandoah River, a reminder of the hardships faced by early frontier families.

The Harrison brothers eventually established farms throughout the valley. Daniel Harrison built his home near a natural spring in present-day Dayton, Virginia. Another brother settled nearby in what became Harrisonburg, Virginia — a town later named after the Harrison family.

In 1745, local courts appointed Daniel Harrison as overseer of the main road through the valley. Each week, settlers temporarily left their farms to work together clearing, maintaining, and improving the road under Harrison's leadership. This route later became part of the Great Wagon Road — one of the most important migration paths in colonial America.

During the French and Indian War, Native American raids threatened settlements throughout the valley. Daniel Harrison served as a captain of cavalry, known as the "Captain of Horses." Families used a large tree gong to warn neighbors when attacks were approaching.

Because of its strategic importance, Harrison's home was officially designated as Fort Harrison during the war. The thick limestone walls and surrounding stockade helped protect settlers during times of conflict.

The road that Daniel Harrison helped build became the main highway through the Shenandoah Valley. Thousands of settlers traveled this route between the mountain ranges as they moved south and west in search of new opportunities. Future pioneers, including Daniel Boone, would later follow this same road on their journeys toward Tennessee and Kentucky.

Daniel Harrison was more than an explorer and soldier. He was also a successful farmer and businessman. He raised corn, wheat, and barley, and built a grist mill where local farmers could grind grain. He also built a distillery that produced bourbon, another valuable product for settlers and travelers passing through the valley.

Daniel Harrison's story matters to me not only because of his contributions to American frontier history, but also because he is my ancestor. His courage, leadership, and perseverance helped open the Shenandoah Valley to future generations.

American history is filled with famous names, but it was also shaped by countless unsung heroes like Daniel Harrison — people who crossed oceans, climbed mountains, endured hardship, and built roads into the unknown so that others could follow.