

Life on the Frontier

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Essential Question: What was life like for people on the Tennessee frontier?

Many different factors motivated the settlers who crossed the Appalachian Mountains into the future state of Tennessee. The most important factor was economic opportunity in the forms of trade, farmland, and land speculation. While tensions with the Cherokee remained high, the potential profits from trade lured many people to the west. Nathaniel Gist, father of Sequoyah, explored the region with his father in the early 1750's and established strong ties with the Cherokee. Gist eventually set up a trading post on the Long Island of the Holston River. Glowing reports of the fertile land from longhunters and explorers such as Daniel Boone also encouraged people to move west. Finally, men like Richard Henderson and, later, William Blount saw an opportunity to make fortunes through land speculation. Speculators purchased land at low prices with the hope that they could see the land double or triple in value within a few years.

Another factor that motivated settlement of the west was the desire to escape high taxes and supposedly corrupt colonial governments. The Regulator movement in western North Carolina challenged the colonial government by intimidating and harassing colonial officials considered to be corrupt. North Carolina Governor Tryon sent the militia to enforce the law which led to the Battle of Alamance. The Regulators lost the battle, and many of the survivors moved west rather than submit to the government. The westbound settlers also had to deal with the arrival of murderers, horse thieves, and other criminals who fled across the mountains to escape prosecution by colonial government³ In addition, many enslaved Africans and African Americans were brought to the settlements by their owners. These men and women faced the same dangers as the other settlers and played an important role in the eventual success of the settlements.

Most of Tennessee's early settlers came from North Carolina, Pennsylvania or Virginia with their belongings carefully packed in a Conestoga or Virginia Road Wagon. These heavy wagons had high curved sides which prevented cargo from sliding out on steep mountain slopes and functioned like boats when fording rivers. Once across the mountains, settlers often turned to the

area's rivers as an easy way to continue their journey west. In 1779, John Donelson led a group of flatboats down the Tennessee River and up the Cumberland River to join James Robertson at the future site of Nashville. Settlers brought essential items such as seeds for planting and tools for building cabins in the wilderness. Cattle, pigs, and other animals were driven along with the wagons or transported in cages. Weapons and ammunition were also vital for protection against both wild animals and hostile Native Americans. Wealthier families often brought luxury items such as fine china or silver.

Once settlers arrived at a suitable location, the hard work of creating a homestead in the wilderness began. Trees were cut and notched to build a one-room log cabin. Kitchens were usually separate buildings because of the risk of fire. As families prospered, cabins were enlarged and glass windows were added. In the early frontier period, many settlers enclosed their homes within a sturdy log wall for protection. These forts, or "stations," became places of refuge during attacks and also provided travelers with a place to rest, acquire information, and resupply as necessary. Sites like James White's Fort in Knoxville and Mansker's Station in Goodlettsville interpret these early frontier dwellings and community centers.

Because life on the frontier was difficult, many settlers came in large groups including members of extended families; other families moved into established communities where they already had family or friends. James Robertson cleared fields near the Watauga settlement on the recommendation of his friend Daniel Boone and then brought his family from North Carolina. Robertson later moved his family to the Cumberland Settlement near present day Nashville. Frontiersmen like Robertson and Boone spent a great deal of time away from home. As a result, frontier women had to do the planting, plowing, and harvesting in addition to preparing food, weaving cloth, making clothes, preserving food, making soap and candles, caring for children, and many other daily tasks. Slavery on the frontier was much different than the plantation slavery that developed in the 1800s. Frontier slaves worked alongside their masters in the fields and helped defend settlements from Native American attacks.

In the earliest days of settlement, many of Tennessee's Scotch-Irish settlers were Presbyterian. However, Presbyterian ministers were required to have a level of formal education that was difficult to obtain on the frontier. Over time, the Baptists and Methodists both made significant inroads with their more relaxed approach church organization. The Methodists were particularly

successful because of the use of circuit riders. These men travelled by horseback throughout the frontier preaching to congregations on a predetermined schedule. The most famous Methodist circuit rider was Francis Asbury. Asbury spent nearly thirty years travelling throughout Tennessee and Kentucky preaching to the faithful. The start of the Second Great Awakening introduced a new element into frontier religious life: the camp meeting. At camp meetings, charismatic preachers led spirited services that lasted for several days. The attendees were sometimes seized by such fervor that they were left shaking on the ground or speaking in tongues. The meetings also gave people an opportunity to socialize. Many a young couple fell in love at the camp meetings. At some meetings, guards patrolled the grounds to make sure that the attendees were all exercising proper Christian restraint.

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Student Activity

Directions: Fill in key facts about frontier life in the graphic organizer below. Use the space below to create a sketch of an aspect of frontier life based on your notes.

Farm Life	Family Life	Religion	Community