

# The Cumberland Settlement

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# The Cumberland Settlement

*Essential Question: Why was the Cumberland Settlement created and what problems did the early settlers encounter?*

Henderson's **Transylvania Purchase of 1775** was an exercise in sheer audacity as Henderson was operating solely on his own authority. The roughly 20 million acres lay in what is now middle Tennessee and Kentucky. While Henderson was not able to convince Virginia and North Carolina to recognize his entire claim, he was able to claim the region near the Cumberland River in Middle Tennessee.<sup>1</sup> In 1779, Henderson planned a settlement in order to take advantage of the region's rich natural resources including fertile soil and abundant animal life. Henderson's settlement was named the **Cumberland Settlement** for the Cumberland River which served as the main transportation route in the region. Henderson gave the difficult task of establishing the settlement to **James Robertson** and **John Donelson**. Donelson was an experienced land surveyor and veteran of the Cherokee War. James Robertson was one of first Watauga settlers and had served as one of the five magistrates established under the Watauga Compact. Robertson had also served as commander of Watauga Fort during the Cherokee War.<sup>2</sup> Henderson had a two part plan for settling the Cumberland region. First, Robertson and a small group of Wataugans traveled overland in the spring of 1779 to select a site for the settlement near French Lick. French Lick was a natural salt lick along the Cumberland River that had been the location of a French trading post. In December of 1779, Robertson and the men returned and built cabins and **Fort**

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Weeks, "Transylvania Purchase." Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/transylvania-purchase/> accessed 13 June 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**Nashborough** in preparation for the arrival of Donelson's party in the spring of 1780.<sup>3</sup> Donelson's party of 30 families had the task of transporting the supplies the new settlement would need to survive including farm tools and household goods. He was also responsible for the safety of many women and children including his and Robertson's families. Additionally, over 30 enslaved people were part of the group. Because of the difficulty in crossing the Cumberland Plateau, Donelson's party took an indirect route by way of the Holston, Tennessee, Ohio and Cumberland rivers. Donelson's group left Watauga on December 22, 1779. Donelson kept a journal during the four month long journey in which he recorded a number of difficulties the travelers faced including: extreme cold, rough waters, an outbreak of smallpox and fighting with the Chickamauga.<sup>4</sup>

On April 24, 1780, Donelson's party arrived at the settlement after traveling over 1,000 miles. Like Watauga before it, the Cumberland Settlement existed outside the boundaries and government of any colony. Therefore, on May 1, 1780 Richard Henderson drew up the **Cumberland Compact**. The compact set up a form of government similar to that of the Watauga Association. Each station in the settlement was allowed to elect men to serve on the 12 person committee known at the "Tribunal of Notables." These "Notables" then carried out the functions of government including enforcing law and order and recording land claims.<sup>5</sup> The Cumberland Compact served as the basis for government in the settlement until North Carolina created Davidson County in 1783.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 30-32.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Fieth, "Cumberland Compact." Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/cumberland-compact/> accessed 13 June 2018

<sup>6</sup> Bergeron, Ash and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*,34.

Almost immediately the settlement came under attack from the Chickamauga. In April 1781, they attacked Fort Nashborough and drove off the horses found outside the walls. A short time later, the settlers gave chase, but were attacked by a large party of American Indians. According to legend, Charlotte Robertson, wife of James Robertson, saved the men by releasing the hunting dogs inside the fort to attack the American Indians. The men were able to return to the fort, but 11 men were killed in what came to be called the **Battle of the Bluffs**.<sup>7</sup> The danger eventually led Donelson to move his family and enslaved people back to the relative safety of Kentucky. Donelson continued to travel to the area and was killed along the Barren River in 1785.<sup>8</sup> James Robertson stayed in the Cumberland Settlement, but lost two brothers and two sons to the fighting before it ended in 1794. Robertson is often called the “Father of Middle Tennessee” for his contributions to the region’s development.<sup>9</sup>

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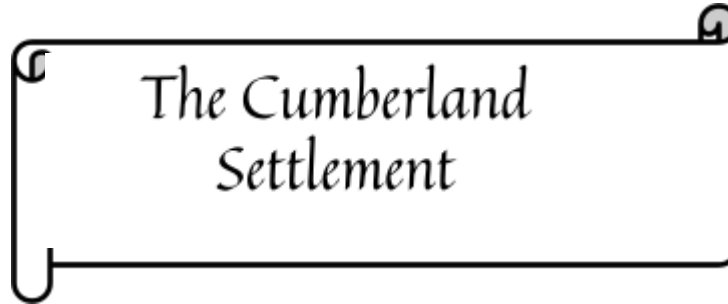
<sup>7</sup> Carole Stanford Bucy “Charlotte Reeves Robertson.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/charlotte-reeves-robertson/> accessed 13 June 2018

<sup>8</sup> Anne-Leslie Owens, “John Donelson.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/john-donelson/> accessed 13 June 2018

<sup>9</sup> Terry Weeks, “James Robertson.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/james-robertson/> accessed 13 June 2018

# The Cumberland Settlement

Write a brief summary of the Cumberland settlement including the reasons it was formed, Henderson's plan for the settlement and the difficulties that the early settlers faced. Use each of the bolded terms in the graphic organizer below.



## The Cumberland Settlement

Why was the settlement created?

What was Henderson's plan for creating the settlement?

What difficulties did the early settlers face?

## The Cumberland Settlement Key

Write a brief summary of the Cumberland settlement including the reasons it was formed, Henderson's plan for the settlement and the difficulties that the early settlers faced. Use each of the bolded terms in the graphic organizer below. *Answers will vary.*

### The Cumberland Settlement

Why was the settlement created?

- to take advantage of the natural resources in the region including farmland and animals

What was Henderson's plan for creating the settlement?

1<sup>st</sup>- Robertson selected site and built cabins and fort.  
2<sup>nd</sup> Donelson traveled by water with families, slaves and goods  
3<sup>rd</sup>- Wrote Cumberland Compact to create a government for the settlement

What difficulties did the early settlers face?

1<sup>st</sup>- difficult travel conditions  
2<sup>nd</sup> cold weather  
3<sup>rd</sup>- disease  
4<sup>th</sup> ongoing attacks from the Chickamauga including the Battle of the Bluffs

## John Adams on Richard Henderson and the Transylvania Purchase

*During much of his life, John Adams (1735-1826), kept a series of small manuscript volumes in which he described both daily activities and notable events in which he participated. Much of John Adams's life was spent in service to his country. He was a delegate to the Continental Congress, an officially appointed diplomat (who served as a commissioner in France, Great Britain, and the Netherlands, and as minister to the Court of St. James's), vice president and president of the United States.*

*In this diary entry, Adams describes meeting an associate of Richard Henderson's roughly five months after the Transylvania Purchase.*

October 25, 1775

“Last Evening Mr. Hewes of N. Carolina, introduced to my Namesake and me, a Mr. Hog from that Colony, one of the Proprietors of Transylvania, a late Purchase from the Cherokees upon the Ohio. He is an associate with Henderson who was lately one of the Associate Judges of N. Carolina, who is President of the Convention in Transylvania. These Proprietors have no Grant from the Crown nor from any Colony, are within the Limits of Virginia and North Carolina, by their Charters which bound those Colonies on the South Sea. They are charged with Republican Notions -- and Utopian Schemes.”

Source: Adams, John. *Diary 15 September 1775- 3 January 1776*. John Adams Family Papers. Massachusetts Historical Society, 2014. Web. 25 June 2014.

<<http://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=D24&hi=1&query=Henderson&tag=text&archive=all&rec=2&start=0&numRecs=2>>

## Cumberland Compact

*The Cumberland Compact was drawn up in May of 1780 by Richard Henderson, a land speculator and representative for North Carolina on the western Virginia/North Carolina survey team. The contract was signed in “Nashborough,” Tennessee, by 250 men of the new Cumberland settlement and established early government institutions (the infrastructure of courts, governance, and taxation) for the first settlers of the Tennessee territory. The Compact called for the creation of a civil government, and represented the settlers’ desire for self-governance and independence from North Carolina. Yet only a small part of the document was devoted to governance; it was in large measure a contract dictating a legal framework for land transfers. For instance, it dictated the legal grounds by which title to Native American land would be transferred to the new settlers, some of whom were land speculators.*

The free men of this country over the age [of twenty] one years shall immediately or as soon [as] may [be convenient,] proceed to elect and choose *twelve* conscientious and [deserving] persons from or out of the different Stations. That is [to] say, from Nashborough *three* from Gaspers [i.e. Gasper's] *two*, Bledsoe's *one*, Ashers [i.e. Asher's] *one*, stones River *one*, Freeland's, *one*, Eatons [i.e. Eaton's] *two*; Fort union *one* Which said persons or a majority of them, after being bound by the solemnity of an oath to do equal and impartial Justice between all contending parties, according to the [best] of their skill and judgment, having due re[gard] to the Regulations of the Lan[d Office herin established,] shall be competent Judges [of the matter, and ...] hearing the allegations [of both parties, and their] witnesses as to the facts [alleged, or otherwise ....] as to the truth of the c[ase, shall have power to] decide the controversie, an[d determine who is of right entitled] to an entry for such [land so in dispute, when] said determination or decision shall [be for ever binding] and conclusive, [against the future claim of the party] against whom such Judg[ment shall be rendered.]

“That as often as the People in General are dissatisfied with the doings of the Judges or Triers, so to be chosen, they may call a new election at any of the said Stations and Elect others to act in their stead, having due respect to the number now agreed to be elected at each Station, which Persons so to be chosen shall have the same power with those in whose room or place they are or may be chosen to act.

“That where any person shall remove to this Country with intent to become an Inhabitant and depart this life, either by violence or ~~natural death~~ in the natural way before he shall have performed the requisites necessary to obtain Lands, the Child or Children of such deceased person shall be entitled in his or her room to such quantity of land as such person would have been entitled to in case he or she had have lived to obtain a grant in their own name And if such death be occasioned by the Indians the said Henderson doth Promise and agree that the Child of Children shall have as much as amounts to their head rights gratis surveyors [i.e. surveyor's] and other incidental Fees excepted.



“And whereas, from our remote situation and want of proper offices for the administration of justice no regular proceedings at law can be had for the punishment of offences and attainment of right. It is therefore agreed that until we can be relieved by government from the many Evils and inconveniences arising therefrom, the Judges or triers to be appointed as before directed when qualified shall be and are hereby declared a proper Court or Jurisdiction for the recovery of any debt or damages;

“That as this settlement is in its infancy unknown to Government and not included within any County within North Carolina the State to which it belongs so as to derive the advantages of those wholesome and salutary laws for the protection and benefit of its Citizens, we find ourselves constrained from necessity to adopt this temporary method of restraining the licentious and supplying by unanimous consent the blessings flowing from a Just and equitable Government declaring and promising that no action or Complaint shall be hereafter instituted or lodged in any Court of Record within this State or elsewhere, for any thing done, or to be done in consequence of the proceedings of the said Judges or general Arbitrators so to be chosen and established by this our Association.

The following or additional resolutions and further association were also entered into at Nashborough this thirteenth Day of May 1780 to wit

“That all young men over the age of sixteen years and able to perform military duty shall be considered as having a full right to enter for and obtain Lands in their own Names as if they were of full age, and in that case not be reckoned in the Family of his Father Mother or Master so as to avail them of any Land on their account.

Whereas the frequent and dangerous incursions of the Indians and almost daily massacre of some of our Inhabitants renders it absolutely necessary for our safety and defence [i.e. defense] that due obedience be paid to our respective Officers elected and to be elected at the several Stations or settlements to take command of the Men or Militia at such Fort or Station

It is lastly agreed and firmly resolved that a dutiful and humble address or Petition be presented by some Person or Persons to be chosen by the Inhabitants to the General Assembly, giving the fullest assurance of the fidelity and attachment to the Interest of our Country and obedience to the Laws and constitution thereof; setting forth that we are confident our settlement is not within the boundaries of any nation or Tribe of Indians, as some of us know and all believe that they have fairly sold and received satisfaction for the land or Territories, whereon we reside and therefore we hope we may not be considered as acting against the Laws of our Country or the mandates of Government. That we do not desire to be exempt from the rateable share of the public expense of the present war or other contingent charges of Government. That we are from our remote situation utterly destitute of the benefit of the Laws of our Country, and exposed to the depredations of the Indians without any justifiable or effectual means of embodying our Militia or defending ourselves against the hostile attempts of our enemy- Praying and imploring the immediate aid and Protection of Government by erecting a

county to include our settlements, appointing proper Officers for the discharge of public duty. Taking into consideration our distressed situation with respect to the Indians, and granting such relief and assistance as in wisdom, Justice and humanity may be thought reasonable.

Nashborough

13<sup>th</sup> May 1780

Richard Henderson

Nathaniel Hart

Wm. H. Moore

Samuel Phariss

John Donelson. C.

Gasper. Mansker

John Caffery

John Blakemore Senr.

John Blakemore Junr.

James Shaw

Samuel Deson

Samuel Martin

James Buchanan

Solomon Turpin

Isaasc Rentfro

Robert Cartwright

Hugh Rogan

Joseph Morton

William Woods

David Mitchell

David Shelton

Spill, Coleman

Samuel McMurray

P. Henderson

Edward Bradley

Edw. Bradley Jun.

Jas. Bradley

Michael Stoner

Michael Stoner

Joseph Mosely

Henry Guthrie

Francis Armstrong

Robert Lucas

Js. Robertson

George Freeland

James Freeland

John Tucker

Peter Catron

Philop Catron

Francis Catron

John Dunham

Isaac Johnson

Adam Kelar

Thos Burgss

Wm Burgess

William Green

Moses. Webb

Absalom Thomson

John McVay

James Thomson

Charles

Thomson

Robert Thomson

Martin Hardin

Elijah Thomson

Andrew Thomson

Wm Seaton

Edward Thomelu

Isaac Drake

Jonathan Jenings

Zachariah Green

Andrew Lucas

James X Patrick

his mark

Richd. Gross

John Drake

Daniel Turne

No. 68

Timothoy Feret  
Isaac Lefever  
Thomas Fletcher  
Sam'l Barton  
James Ray  
Thomas Denton  
Thomas Hendriks  
John Holladay  
Frederick Stump [in Dutch]  
William Hood  
John Boyd  
Jacob Stump  
Henry Hardin  
Richard Stanton  
Sampson Sawyers  
John Hobson  
Ralph Wilson  
James Givens  
Robert Givens  
Jas. Harrod  
James Buchanan Sr.  
William Geioch  
Saml. Shelton  
John Gibson  
Robert Espey  
George Espey  
William Gowen  
John Wilfort

James Espey  
Michael Kimberlin  
John Cowan  
Francis Hodge  
William Fleming  
James Leeper  
George Leeper  
Daniel Mungle  
Patrick McCutchen  
Saml. McCutchen  
William Price  
Henry Kerbey  
Joseph Jackson  
Daniel Ragsdil  
Michael Shaver  
Samuel Willson  
John Reid  
Joseph Daugherty  
George Daugherty  
Chal. Cameron  
Wm. Russell Junr.  
Hugh Simpson  
Samuel Moore  
Joseph Denton  
Arthur McAdoo  
James McAdoo  
Nathl. Henderson  
John Evans  
Wm. Bailey Smith

Peter Luney  
Jon. Luney  
James Cain  
Danl. Johnson  
Danl. Jarrot  
Jesse Maxey  
Noah Hawthorn  
Charles McCartney  
John Anderson  
Mathew Anderson  
Wm. McWhirter  
Barnet Hainey  
Richd. Sims  
Titus Murray  
James Hamilton  
Henry Dougherty  
Zach White  
Burgess White  
William Calley  
James Ray  
William Ray  
Perley Graves  
Samuel White  
Daniel Hogan

No. 80

Thos. Hines  
Robert Goodloe  
Thos. W. Alston  
Wm. Barnes  
Thomas Shannon  
James Moore  
Edward Moore  
Richd. Moore  
Saml. Moore  
Elijah Moore  
John Moore  
Demsey Moore  
Andaen: Levin  
Ebenezer Titus  
Mark Roberson  
John Montgomery  
Charles Campbell  
William Overall  
John Turner  
Nathaniel Overall  
Patrick Quigley  
Josias Gamble  
Saml. Newell  
Joseph Reid  
David Maxwell  
Thos. Jefriess  
Joseph  
Dunnagin  
John Phelps  
Andrew Bushoney  
Daniel Ragsdell  
Jno. McMurty

Da. Williams  
John Mcademes  
Samson Williams  
Thomas Thompson  
Martin King  
Wm. Logan  
John Alstead  
Nicholas Counrod  
Evin Evans  
Jonathan Evins  
Jn. Thomas  
Joshua Thomas  
David Rounsavall  
Isaac Rounsavall  
James Crockett  
Andrew Crockett  
Russell Gower  
John Shannon  
David Shannon  
Jonathan Drake  
Benjamin Drake  
Benjamin Drake  
John Drake  
Mereday Rains  
Richard Dodge  
James Green  
James Cooke  
  
Daniel Johnston  
Geo. Miner  
George Green  
William More  
Jacob Cimperlin  
Robert Dockerty

John Crow  
William Summers  
Lesois Frize  
Ambs. Mauldin  
Morton Mauldin  
John Dunham  
Archelaus Allaway  
Saml. Hayes  
Nathl. Hayes  
Isaac Johnson  
Thomas Edmeston  
Ezekeil Norris  
William Purnell  
Wm. McMurray  
John Cordry  
Nicholas Tramal  
Haydon Wells  
Daniel Ratletf  
John Callaway  
John Pleake  
Willis Pope  
Silas Harlan  
Hugh Leeper  
Harmon Consellea  
Humphrey Hogan  
James Foster  
Wm. Morris  
  
Nathaniel Bidlack

A. Tatom William  
Hinson Edmund  
Newton Jonathan  
Green John  
Phillips George  
Flynn Daniel  
Jarrott John  
Owens James  
Freeland Thos.  
Molloy

No. 102

80

60

JAJ

Isaac Lindsey  
Isaac Bledsoe  
Jacob Castleman  
George Power  
James Lynn  
Thomas Cox  
Edward Lucas  
Philip Alston  
James Russell

Source: "Cumberland Compact." *Tennessee Founding and Landmark Documents*.  
Tennessee State Library and Archives, 2011. Web. 16 June 2017.  
<<http://tsla.tnsosfiles.com/digital/teva/transcripts/33634.pdf>>

## Excerpts from John Donelson's Journal

*“Journal of a voyage, intended by God's Permission, in the good Boat Adventure, from Fort Patrick Henry on Holston river to the French Salt Springs on Cumberland River, kept by John Donaldson.”*

Thursday March 2<sup>nd</sup>. Rain about half the day, passed the mouth of French Broad River: and about 12 O.'clock, Mr. Henry's boat being driven on the point of an island by the force of the current was sunk, The crew's lives much endangered, the whole cargo much damaged, which occasioned the whole fleet to put on shore and go to their assistance; but with much difficulty bailed her out & raised her, in order to take in her cargo again. The same afternoon Reuben Harrison went out a hunting and did not return that night, though many guns were fired to fetch him in.

Friday 3<sup>rd</sup>. Early in the morning fired a four pounder for the lost man, sent out sundry persons to search the woods for him, firing many guns that day and the succeeding night, but all without success, to the great grief of his parents and fellow travelers [i.e. travelers]. “Vale! Vale!”

Saturday 4<sup>th</sup>. Proceed on our voyage, leaving old Mr. Harrison, with some other vessels to make further search for his lost so about 10 O.'clock. the same day found him a considerable distance down the river, where Mr. Ben Belew took him on board his boat. At 3 O.'clock. P. M. passed the mouth of Tennessee river and camped on the south shore about 10 miles below the mouth of Tennessee.

Monday 6<sup>th</sup>. Got under way before sunrise: the morning proving very foggy, many of the fleet were much bogged: about 10. O.'clock. lay by for them, when collected proceeded down. Camped on the north shore, where Capt. Hutchings' negro man died, being much frosted in his feet & legs, of which he died.

Tuesday, 7<sup>th</sup>. Got under way very early, the day proving very windy, a S.S.W. & the river being wide occasioned a high sea, insomuch, that some of the smaller crafts were in danger, therefore came to at the uppermost Chiccamauga Town, which was then evacuated, where we lay by that afternoon and camped that night. The wife of Ephraim Peyton was here delivered of a child. Mr. Peyton has gone through by land with Capt. Robertson.

Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup>. Poor Stuart, his family and friends to the number of twenty eight persons ... had embarked with us for the western country, but his family being diseased with the

small-pox, it was agreed upon between him & the Company, that he should keep at some distance in the rear, for fear of the infection spreading: and he was warned each night when the encampment should take place by the sound of a horn. After we had passed the [Indian] Town, the Indians, having now collected to a considerable number, observing his helpless situation, singled off from the rest of the fleet, intercepted him & killed & took prisoners the whole crew, to the great grief of the whole Company uncertain how soon they might share the same fate; their cries were distinctly heard by those boats in the rear.

We have now passed through the whirl. The river widens with a placid & gentle current. And all of the Company appear to be in safety except the family of Jonathan Jennings, whose boat ran on a large rock projecting out from the northern shore and partly immersed in water immediately at the Whirl, where we were compelled to leave them perhaps to be slaughtered by their merciless enemies.

Continued to sail on that day and floated throughout the following night.

Friday 10<sup>th</sup>. This morning about 4 o'clk, [i.e. o'clock] we were surprised by the cries of "help poor Jennings"; at some distance in the rear. He had discovered us by our fires, and came up in the most wretched condition. He states that as soon as the Indians discovered his situation they turned their whole attention to him & kept up a most galling fire on his boat. He ordered 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 for the purpose of getting her off, himself returning their fire as well as he could (being a good soldier & an excellent marksman). 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, but chiefly by the exertions of Mrs. Jennings, who got out of the boat & shoved her off, but was near falling a victim to her own intrepidity on account of the boat starting so suddenly, as soon as loosened from the rock. Upon examination he appears to have made a wonderful escape, for his boat is pierced in numberless places with bullets. It is to be remarked, that Mrs. Peyton, who was the night before delivered of an infant, which was unfortunately killed in the hurry & confusion consequent upon such a disaster, assisted them, being frequently exposed to wet & cold then and afterwards, and that her health appears to be good at this time, & I think & hope she will do well.

*Donelson's party continued on after the attack despite their fatigue and lack of food. The diary mentions hunting buffalo, eating swan and gathering greens which some members of the party referred to as "Shawnee Salad."*

Friday 31<sup>st</sup>. Set out this day and after running some distance met with Col. Richard Henderson, who was running the line between Virginia and North-Carolina. At this meeting we were much rejoiced. He gave us every information we wished And further informed us that he had purchased a quantity of corn in Kentucky to be shipped at the falls of Ohio for the use of the Cumberland settlement. We are now without bread and are compelled to hunt the Buffaloe [i.e. Buffalo] to preserve life. Worn out with fatigue our progress at present is slow. Camped at night near the mouth of a little river at which place and below there is a handsome bottom of rich land. Here we found a pair of hand-mill stones set up for grinding, but appeared not to have been used for a great length of time.

Proceeded on quietly until the 12th of April, at which time we came to the mouth of a little river running on the north side, by Moses Renfoe & his company called Red River, up which they intend to settle. Here they took leave of us. We proceeded up Cumberland; nothing happening material until the 23rd, when we reached the first settlement on north side of the river, one mile & half below the Big Salt Lick, and called Eaton's station after a man of that name, who with several other families came through Kentucky & settled there.

Monday April 24th. 1780. This day we arrived at our journey's end at the Big Salt Lick. Where we have the pleasure of finding Capt. Robertson & his Company. It is a source of satisfaction to us to be enabled to restore to him & others their families & friends, who were entrusted to our care, and who, some time since, perhaps despaired of ever meeting again. Tho our prospects at present are dreary. We have found a few log cabins which have been built on a Cedar Bluff above the Lick. by Capt. Robertson and his company.

Source: Donelson, John. *Diary 1779*. Digital Collections. Tennessee State Library and Archives, n.d. Web. 25 June 2014.  
<[http://www.tn.gov/tsla/founding\\_docs/33635\\_Transcript.pdf](http://www.tn.gov/tsla/founding_docs/33635_Transcript.pdf)>