Washington County Semi-Quincentennial

Part II

The Watauga Association

In our first look back at the beginnings of Washington County, we took a "big picture" approach, trying to place local events and concerns into the context of the national events that led to the American Revolution. In this installment, we focus on the Watauga Association. The formation of this self-governing body by residents of the Watauga settlement in 1772 demands closer examination as it represents an event, that while on the local level was a response to pressing local priorities, also came to be in alignment with the spirit of the Revolution. Moreover, the Watauga Association led directly to the later establishment of our own Washington County, Tennessee.

What was the Watauga Association? The short answer is that it was a civil body of self-governance established by white settlers in what would become Northeast Tennessee. To understand the deeper story, we need to ask, who were the people that organized it? Where did they come from, what drove them to press ever westward and what were the circumstances that led them to create this organization in the wilderness? Most of the residents along the Watauga River in present day Elizabethton were settlers, intent on staking their claim in the vast backcountry of Britain's American colonies. Many came from Virginia, through the Great Appalachian Valley, following the Powell, Clinch and Holston River systems. Others came from Western North Carolina, either overland across the formidable Unaka Range of the Appalachians, or by floating down the Watauga and Nolichucky Rivers. After making that passage, the broad, flat, fertile river valleys they found nestled in the foothills surely must have seemed like what they were looking for: a place far away from authority where they could build a new life. Some were long hunters such as Daniel Boone, explorers who had roamed and hunted the plentiful Cherokee territories for decades. Others were traders like Jacob Brown and John Carter, who established a mutually agreeable relationship of commerce with the Cherokees. Still others were drifters, wanderers and even scoundrels who always moved away from civilization or authority. The common passion that drove all of them was the pull of the Trans-Appalachian west and the promise of a vast and bountiful land full of opportunity.

William Bean, a plantation owner from Virginia, brought his family to the Watauga River Valley in 1769, becoming the first permanent white settler in what would become

Tennessee. Many friends and extended family followed him there and settled as well. James Robertson came to the Watauga from North Carolina in 1770 and helped found the Watauga Settlement in 1771. Robertson had been sympathetic to the Regulators, a movement against unfair tax enforcement in North Carolina that was brutally put down by Governor William Tryon. Historians disagree over how involved with the Regulator movement Robertson actually was, but most agree that he decided to leave North Carolina to get away from heavy handed government.

Together Bean and Robertson would become prominent citizens in the Watauga Settlement, the earliest of 4 settlements that would eventually spring up: Watauga and Nolichucky (in present day Carter and Unicoi counties), and the North of Holston (Bristol) and Carter's Valley (Rogersville) settlements along the Holston River. Many more settlers would follow from Virginia as well as North Carolina through the early 1770s.

The British government was anxious to limit westward settlement. They wanted to restrict settlers to the eastern side of the Appalachians and to pacify Native Americans. King George III's Proclamation of 1763 was intended to accomplish this by setting a vague and ill-defined boundary that followed the ridge of the Appalachians, beyond which was declared Indian Reserve, and illegal for any private group to buy or encroach upon Cherokee lands. This boundary was widely ignored and largely unenforceable. John Stuart, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Southern Department and his deputy Alexander Cameron, were forced to negotiate several revisions of the original line. The first two revisions occurred in Western North Carolina (Tryon's Line 1767) and the Ohio River Valley (Hard Labor 1768). Settlement continued unabated through Southwest Virginia and into upper East Tennessee, leading to another revision with the Treaty of Lochaber in 1770. The survey that laid this treaty out was done by John Donelson in 1771, important because it contained two important deviations from the intended treaty lines. The first was a vast diversion westward of the proposed boundary in Kentucky and Ohio. More relevant for our purposes is a smaller diversion shifting the line south from the Virginia/North Carolina border to the South Holston River, and in so doing keeping the "North of Holston" settlement above the line, therefore inside Virginia. This made the North of Holston settlement legal, as it was now inside negotiated boundaries.

However, the other three settlements, Watauga, Nolichucky and Carter's Valley all fell outside the area where they could legally find a piece of land, make improvements on it and claim it as a first settler. After all the treaty revisions and changing boundaries, the residents of these settlements found themselves on the outside looking in. Alexander Cameron issued an order in 1772 proclaiming their presence "obnoxious to the King and his Indian wards", and that they must leave immediately. This abrupt order was directed only

to the Watauga Settlement; Carter's Valley and the Nolichucky settlement were not mentioned. Nonetheless, this sent a wave of alarm through all three settlements. They had believed they were on legal land in Virginia, available for settlement based on treaties with the Cherokee and other tribes. They had been about the business of carving out a life in this bountiful wilderness they had heard so much about. Suddenly they were deep in the backcountry surrounded by often hostile Cherokees and now lacking any standing with the British government, of which they were supposedly subjects. This situation galvanized the people of all three affected settlements to come together and consider their way forward. Jacob Brown closed his store on the Nolichucky and moved to Watauga, as did John Carter on the Holston. They and other prominent residents gathered at Watauga to consider a way forward. First, they negotiated an extension to allow that allowed them to harvest crops which bought them some time, but there was little doubt that most settlers were going to stay regardless, as they were "too inconveniently situated" to pull up stakes and leave. They also were unwilling to "lose the labor bestowed on their plantations", meaning that they had expended too much time, money and work in their new lives on the frontier to abandon them. Daniel Boone, who was at the Watauga settlement in 1772, encouraged the settlers to stay.

Since they could not seek help from the colonial governments the settlers decided to deal directly with the Cherokee. The reasoned that if they were prohibited from *purchasing* land from the Cherokee, perhaps they could *lease it*. William Bean and James Robertson travelled down to Chota, the major village of the Overhill Cherokee, and approached some chiefs about this proposal and found at least enough support to get Attacullaculla (father of Dragging Canoe, of whom much more later) to travel up to Watauga to discuss a deal. In 1772, at Watauga, Attacullaculla took "pitie" on the settlers and agreed to the Articles of Friendship, whereby the settlers could have full use of the land along the Watauga for ten years for 6000 pounds worth of goods. Jacob Brown then negotiated his own lease for the land along the Nolichucky. With what they considered to be a more legitimate claim to the land they occupied, the settlers now needed to be able to administer land acquisition and distribution. In addition to all the ramifications of the order to leave and the lease agreement, the settlers had for some time felt the need to maintain law and order in their settlement; they were physically isolated, and with steady traffic through the area, they became leery of some of the people who passed through with shady histories. Incidents had occurred that disturbed the order and security of the settlements. With mounting issues that demanded attention, and with no authority to seek guidance from, the residents recognized they needed to organize themselves.

In May of 1772, at Sycamore Shoals on the Watauga River these pioneers from the Watauga settlement gathered and adopted a constitution of laws and formed, for the first time on

the continent, an autonomous and independent local government. Spelled out in the "Written Articles of Association", a code of laws was adopted by the community, with all citizens signing on to it. The original document was lost long ago; most of what we know of the Association's formation comes from their petition for admission to North Carolina submitted in 1776. To oversee and execute the Articles of Association, and to maintain law and order in the settlements, a court was appointed consisting of five judges, or magistrates, as well as a sheriff and a clerk. The court was to decide all issues according to the laws of Virginia. Many of the settlers had come from Virginia and were familiar with their laws. Some of the settlers from North Carolina had been Regulators and were happy to align with another colony. It should be noted that they did not declare complete independence, just that they had formed for "want of proper legislature", and "want of proper authority". The Watauga colonists and those in the surrounding settlements still considered themselves British subjects. Tension between Britain and her colonies had not yet risen to the level of open revolution. Their main aim was to be regarded as legitimate land occupants by the British government and to have affiliation with an established colony.

Once formed in 1772, the Watauga Association presided over relatively quiet and productive settlements for approximately two years as the settlers busied themselves with carving their lives out of the wilderness. However, as more and more settlers came, the Cherokee began to grow unhappy with not only the volume of settlers but also their dominance of the landscape. Whereas long hunters in the past would pass through, hunt and leave, the settlers cleared and tilled land, built log cabins, and kept draft and farm animals over large areas. The Cherokee complained to the British agents, John Stuart and Alexander Cameron, who this time urged North Carolina Governor Josiah Martin to order the settlers to leave, which he did in the spring/summer of 1774. The Wataugans paid no attention to this latest attempt to evict them, perhaps because they were pre-occupied with dealing with the Cherokee, as tension and incidents had increased steadily. Again, they resorted to dealing directly with the Cherokee and were able to keep a lid tenuously on the simmering situation.

The Wataugans' backcountry domain did not go unnoticed. The Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, in a 1774 letter to his superior Lord Dartmouth, the Secretary of State for the American Colonies, commented on the breakdown of Royal authority and the "unrestrained" nature of settlements in the backcountry. He singled out the Watauga Association, stating that they acted as "a separate state; the consequences of which may prove detrimental to the peace and security of the other colonies; it at least sets a dangerous example of forming governments distinct from and independent of His Majesty's authority". He apparently did not realize that some men from Watauga had recently fought

for Virginia at the critical point of Dunmore's War. In 1774, The Watauga Association sent about twenty men to go to the North of Holston and join Evan Shelby, commander of the militia of Fincastle County. From there they marched to the Ohio River Valley, and under the command of Colonel Andrew Lewis, participated in his victory over the Shawnee at Point Pleasant. This Shawnee defeat and the ensuing negotiation resulted in a large swath of land being opened in Kentucky which provided a powerful magnet to settlers and speculators.

One of these men was Richard Henderson, a judge and land speculator from Hillsborough, North Carolina. His agent was one Daniel Boone, who told Henderson about the availability of large tracts of land available in Kentucky. Henderson set up the Transylvania Company and instructed Boone to arrange a meeting between himself and the Cherokee chiefs. At the time Boone was living in the Watauga settlement, and planned a treaty meeting at Sycamore Shoals, a broad expanse of flat clear land along the Watauga known as the "old fields" that often was used for large gatherings, in present day Elizabethton.

There, on March 17, 1775, Richard Henderson negotiated for his Transylvania Company the purchase of twenty million acres for 10,000 pounds (2 thousand in silver and 8 thousand in goods). It was a big occasion with many Cherokee and settlers gathering at Sycamore Shoals to follow the treaty talks and to look at all the goods Henderson had brought from North Carolina. When it looked as though the Cherokee were going to agree to Henderson's proposal, Attacullaculla's son, Dragging Canoe, got up and made an impassioned speech against the agreement. He lamented what he saw as Cherokee decline in the region, and that the elders were putting the Cherokee nation at risk, noting that other nations had "melted away like snowballs before the sun". He also presciently argued that the white men would never be satisfied. While he was very eloquent and his speech caused a stir, the elder chiefs deliberated and the next day they accepted the Transylvania proposal. Two days later, on March 19th, 1775, the Watauga Association, seeing an opportunity to strengthen their land claims, negotiated with the chiefs the purchase of the land they had been leasing, as well as all the land between the North of Holston settlements and up to the Blue Ridge Mountains, all told around 2,000 square miles. This land was conveyed to Charles Robertson, James' nephew, who was acting on behalf of the Watauga Association. Jacob Brown of the Nolichucky got in on the act on March 25th, buying two tracts of land encompassing his own settlement including land up to the Watauga.

The British land agents were not impressed with all this activity. Henderson's Transylvania Purchase was immediately questioned and condemned by both the Virginia and North Carolina governors. This did not stop a new surge of settlers traveling down the Great Appalachian Valley and along the Powell/Clinch/Holston River systems right through upper

East Tennessee on the way west to the Cumberland Gap. Passing through this area, some folks simply found a place they liked and stayed. All the settlers in the Watauga/Nolichucky area still had the same fundamental problem; they were outside the legal boundaries, and therefore regarded by the government as squatters. However, no Royal authority seems to have been terribly concerned with Watauga or Nolichucky at that point; perhaps they just didn't notice their relatively modest purchases when compared to the massive Transylvania Purchase. The Watauga Association did not wait for objections. On April 1, they established a land deed office with James Robertson as executor of deeds, not rental leases. Also appointed to this office were James Smith as the Land Office Clerk and William Bailey as surveyor. The Watauga Association was pressing on with the business of the Watauga settlement and looking to gain acceptance into a colony. Less than one month later, the dynamics of their situation would change drastically when on April 19, 1775, tension between the colonies and the British government boiled over into open conflict at Lexington and Concord.

From its inception in 1772, The Watauga Association had been able to primarily concern itself with running the civil affairs of the settlement. Most of the growing national resistance to British policies and the resulting revolutionary fervor had been over taxation and punitive actions that primarily affected the northeast after the Boston Tea Party in 1773. However, the clash at Lexington and Concord in April 1775 would set in motion events that would pull the Watauga Association into the Revolution. The 2nd Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia on May 10, and would remain the governing body of the colonies for the duration of the revolution. At that convention the Continental Army was formed, and George Washington was appointed its Commander in Chief. Bunker Hill would follow in June, after which King George III issued a Proclamation that declared the colonies to be in "open rebellion". While most of the Watauga settlers sympathized with the Colonies' resistance to British government, this support was not uniform. However, the Crown's policy of discouraging westward expansion had long alienated settlers all along the Trans-Appalachia frontier and the Watauga Association and its residents were no exception. And in the volatile political upheaval then sweeping the country the Wataugans now saw another path to securing the land they occupied.

In the fall of 1775, the Watauga Association broke from allegiance to Britain, declared for the Patriot cause, expressed their allegiance to the United Colonies, and stated they would follow the Continental Congress for guidance. They brought the Nolichucky settlement into the Association and formed a thirteen-member Committee of Safety with John Carter as Chairman, which would supervise the militia and provide for the defense of the settlements. They raised a company of "fine riflemen" and placed them under the command of Captain James Robertson. While the Committee of Safety would serve the

role of providing security and protection of its citizens, the Court of magistrates would continue its civil functions as before.

Perhaps to emphasize their allegiance to the new cause, they designated the area of the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements as the Washington District, the first time an area was named for George Washington. Finally, they prepared to apply for inclusion into Virginia. Numerous challenges lay just ahead for the new entity. Not only were the Wataugans now in revolt against the most powerful nation in the world, but their new position would also soon result in conflict with the Cherokee.

Opinions vary as to the historical significance of the Watauga Association. Were they the first free and independent body on the North American continent, thereby embodying the revolutionary spirit, or were they just a bunch of squatters whose main purpose was to legitimize their presence on Cherokee land? Regarding the contention that the Watauga Association was concerned solely with land and legal standing for purposes of westward expansion, it must be noted that in their petition, they repeatedly make the statement that their main purpose for forming the Association was to establish "proper authority". They further make clear that they considered themselves indebted to the cause, and that they are willing to immediately contribute to its success, with both blood and treasure.

Healthy debate over the Watauga Association continues. One thing is clear, however; on the eve of the American Revolution, the Watauga Association, an isolated self-governing group of settlers in the backcountry of North Carolina evolved into the Washington District, an autonomous, functioning part of the body politic of the emerging United States that would one day become Washington County, Tennessee.

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