

# 18<sup>th</sup> Century Cumberland County

No. 8

Obed Watershed Community Association

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## Native American Presence

**Pre-Cherokee:** Ancient woodland tribes must have settled on the Plateau as burial mounds containing many skeletons have been found. Early Euro-Americans settlers reported a six-foot high burial mound near Grassy Cove that covered an acre.

**Cherokee Hunting Ground:** The Cherokees claimed East Tennessee and had overlapping claims over Middle TN with the Chickasaw tribes. Some Shawnees may have had villages in the Cumberland River Valley of Middle TN.

The Cherokees were the largest Indian tribe in the entire South and the only tribe that lived predominantly within the boundaries of TN. According to various estimates, between fifty and eighty towns were scattered among the southern Appalachian Mountains with a total population of perhaps 22,000 people. The heart of the Cherokees Nation was the Middle Settlement in present day western North Carolina. Farther south in northwestern South Carolina were the Lower Towns.

Just “over the hills” from those two regions were the Overhill Towns of East TN, the most remote, independent regions of the early Cherokees. The Overhill Towns were situated mainly along the lower course of the Little TN River, but communities were probably on the Tellico and Hiwassee rivers and perhaps on the Little Pigeon River as well. The Cherokees claimed as their hunting range a vast territory that extended far beyond their settlements and included East and Middle Tennessee, including the Cumberland Plateau.

Only European explorers ventured into this wilderness before 1750. In 1748, Dr. Thomas Walker explored the vast royal grant made to the Loyal Land Company of Virginia. He named the Cumberland Plateau, Mountains, Gap, and River in honor of the Duke of Cumberland, then the prime minister of England.

**Tallonteeskee Trail:** The Plateau was criss-crossed by hunting and long-distance Native American trading trails. A major trading route, the Tallonteeskee Trail, roughly followed the present tracks of the TN Central RR from Kimbrough’s Gap at Rockwood to Standing Stone (Monterey.)

**Pre-European Natural Community:** When the first Europeans crossed the Plateau, they described a vast prairie covered with natural grasses that pastured numerous herds of deer, elk, and buffalo. So unused to humans, the creatures exhibited no fear of people when hunters approached to shoot them. The grassy plains and wild crab apple trees of now Crab Orchard attracted the eyes of many settlers.

## 1760s

**Treaty of 1763:** After the end of the French and Indian War, the English government sought to preserve peace and trade with the Indians by its Proclamation of 1763 which prohibited European settlement and private purchase of Indian land west of the Appalachian divide. That did not stop North Carolinians and Virginians to trespass on Cherokees land in northeastern TN, leasing land for trade goods.

**Early TN Settlement:** In the 1760s, European explorers and long hunters began to appear in significant numbers in the region that would become Tennessee. Thousands of colonial Virginians, North Carolinians as well as Pennsylvanians and Marylanders soon followed their lead. These people moved into the backcountry to start anew, and in many cases looked to the possibility that the seemingly endless supply of empty land might provide them with a livelihood.

## 1770s

**1771** - British officials ordered trespassing settlers to evacuate homes and leave Cherokee territory.

**1772** - Land speculators and settlers in the area now known as the TriCities region in northeast TN created the Wataugua Compact, an extralegal association that sought to legitimize settlement of Cherokee land by leasing land from the Cherokees. Later, the Wataugua Association bought land from the Cherokees.

**1775 - Sycamore Shoals Cession:** Richard Henderson of NC purchased from the Cherokee chiefs a vast territory bounded on the north and west by the Ohio and KY rivers and on the west by the Cumberland Plateau for goods worth 10,000 pounds. Richard Henderson was determined to develop a settlement he called Nashborough within the Cumberland District. Dragging Canoe, the son of the chief who sold the land, opposed the sale.

**1776 - Settlement of Nashborough:** With James Robertson as a guide, the first settlers came through the Cumberland Gap to the area that would become Nashville. Settlers had three ways to get to Nashborough:

- Cumberland Gap and down the Cumberland River with its dangerous Whirl,
- The Tennessee River with its rapids, shoals, and sucks in its southern loop,
- The Cumberland Plateau Wilderness. Crossing the Plateau was the shortest route both in terms of time and distance.

**1776 - American Revolution:** Dragging Canoe refused to recognize the Sycamore Shoals and Wataugua cessions and resolved to recover the land. In 1776, he sided with the English in the American Revolution and led attacks against European settlements in East TN.

**1777-** North Carolina General Assembly passed a land act that created boundaries for the Western District that covered the entire area of modern TN. Only some 2,000 Euro-Americans were settled along a few eastern rivers. The Wataugua Association dissolved and became part of North Carolina's Western District.

## 1780's

**1779-1782:** Dragging Canoe continued his attacks, now against the settlements in the Cumberland Valley. The European settlers used the Revolutionary War as an opportunity to move against the Cherokees. A frontier army was formed, consisting of 2,000 troops from Virginia, North Carolina, and the Wataugua Association. The army moved against the Cherokees and destroyed settlements along the Little TN River. By 1780, Cherokee resistance in East TN was crushed

**1782** - The Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the American Revolutionary War.

**1783** - To pay its war debts to Continental Army veterans, the North Carolina General Assembly offered the veterans a minimum of 640 acres and a slave in the Cumberland district (Middle TN.) The North Carolina General Assembly opened all ungranted land in the Cumberland region to settlement, claiming that the Native Americans had forfeited claims to the land by allying with the British.

Land speculators bought these war certificates from the veterans at bargain prices. Once in possession of the land warrants, speculators sent front men to the Cumberland district with orders to carry out the necessary surveys and run a land office. In response to these encroachments, the Native Americans ferociously and persistently attacked Nashborough. The state government of North Carolina was unwilling to provide more than token military and economic aid against the Native American insurgency.

**1785 - Treaty of Hopewell:** The treaty ended the open conflict between the Cherokees and the US government. The Cherokees ceded a tract of land south of the Cumberland River in TN and KY with the understanding that the rest of their domain would be closed to Euro-American settlement, yet settlers continued to violate boundaries.

The Cumberland Plateau was allocated to the Cherokees for their hunting grounds. It left settlers on the “wrong” side of new boundaries for the Watuagua district. Further, the treaty provided that the Cherokees could punish trespassers as they saw fit. Such an affront to their legitimacy led frontiersmen and speculators alike to believe that the government represented an “an inhuman lack of concern for the plight of white settlers on the frontier.”

### **1787: Avery Trace (North Carolina Road)**

The North Carolina legislature approved funding a road from the south end of Clinch Mountain below Rogersville, across the Clinch River near Lowe’s Ferry, up the eastern escarpment at Emory Gap (Harriman), and across the Plateau, making use of the Tallonteeskee Trail. Peter Avery slashed trees to mark a trace from the Clinch River through the Wilderness to the Mero District (Nashville.) This road became the major road from North Carolina to the developing settlements around Nashville.

The narrow trail could only handle pack horses. In the autumn of 1788, the first group of 25 families crossed the Plateau. By the end of that year, 60 families had crossed the wilderness.

The Cherokees by treaty had possession of the Plateau and disputed the rights of Euro-Americans to use the Avery Trace through their country, demanding a toll for its use. Because the Avery Trace followed the path of an established hunting trail, the Euro-Americans were bound to meet Cherokees. Stories recount the many skirmishes between Cherokees and the travelers.

North Carolina’s state government organized a militia to accompany the settlers for defense against Native American attacks. After 1793, soldiers provided an ‘annual escort through the wilderness’ for settlers moving to the Mero District. Travelers waited at Fort Southwest Point near Kingston until a sufficient number had gathered, and then soldiers escorted them across the Plateau. At one point, 10% of the US Army (400 men) was stationed at this fort.

Over time, soldiers cleared trees and leveled the grade to create a road ten feet wide to accommodate wagons. By 1795, the Avery Trace was called a wagon road. One party in 1797 took a week to travel between Knoxville and Nashville. In 1796, one man reported to the *Knoxville Gazette* that he had counted 175 wagons on the road in four days and ten times that number of pack horses.

Until 1795, the Cherokees prevented settlers from building any kind of accommodation for travelers anywhere along the trail. However, they did allow hunting on a 1.5 mile strip on either side of the trail.

Today, we can only guess where the Avery Trace crossed the Plateau. As county historian Barbara Parson says, “It ain’t where the signs are.”

**1788:** North Carolina ceded the “western district” to the new federal government with the stipulation that it guaranteed all the old land titles, protected the institution of slavery, and otherwise established the new territory under the provisions of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

### **1790's: Statehood**

**1790-96:** The US government created the Territory of the US South of the River Ohio, an area that included the lands of the Chickasaws, Cherokees, and Chickamaugus, as well as scattered Euro-American settlements, totaling 28,649 residents in the eastern district and 7,049 in the Cumberland. William Blount was appointed by President Washington as the territorial governor.

**1791 - Treaty of Holston:** President Washington charged William Blount with the task to persuade the

Cherokees to cede tribal land southeast of the Clinch River, straddling what is today the TN-NC border, in exchange for a 'solemn' guarantee of the Cherokees right to all unceded lands. Blount even went so far as to empower the Cherokees to punish anyone settling on their lands. In addition to ceding land to the federal government, the Cherokees had to allow 'free and unmolested use of a road' between East TN and the Cumberland settlements (Middle TN) and grant the settlers the right to navigate the Tennessee River.

**1792** - The death of Dragging Canoe and destruction of their settlements ended Cherokees resistance to Euro-American settlement in TN. However, raids on settlers crossing the Plateau continued throughout this period. In 1792 more than 100 travelers were killed on the wilderness road. Several accounts of these encounters are recorded:

- **Handley:** Captain Samuel Handley with 42 men was attacked near Crab Orchard by 56 Indians led by Chief Middle Striker. Three soldiers were killed and at least one was scalped. Captain Handley was captured, but the remainder of his troop escaped.
- **Spencer:** Thomas Sharp (Big Foot) Spencer, a renowned hunter, was shot to death in 1794 in an Indian ambush near Crab Orchard. Spencer, a settler in the Nashville area, was returning from Virginia to the Mero District when he was killed. He was buried on the hill where he died which was named after him.
- **McClelland:** In 1794 Lt. McClelland and 37 men were attacked near Crab Orchard by a band of 100 Creeks. The soldiers repelled two Indian attacks, lost four men killed and had four missing. They lost most of their horses and supplies. The band's leader and several of his warriors were killed.

**1795: Treaty of Holston.** This treaty with the Cherokee provided for another road across the Plateau using a different route than the Tallonteeskee Trail. This road was eventually known as the Walton Road.

**1796: TN Statehood.** Territorial leaders wanted statehood because they felt their representation in Congress would change how the federal government treated land speculators and settlers. In 1796, 77,262 residents were enumerated and statehood was achieved. William Blount became Senator for a year when he was forced to resign for helping another US Senator in his efforts to acquire Louisiana for the British.

**1805: Third Treaty of Tellico.** This treaty took the Cumberland Plateau and surrounding territory away from the Cherokees who in return received \$14,000 and a \$3,000 annuity. The chiefs who signed the treaty received tracts of land in secret articles of the agreement.

**Resources:** Helen Bullard and Joseph Marshal Krechniak: *Cumberland County's First Hundred Years* (1956); W. Calvin Dickinson: *Cumberland County, TN* (1992); Wilma Dykeman: *Tennessee - A History* (1984); Ronald Satz: *TN's Indian Peoples* (1979.)

The Obed Community Association has as its purpose community appreciation and volunteer involvement in ongoing research of the natural and cultural heritage of the Obed River watershed within Cumberland County. Louise Gorenflo, OWCA director, produced this fact sheet. Those wanting to join this membership organization or more information may contact OWCA at 484-2633 or at 185 Hood Drive, Crossville, TN 38555.