

Tennessee Statehood

Essential Question: What role did William Blount play in Tennessee statehood?

The establishment of the Southwest Territory in 1789 was the first step towards statehood for Tennessee and created opportunities for many land speculators including John Sevier and William Blount. Blount came from an influential North Carolina family and served as one of North Carolina's delegates to the Constitutional Convention. Blount did not actively participate in the convention, but he did attend the sessions and signed the new U.S. Constitution.¹ It was during this time that Blount came to the attention of George Washington. When North Carolina ceded its western lands to the federal government in 1789, Washington appointed Blount governor of the new territory. The Southwest Territory comprised all of present day Tennessee and stretched from the crest of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. From Blount's perspective it was an ideal assignment. By this time he had acquired a million acres of western land, and it is likely that through partnerships he controlled much more. Blount arrived in the territory in October 1790. He lived first in upper east Tennessee at Rocky Mount.² One aspect of Blount's job as governor was to resolve disputes with the Cherokee. In June 1791, Blount called the Cherokee to a treaty at White's Fort on the Holston River, in present-day Knoxville. The Treaty of the Holston was signed on July 2, 1791. The treaty began with a call for peace between the United States and the Cherokee and an exchange of prisoners. It also required the Cherokee to cede or give up additional land and set a new boundary.³

¹ Stanley Folmsbee, "William Blount." North Carolina Encyclopedia. 1979.

<https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/blount-william> accessed 14 June 2018.

² Terry Weeks, "William Blount." Tennessee Encyclopedia. 8 October 2017.

<https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/william-blount/> accessed 13 June 2018.

³ Treaty with the Cherokee, 1791. The Avalon Project. Yale.

https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/chr1791.asp accessed 10 June 2021

However, the Cherokee were unhappy because they believed Blount had treated them unfairly.⁴ Blount later built a home near the site of the treaty signing known as Blount Mansion. Despite the successes of the treaty, militant Cherokees and Creeks continued to attack settlers who wanted protection from the army. Blount's superiors refused and Blount was left looking for a solution. Blount decided that the best solution was for Tennessee to become a state.

Thousands of settlers had entered Tennessee through the Cumberland Gap. Because rivers were important as transportation routes, settlements had begun to spring up along the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. When a 1795 census revealed a population in excess of 60,000, large enough to satisfy the statehood requirements of the Northwest Ordinance, Blount sent a delegate to Congress with instructions to ask for immediate admission.⁵ The delegate soon discovered that the Federalist-controlled Congress was certain that angry westerners would vote against the Federalist candidate in the upcoming presidential election. Therefore, Congress did not take any steps to admit Tennessee as a state. To get around this obstacle, Blount decided to proceed without the blessing of Congress. Blount called for a constitutional convention and when the new document was approved, Blount simply declared that the new Tennessee state constitution was operational.⁶ On June 1, 1796, Tennessee was admitted to the United States. John Sevier, former governor of the State of Franklin, was elected as Tennessee's first governor. Knoxville served as Tennessee's first state capital.

William Blount held office as one of the first Senators from Tennessee. He hoped to use the position to manipulate land prices in the west in his favor. He was convinced that

⁴ Weeks, "William Blount."

⁵ Bergeron, Ash and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*, 62-63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

land values would rise if the British controlled the port of New Orleans, and so he arranged for Creek and Cherokee Indians to assist the British in capturing the city from the Spanish. Blount's plot was discovered, and in August 1797, he was promptly expelled from the Senate. Blount returned to Tennessee, where he remained popular.⁷ He was elected to the state senate and served in this capacity until September 1799. In March of the following year, William Blount complained of a chill and died after a six-day illness. He is buried at the First Presbyterian Church in Knoxville.

John Sevier was the descendant of French Huguenots who left France for England and changed their name from Xavier to Sevier.⁸ Sevier helped create the Watauga Compact and served as a commissioner of the Watauga Association.⁹ Sevier, who was known as Nolichucky Jack, was a fierce fighter and took part in many battles against the Cherokee. Sevier's reputation as a military leader was greatly increased by his leading role in the Overmountain Men's victory at King's Mountain in 1780.¹⁰ Sevier served as governor of the failed State of Franklin as well as representing North Carolina in Congress.¹¹ Sevier served six terms as governor of Tennessee and was later elected to represent Tennessee in Congress. In 1815, while on a survey mission, Sevier died and was buried on the Tallapoosa River in modern day Alabama. Sevier's body was later exhumed and reburied in Knoxville in 1887.¹²

⁷ Folmsbee, "William Blount."

⁸ Robert E. Corlew, "John Sevier." Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/entries/john-sevier/> accessed 14 June 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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Follow in William Blount's footsteps as he helps Tennessee become a state. List the 5 events from the essay that you think were most important. Then write a short epitaph for William Blount's gravestone. An epitaph is a short statement in memory of a person who has died

