

The Watauga Compact and Watauga Purchase

Essential Question: What events contributed to the development of the Watauga settlement?

The first permanent white settler in what is now Tennessee was William Bean, who settled in 1769 on Boone's Creek, near where it flowed into the Watauga River. Within a year there were several more families in three neighboring communities: Nolichucky, Carter's Valley, and North Holston. Most had arrived by way of the Great Valley, coming down through Virginia, while some had moved west from North Carolina.

The settlers claimed they had settled within the boundary of Virginia and the Proclamation of 1763. A survey revealed, however, that all the communities except North Holston were outside of the boundaries of both North Carolina and Virginia. The settlements were on land that had been guaranteed to the **Cherokee** Nation. The government told the settlers that they had to move off of Cherokee land. Instead, the settlers came together in the Watauga settlement and asked the Cherokee if they could lease land along the Watauga River for ten years. The Cherokee agreed.

However, the Wataugans were still beyond the boundary of any organized government. To solve this problem they created the **Watauga Association** in 1772. This group of white, male settlers worked together to create a system of laws for their settlement based on the laws of Virginia. The laws were written in a document called the **Watauga Compact**. The settlement had five elected officials called commissioners who were in charge of recording legal documents like land titles and dealing with law breakers. The Watauga Association made no claims of independence from Great Britain. Even so, the Wataugans were under the authority of no other government and thus represent the first independent white government in the British colonies.

In 1774, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia wrote to the British official in charge of the Americas about the Wataugans. He described the Wataugans refusal to leave their lands, their agreement with the Cherokee and their extra-legal government. Further, Dunmore stated that Wataugans' state formation "sets a dangerous example to the people of America, of forming governments distinct from and independent of his majesty's authority."

In 1775, the Watauga settlement was the site of a most remarkable real estate transaction: the **Transylvania Purchase**. For several days in mid-March, Richard Henderson of North Carolina negotiated with leaders of the Cherokee Nation. He eventually secured an agreement by which the Cherokee exchanged their claim to all of the Cumberland River Valley and most of Kentucky in exchange for 10,000 pounds of trade goods.

Virginia and North Carolina eventually voided the Transylvania Purchase, but it still had significant consequences for the Wataugans. In the aftermath of the transaction, Wataugan leaders approached the Cherokee to ask that their lease be converted into a purchase.

Attakullakulla, or Little Carpenter was an important Cherokee chief and diplomat. He favored both the agreement with Henderson and the sale of Watauga to the settlers. Not all Cherokee liked the idea of selling their land. Attakullakulla's own son, **Dragging Canoe**, opposed both land sales. He believed that the Cherokee had to stop the growth of white settlements or the Cherokee would eventually lose all their land. However, enough Cherokee agreed with Attakullakulla for the sale to be completed. The sale of the Watauga settlement is known as the **Watauga Purchase**.

Sources:

Biggers, Jeff. *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006. Print.

Michael Toomey, East Tennessee Historical Society. North Carolina History Project: Encyclopedia. <http://www.northcarolinahistory.org>

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Create a mind map on Watauga, Tennessee's first settlement. Use each of the bold terms from the essay in your mind map. Then on the back of this page write a short summary of the important events and people highlighted in your mind map.

