Connecting the Thread of Early Tennessee History: Fort Loudoun to King’s Mountain and beyond

*Standards: 4.20, 4.22, 4.25, 4.30, 4.34, 4.36, 8.19, 8.20, 8.21, 8.22, 8.26*

*Essential Questions: What events contributed to the development of the Watauga settlement? How did the creation of Watauga affect later settlements?*

Beginning in the 1700s, the Overhill Cherokee developed strong economic ties to British South Carolina. The outbreak of the French and Indian War in 1754, posed a threat to both British and Cherokee interests west of the Appalachians. The Cherokee feared attack from the Shawnee who were allies of the French. The British feared loss of trade and territory if the French and Shawnee conquered the Cherokee. The Cherokee requested that the British build a fort to provide protection from their enemies. In 1756, The British responded to the Cherokee’s request by constructing Fort Loudoun in present day Monroe County.

At first the relationship between the British and Cherokee was economically and militarily beneficial. However, as encounters between the British and Cherokee continued, conflicts arose. In February of 1760, twenty-three Cherokee hostages were killed by the British at Fort Prince George in South Carolina. As a result, the Cherokee besieged Fort Loudoun. After months of near starvation, the fort’s commander, Captain Paul Demere, surrendered on August 7, 1760. Demere was promised safe passage to Fort Prince George. However, the Cherokee attacked the retreating British, killing 23 soldiers and taking 120 hostages. The attack may have been in retaliation for the deaths of the Cherokee at Fort Prince George. Following the Fort Loudoun massacre, British forces attacked Cherokee towns and ultimately defeated the Cherokee.

The British victory in the French and Indian War had important consequences for the Cherokee and settlers. Though they had won the war, the British found themselves in debt. Therefore, to avoid costly wars with Native Americans, the British issued the Proclamation of 1763. This law set the crest of the Appalachians as the boundary of British settlements in North America. However, many settlers refused to obey the law and continued to move west in search of new land or did so under the impression they were still within colonial boundaries.

The first permanent white settler in what is now Tennessee was William Bean, who settled in 1769 on Boone’s Creek, near where it flowed into the Watauga River. Within a year there were several more families in three adjoining communities: Nolichucky, Carter’s Valley, and North Holston. Most had arrived by way of the Great Valley, coming down through Virginia, although some passed through the gaps in the Unaka Range from North Carolina after the failed Regulator movement of 1771.

The inhabitants of these settlements believed, or at least claimed to believe, they had settled within the boundary of Virginia. A survey revealed, however, that all the communities except North Holston were located outside the boundaries of North Carolina and Virginia on land that had been guaranteed to the Cherokee Nation. Thus, the British told the settlers to relocate north of the boundary. Instead, they consolidated in the Watauga settlement and approached the Cherokee with a request to lease land along the Watauga River. The Cherokee agreed. By leasing the land, the settlers exploited a loophole in the law, which only forbid settlers to buy land and create permanent settlements.

The Wataugans were still beyond the bounds of any organized government, and to address this problem, they created the Watauga Association in 1772. Based on the Virginia legal system, a panel of five commissioners regulated all judicial activities in the settlement, including court cases, legal documents, and land titles. The primary focus of the Watauga Association was the practical needs of routine government; it made no claims to independence from Great Britain. Even so, Wataugans were under the authority of no other government and thus represent the first autonomous 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 Watuagans’ refusal to leave their lands, their agreement with the Cherokee, and their extra- legal government. Further Dunmore stated that the consequence of the Wataugans’ state formation “may prove hereafter detrimental to the peace and security of the colonies; it at least sets a dangerous example to the people of America, of forming governments distinct from and independent of his majesty’s authority.”

On March 14, 1775, the Watauga settlement was the site of a most remarkable real estate transaction: the Transylvania Purchase. For several days, Richard Henderson of North Carolina negotiated with leaders of the Cherokee Nation including Attakullakulla and Oconostota. He eventually secured an agreement by which the Cherokee exchanged their claim to all of the Cumberland River Valley and most of Kentucky in exchange for 10,000 pounds of trade goods. In 1779, James Robertson and John Donelson left Watauga and traveled to the Cumberland region. As the Wataugans before, the Cumberland settlers also created their own government under the Cumberland Compact that they wrote.

Virginia and North Carolina eventually voided the Transylvania Purchase, but it still had significant consequences for the Wataugans. In the aftermath of the transaction, Watauga leaders approached the Cherokee to ask that their lease be converted into a purchase, and once again, the Cherokee agreed. The Watauga Purchase took place on March 19, 1775. But Henderson’s Transylvania Purchase created serious disagreement within the Cherokee Nation. Dragging Canoe, son of Attakullakulla, united the Cherokee who opposed the sale of land to the settlers. Known as the Chicamauga, the group formed an alliance with the British during the American Revolution and attacked settlements in East and Middle Tennessee.

With the threat of a Cherokee attack imminent, the Wataugans appealed to North Carolina for assistance and annexation in a document known as the Watauga Petition. North Carolina eventually agreed and created the Washington District to include all of its lands west of the Unaka Mountains. The Chicamaugas continued to attack the Watauga settlements and others in 1776, but the Wataugans retreated to their fort and withstood the siege.

In the following year, North Carolina created Washington County from what had been

Washington District, and the Watauga Association was no longer necessary. The settlement, however, witnessed one more important event associated with the Revolution, when the “Overmountain Men” met at the Sycamore Shoals of the Watauga River [present day Elizabethton] before they crossed the mountains to attack and defeat British Colonel Patrick Ferguson at the Battle of King’s Mountain in 1780.

# Sources:

Biggers, Jeff. *The United States of Appalachia: How Southern Mountaineers Brought Independence, Culture, and Enlightenment to America*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2006. Print.

# Michael Toomey, East Tennessee Historical Society. North Carolina History Project: Encyclopedia. [http://www.northcarolinahistory.org](http://www.northcarolinahistory.org/)