

Life on the Frontier

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Essential Question: What was life like for people on the Tennessee frontier?

Many different factors motivated the settlers who crossed the Appalachian Mountains into the future state of Tennessee. The most important factor was economic opportunity in the forms of trade, farmland and land speculation. While tensions with the Cherokee remained high, the potential profits from trade lured many people to the west. Nathaniel Gist, or Guess, the father of Sequoyah, explored the region with his father in the early 1750s and established strong ties with the Cherokee. Gist eventually set up a trading post on the Long Island of the Holston River.¹ Several of the early traders brought enslaved men to assist in transporting furs across the mountains.² Glowing reports of the fertile land from longhunters and explorers such as Daniel Boone also encouraged people to move west. Finally, men like Richard Henderson and, later, William Blount saw an opportunity to make fortunes through land speculation. Speculators purchased land at low prices with the hope that they could see the land double or triple in value within a few years.

Another factor that motivated settlement of the west was the desire to escape high taxes and supposedly corrupt colonial governments. The Regulator movement in western North Carolina challenged the colonial government by intimidating and harassing colonial officials considered to be corrupt. North Carolina Governor Tryon

¹ Jeff Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 52. 32-33.

² Edward McCormack, *Slavery on the Tennessee Frontier*. (Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1977), 2.

sent the militia to enforce the law which led to the Battle of Alamance.³ The Regulators lost the battle, and many of the survivors moved west rather than submit to the government.⁴ Many enslaved people were brought to the settlements by their enslavers. William Bean, John Carter and John Sevier all used enslaved labor on their farms and in their households.⁵ In his diary, John Donelson wrote of

“Capt. Hutchings’ negro man” who died “being much frosted in his feet & legs.” He also related the story of Mr. Jennings who escaped from an attack on the river by ordering “his wife, a son nearly grown, a young man who accompanied them, & his two negroes to throw all his goods into the river, to lighten their boat...But before they had accomplished their object, his son, the young man & the negro man jumped out of the boat & left them. He thinks the young man & the negro were wounded before they left the boat. Mrs. Jennings, however, & the negro woman succeeded in unloading the boat.”⁶

In addition, the westbound settlers also had to deal with the arrival of murderers, horse thieves, and other criminals who fled across the mountains to escape prosecution by colonial governments.⁷

Most of Tennessee’s early settlers came from North Carolina, Pennsylvania or Virginia with their belongings carefully packed in a Conestoga or Virginia Road Wagon. These heavy wagons had high curved sides which prevented cargo from sliding out on

³ ANCHOR. “The Regulators.” North Carolina Encyclopedia <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/regulators> accessed 12 June 2018.

⁴ Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*, 52.

⁵ McCormack, *Slavery on the Tennessee Frontier*, 4.

⁶ John Donelson, *Diary*. Tennessee State Library and Archives.

<https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/tfd/id/585/rec/12> accessed 4 June 2021

⁷ Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*, 55.

steep mountain slopes and functioned like boats when fording rivers.⁸ Once across the mountains, settlers often turned to the area's rivers as an easy way to continue their journey west. In 1779, John Donelson led a group of flatboats down the Tennessee River and up the Cumberland River to join James Robertson at the future site of Nashville. Settlers brought essential items such as seeds for planting and tools for building cabins in the wilderness. Cattle, pigs, and other animals were driven along with the wagons or transported in cages. Weapons and ammunition were also vital for protection against both wild animals and hostile American Indians. Wealthier families often brought luxury items such as fine china or silver.

Once settlers arrived at a suitable location, the hard work of creating a homestead in the wilderness began. Trees were cut and notched to build a one-room log cabin. Kitchens were usually separate buildings because of the risk of fire. As families prospered, cabins were enlarged and glass windows were added.⁹ In the early frontier period many settlers enclosed their homes within a sturdy log wall for protection. These forts, or "stations," became places of refuge during attacks and also provided travelers with a place to rest, acquire information, and resupply as necessary. Sites like James White's Fort in Knoxville and Mansker's Station in Goodlettsville interpret these early frontier dwellings and community centers.

Because life on the frontier was difficult, many settlers came in large groups including members of extended families; other families moved into established communities where they already had family or friends. James Robertson cleared fields

⁸ National Museum of American History. "Conestoga Wagon." Smithsonian. http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_842999 accessed 12 June 2018.

⁹ Tennessee4me, "Housing." Tennessee State Museum. http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/a_id/250/minor_id/79/major_id/25/era_id/3 accessed 12 June 2018.

near the Watauga settlement on the recommendation of his friend Daniel Boone and then brought his family from North Carolina.¹⁰ Robertson later moved his family again to the Cumberland Settlement near present day Nashville. Frontiersmen like Robertson and Boone spent a great deal of time away from home. As a result, frontier women often had to do the planting, plowing and harvesting in addition to preparing food, weaving cloth, making clothes, preserving food, making soap and candles, caring for children, and many other daily tasks. Frontier families also faced danger from American Indians hostile to their presence. The Knoxville Gazette reported that the Titsworth family was attacked on October 4, 1794. Isaac Titsworth's wife and one of his children were killed. John Titsworth, his wife and one child were also killed. Four children and one enslaved person were taken captive. Three of the children were later scalped. Peggy, the 13 year old daughter of Isaac Titsworth, and Mingo, an enslaved person of 15 or 16, remained with their captors.¹¹

Slavery on the frontier was much different than the plantation slavery that developed in the 1800s. Frontier enslaved persons worked alongside their masters in the fields and helped defend settlements from American Indians during attacks.¹² On April 28, 1793 a man named Abraham, enslaved by Anthony Bledsoe, survived an attack while plowing Bledsoe's field. The white man working with Abraham was killed, but Abraham managed to circle around and kill one of the attackers before making his escape. On the frontier, enslaved people often had access to weapons for defense or for hunting. William Moffet of Grangier county appeared in court to certify that Pau,

¹⁰ Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*, 50.

¹¹ Steve Cotham, transcriber. "Births, Marriages, Deaths and Scandals From Early Knoxville Newspapers, 1794 Part 3", Tennessee Ancestors, Volume 5, Number 1, 1997. 12.

¹² Tennessee4me, "Slavery." Tennessee State Museum.

http://www.tn4me.org/article.cfm/a_id/260/minor_id/81/major_id/25/era_id/3 accessed 12 June 2018.

whom he enslaved, I had permission to carry “fire armes & ammunition for the purpose of killing Squirrels & other wild game on the premises of Said Moffet.”¹³ The more familiar relationship between enslaved people and their enslavers did not change the fundamental inequalities of the slave system. The Knoxville Gazette published many advertisements in which land was offered for sale in exchange for “Cash, Negroes or Horses.”¹⁴ A lottery in Greene County offered land, horses, cattle and two enslaved people, Joe and Luce as prizes.¹⁵ Enslaved people actively resisted slavery through legal action such as Margaret Lee who petitioned the Washington District Superior Court for freedom and her children’s freedom in 1795 on the basis that she was born free, but stolen from her home in Boston in 1774 and taken to Maryland where she was sold.¹⁶ Other enslaved people sought freedom by running away. The Knoxville Gazette contains many advertisements for runaways like Jem, who was captured while trying to reach the Cumberland settlement where his former enslaver, Joseph Davis, lived.¹⁷ It seems likely that Jem’s true objective was not to be reunited with Joseph Davis, but with his family.

The Knoxville Gazette recorded many instances of enslaved men and women being killed or taken prisoner by the Cherokee, Creeks or Chickasaws. On December 23, 1793, Roger Oats and Nicholas Ball were killed in present day west Knox County. The assailants took with them “four horses from the waggon, and a mulatto boy, 14

¹³ East Tennessee Roots, “Slavery in East Tennessee.” <http://www.easttennesseeroots.com/Slavery.html> accessed 7 June 2021.

¹⁴ Steve Cotham, transcriber “Births, Marriages, Deaths and Scandals From Early Knoxville Newspapers, 1795 Part 1”, Tennessee Ancestors, Volume 5, Number 1, 1989. 19.

¹⁵ Steve Cotham, transcriber “Births, Marriages, Deaths and Scandals From Early Knoxville Newspapers, 1794 Part 2, Tennessee Ancestors, Volume 4 Number 2, 1988. 113.

¹⁶ “Petition of Slave Margaret Lee.” East Tennessee Roots, Volume 6 Number 4. 1989. 180.

¹⁷ Steve Cotham, transcriber “Births, Marriages, Deaths and Scandals From Early Knoxville Newspapers, 1795 Part 1”, Tennessee Ancestors, Volume 5, Number 1, 1989. 24-25.

years of age.” A later edition of the Gazette reported that the boy was “lately found dead near the place where he was taken.”¹⁸ On June 9, 1794, a large party left Knoxville for Natches. The boat was boarded at Muscle Shoals, the white travelers on board were killed and the 22 enslaved people were taken prisoner.¹⁹ Enslaved men and women, though often nameless in the historical record, faced the same dangers as other settlers and played an important role in the eventual success of the settlements.²⁰

¹⁸ Steve Cotham, transcriber “Births, Marriages, Deaths and Scandals From Early Knoxville Newspapers, 1794 Part 1”, Tennessee Ancestors, Volume 3, Number 3, 1987. 162-164.

¹⁹ Steve Cotham, transcriber. “Births, Marriages, Deaths and Scandals From Early Knoxville Newspapers, 1794 Part 2”, Tennessee Ancestors, Volume 4, Number 2, 1988. 118.

²⁰ Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*, 50-51.

Student Activity

Directions: Fill in key facts about frontier life in the graphic organizer below. Use the space below to create a sketch of the life of each person based on your notes

Males	Female	Enslaved person	American Indian