

The Cumberland Settlement

Standard: 8.26

Essential Question: Why was the Cumberland Settlement created and what problems did the early settlers encounter?

Henderson's **Transylvania Purchase of 1775** was an exercise in sheer audacity as Henderson was operating solely on his own authority. The roughly 20 million acres lay in what is now middle Tennessee and Kentucky. While Henderson was not able to convince Virginia and North Carolina to recognize his entire claim, he was able to claim the region near the Cumberland River in Middle Tennessee.¹ In 1779, Henderson planned a settlement in order to take advantage of the region's rich natural resources including fertile soil and abundant animal life. Henderson's settlement was named the **Cumberland Settlement** for the Cumberland River which served as the main transportation route in the region. Henderson gave the difficult task of establishing the settlement to **James Robertson** and **John Donelson**. Donelson was an experienced land surveyor and veteran of the Cherokee War. James Robertson was one of first Watauga settlers and had served as one of the five magistrates established under the Watauga Compact. Robertson had also served as commander of Watauga Fort during the Cherokee War.² Henderson had a two part plan for settling the Cumberland region. First, Robertson and a small group of Wataugans traveled overland in the spring of 1779 to select a site for the settlement near French Lick. French Lick was a natural salt lick along the Cumberland River that had been the location of a French trading post. In

¹ Terry Weeks, "Transylvania Purchase." Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/transylvania-purchase/> accessed 13 June 2018.

² Ibid.

December of 1779, Robertson and the men returned and built cabins and **Fort Nashborough** in preparation for the arrival of Donelson's party in the spring of 1780.³ Donelson's party of 30 families had the task of transporting the supplies the new settlement would need to survive including farm tools and household goods. He was also responsible for the safety of many women and children including his and Robertson's families. Additionally, over 30 enslaved people were part of the group. Because of the difficulty in crossing the Cumberland Plateau, Donelson's party took an indirect route by way of the Holston, Tennessee, Ohio and Cumberland rivers. Donelson's group left Watauga on December 22, 1779. Donelson kept a journal during the four month long journey in which he recorded a number of difficulties the travelers faced including: extreme cold, rough waters, an outbreak of smallpox and fighting with the Chickamauga.⁴

On April 24, 1780, Donelson's party arrived at the settlement after traveling over 1,000 miles. Like Watauga before it, the Cumberland Settlement existed outside the boundaries and government of any colony. Therefore, on May 1, 1780 Richard Henderson drew up the **Cumberland Compact**. The compact set up a form of government similar to that of the Watauga Association. Each station in the settlement was allowed to elect men to serve on the 12 person committee known at the "Tribunal of Notables." These "Notables" then carried out the functions of government including enforcing law and order and recording land claims.⁵ The

³ Ibid.

⁴ Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 30-32.

⁵ Kenneth Fieth, "Cumberland Compact." Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/cumberland-compact/> accessed 13 June 2018

Cumberland Compact served as the basis for government in the settlement until North Carolina created Davidson County in 1783.⁶

Almost immediately the settlement came under attack from the Chickamauga. In April 1781, they attacked Fort Nashborough and drove off the horses found outside the walls. A short time later, the settlers gave chase, but were attacked by a large party of American Indians. According to legend, Charlotte Robertson, wife of James Robertson, saved the men by releasing the hunting dogs inside the fort to attack the American Indians. The men were able to return to the fort, but 11 men were killed in what came to be called the **Battle of the Bluffs**.⁷ The danger eventually led Donelson to move his family and enslaved people back to the relative safety of Kentucky. Donelson continued to travel to the area and was killed along the Barren River in 1785.⁸ James Robertson stayed in the Cumberland Settlement, but lost two brothers and two sons to the fighting before it ended in 1794. Robertson is often called the “Father of Middle Tennessee” for his contributions to the region’s development.⁹

⁶ Bergeron, Ash and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*,34.

⁷ Carole Stanford Bucy “Charlotte Reeves Robertson.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/charlotte-reeves-robertson/> accessed 13 June 2018

⁸ Anne-Leslie Owens, “John Donelson.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/john-donelson/> accessed 13 June 2018

⁹ Terry Weeks, “ James Robertson.” Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/james-robertson/> accessed 13 June 2018

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Write a brief summary of the Cumberland settlement including the reasons it was formed, Henderson's plan for the settlement and the difficulties that the early settlers faced. Use each of the bolded terms in the graphic organizer below.

The Cumberland Settlement

Why was the settlement created?

What was Henderson's plan for creating the settlement?

What difficulties did the early settlers face?