

Tennessee: Frontier to Statehood

Whether it was 1768 or 1769, no one knows the exact date when the first permanent settlers moved into the upper eastern regions of what is now Tennessee. What is known is that when the French and Indian War (or the Seven Years War) broke out in North America in 1754, there were Europeans from Britain, France, and Spain contesting Native Americans in their effort to lay claim to the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains, including the region that would eventually become Tennessee.

English settlers erected forts both to ensure that their Indian allies remained loyal and to serve as buffer between British and French settlements. When the English called on their Cherokee allies to send a force of warriors north to fight the French and French-allied Indians, the Cherokees demanded as the price of their service the construction of a fort in the Overhill district where their women and children could be safe should an attack occur while they were away. When the governors of Virginia and South Carolina agreed to send a fort-building expedition, the men arrived and constructed a small fort near the Overhill town of Chota beside the Little Tennessee River. They failed, however, to leave behind a garrison to protect the fort, and so the Cherokees destroyed the fort to prevent it from falling to the French. When another group from South Carolina came, this time they brought 120 short-term troops to build the fort and 80 British regulars to garrison it. The fort was finally completed in July 1757. It was christened Fort Loudon in honor of the commander of British forces in America.

Some of the British forces invited their wives and children to join them and soon a small community emerged within the fort. Despite their hunting, fishing, and modest cornfields, food supply was a problem for the British settlers. Trading took place with the Cherokee Indians in the area, which improved relations to an extent, and soon Cherokee warriors were regularly sending forces north to fight the French and French-allied Indians. The Anglo-Cherokee alliance began to deteriorate, however, when several Cherokee warriors plundered cabins and stole horses from Virginia settlements on their way back from fighting in the Ohio country. The Virginians in turn killed some warriors, which prompted the Cherokees to turn on the entire “tribe” of Englishmen settlers, in Virginia and elsewhere. Attempts to ease the tension failed, and in March 1760, the Cherokees surrounded Fort Loudon and prepared to siege the town. When British reinforcements were ambushed in the western mountains of South Carolina, the fort was all but doomed. When their stockpile of provisions began running low in July, the garrison had no choice but to seek terms of surrender. The Cherokees agreed to let the settlers leave in peace so long as they surrendered the fort with its cannons; but along their trek home a group of Cherokee warriors ambushed their camp, killing twenty-six soldiers and three women. Some of the survivors were taken to Cherokee camps and tortured, others were held for ransom. The British struck back in the summer of 1761 when troops burned numerous Cherokee towns, destroyed their crops, and drove them into the mountains to starve. In late 1761 a truce was reached that included the return of Fort Loudon and the release of all hostages.

Meanwhile, Britain had managed to win a hard fought struggle against the French and their allied Indians for the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, including, of course, Tennessee. Fort Loudon was never garrisoned again but it had served its

purpose well. By binding the powerful Cherokee tribe to the English during the critical early stage of the war, the fort helped the English hold on until the tide of war turned in their favor.

Despite King George III's Proclamation of 1763, which prohibited white settlements west of the Appalachian mountains, English "long hunters"—so named because their hunting expeditions kept them away from home for months at a time—freely explored the regions west of the Appalachians, including East Tennessee. Famous long hunter Daniel Boone, while mainly identified with the Kentucky frontier, roamed the areas throughout northeastern Tennessee as early 1760, and lived with his wife near present-day Bristol in the early 1770s. These long hunters were crucial in providing reports about unexplored lands and their Indian inhabitants to settlers preparing to stake out homesteads in the Tennessee country.

The first permanent white settlers moved into upper East Tennessee in the late 1760s, arriving in groups consisting of families that hailed from predominantly the colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. Four distinct settlements emerged in the region: the North Holston settlement (present-day Bristol), the Watauga settlement (present-day Elizabethton), the Carter's Valley settlement (between present-day Kingsport and Rogersville), and the Nolichucky River settlement (present-day Erwin). Initially, these settlers were met with little Cherokee resistance. After British officials surveyed the area they realized that three of these four settlements encroached on Cherokee lands as determined by the Lochaber Treaty of 1770. When told to vacate their newly constructed communities, the settlers refused, and representatives of the three settlements formed a quasi-government—the Watauga Association—to negotiate a new arrangement with the Cherokees. The new arrangement permitted the whites to lease the land from the Indians for a specific period of time, in exchange for various goods. The peace lasted for a few years, during which time the settlements expanded and prospered.

When the American Revolution erupted in New England in April 1775, the Watauga Association called for a revolutionary committee of safety, and then organized them into the "Washington District." A special Committee of Thirteen, headed by John Carter, took charge of the District's administration. On July 5, 1776, the association sent a petition to North Carolina's leaders demanding annexation. North Carolina revolutionary leaders agreed to allow the Wataugans to elect representatives to attend a meeting in Halifax, North Carolina that would frame a constitution for North Carolina. These representatives were John Sevier, John Carter, John Haile, and Charles Robertson. The region, which was later named Washington County, was officially annexed by North Carolina's legislature in 1777. The settlers of Washington County chose John Carter to serve as senator and Jacob Womack and John Sevier (who was soon to play a major role in Tennessee history) were elected to the House of Commons.

Relations with the Cherokees were remarkably peaceful during the early-1770s. The Sycamore Shoals Treaty of March 1775 permitted the purchase of vast tracts of Cherokee land in exchange for a household of goods worth over ten thousand pounds. When the Cherokees agreed to this and several other "land-grab" deals, it opened up approximately twenty million acres for white settlement, which included the area of Middle Tennessee where the Cumberland settlement would soon emerge.

By the spring of 1776, a year after the Revolution began, British forces offered to support the Indians in any plans for aggression against the white colonial settlers. The Wataugans strengthened their defenses at the settlements and prepared for Cherokee attacks. In July the expected attack came, but the Cherokees failed when the colonists drove them back. The Cherokees then prepared to lay siege to Sycamore Shoals. However, after nearly two weeks, they were unable to defeat the colonists. They eventually retreated, after which reinforcements from Georgia, Virginia, and North Carolina marched toward the Cherokee towns in September 1776, destroying several sites. The resulting peace treaty drew new boundaries in the area of the new Tennessee settlements, legalizing all four of the original locations.

In 1780, the expanding southern campaign of the American Revolution offered settlers in the upper east regions of Tennessee the chance to fight for their independence. Tennessee pioneers participated in several military campaigns in the Carolina's, most notably the Battle of King's Mountain in October of 1780. John Sevier and other Tennesseans fought heroically and played a crucial role in winning that battle, which is often referred to as the turning point of the Revolutionary War in the South.

In 1779 a group of 300 men (including slaves), women, and children set out along the Cumberland Gap to establish a new settlement near present-day Nashville. The trek took two long months to complete through very cold weather, but all survived. Upon arrival they began the hardy work of hunting, fishing, and constructing shelters. About that time, another party of settlers, led by John Donelson, set out on flatboats on the Holston River toward the Cumberland Basin area—a one-thousand mile river route. The adventure proved disastrous. By February 1780, due to low river levels, the flotilla had journeyed only a few miles. By mid-March the group had been riddled with death, smallpox, frostbite, shipwreck, Indian attack, and other serious hindrances. When the party reached Muscle Shoals it was nearly stopped by the menacing waters and the shoals. "Here we did not know," Donelson, confessed, "how soon we should be dashed to pieces and all our troubles ended at once." The "hand of Providence," however, spared the brave adventurers. A week later the group reached the Ohio River and commenced upstream to find the connection with the Cumberland River. It took them two months to reach the French Lick and their final destination.

By 1783, North Carolina created Davidson County and established its county court. The residents chose James Robertson and Anthony Bledsoe to represent them in state legislature. Additionally, the government passed the "Land Grab Act," which put on the market all lands not within the designated military reservation or the Cherokee reservation. For only ten dollars per one hundred acres, buyers could whatever they could mark. Nearly four million acres were claimed under this Act, which only lasted from October 1783 to May 1784. This vastly increased activity in the Cumberland and East Tennessee regions.

Frontier life in the Cumberland settlements was hard. Pioneers struggles to provide food, clothing, and shelter. Relations with Indians in the Cumberland area were much more hostile than in the East Tennessee settlements, and fighting took place almost constantly during the early 1780s with the various Indian tribes in that area. Whites brought with them African slaves to assist in the daily struggles of frontier life. Relatively few in number, the slaves probably had a

fairly close relationship with their owners. Some even fought alongside their masters against Indian assaults. By the 1790s, slavery had expanded noticeably in the Tennessee country.

In the early 1780s, the upper East Tennessee settlers began an independence movement. Increased land speculation from the Land Grab Act of 1783 increased the area's population, and the region was developing several different towns and counties. John Sevier emerged as the leader of this push to establish statehood in the upper East Tennessee region. The North Carolina legislature decided to cede the western lands (upper East Tennessee country) to the Confederation government.

Leaders of these western "North Carolina" counties (west of the Appalachian Mountains) called a convention and drew up a state constitution declaring the chief reasons the residents desired an independent and sovereign state. Primarily, the proponents of the state of Franklin argued that their lives, liberties, and property could be more secure by creating a sovereign state. However, there were also practical issues at play: attacks from Indians were frequent and the residents sought more adequate protection, and the geographical separation prevented easy and quick contact with the rest of North Carolina, slowing trade and other necessary communication with the mother colony to the east of the Appalachian Mountains.

The settlers, led by John Sevier, called a convention and appointed delegates to meet in Jonesboro. During the Jonesboro convention, Sevier was named the governor of the proposed state of Franklin, a name chosen by Sevier himself. The delegates then drew up a constitution of their own. Meanwhile, the North Carolina legislature had decided to reverse their original act to cede their western land claims. Once Sevier and the other Franklin proponents discovered the news, the conflict between Franklin and North Carolina intensified. In the spring of 1785, North Carolina governor Alexander Martin warned the Franklinites that further opposition to state laws could result in a civil war. In May, Sevier sent a Franklin leader, William Coker, to New York City, then the nation's capital, to lobby the Confederation government for statehood, but he was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the Franklin convention met again in November to discuss instituting a new and permanent constitution. They decided to formally adopt their original constitution, which was essentially a replica of North Carolina's constitution. Therefore, the Franklinites embraced the very institutional provisions that they had rebelled against.

Disputes with the Cherokees over official boundary lines resulted in many armed conflicts between the settlers of Franklin and the Indians. In an effort to reach a settlement, Governor Sevier forced the Cherokee leaders to meet him at Coyatee (northwestern South Carolina) in August 1786. The resulting treaty extended the boundary line of white settlement south to the Little Tennessee River. This of course resulted in increased hostility with Cherokees along the borders, and over the next few years Sevier would further enhance his reputation for being a fierce and relentless Indian killer. The worst episode occurred in 1788, when Sevier and his men lured some Cherokees under a flag of truce and then brutally slaughtered the defenseless Indians. A leading historian on the topic has written: "The State of Franklin gave every indication that it would take over Cherokee lands with impunity and exterminate anyone who stood in its way."

Internal dissension and opposition from the North Carolina legislature after 1786 destroyed any hope that Franklinites clung to. The state elected anti-Franklinites to the senate and in 1787, granted tax forgiveness to Franklin residents in an act of conciliation. The final blow to Franklin was delivered by the constitutional convention meeting in Philadelphia in 1787, where it was mandated that no new state could be formed “without the consent of the Legislatures of the States concerned as well as of the Congress.” After Sevier’s governorship expired in March 1788, Samuel Johnston, the Governor of North Carolina, ordered Sevier’s arrest on the grounds of treason. He was brought to Morganton for trial but was rescued by friends, family, and loyal Franklinites. There was no pursuit and so ended the push for statehood. Eventually, North Carolina officials issued a blanket pardon to all Franklinites, including John Sevier.

In the fall of 1789, Daniel Smith, a prominent leader of the Cumberland Basin settlements, attended the North Carolina state constitution ratifying convention eager to lobby for the state’s cession of its western lands. On December 22, a month after North Carolina ratified the Constitution, the state legislature voted to cede its claims on the western lands. The act took specific measures to protect land investments by wealthy North Carolina speculators, to ensure that slavery would be protected under the new local government, and to guarantee that the region would be governed under the terms of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The United States Congress quickly approved the bill and President George Washington signed it into law on May 26, 1790. All territory south of the Ohio River would be deemed the “Southwest Territory” (which included the area of present-day Tennessee).

The Federal Government looked intently upon the Southwest Territory as a prime investment opportunity and a source of easy wealth. President Washington appointed William Blount to shepherd the territory during Tennessee’s apprenticeship period. Since he was not closely tied to the Franklin movement, as was John Sevier, Blount was deemed suitable for the position, despite the irony that he had spent years grabbing hundreds of thousands of acres within the Southwest Territory before the government had an opportunity to acquire them.

Upon taking the oath of office before a Supreme Court justice in Virginia, Blount was off toward his Southwest Territory, a region where he had never visited despite his land dealings there. Blount immediately began constructing official U. S. governing bodies out of the several existing county governments. He appointed John Sevier brigadier general of the Washington District militia. He then headed west toward the Nashville settlements to organize its government.

Blount was also left with the daunting task of dealing with the Indians. Federal assistance on this issue was practically non-existent, so the brunt of the problem was left for the local government to solve. The presence of illegal white settlers south of the French Broad River was a point of conflict with the Cherokee, and Blount called a meeting with the chiefs to discuss a settlement in May 1791. Twelve hundred Cherokees including forty-one chiefs were present at the meeting. Both parties finally reached a very reluctant agreement on July 2 in the Treaty of Holston. The treaty set new boundaries that permitted white settlement below the French Broad River in exchange for an annual payment of one thousand dollars to the Cherokee Nation. After the signing of the treaty Blount immediately began pushing the Cherokee to sell their lands south

to the Muscle Shoals vicinity. The Cherokee's fervently denied and became disenchanted with the agreement.

Meanwhile, confrontations with Indians in the Northwest Territory caused extensive fear in the Tennessee country. From 1792 to 1794 hostilities between reds and whites inflamed, particularly among the Creeks and the Chickamaugas. Blount struggled to reach peace settlements with all the Indian tribes he encountered, and reluctant agreements won by bribes of money, goods, and whiskey were usually followed by increased antagonisms. In September 1792 the Cherokees attacked the settlement at Station Inn near present-day Nashville. The settlers barely staved off the siege. A series of general back-and-forth attacks commenced between the whites and the Indians, until Blount ordered John Sevier to march south to pursue and attack any and all Cherokees he encountered. Sevier commenced his destructive march all the way to Etowah, Georgia, just across the present-day Georgia – Tennessee border. Tensions mounted in Washington and eventually Blount's Indian policies came under attack, serving to intensify his determination to push the territory toward statehood.

Governor of the Tennessee Territory, William Blount, wielded extensive power in the appointment of government officials and controlling the local newspaper. After operating out of "Rocky Mount" for a while, Blount decided to move the capital farther south to be more conveniently situated to deal with the Indian problems and to communicate with the Mero District. In October 1791 he decided that the new capital should be built at James White's fort on the Holston River (this was the area Blount selected for the initial Cherokee treaty negotiations). Knoxville, named after Harry Knox, would continue to serve as the seat of Tennessee's government for years to come. The Northwest Ordinance that regulated the Southwest Territory outlined stages of transition from territory to statehood. One stipulated that a territory was entitled to a legislature once it contained at least five thousand free adult males. Blount ordered that the counties conduct a census, which was completed in July of that year. To everyone's surprise, the total population stood at a staggering 35,700! The most populated area of the territory, the Washington District, contained 29,000 residents. The slave population totaled 3,400, with nearly 2,300 in the Washington District alone. The territory's population surpassed the minimum number of free adult males by approximately 1,300. However, Blount decided to ignore the legal entitlement to a legislature and chose to govern without the hindrance of a law-making body.

In 1791, Blount named William Cocke as attorney general of the Washington District and Andrew Jackson to hold that same post in the Mero District. The following year he officially established Knox and Jefferson Counties, which constituted the new Hamilton District, in addition to authorizing a new tax on persons and land. By 1793, as a result of mounting hostilities between the Indians and Americans, a new movement for a territorial legislature began. This time Blount obliged, and on October 19 he issued a call for elections to be held in December. A total of thirteen representatives were chosen, and the first meeting of the new assembly convened in February 1794. Among the thirteen men present at the meeting were William Cocke of Hawkins, John Tipton of Washington County, John Beard of Knox, and Dr. James White of Davidson. The chief issue at the meeting was to select ten men from whom President Washington would later choose five to serve as the council of the assembly.

The upper and lower houses met on August 25, 1794. They settled on a 25-cent per 100-acre tax rate, to the dismay of the landowners, established a Treasury Department and several various courts, and officially created Sevier County. They drew up another petition to the federal government for protection from hostile Indians, chartered colleges, and requested Blount to conduct a referendum on the question of statehood. By June of the following year, the territorial assembly met again and quickly agreed to enact a law requiring a census and a referendum on statehood. The legislature also chartered Washington College at Salem, and created Blount County.

By 1795, the total population had grown to 77,300, of which 66,650 were free persons and 10,600 were enslaved. This qualified the territory for the third stage of its transition to statehood. The non-binding referendum showed solid support for statehood—over two-thirds of the registered opinions favored statehood. As a result, on November 28 Blount called for an election in December of five delegates from each county to a proposed constitutional convention to commence on January 11, 1796.

In a relatively short period, the region encompassing present-day Tennessee had been settled and organized. To be sure, its early forays into self-government were fraught with missteps and roadblocks thrown up the “mother colony” of North Carolina. But in less than 6 years, William Blount had managed to masterfully shepherd Tennesseans through an apprenticeship period in which the region had been a part of the Southwest Territory to place Tennessee onto the road to statehood and admission into the Union as its sixteenth state.

Source: Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and their History* (1999).