

Washington County Semi-Quincentennial

Part One:

January 1776

In the backcountry of the Colony of North Carolina, in what would later become Upper East Tennessee, settlers had watched from afar as tensions between Great Britain and her American colonies reached a boiling point. What perhaps should have been a period of relative calm after Britain's victory over France in the Seven Years War was instead filled with a series of events that inexorably moved the colonies towards open revolution. In the years just after that war, to pay for its massive war effort against France, Parliament levied a variety of taxes and enacted policies that continually rankled colonists: The Stamp Tax and Quartering Act in 1775, the Townshend Acts, and the Revenue Act of 1767. In Massachusetts unrest over these policies resulted in the Boston Massacre in 1770. Backlash against taxation policies on tea resulted in the Boston Tea Party in 1773. This in turn led to Parliament passing a series of Acts designed to punish Massachusetts but were viewed by all colonists as "The Intolerable Acts". In response, The First Continental Congress was convened in the fall of 1774 which sought to unify the colonies in their resistance to these policies. Finally, in the spring of 1775, it all erupted into armed conflict at Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill.

These seminal events in our national history and the issues surrounding them were not lost upon the settlers in the backcountry. But the ideals and philosophies that would soon become forged into the national identity and would become driving forces in the revolution had not yet been fully articulated or embraced. Thomas Paine's Common Sense, one of the primary voices shaping the evolving revolutionary argument, had just been published in January 1776 and the Declaration of Independence was still six months away. These events in the northeast, while momentous and concerning, did not resonate with the residents of the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements nearly as much as immediate concerns of sustenance and survival. Settlers on the western frontier in general began to feel more and more isolated as colonial governments seemed to cater more to the coastal planter class than the backcountry pioneers.

One policy that very much did concern the settlers in backcountry was The Proclamation of 1763. Issued by George III, this act prohibited private purchase and settlement of territory west of a line generally following the Appalachian Mountain chain along the Eastern Continental Divide. This was an attempt by Parliament to pacify the western frontiers as they stood to benefit if the frontiers were quiet, and the colonists stayed closer in. To the influx of settlers coming in from Virginia and Western North

Carolina, whose primary interest was land ownership, westward expansion and all that came with it, this was something they could not abide, and the Proclamation Line had been largely ignored. The Cherokees' own claim to the land was certainly not to be forgotten, and they resisted more and more as settlers poured into their hunting grounds and began to transform the landscape. The resulting atmosphere of tension heightened fears of Cherokee attack in the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements. Even worse for them, since they were west of the boundary as set forth in the Proclamation, they were regarded as illegal squatters and ordered to leave in 1771. Even though they had no intention of leaving and would ignore this edict, it was also clear they could not appeal to North Carolina for protection. In essence they were on their own.

So increasingly alienated from the colonial government, physically isolated by the Appalachians and under threat of Cherokee attack, settlers in the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements organized to form the Watauga Association in 1772. This self-governing body saw to local affairs and provided for basic government services. It established a five-member court, established a clerk and a sheriff as well as an office to process land claims. The Watauga Association is recognized by many as the first autonomous and independent government on the continent. In fact, this small group at the edge of the British Empire got the attention of one Lord Dunmore, the Governor of Virginia, who called it a "dangerous example... of forming governments distinct from and independent of His Majesty's authority".

Whatever qualities can be attributed to The Watauga Association in the context of the American Revolution, it was primarily formed to address the main concerns of the settlements at the time: safety and land. To solidify their claim to the land upon which they had settled, immediately after the Association was formed, the Wataugans proposed to the Cherokees, and got them to accept, a plan whereby the settlers would lease, not purchase, the lands they occupied. This circumvention of the Proclamation lasted about two years before it began to fall apart amidst Cherokee complaints and North Carolina Governor Josiah Martin again ordered them to leave in 1774. However, in October, the Ohio Country Shawnee were defeated in Dunmore's War resulting in a major shift of the Proclamation boundary. The Watauga Association was able to convert their lease agreement in March of 1775 and buy their land from the Cherokee in a treaty that, while giving them a claim to ownership, was again declared to be invalid by the Governors of both North Carolina and Virginia. Any authority these Governors had was thrown into question just one month later by the events of April 1775, when the American Revolution started at Lexington and Concord. In May, the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia, and after creating the Continental Army appointed George Washington as its Commander-in-Chief.

As news of these events filtered down from the northeast to the backcountry tensions ran high and frontier settlements adopted a war footing. In the fall of 1775, the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements formed a 13-member Committee on Safety specifically tasked with protecting the respective settlements from not only Cherokee attacks, but rogue groups who might arise during the period of unrest. Feeling isolated from and poorly represented by the eastern colonial governments, and under the constant dual threat of lawlessness from rogue white settlers and attacks from enraged Cherokees, the settlements designated themselves the “Washington District”. In naming their district for the recently appointed Washington, they were the first body to name an area for George Washington.

The thirteen colonies were moving towards revolution, and the residents of Upper East Tennessee moved with them. They would continue to contend with their own harsh environment and scratch out a living in the backcountry, but in January 1776, they had essentially aligned themselves with the Patriots. These settlements in what would become upper East Tennessee and Washington County would later play a pivotal role in the southern campaign and in the American Revolution.

Written by Jeff Jernigan,
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