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JOHN CHISHOLM, A SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

KATE WHITE

John Chisholm appeared among the people of the Watauga-Nolachucky region about the same time as Jacob Brown and John Irvine (or Irvin), all three coming from the Province of South Carolina. In the genealogy of the Irvine and Chisholm families of South Carolina and Georgia it is said that those families migrated from Drum, Scotland, directly to South Carolina, and were closely connected with Robert Bruce, Earl of Carrick, and of the royal house of Scotland. Ann Cutbirth, who came from Scotland to South Carolina in 1738 and who married, first, Patrick Graham, and, second, James Bulloch (son of a governor of Georgia), in her will of 1762 remembered her two nephews, John and Thomas Chisholm.

It was in the year 1772 that the settlements on the Watauga, Holston and Nolachucky began to receive a steady flow of immigrants, designated by the British authorities "squatters," and as such ordered to evacuate the land. In the same year the Watauga Association was formed for law and order.

In Lord Dunmore's War of 1774, resulting in the battle of Pt. Pleasant, the name of John Chisholm appears as a private on the roster of Captain Wm. Nalle's company. It is likely that Chisholm remained for a time in Virginia, since his name does not appear appended to the Petition of the Inhabitants (for incorporation into the government of North Carolina) of 1776. However, on grant of this petition and the establishment of Washington District in the same year, we find that John Chisholm was one of the justices of the Washington District Court of 1777, prior to the organization of Washington County. When the county was organized, February 23, 1778, Chisholm was still one of the justices. That office he continued to hold until after the battle of King's Mountain. The record of the last court held before that battle shows that Chisholm was fined one hundred pounds for beating one, Abraham Denton, who stood charged in court with being an active Tory. After that battle, at the first session held November 7, 1780, Chisholm was elected deputy-surveyor of the county, under James Stuart.

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In 1784, when the first convention was held by the men of the West to consider what they should do for their protection and government in view of the act of cession passed by North Carolina's legislature, the delegation selected to represent Washington County included John Chisholm along with John Sevier, Rev. Samuel Doak and others. Chisholm remained throughout the Franklin State struggle a strong supporter of its governor, Sevier. His name is affixed to the petition to North Carolina of 1787 asking for grant of separation.

After the second cession act and the appearance of Wm. Blount upon the scene as territorial governor, Chisholm received at his hands appointment as one of the justices of Washington County. Blount's seat of government for some years was at the home of William Cobb, near the present Johnson City, and when it was removed to Knoxville, Chisholm went along, and built the first tavern in Knoxville in the rear of the gubernatorial mansion of Governor Blount, the latter being on Arch (now Hill) Street and the tavern on River Street.

At this period (1792) there were no governmental post routes in the Southwest Territory. Private individuals entered the field; and Chisholm added that business to tavern-keeping. In the issue of October 6, 1792 the *Knoxville Gazette* printed his announcement:

"The subscriber will establish a post from Knoxville to Jefferson Court House, thence to Greenville Court House, thence to Jonesboro, thence to Abingdon, and return by Sullivan Court House and Hawkins Court House to Knoxville, once every twenty-one days for one year, to commence the first Monday of November, next, or as soon as \$250.00 shall be subscribed for defraying the expenses, to be paid at the expiration of every three months. No subscription under \$2.00 received unless money is paid down. Newspapers and letters carried and left at the nearest court house for subscribers without any other charge. The subscription paper is lodged in the hands of Mr. Richardson, the Printer."

Three weeks later, the *Gazette* announced that the post-route was established, and urged the increased facility as reason for the public to subscribe for that newspaper.

At Knoxville, June 11, 1792, the County of Knox was created by ordinance, and on the 16th Chisholm was named a justice of the peace by Governor Blount. He was called "Captain Chis-

holm," a title received in militia service. He wrote often to John Sevier of happenings around White's Station, later Knoxville.

At the time of the treaty of Holston, concluded on the site of Knoxville, July 2, 1791, all the merchants' store-buildings were on the river bank, and all business done within half a block of the river. Shortly after that treaty Chisholm seems to have been employed by Governor Blount on missions to the Indian tribes at the South. In the spring of 1792, Blount used him as messenger to Alexander McGillivray, the great chief of the Creek Indians, who after wavering between alliance with the Spaniards and the Americans was now won over to the former. Chisholm was also the useful agent of the governor among the Cherokees. In a letter to General James Robertson, of date May 20, 1792, Blount painted a picture of the reception of the Cherokee Chief, The Glass, as he and other chiefs yielded and came in from the lower towns to Coyate: "At the house built there for my reception is erected the standard of the United States (a very elegant stand) on a high pole. To this they (the lower chiefs) were conducted by the Bloody Fellow and John Watts, Kittagesta and other chiefs and Captain Chisholm and [Leonard] Shaw walking side by side with the Bloody Fellow and Watts to the great joy of both parties, where volleys were fired by those from the lower towns in honor of it and returned by the upper. . . . Chisholm declares he never saw more joy expressed by any people."

In August of the same year Governor Blount sent Chisholm on a mission to the Cherokees of the Estanaula region. In the campaign of 1793, Captain Chisholm accompanied General Sevier, the commander, and was useful in giving information of the country to be invaded—around the present Rome, Ga. He continued to run his tavern in Knoxville, after this campaign. In July, 1795, he conducted a delegation of Chickasaw and Choctaw Indians to Philadelphia; they remained in Knoxville for more than a week to rest their horses and the great Piomingo had "committed them to the care of Capt. Chisholm." In November of 1795, Blount sent the Captain to the Chickasaws to "use his influence and address to restore peace between them and the Creeks." Following the admission of Tennessee into the Union, Governor Sevier used Chisholm among the Cherokees, Creeks; and he seems to have gone also to the Chickasaws. Sevier's Diary shows that he was at times a guest at Chisholm Inn.

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Wm. Blount was elected one of the first Senators in Congress from Tennessee, in 1796, so popular was he among the people he had served as governor. He was a fine looking man, cultured, cordial and a good mixer. He was a thoroughgoing politician and unable to say "no" to a friend. The Indians, too, liked him, and he tried to be just to them. He spent no little money in their entertainment. When he went to Congress he was, practically speaking, a bankrupt, from having lent money to friends and signing notes as surety. He, like most prominent men of the time, dreamed of and lusted for vast possessions of land. This led to his expulsion from the Senate, since it led him on to the formation of plans which were capable of being given the color of conspiracy that would have involved his government. Chisholm's name played a not inconspicuous part in the impeachment trial which followed.

The charge was that Blount had engaged in an effort to wrest Louisiana and the Floridas from Spain, in behalf of England, on condition that he was to become governor of the territory if won and to receive large grants of land. It was also charged that his confederates in this wild scheme were John Chisholm, of Knoxville, John Rogers, a Cherokee, James Carey, an interpreter among the Cherokees, Major James Grant, of Knoxville, and Dr. Nicholas Romayne, of New York, the latter an Englishman who was well known to the British minister, Liston, resident in this country.

As early as 1796 Blount and Romayne were in conference in the East about some sort of speculation in western lands. During the session of Congress in Philadelphia Chisholm and Carey with a number of Cherokee chiefs and warriors from Tellico turned up there, on affairs of the Indians. Chisholm laid before Liston, the British minister, plans for an invasion of Spain's possessions, and he so far impressed the minister that the latter wrote to the London government for advice. This was in January, 1797. An answer "not arriving as soon as the eagerness of the projector expected, he became impatient and was extremely pressing to go to England to obtain, in person, an answer from the British government."

Liston arranged with a wealthy Philadelphia merchant, Wm. Davy, for Chisholm's passage on a chartered brig, and paid Chisholm's fare. The vessel was cleared for Hamburg, but her true destination was London. Davy had been told by Liston's secre-

tary that Chisholm was to carry dispatches for the minister. Davy feared that if the brig were searched by the French and the dispatches found on Chisholm the vessel would be condemned. He was assured that the documents were loaded, and that Chisholm was instructed to throw the package into the ocean, should the brig be captured; and that it would sink to the bottom. The brig was prevented from sailing on the day first intended, and Sunday, the 19th of March, was fixed for her departure. The brig dropped down the river, and Davy was disturbed on learning that Chisholm was yet in the city. Both Davy and the minister were much excited, and the two rushed around to places where it was likely that Chisholm might be found. At eleven o'clock at night the minister gave out and returned to his home; but Davy kept up the search and about one o'clock found Chisholm in a bar-room, in a brawl with a party of Frenchmen; he had three of them thrown on the floor when Davy found him. Davy took him out and asked him why in the blazes he had not sailed in the vessel. Chisholm replied that the brig had not sailed and would not until five o'clock in the morning; that the captain knew where he was and would call for him in time to sail. It so turned out. Chisholm was gone next morning, and sent back by the pilot enthusiastic letters, one to Davy and one to Blount.

Chisholm reached London May 1, 1797, and immediately made arrangements to meet Mr. Pitt and Lord Grenville. The latter had on April 8th written Liston to drop the matter; that it was not then expedient to attempt to wrest territory from Spain. When he received Chisholm, he gave the same assurance. Chisholm was given a large sum of money, treated courteously and advised to return to America. This is the last we know of Chisholm; no trace of him thereafter has been found.

In his deposition in the impeachment proceedings, Davy described Chisholm as he appeared in Philadelphia: "He was a hardy, lusty, brawny, weather-beaten man. . . . While drinking some porter, he appeared sociable; said that he was a back-country man; that he had long lived among the Indians, and was with them during the last war; that he was well known to the Spaniards; that his name was Captain Chisholm; that he had been an interpreter to the Indians last winter in this city; that the Spaniards had frequently imprisoned him and treated him cruelly in Pensa-

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cola; that they dreaded him, and he hated them, and was now determined to take his full revenge on them. He added, that his influence with the Indians was such that he could do with them as he pleased; that he knew every part of the Mississippi; that there was no man in America who knew the forts and their exact situation so well as himself, and that he was now going to London to accompany and conduct a squadron to the attack of Pensacola; . . . that the Spaniards had no posts of any consequence on the whole of the Mississippi; that one hundred, or one hundred and fifty, a mere handful of men, might destroy them all."

John Chisholm was a large man, with very red hair, and was between fifty-five and sixty years of age when he sailed for England. He was pugnacious and cared little who was ruling so long as he was in exciting action, preferably a fight. Often he came to blows with friend or enemy alike, as court records show. It was this reference to Chisholm in the celebrated Blount to Carey letter, written from Col. King's Iron Works, April 21, 1797, that involved Blount in serious trouble: "Among other things I wished to have seen you about, was the business of Captain Chisholm mentioned to the British minister, last winter, in Philadelphia. I believe, but am not quite sure, that the plan then talked of will be attempted this fall, and if it is attempted, it will be in a much larger way than then talked of, and if the Indians act their part, I have no doubt but it will succeed. A man of consequence has gone to England about the business; and, if he makes arrangements as he expects, I shall myself have a hand in the business, and probably shall be at the head of the business on the part of the British. . . . Where Captain Chisholm is I do not know. I left him in Philadelphia in March, and he frequently visited the minister and spoke upon the subject; but I believe he will go into the Creek nation, by way of South Carolina or Georgia—He gave out he was going to England, but I did not believe him."

It was Colonel James King to whom Blount gave the letter for safe delivery to James Carey, at Tellico Blockhouse. King entrusted the letter to Major James Grant who delivered it in person to Carey. The letter was shown by Carey to Byers, an employee of the government at Tellico Blockhouse. Byers carried it to Philadelphia express, and it was in the hands of President Adams about June 14th.

Chisholm left a wife and family in Knoxville. His daughter, Elizabeth, married John Somerville, in Knoxville, May 20, 1794. Sons were Ignatius and John D. Chisholm.¹

¹ John D. Chisholm married a half-breed woman, and removed to the West with the Cherokees at an early day. While yet in the Alabama Country he was one of a syndicate which proposed to the national government the removal by the syndicate of obstructions to navigation at Muscle Shoals of the Tennessee for the privilege of charging toll per ton on traffic (1805). Along with James Rogers he acted as deputy of the Cherokees then living on the Arkansas River in executing the Cherokee treaty of July 8, 1817. He and Rogers also represented the Western Cherokees in council with U. S. officials in 1834. As late as 1843, he, adopted into the Cherokee tribe, was living on the Canadian River. It is believed that his name was given to Chisholm's Trail, noted in western history. If his father survived the journey to England, it is probable that on return to this country he found a home with the Cherokees, and, with his son John D., was among the first of that nation to remove voluntarily west of the Mississippi.

On removal to the West John D. Chisholm established himself on the Arkansas and Sprada Rivers. His son, Thomas, is said to have been the last head-chief of the Cherokees to have come to that office by heredity. This son was awarded a silver medal by President Jefferson in 1808. He was the father of Mrs. Narcissa Chisholm Owen, mother of the Hon. Robert L. Owen, one time U. S. Senator from Oklahoma, by her marriage to Robert Latham Owen I, who at the time was chief civil engineer of the East Tennessee & Virginia Railroad, then under construction, and later its president. The marriage took place at Jonesborough, the ceremony performed by the noted educator and divine, David Sullins. Miss Chisholm was a teacher in the female seminary at Jonesborough presided over by Sullins. Thus, fate brought to that historic old town where John Chisholm had first appeared west of the Alleghanies his descendant. John D. Chisholm died at Hot Springs, Ark., on a date unknown, to which place he had gone for the benefit of the waters.—EDITOR'S NOTE.

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