

# Longhunters and Settlement of Tennessee

*Essential Question: How did trade and exploration lead to the settlement of Tennessee?*

Until 1750, the rugged Appalachian Mountains served as a very effective barrier to the westward expansion of the colonies. In that year, Dr. Thomas Walker, a physician turned land speculator, made a monumental discovery. While working for the Loyal Company of Virginia, Walker led an expedition southward along the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, and discovered the Cumberland Gap. Cumberland Gap, a natural passage through the mountains, became a gateway to the West for generations of explorers and settlers. One group that made use of the Cumberland Gap as a gateway to the west were the longhunters. These hunters, enticed by circulating rumors of bountiful game across the mountains, embarked on hunting expeditions typically lasting six to seven months, setting out in October and returning in April or May. The longhunters were responsible for the majority of geographical knowledge the American colonists accumulated about the Trans-Appalachian West. As tales of their adventures spread throughout the colonies, the longhunters attracted the attention of land speculators.

Land speculators purchased land at low prices with the intent to sell the land for higher prices in the future. Land speculation companies saw their opportunity to gain lands west of the mountains with the discovery of the Cumberland Gap. These companies began hiring longhunters as surveyors to map the Trans-Appalachian lands while on hunting expeditions. The most famous of these hunters was Daniel Boone,

who would ultimately explore and map vast areas of Northeast Tennessee and southern Kentucky while working for land speculator Richard Henderson.

Tennessee's first permanent white settler, William Bean, established a small settlement along the Watauga branch of the Holston River in 1769. Other settlers followed, including James Robertson and John Sevier. The Watauga Settlement found itself in difficult circumstances when a survey revealed that it was outside the boundaries of Virginia and in violation of the Proclamation of 1763. Whether the settlers had truly believed their settlement to be in Virginia or had decided to skirt the law is debatable.<sup>1</sup> In any event, the government ordered the settlers off Cherokee land. The settlers, unwilling to give up the community they had worked to establish, decided to strike a deal with the Cherokee. The Watauga settlers arranged to lease the land from the Cherokee for a period of ten years. However, the Wataugans were still beyond the boundary of any organized government. To solve this problem they created the Watauga Association in 1772. This group of white, male settlers worked together to create a system of laws for their settlement based on the laws of Virginia.<sup>2</sup> The laws were written in a document called the Watauga Compact. The settlement had five elected officials called commissioners who were in charge of recording legal documents such as land titles and enforcing the law.

The Watauga Association made no claims of independence from Great Britain. Even so, the Wataugans were under the authority of no other government and thus represented the first independent white government in the British colonies. In 1774, Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, wrote to the British official in charge of the

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 52.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Americas about the Wataugans. He described the Wataugans' refusal to leave their lands, their agreement with the Cherokee and their extra-legal government. Further, Dunmore stated that the Wataugans' state formation "sets a dangerous example to the people of America, of forming governments distinct from and independent of his majesty's authority."<sup>3</sup>

With the aid of Boone's exploration reports, Richard Henderson formulated a plan to purchase huge amounts of land from the Cherokee in order to establish his own colony. Completely ignoring the Proclamation of 1763, Henderson completed the Transylvania Purchase in March 1775 at Sycamore Shoals. The Cherokee gave up their claims to the Cumberland River Valley and most of modern Kentucky in exchange for trade goods valued at £10,000. Inspired by Henderson's Transylvania Purchase, the Wataugans also arranged to purchase their land from the Cherokee for £2,000.<sup>4</sup> As part of the agreement, white settlers would be allowed to use a path through the Cumberland Gap. Immediately, Henderson dispatched Boone and a team of 30 axmen to carve a path through the heavily forested area. By April, Boone's team had completed the path, which was known as the Wilderness Road.<sup>5</sup> Though Henderson's Transylvania Purchase was later largely invalidated by the Virginia assembly, it did lead to the creation of the Cumberland Settlement.

With the opening of the Wilderness Road, settlers began to pour into the western regions. Many of the new settlers pushed further west than Bean or the Wataugans. Thomas Sharpe Spencer, a longhunter renowned for his enormous

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Cockrell, "Watauga Settlement." North Carolina Encyclopedia. 2013. <https://www.ncpedia.org/watauga-settlement> accessed. 12 June 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Toomey, "Daniel Boone." Tennessee Encyclopedia, March 7, 2018. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/daniel-boone/> accessed 12 June 2018.

physical strength and stature, traveled as far as the Cumberland River in what is now Middle Tennessee. In 1776, Spencer and a small party of companions built several cabins and planted the first crop along the Cumberland River. Though most of the party returned to the east, Spencer remained in the area until 1779, famously spending his final winter along the river living in a hollowed out sycamore tree.<sup>6</sup> Though forced to abandon his initial venture, Spencer returned in the winter of 1779-1780 as part of the expedition commissioned by Richard Henderson and led by Capt. James Robertson and Col. John Donelson with the intent of founding a permanent settlement along the Cumberland River.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Durham, "Thomas S. Spencer." Tennessee Encyclopedia, March 1, 2018. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/thomas-sharp-spencer/> accessed 12 June 2018.

# Daniel Boone, Wilderness Road and the First Settlers of Tennessee

*Directions: Match the important person, place or event in the box below with the correct definition.*

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. While working for the Loyal Company of Virginia, this man discovered the Cumberland Gap.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. This man was Tennessee's first permanent settler.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. This man was a long hunter who traveled to the Cumberland River in Middle Tennessee. He spent his last winter in the area in a hollowed out sycamore tree.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. This natural passage through the Appalachian Mountains served as a gateway for generations of explorers and settlers.

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. While working for Richard Henderson, this man mapped large areas of upper East Tennessee and oversaw the completion of the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap.

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. This was the name given to men who crossed the Appalachian Mountains for looking for game and brought back stories of the lands west of the Appalachians.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. This man believed that he could become very wealthy by claiming or buying the lands surveyed by Daniel Boone and then reselling them to later settlers. He organized a large land purchase from the Cherokee in 1775.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. This trail through the Cumberland Gap was created by Daniel Boone and a team of 30 axmen working for Richard Henderson. It was used by thousands of settlers headed for Tennessee or Kentucky.

\_\_\_\_\_ 9. Richard Henderson arranged this large purchase of land from the Cherokee in 1775.

- A. Cumberland Gap
- B. Daniel Boone
- C. Dr. Thomas Walker
- D. Long hunters
- E. Richard Henderson
- F. Thomas Sharpe Spencer
- G. Transylvania Purchase
- H. Wilderness Road
- I. William Bean

*Answer the question below with at least one complete sentence:*

10. What impact (importance) did the Wilderness Road have on Tennessee?

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