

The Settlement of Tennessee

Essential Question: What events contributed to the development of the Watauga settlement?

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.¹ 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.² 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

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

² *Ibid.*, 54.

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 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."³

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 £2,000.⁴ This event was called the **Watauga Purchase**. 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.⁵ Though Henderson's Transylvania Purchase was later largely invalidated by the Virginia assembly, it did lead to the creation of the Cumberland Settlement.

³ Ibid., 57.

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

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

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 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.⁶ 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.

The relationship between the Cherokee and the settlers of Tennessee was as complex and diverse as the individuals involved. **Attakullakulla**, Cherokee peace chief and diplomat, played a key role in Tennessee's early history. By the time of the Transylvania and Watauga Purchases, Attakullakulla was an old man who had spent his life trying to find a way for the Cherokee and Europeans to peacefully coexist. Felix Walker, a young adventurer present during the Transylvania Purchase, described Attakullakulla in detail.

Attakullakulla, the Indian name, known to the white people by the name of Little Carpenter- in allusion, say the Indians, to his deep, artful, and ingenious diplomatic abilities, ably demonstrated in negotiating treaties with the white

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

people, and influence in their national councils; like as a white carpenter could make every notch and joint fit in wood, so he could bring all his views to fill and fit their places in the political machinery of his nation. He was the most celebrated and influential Indian among all the tribes then known.⁷

Attakullakulla first appeared in the historical record as one of the seven Cherokee who visited England to renew a treaty known as the Articles of Friendship and Commerce in 1730. Attakullakulla helped to create a military alliance between the Cherokee and the British during the French and Indian War and tried to stop the hostilities that arose when the alliance broke down. It was also Attakullakulla who negotiated the treaty that ended the war between the British and Cherokee that broke out after the Fort Loudoun Massacre. Attakullakulla was one of several Cherokee leaders who agreed to the Transylvania and Watauga Purchases in 1775. His name and mark are clearly visible on the Watauga Purchase document held by the Tennessee State Library and Archives.

Another Cherokee leader who favored peace with the settlers was the Beloved Woman Nanye-hi who was also known by the English name **Nancy Ward**. Nanye-hi was born in the town of Chota in 1738. Her mother was Tame Doe, the sister of Attakullakulla. In 1755, Nanye-hi accompanied her husband into battle with the Creek. When he was killed in the battle, Nanye-hi took up his gun, rallied the other warriors and led a charge which resulted in victory for the Cherokee.⁸ Because of her bravery, Nanye-hi was chosen as Ghighau or Beloved Woman. The Beloved Woman played an

⁷ Felix Walker, "Narrative of an Adventure in Kentucky in the Year 1775." *The Western Journal and Civilian*. 11 (1854): 392-394. Internet Archive accessed June 23, 2016.

<https://archive.org/details/westernjournala00cobbgoog>

⁸ David Ray Smith, "Nancy Ward." Tennessee Encyclopedia. March 1, 2018. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/nancy-ward/> accessed 13 June 2018.

important role in Cherokee society. She was leader of the Council of Women, served on the Council of Chiefs, and decided the fate of prisoners.⁹ It was in this role that Nanye-hi saved the life of Lydia Bean, wife of Tennessee's first settler William Bean, in 1775.¹⁰ Lydia Bean taught Nanye-hi how to make butter and cheese before her return to her home. Nanye-hi was later credited with introducing dairying to the Cherokee.¹¹

Nanye-hi married English trader Bryant Ward in the late 1750s and was thereafter known to the English as Nancy Ward. Nanye-hi, like her uncle Attakullakulla, favored peace between the Cherokee and the settlers. She twice sent warnings to John Sevier of planned attacks by the Cherokee. She also spoke during the treaty negotiations in 1781 and again in 1785 as the Treaty of Hopewell was being negotiated.¹²

Unlike Attakullakulla and Nanye-hi, Cherokee leader **Dragging Canoe** opposed attempts at peace with the settlers and bitterly resented the loss of Cherokee lands. Dragging Canoe was the son of Attakullakulla. Legend says that as a young boy he begged his father to allow him to accompany a war party. Attakullakulla refused, but the determined boy hid in a canoe where he was discovered. Attakullakulla told him that he could go, if he could carry the canoe to the water. The boy could not lift the heavy canoe, so he began to drag it towards the water. Thereafter, he was known as Dragging Canoe.¹³ Dragging Canoe vehemently opposed the Transylvania and Watauga Purchases. He saw the start of the American Revolution as an opportunity to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ James Mooney, (1900) *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*. Reprint. (Nashville: Charles and Randy Elder Publishers, 1980.), 204.

¹¹ Smith, "Nancy Ward."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Patricia Bernard Ezell, "Dragging Canoe." Tennessee Encyclopedia. October 8, 2017. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/dragging-canoe/> accessed 13 June 2018.

drive the settlers off of Cherokee lands. The Cherokee were defeated and ceded more land in the treaties that followed. Dragging Canoe refused to accept defeat and left the Cherokee towns with like-minded warriors to found a new town on Chickamauga Creek near present -day Chattanooga.¹⁴ Creek and Shawnee warriors joined the group which eventually expanded to five towns. The **Chickamauga** continued to attack settlements in East and Middle Tennessee until their towns were destroyed in 1794.¹⁵

¹⁴ Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 54.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The Watauga Compact and Purchase

Create a mind map on Watauga, Tennessee's first settlement. Use each of the bold terms from the essay in your mind map. Then on the back of this page write a short summary of the important events and people highlighted in your mind map.

