

# William Blount, the Southwest Territory, and Tennessee Statehood

*Standards:*

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

**William Blount**, the eldest son of Jacob Blount, Sr., and Barbara Gray Blount, was born in Bertie County, North Carolina, on March 26, 1749. He was active in the family mercantile business and later served in the American Revolution as paymaster of the 3<sup>rd</sup> North Carolina regiment and of the state militia. Like many businessmen of his day, Blount believed the future of the new nation lay beyond the Appalachian Mountains so he accumulated as much western land as possible. He also served in various public offices throughout his life. In 1787, he was appointed as a North Carolina delegate 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. 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 **Territory South of the River Ohio** was commonly called the **Southwest Territory**, and 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. Blount, like many other prominent men of the land, was a land speculator. Speculators acquired large tracts of land by means of purchases or land grants with the hope of reselling it at a profit. By 1789, Blount had acquired a million acres of western land, and it is likely that through partnerships he controlled much more. Blount had already determined that he needed to move west in order to protect his vast holdings; his appointment as territorial governor made the task easier.

Blount arrived in the territory in October 1790. He lived first in upper east Tennessee at Rocky Mount. 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**, signed in early July, called for additional Cherokee land cessions and set a new boundary. However, the Cherokee were unhappy because they believed Blount had treated them unfairly. 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

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**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. 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 to statehood. 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. On **June 1, 1796**, Tennessee was admitted to statehood. **John Sevier**, former governor of the State of Franklin was elected as Tennessee's first governor.

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 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. 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.

Source: Toomey, Michael. "William Blount." *North Carolina History Project*. John Locke Foundation, 2014. Web. 26 June 2014.  
<<http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/commentary/126/entry>>

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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*

