

5. Daniel Boone, Wilderness Road and the First Settlers of Tennessee

Essential Question: What impact did Daniel Boone and the Wilderness Road have on Tennessee?

The impact and contributions of a number of individuals in regards to the opening, mapping, and eventual settlement of lands west of the Appalachians cannot be overstated. The perilous mountains largely prevented the American colonists from expanding westward. Then, an English-born physician-turned-land speculator changed everything. In 1750 **Dr. Thomas Walker**, working for the Loyal Company of Virginia, led an expedition southward along the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, and in doing so made an enormously consequential discovery – the **Cumberland Gap**. Cumberland Gap, a natural passage through the mountains, would serve as a gateway to the West for generations of explorers and settlers.

Through that gateway flooded a diverse group of individuals known as **long hunters**. These hunters, enticed by circulating rumors of bountiful game across the mountains, embarked on hunting expeditions typically lasting 6-7 months, setting out in October and returning in April or May. Far from merely poaching game from Indian hunting grounds, the long hunters were responsible for the vast majority of geographical knowledge the American colonists accumulated about the trans-Appalachian West. As tales of their adventures spread throughout the colonies, the long hunters attracted a new element – land speculators. Companies which bought and sold land looked anxiously to the unspoiled, unclaimed wilderness west of the mountains, and with the discovery of the Cumberland Gap saw their opportunity. These companies began hiring the long hunters as mercenary explorers to map and survey trans-Appalachian lands while on their hunting expeditions.

The most famous of these hunters was **Daniel Boone**, who would ultimately explore and map vast swaths of upper East Tennessee and southern Kentucky largely by himself. By 1764 Boone had been contracted by **Richard Henderson's** land company Henderson & Company to survey western lands which might be suitable for claiming and purchase. Over the next several years, with the aid of Boone's exploration reports, Henderson formulated a plan to purchase huge amounts of land from the Cherokee across the mountains in order to establish his own colony. By March 1775 Henderson's deal had come together, and the "**Transylvania Purchase**" was completed. As part of the agreement, white settlers would be allowed the use of 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 **Wilderness Road**. If the Cumberland Gap was the gateway to the West, then Wilderness Road was the road which ran through it.

Though Henderson's Transylvania Purchase was later largely invalidated by the Virginia assembly, the dream of western expansion continued unabated. With the carving out of a safe pathway through the Cumberland Gap, settlers began to pour into the western regions.

Traditionally remembered as the first permanent white settler in Tennessee, **William Bean** was regardless among the earliest wave of trans-Appalachian migrants. Along with a small group of family and friends, Bean established a small settlement along the Watauga branch of the Holston River in 1769, where he and his party remained for quite some time. Eventually, Bean's party became founding members and leaders of the Watauga Association established close to their settlement. Bean's signature is recorded on the famous Watauga Petition of 1776 to the North Carolina legislature, which he helped draft.

While groups such as Bean and the Wataugans remained relatively close to home in the eastern portions of the West, other pioneers pushed further into the frontier. **Thomas Sharpe Spencer**, a long hunter 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 in Tennessee along the 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. 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 settlement they established is today the city of Nashville.

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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?
