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THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES: WASHINGTON COUNTY

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Tennessee Ancestors

County records are a primary source of information for doing genealogical research; therefore, it is essential that you know what county your ancestor lived in at a given time. Tennessee's county boundary lines are stable now, but they were altered drastically and repeatedly as settlement progressed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, the genealogy of Tennessee counties is important to your own genealogy.

As an example, suppose an ancestor lived in what is now Campbell County during its early history. Should you search only the records of that county for him? No. In fact, if he died before Campbell was formed, you may not find any records there. Campbell was formed in 1806 from Claiborne and Anderson counties. Claiborne was formed from Grainger and Hawkins, and Anderson was formed from Knox. Grainger, in turn, was formed from Knox and Hawkins, and Knox was formed from Greene and Hawkins. Hawkins was formed from Greene and Sullivan, and Greene and Sullivan were formed from Washington. It may be necessary for you to check any one--or all--of these counties' records, depending on when your ancestor lived in Campbell County.

While there are a number of early maps showing Tennessee county boundary lines, most of them are inaccurate. Some twentieth-century books have based their maps on earlier ones, perpetuating the inaccuracies. There have been a few reconstructions of changes in individual county boundaries, such as James S. Bowman's "Boundaries of Knox County, 1792-1946,"¹ but the only systematic attempt to show graphically the evolution of all Tennessee counties is Thorndale and Dollarhide's Map Guide to U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790-1920.² Though generally accurate, the scale of the maps doesn't allow for much detail. Furthermore, the maps are constructed only for the years the federal census was taken--not every time a new county was formed.

The following essay is the first in a projected series of articles on the chronological formation of early Tennessee county boundaries. This series will describe through narrative and maps the formation of each new county, with accompanying changes in extant counties through 1796, when Tennessee became a state.

Washington was the first county formed in what is now Tennessee. In fact, for two years it was Tennessee--that is, if you include the portion also claimed by Virginia. An explanation of this peculiar state of affairs requires some historical background.

¹Mary U. Rothrock, ed., The French Broad-Holston Country; a History of Knox County, Tennessee (Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1946), map following p. 44.

²William Thorndale and William Dollarhide, Map Guide to the U. S. Federal Censuses, 1790-1920 (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 314-25.

THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES

The 1655 charter defining the colony of North Carolina specified that the colony's northern boundary would extend along the 36°30' parallel of latitude all the way to the Mississippi River and its southern boundary along the 35th parallel to the Mississippi. This, however, was a theoretical document; in practice, boundary lines had to be surveyed and conflicting land claims had to be settled. The boundaries never followed those exact parallels because of inaccurate surveying, compromises, boundary disputes, treaties with Native Americans, etc. Generally speaking, though, the charter defined all of what is now Tennessee as part of the original North Carolina colony (see Fig. 1).

As settlement progressed westward from the Atlantic Coast, the boundary lines between colonies began to be surveyed. For many years the northern boundary of North Carolina/Tennessee was the one of greatest interest because that's where the most settlement was occurring. In 1728 William Byrd and others surveyed the border between North Carolina and Virginia to Peters Creek in present-day Stokes County, N.C. Though ostensibly at 36°30' latitude, the surveyors made adjustments for "certain natural objects" which eventually led them several miles north of true 36°30'. In 1749 a surveying team which included Peter Jefferson (Thomas' father) extended the survey to Steep Rock Creek in what is now Johnson County, Tennessee. (This creek can't be identified on a modern map because its name was changed soon thereafter. In his History of Tennessee, Stanley Folmsbee states that Steep Rock Creek is the present Laurel Creek.)

Though the area was claimed by the British in their North Carolina charter, settlers did not begin moving into upper "East Tennessee" until the Treaty of Fort Stanwix was signed in 1768 with the Iroquois (who had only a shadowy claim to the area). The Treaty of Lochaber in 1770 recognized Cherokee ownership of the area and ceded to the British all the land north and east of a line running along what was thought to be the 36°30' parallel to the Holston River and then northward to the mouth of the Kanawha River.

When the Treaty of Lochaber line was actually surveyed a year later by John Donelson, he began where Jefferson and Fry had left off in 1749 and ran the line to the South Fork of the Holston River. At that point, it became apparent that a number of white settlers would be south of the line, so the Cherokees very graciously allowed two modifications. The line separating North Carolina from Virginia was continued along the river to the present site of Kingsport, then northwestward to the Kentucky River. The area north of the river (now upper Sullivan County) was called the North Holston Settlement (see Fig. 2), and was to be governed by Virginia (Fincastle County), since it was north of the Donelson line.

In 1775 another group of settlers moved into what is now upper Hawkins County, Tennessee. This was called the Carter Valley Settlement or Pendleton District (see Fig. 3). In January 1776 these folks petitioned for, and were granted, status as citizens of Fincastle County, Virginia, along with the North Holston Settlement. In December 1776 Washington County, Virginia, was formed from the lower part of Fincastle, making the North Holston and Carter Valley settlers automatically residents of that county.

THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES

Since 1770 other pioneers had been settling along the Watauga, Holston, and Nolichucky rivers south of the Donelson line. Discovering that they were not within the bounds of Virginia as they had believed, they petitioned the North Carolina legislature to be officially annexed to that state. They were granted status as "Washington District," North Carolina, in November 1776. There was so much confusion that in July 1777 another treaty (the Treaty of Long Island) was negotiated, which drew lines between Indian and white settlement and between Virginia and North Carolina. The North Holston and Carter Valley Settlements remained Virginia territory; the present Washington/Carter/Johnson County area was ceded to North Carolina; and the rest of what is now Tennessee remained Cherokee land (see Fig. 4).

North Carolina legislators did not remain content with this for long, however. Before the year was over, they unilaterally proclaimed that virtually all of present Tennessee was now Washington County, North Carolina:

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 the late District of Washington, and all that part of this State comprehended within the following lines, shall be erected into a new and distinct county, by the name of Washington County, viz: Beginning at the most northwesterly part of the county of Wilkes, on the Virginia line; thence running with the line of Wilkes County, to a point thirty-six miles south of the Virginia line; thence due west, to the ridge of the great Iron Mountain which heretofore divided the hunting grounds of the Overhill Cherokees, from those of the middle settlements, and valley; thence running a southwesterly course, along the said ridge, to the Unacoy Mountain, where the trading path crosses the same from the valley to the Overhills; thence south with the line of this State, adjoining the State of South Carolina; thence due west, to the great river, Mississippi; thence up the said river [with] the courses thereof, to a point due west from the beginning; thence due east with the line of this State, to the beginning; and it is hereby declared, that all that part of this State comprehended within the lines aforesaid, shall from henceforth be and remain the county of Washington, and shall be, and is hereby, declared to be part of the District of Salisbury.³

Generally speaking, this outlines the whole state of Tennessee, much like the original North Carolina charter. In practice, the North Holston and Carter Valley settlements remained under the governance of Washington County, Virginia, because of the Donelson survey still in effect. Furthermore, the Treaty of Long Island still did not allow white settlement beyond the treaty line running through Greene County. For all practical purposes, then, the only white settlers (in what is now Tennessee) who were considered Washington Countians

³Henry D. Whitney, The Land Laws of Tennessee (Chattanooga, Tenn.: Deardorff & Sons, 1891), p. 681.

THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES

(N.C.) were those in the present Washington/Carter/Johnson County area. Fig. 5 shows the eastern end of the new Washington County, North Carolina, with dotted lines outlining the area which still considered itself under Virginia governance. Fig. 6 shows the boundaries of Washington County, North Carolina, as formally proclaimed by the North Carolina legislature. The jogs in Tennessee's northern border make for a complicated story and will be dealt with in more detail in the next article in the series.

Next: In the August issue we will look at the formation of Sullivan County.

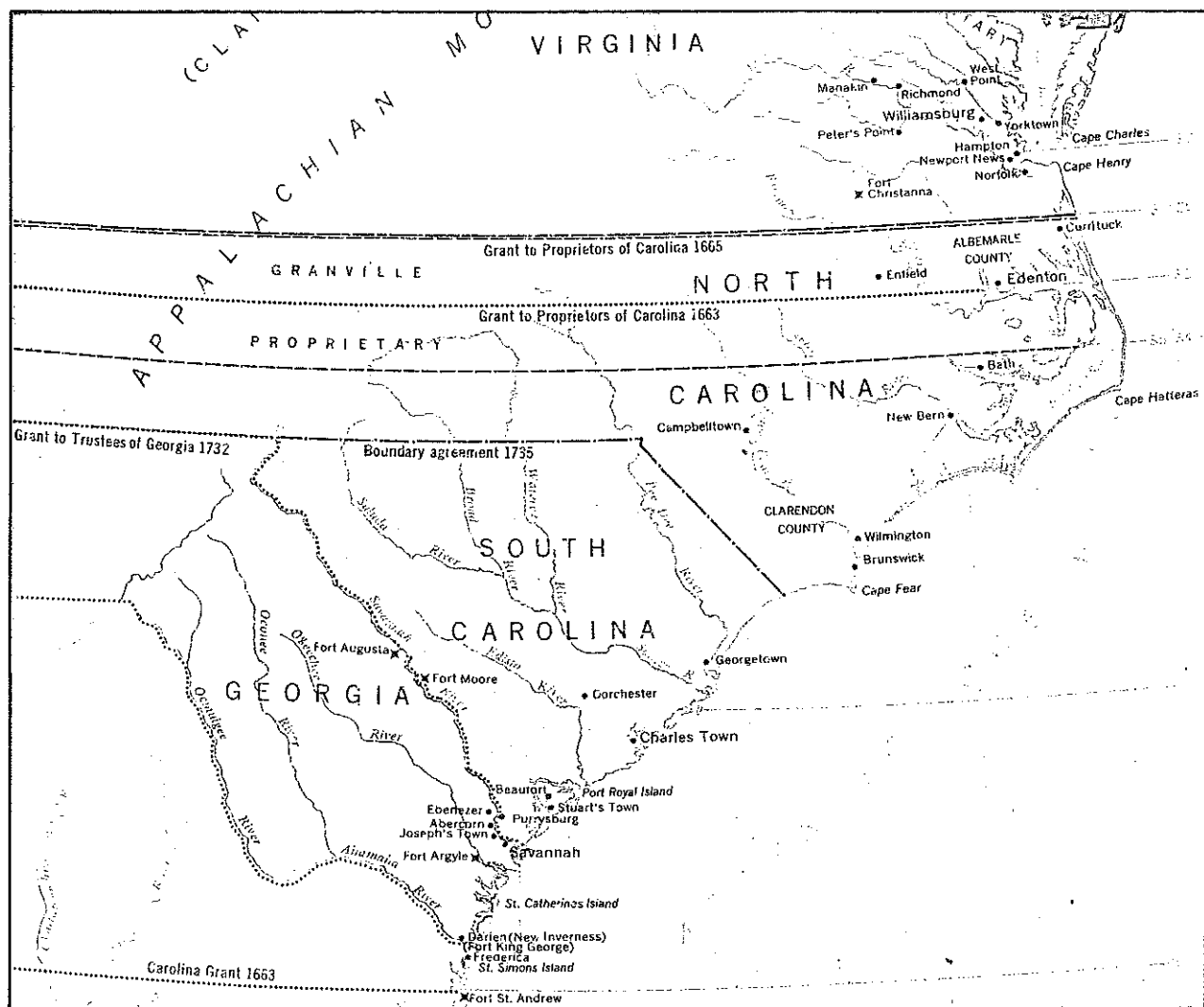


Fig. 1.

Source: *The American Heritage Pictorial Atlas of U.S. History*

THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES

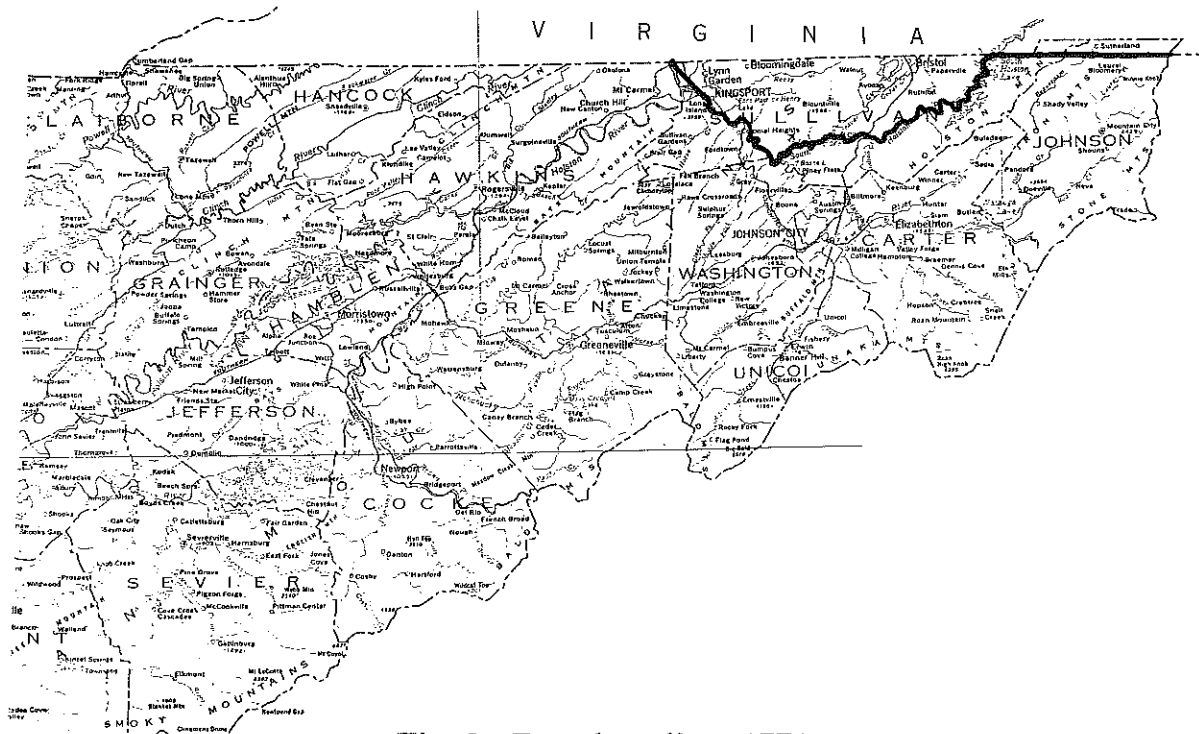


Fig. 2. Donelson line, 1771

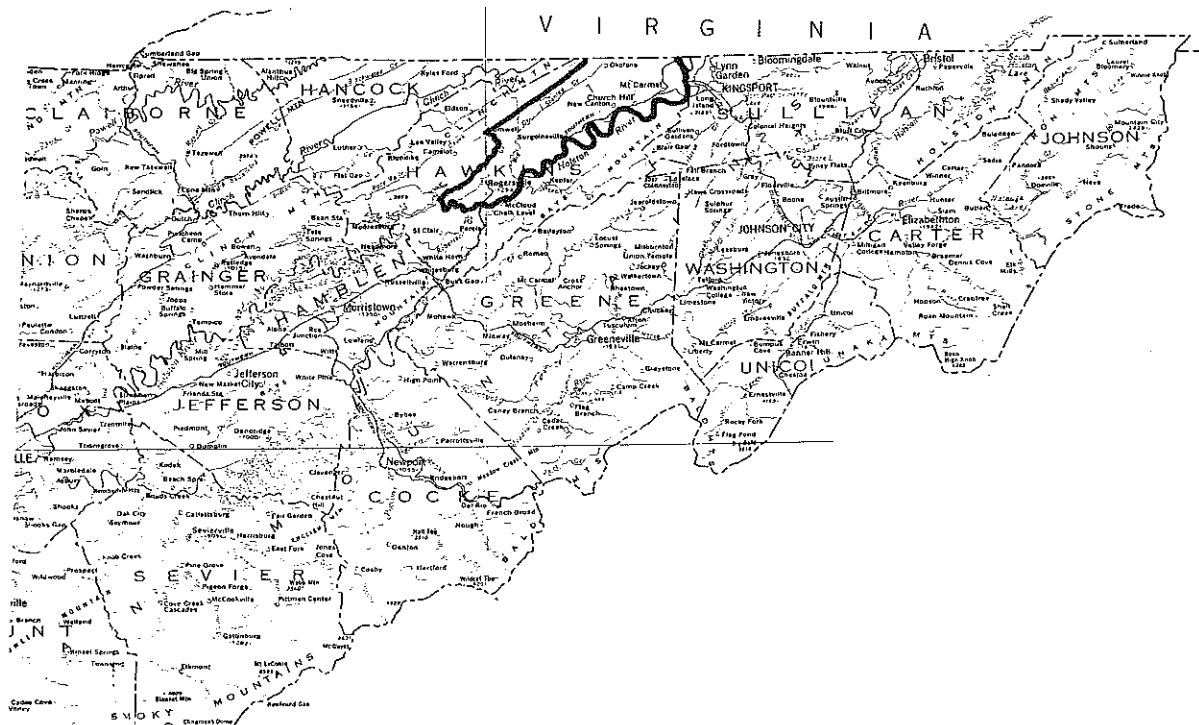


Fig. 3. Carter Valley Settlement, 1775

THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY TENNESSEE COUNTY BOUNDARIES

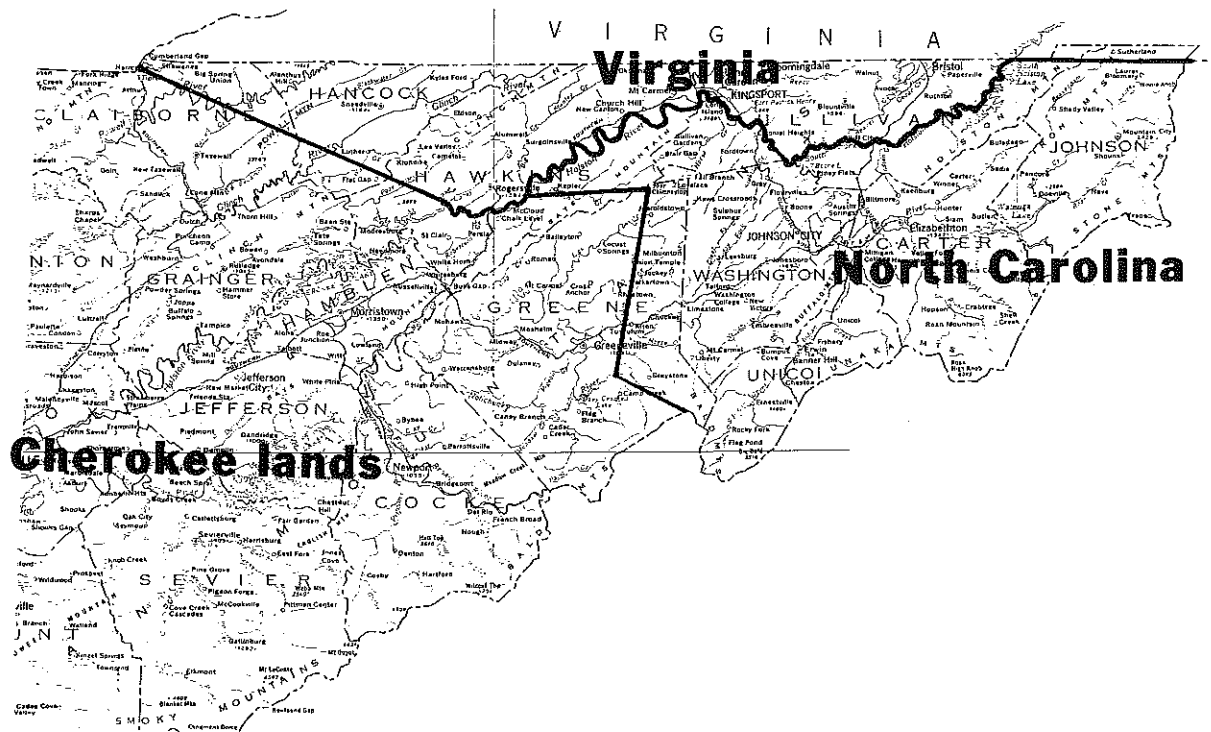


Fig. 4. Treaty of Long Island, 1777

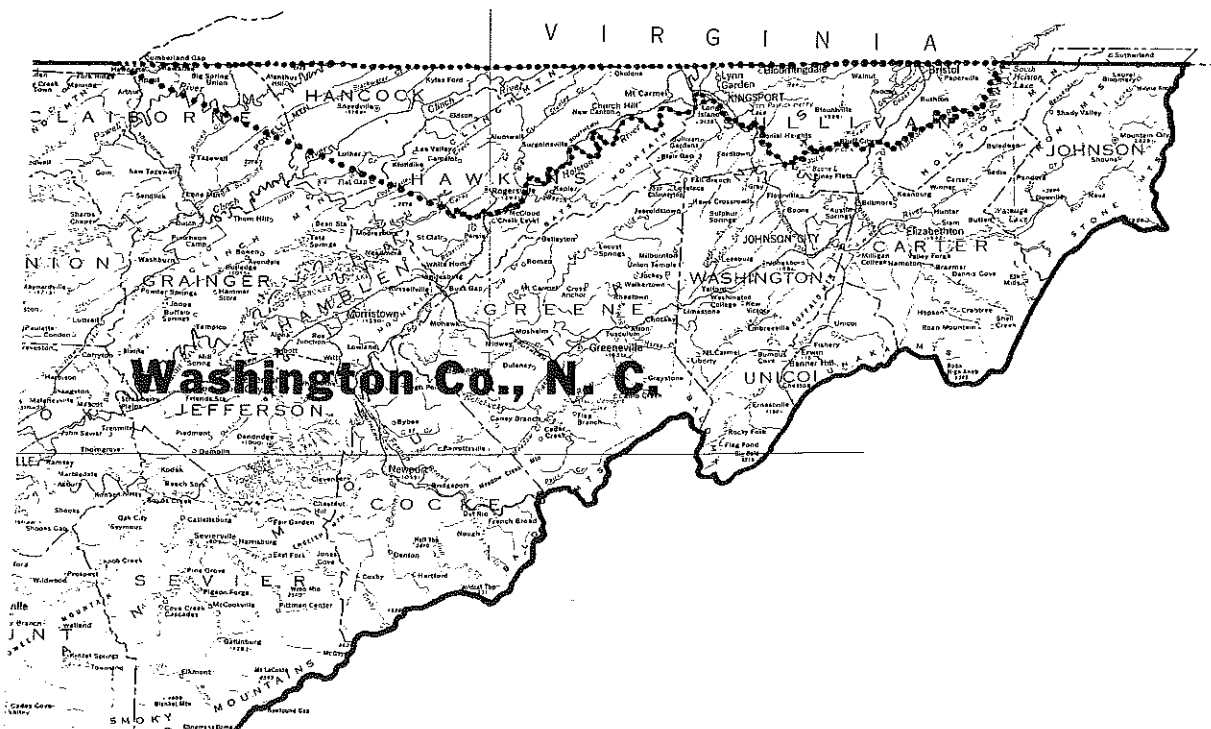


Fig. 5. Washington Co., N.C., 1777

