

# THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES: TENNESSEE COUNTY, KNOX COUNTY, AND JEFFERSON COUNTY

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**Tennessee Ancestors**

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**EDITOR'S NOTE:** This is the fifth in a series of articles begun in the April 1994 issue of *Tennessee Ancestors*.

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Tennessee County, North Carolina, was formed from Davidson County in 1788 as a result of population growth in that area:

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina, and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, That from and after the passing of this Act, the said county of Davidson shall be divided by a line beginning on the Virginia [now Kentucky] line, running south along Sumner county to the dividing ridge between Cumberland river and Red river, then westwardly along the said ridge to the head of the main south branch of Sycamore creek, then down the said branch to the mouth thereof, then due south across Cumberland river to Davidson county line; and all that part of Davidson County that lies to the east of the said line, shall continue and remain the county of Davidson; and all that part of the said county of Davidson that lies west of the said line, shall be erected into a county by the name of Tennessee. <sup>1</sup>

The first parts of this boundary appear to follow the present Robertson County line between Sumner and Davidson counties. The last part (due south from the mouth of Sycamore Creek) does not follow the present western boundary of Davidson County, which meanders somewhat southwest of the line in this description. (See Figure 1.) When, in 1796, the new state of Tennessee was created, the general assembly divided Tennessee County into two distinct counties, Montgomery and Robertson. <sup>2</sup> The eight years of official records of Tennessee County may be found in the Montgomery County courthouse in Clarksville, Tennessee. <sup>3</sup>

When the Revolutionary War ended, Congress asked states with Western claims to cede their lands to the new nation. <sup>4</sup> North Carolina did not ratify the United States Constitution until 1789. In December it voted to cede its western territory, namely what is now Tennessee, to the United States. Congress accepted this cession in 1790, creating the "Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio." <sup>5</sup> Contrary to the implications of its name, this Southwest Territory, as it was commonly called, included only the North Carolina cession: present-day Tennessee.

The territory was to be governed under the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which provided for three stages of government: an appointed governor, a representative system when the population included 5,000 free male inhabitants of voting

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age, and statehood when the free population reached 60,000. <sup>6</sup> Achieving statehood would take the new territory six years.

In the meantime, the most serious problem facing the first governor of the territory, William Blount, was Indian relations. In the previous decade, three conflicting treaties had been signed by the Cherokees with three different governmental entities: North Carolina, the ill-fated State of Franklin, and U.S. Commissioners. (See previous article in this series.)

In 1791, with only one official government in the area, a new treaty, the Treaty of Holston, was negotiated. Among its provisions was the establishment of a new boundary line between the Cherokees and white settlement in the Tennessee territory:

...a point [on the North Carolina boundary] from which a line is to be extended to the river Clinch, that shall pass the Holston at the ridge which divides the waters running into Little River from those running into the Tennessee <sup>7</sup>; thence up the river Clinch to Campbell's line [1777 Treaty of Long Island line], and along the same to the top of Cumberland Mountain; thence a direct line to the Cumberland River where the Kentucky road crosses it; thence down the Cumberland River to a point from which a south-west line will strike the ridge which divides the waters of Cumberland from those of Duck River, forty miles above Nashville; thence down the said ridge to a point from whence a south-west line will strike the mouth of Duck River. <sup>8</sup>

Some parts of this boundary are quite clear; others are not. The first part (through Blount County) was not clarified until a survey by Benjamin Hawkins in 1797. Up the Clinch River, then to Cumberland Gap is clear. The "direct Line to the Cumberland River where the Kentucky road crosses it" is all in Kentucky, from Cumberland Gap to a point west of present Monticello, Kentucky.

The next segment raises doubts. The few previous attempts that I have found at depicting this on a map presume a straight line from the Kentucky Road to the dividing ridge. However, "thence down the Cumberland River" appears to me to follow the course of the river, especially since the "south-west line" emanates from a later "point," rather than from the Kentucky Road crossing. Also, the "forty miles above Nashville" makes no sense unless the line follows the course of the river.

Is the forty miles "as the crow flies" or up the twisting course of the river? How many degrees southwest? At what point on the ridge dividing the Cumberland and Duck rivers? Earlier cartographers appear to have chosen as the latter point the head of the ridge where the Duck River originates (near the northwest corner of Coffee County).

In Figure 2, I have straddled the fence by showing two dotted lines for this portion of the boundary: 1) a straight line corresponding to depictions on earlier maps, and 2) a line following Cumberland River--both terminating at the headwaters of Duck River. Take your pick. My line is somewhat more than forty miles above Nashville, but any

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closer to Nashville would not allow a "south-west" line to the head of Duck River. Perhaps my line should be farther west and not to the head of the ridge. Part of the problem may be, as noted before, that lawmakers often had only a general notion of the geography of the frontier.

The last portion of the boundary is clear: following the ridge which divides the two rivers--though the point I have chosen from which a southwest line to the mouth of Duck River is drawn is somewhat arbitrary.

This treaty line is of more than passing importance because it redefined the outer boundaries of most of the extant "Tennessee" counties. Sumner County was greatly reduced by having its eastern boundary moved westward. Davidson County's new southern boundary was farther south. Curiously, this appears to have left its southeastern corner dangling since no provision seems to have been made to extend it to the dividing ridge. Since the eastern side of Tennessee County ran due south, one can assume it continued south when the county's southern boundary was extended to the Duck River ridge.

In 1792, Governor Blount used the new treaty line in "circumscribing" new boundaries for Greene and Hawkins counties and creating two new counties, Knox and Jefferson, within the area acquired by the Cherokee treaty:

Be it ordained, That from and after the fifteenth day of the present month of June, the counties of Greene and Hawkins shall be circumscribed by a line beginning on Nolichucky River at the place where the ridge which divides the waters of Bent and Lick Creek strikes it; thence with that ridge to Bull's Gap of Bay's Mountain; thence a direct line to the place where the road that leads from Dodson's Ford to Perkin's iron works crosses the watry fork of Bent Creek; thence down that road to the head of Panther Creek, down the meanders of that creek to the river Holston; thence a northwest course to the river Clinch; again, from Nolichucky River where the ridge that divides the waters of Bent and Lick Creek strikes, a direct course to Peter Fine's ferry on French Broad; then south to the ridge that divides the waters of French Broad and Big Pigeon, and with said ridge to the eastern boundary of the territory.

That two new counties be laid out and established below the aforesaid line, that is, to the southward and westward of it, to be distinguished from and after the said fifteenth day of June instant by the name of Jefferson County, and Knox County. The county of Jefferson to be butted and bounded by the above described line from the eastern boundary of the territory to the river Holston, and down the river Holston to the mouth of Cresswell's mill creek; thence a direct line to the mouth of Dumplin Creek on French Broad; thence up the meanders of French Broad to the mouth of Boyd's Creek; thence south twenty-five degrees east, to the ridge which divides the waters of Little Pigeon and Boyd's Creek and with the said ridge to the Indian boundary, or the eastern boundary of the territory, as the case may be, and

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by the eastern boundary; and Knox County to be butted and bounded by the line of Jefferson County, from the mouth of Cresswell's mill creek to the Indian boundary, or eastern boundary of the territory, as the case may be; again from the mouth of the said creek up the meanders of the river Holston, to the mouth of Panther Creek; thence northwest to the river Clinch; then by the river Clinch to the place where the line shall cross Holston at the ridge that divide the waters of Tennessee and Little River according to the treaty of Holston, shall strike it; and by that line.<sup>9</sup>

These lines are relatively clear, as shown in Figure 3.<sup>10</sup> Figure 4 shows all the counties of the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio as of 1792, using the Treaty of Holston boundary.

Next: Sevier and Blount are the last territorial counties formed.

### NOTES

1. Walter Clark, ed., The State Records of North Carolina (Goldsboro, N.C.: Nash Brothers, 1905), Vol. XXIV, p. 972.
2. Acts of Tennessee, 1796, Ch. 30, p. 67-70.
3. Robert M. McBride, "Lost Counties of Tennessee," East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications, No. 51 (1979), p. 141.
4. Stanley J. Folmsbee, et al., Tennessee: A Short History (Knoxville, Tenn.: The University of Tennessee Press, 1969), p. 79.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 98-99.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 99.
7. At that time, the name Holston was applied to all of the Tennessee River above the mouth of the present Little Tennessee River--which, in turn, is the Tennessee River referred to in the treaty.
8. Henry D. Whitney, The Land Laws of Tennessee (Chattanooga, Tenn.: Deardorff & Sons, 1891), p. 18.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 684-85.
10. For a superb map showing changes in Knox County boundaries over the years, see the East Tennessee Historical Society's The French Broad-Holston Country (Knoxville, Tenn.: ETHS, 1946), map by James Bowman facing p. 44.

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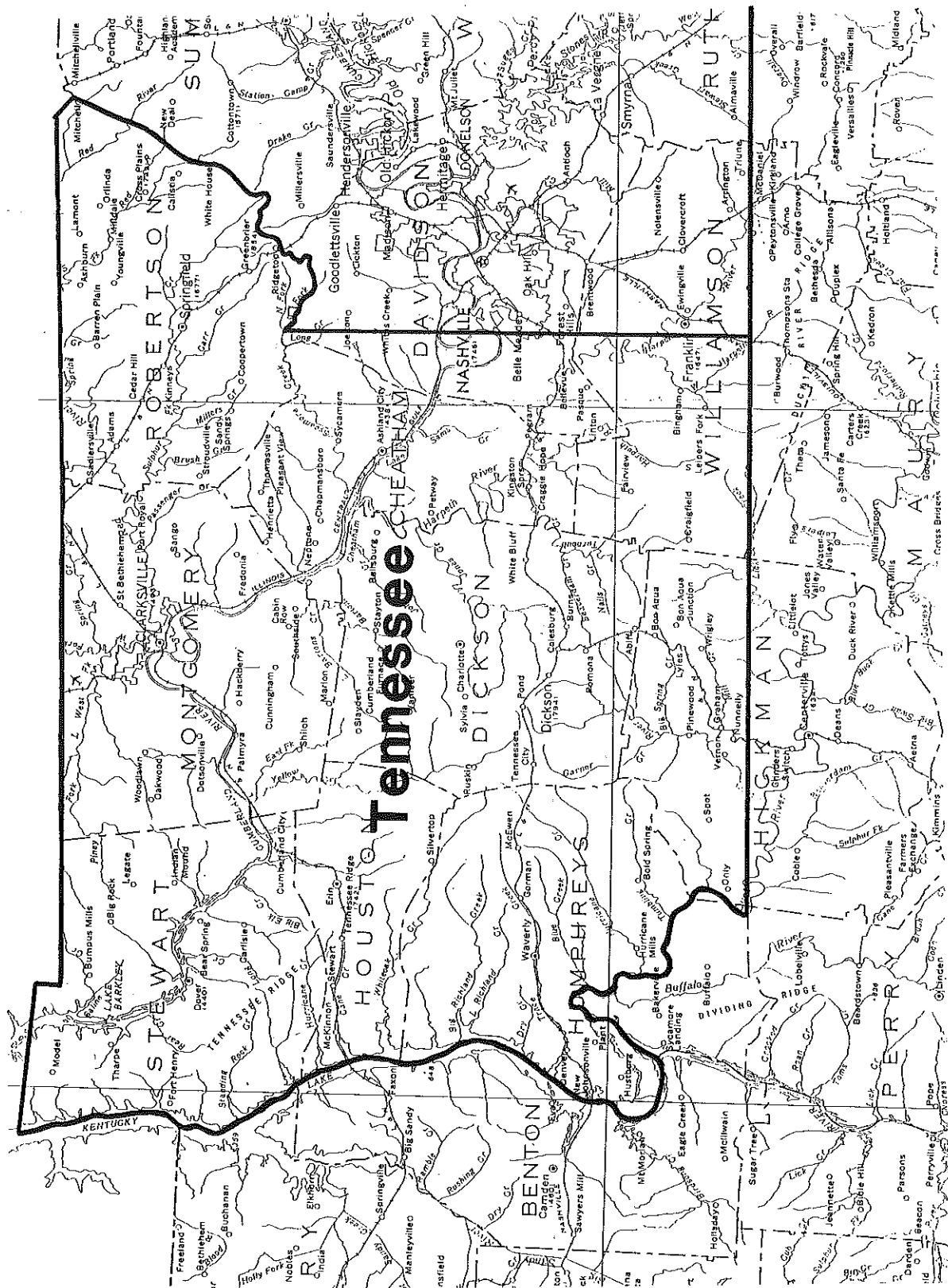


Fig.1. Tennessee County, N.C., 1788

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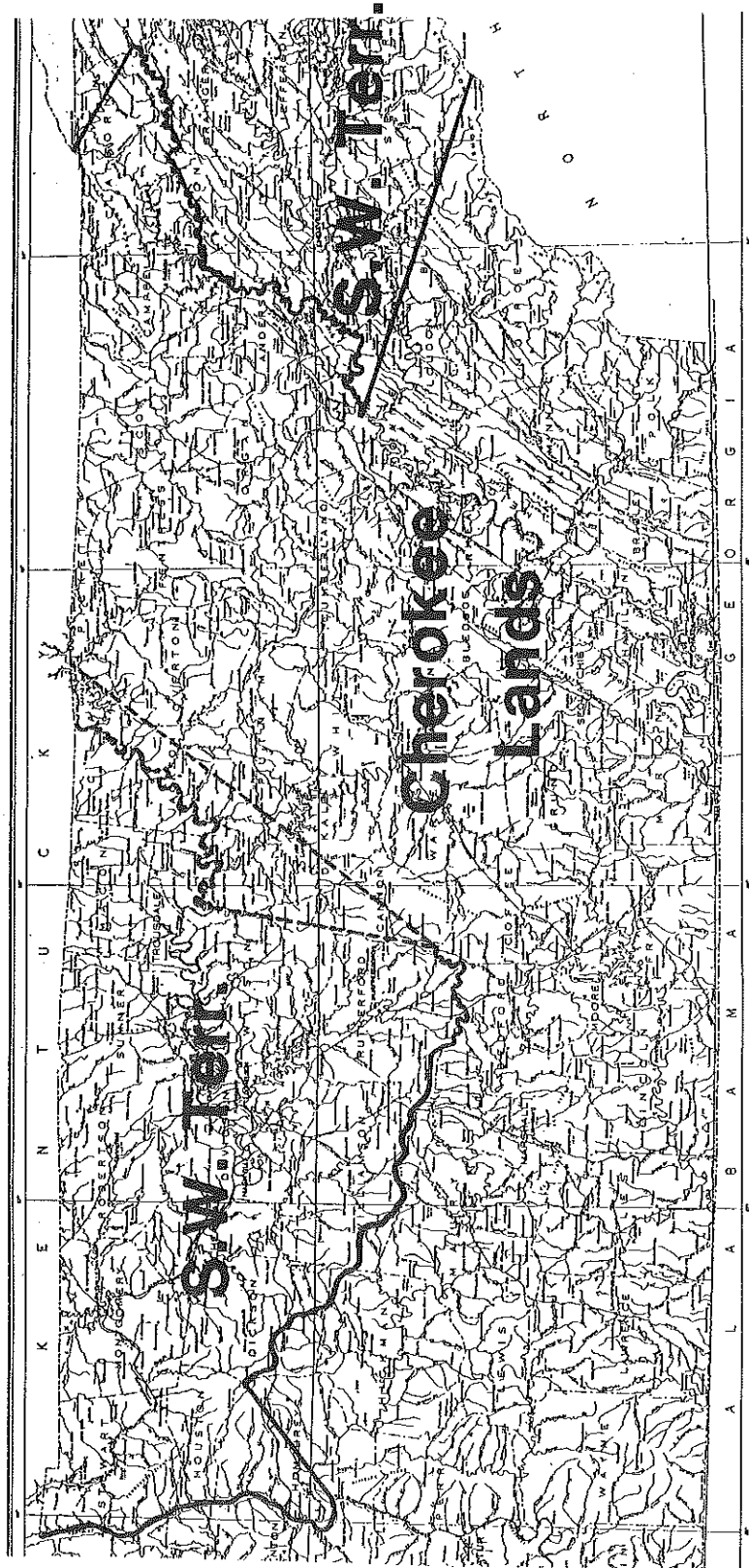


Fig.2. Treaty of Holston, 1791

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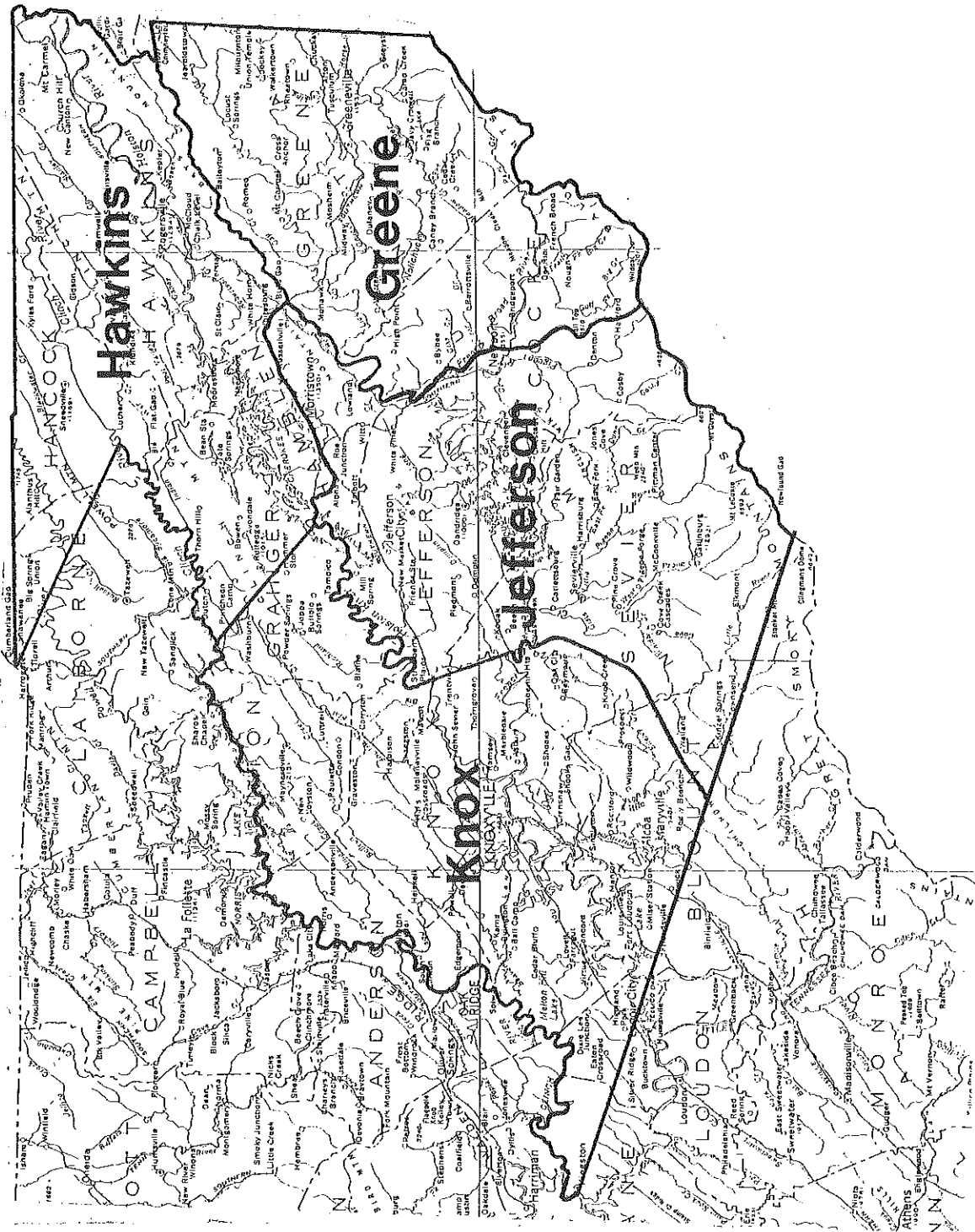


Fig.3. Jefferson and Knox counties formed, Greene and Hawkins counties redefined, Territory South of the River Ohio, 1792

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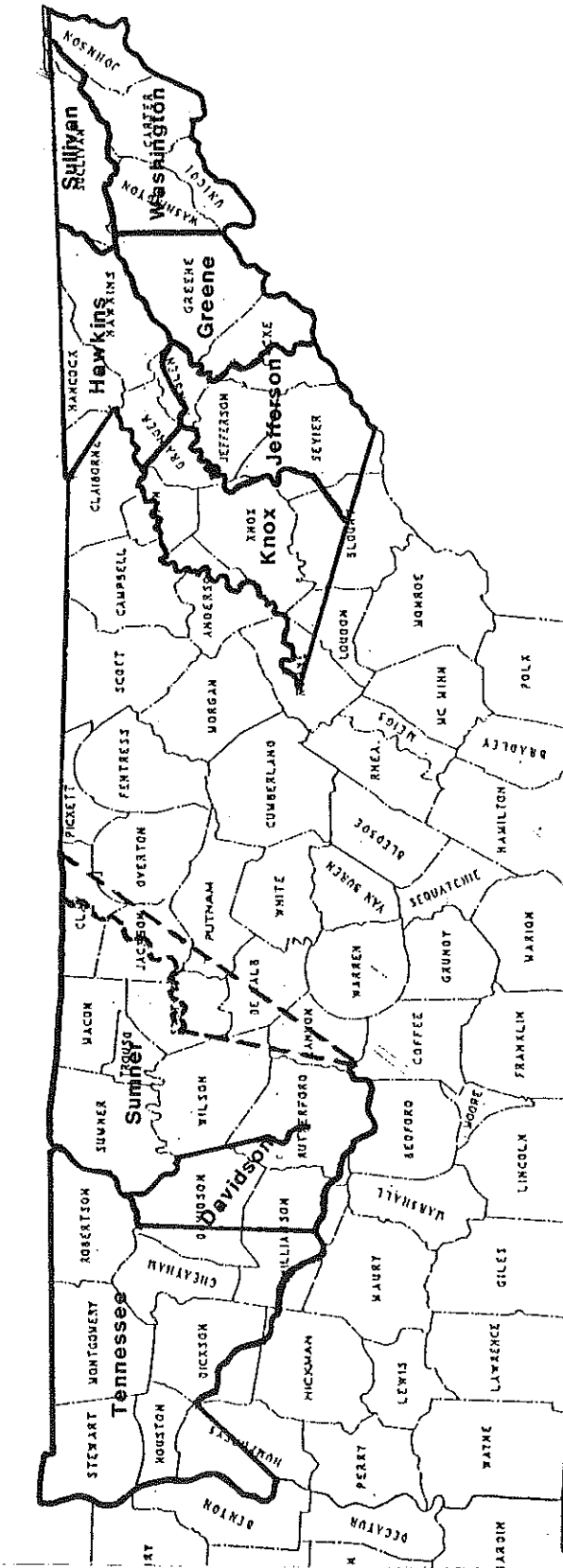


Fig.4. Territory South of the River Ohio counties, 1792