

ROBERTA INGLES STEELE
1919-2004

She was proud, protective of family heritage

Roberta Ingles Steele was the great-great-great-granddaughter of Mary Draper Ingles.

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RADFORD — Like her great-great-great-grandmother, Roberta Ingles Steele was a strong, tenacious, determined woman.

"If she decided she wanted to accomplish something, she decided to stick to it until it was done," said her son, Robert Steele.

Just two weeks before she died of cancer on Aug. 22, the 84-year-old Steele decided she needed to know the original name of the New River, the watercourse her great-great-great-grandmother followed as she clawed her way to freedom after being taken from her home near present-day Blacksburg by Shawnee warriors.

She phoned local historian Ann Bailey and asked her to do a little research.

Bailey found an answer to Steele's question in Patricia Johnson's "New River Early Settlement."

"It was called the Neuse River and the Indians in West Virginia called it the River of Death," Bailey reported.

Steele was undoubtedly happy to know her ancestor had defied the Indians' characterization of the river. By following the river from Ohio, where her captors had brought her, the pioneer woman found her way home. She ran, walked and crawled 850 miles in 43 days to get there.

That was in 1755. Steele's great-great-great-grandmother was Mary Draper Ingles.

"Roberta was awful protective of what people said about Mary Draper Ingles," Bailey said, noting that Steele was extremely proud of her heritage. "And rightfully so," she added, "because they did a lot



Roberta Ingles Steele and her husband, Paul, at the Ingles family home, La Riviere.

for Radford."

Steele lived in the house her great-uncle William Ingles built fronting the New River in Radford in 1892. La Riviere, as it's called, is filled with paintings, photographs and documents of the Ingles' family history. Roberta Steele and her husband, Paul, were married there in 1950, and the couple moved into the house in 1977 to care for Roberta's mother, Sally Harris Ingles. When she died two years later, they stayed in the house, becoming the fourth generation to inhabit La Riviere.

Paul Steele said his wife entertained relatives from around the country at La Riviere. She enjoyed sharing the history of the house — declared a landmark on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994 — with other descendants of the Ingles family.

"The most important passion in her life was her family," he explained.

"Her interest in family included the present and the past," added her son. "She was always interested in her living relatives. She kept up with everyone."

Along with her older brother, Andrew Ingles, Steele published two books on her family's history, including "Escape from Indian Captivity," a deciphering of her great-great-grandfather John Ingles' manuscript about Mary



Draper Ingles.

"It's a well-known story and she was very concerned that it be told accurately," Robert Steele said.

The original manuscript is preserved in the University of Virginia Library, but Steele's book is an accurate rewrite, original spelling and all.

"The Indians went off excitedly unmolested they gathered up their prisoners & plunder and started & steered their course down the New River. They made but slow progress in getting on as their way was much impeded by the thickness of the forest & undergrowth which covered the whole country."

When Paul Steele met his future wife in 1941, he knew immediately that she was cut from the same cloth as her famous ancestor. Her high school classmates had elected her president of the student

body, making her the first female to fill that role. She went on to get several degrees, attending Agnes Scott College in Atlanta, Radford State Teachers College (now Radford University) and Teachers College at Columbia University in New York. She was active in civic affairs, taught high school and college classes and played a leadership role in women's clubs. In her younger years, she was also an athlete, excelling in tennis.

"She didn't play tennis with girls because they couldn't give her a game, so she played with men," Paul Steele noted. "She was a special lady. Her attitude was that she could do what she wanted to do."

Even during a 54-year marriage, he was never perturbed by his wife's strength, tenacity or determination.

"No," he said, "I admired her for it."