

The Old Southwest Frontier

Turning Native American Land into Private Property

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Formation of the Southwest Frontier: When North Carolina finally ratified the new Constitution of the United States in 1789, it ceded its western lands, the Tennessee country, to the Federal government. North Carolina had used these lands as a means of rewarding its Revolutionary soldiers, and in the Cession Act of 1789 it reserved the right to satisfy further land claims in Tennessee. Congress now designated the area as the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio, more commonly known as the Southwest Territory.

The Territory was divided into three districts: two for East Tennessee and the Mero District on the Cumberland (Nashville area) - each with its own courts, militia and officeholders. President George Washington appointed as territorial governor William Blount, a prominent North Carolina politician with extensive holdings in the western lands.

The Native American Menace: Treaty after treaty was signed with Native American tribes, each ceding more land to the Europeans in return for trinkets and the promise that settlers would not trespass on the remaining tribal lands. Despite the government's prohibition, settlers continually squatted on tribal land, which only increased the natives' hostility. Warfare flared up in 1792 as Cherokee and Creek warriors, bent on holding back the tide of white migration, launched frequent attacks.

Native Americans Land Cessions: The Euro-American displacement of Native Americans from the Cumberland Plateau was finalized through various cessions of tribal land negotiated between 1798 and 1806. Treaties signed with the Cherokee and Chickasaw during that period resulted in the acquisition of much of south-central Tennessee and most of the Cumberland Plateau, finally removing the Native American barrier between the eastern counties and the Cumberland settlements (Middle TN.) The State of Tennessee, which entered the Union in 1796, now had jurisdiction over contiguous territory from east to west, making it easier for land-hungry Euro-Americans to reach the western parts of Tennessee.

Land Speculation

North Carolina Military Warrants: Once the threat of Native Americans warfare had subsided, the pace of settlement and growth in Tennessee quickened. A brisk business in public lands arose from the continued issue of North Carolina military warrants with grants within TN boundaries.

Many of the early settlers were Revolutionary War veterans who claimed land grants from North Carolina and other states for military service. Revolutionary soldiers were usually paid late, if at all in the case of militia units. The promise of land bounties kept most of them fighting. The new country would be rich in vast lands that could be given away. Most of the lands given in bounty were in Tennessee (originally western North Carolina), Kentucky (western Virginia), and Georgia; a few were in the Ohio Valley.

North Carolina Land Acts: In 1777, for example, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a land act that created boundaries for the "western district" that covered the entire area of

modern Tennessee, even though only approximately 2,000 white immigrants were settled along a few eastern rivers. In 1782, moreover, the assembly, in response to British threats, offered Continental recruits a minimum of 640 acres and a slave in the Cumberland district. They based this action on the belief that settlers should have free access to the land surrounding the few stations that comprised the new settlements. The following year, legislators challenged Native Americans authority by opening all ungranted land in the region to settlement, an action which they justified by pointing out that North Carolina needed to repay war debts and that Native Americans (specifically, the Cherokee) had forfeited their claims by allying with the British.

Selling Claims to Speculators: In passing this last “land grab” act, the North Carolina General Assembly created an atmosphere that was particularly advantageous for a select few speculators. Even if he could (and wanted to) hold on to war certificates, the average North Carolinian could only secure a warrant after a potential tract had its boundaries located and marked. Without the means of getting to the military district, or for paying for the surveys, most veterans found that their certificates were worthless. Faced with this reality, and with a need for real money in the postwar economic recession, many soldiers sold their claims to speculators for bargain prices. Those who kept them often were later swindled.

Land Grabs: Land grant acts passed in North Carolina created a booming market in Tennessee land before actual settlers had ever arrived. Land speculation was based upon cheaply amassing large amounts of western land, or claims to it, in hopes that increased immigration would raise the price of these lands. Speculators became the grantees of much of Tennessee's best lands, because they bought up the soldiers' warrants. Once in possession of the land warrants, speculators sent front men to the Cumberland district with orders to carry out the necessary surveys and file them quickly at the all-important land office. They then sold these in smaller tracts to incoming settlers. In Tennessee, merchant capitalists, land companies, and distant planters amassed more than two-thirds of the territory's mountain region. Having engrossed the land with the purpose of making a profit, these speculators charged high prices for their acreage.

Statesmen and Speculators: Most of Tennessee's early political leaders - Blount, Sevier, Henderson, and Andrew Jackson, among others - were involved in land speculation, making it difficult sometimes to tell where public service left off and self-serving began. Public disclosure of widespread fraud sent shockwaves through unknown and prominent speculators alike.

The Beltway vs. the Territorial Elite: Southwestern speculators and the new Federal government had different perspectives on the development of the Southwest Territory. Whereas the Washington administration wanted an organized process that would maximize land sales for federal coffers, the territorial elite wanted the government merely to sanction and develop their activities by securing land titles and providing the military and economic support necessary to foster migration. When Federalists saw the extent to which this policy undermined their notion of development, and the extent to which speculation had already minimized available land, they had little reason actively to alleviate territorial problems with Native American tribes. The Federal government's hands-off policy left the speculators and settlers on their own to push Native Americans off the land the Euro-Americans coveted.

TN Sale of Public Domains: After 1806, the state also began to dispose of its public domain by selling off unclaimed land for a nominal fee. Cheap public land and the circulation of so many old claims had the desired effect of attracting settlers from the East.

Plateau Speculation: The first large land operations in Cumberland County came in 1830 as a result of an act permitting 5,000-acre grants. This system was abused by four big operators: Thomas B. Eastland, John McCormick, Stephen Haight, and John G. Smith. Eastland was the biggest landowner in TN during the decade from 1830-1840. He held nearly all of Cumberland, Morgan, White, Bledsoe, Fentress, Campbell, Scott, and Roane counties.

Absentee Ownership: Before 1860, about three-quarters of Cumberland County was owned by distant landowners. These absentee owners lived all over the US and in Europe who bought the land for speculation in land development and resource extraction.

TN Growth

TN Population Explosion: With so much fresh land opening for settlement, the state experienced a very rapid rate of population growth. Between 1790 and 1830, Tennessee's growth rate exceeded that of the nation, as each successive Native American treaty opened up a new frontier. Between 1790 and 1800 the state's populace tripled. It grew 250% from 1800 to 1810, increasing from 85,000 to 250,000 during the first fourteen years of statehood alone. By 1810, too, Middle Tennessee had moved ahead of the eastern section in population. This demographic shift caused a shift in the balance of political power, as leadership in the governor's office and the General Assembly passed from the older region of East Tennessee to the middle section, particularly the up-and-coming town of Nashville. The state capitol, at Knoxville from 1796 to 1812, moved to Nashville from 1812 to 1817, then returned briefly to Knoxville. From 1818 to 1826 the General Assembly met in Murfreesboro, and in 1826 the capital moved to its permanent site in Nashville.

1806 to 1819

Development and Prosperity: Thirty-six of Tennessee's 95 counties were formed between 1796 and 1819. Raw, isolated settlements developed quickly into busy county seats, and the formerly beleaguered outpost of Nashville grew into one of the leading cities of the Upper South.

Agriculture: With 80 percent of its people engaged in agriculture, Tennessee retained an overwhelmingly rural character. Although most farmers worked simply to supply the food needs of their families, income could be made from selling certain "cash crops." Cotton and tobacco were commercial crops from the beginning. They were profitable, easily transported, and could be worked on large farms, or plantations with slave labor. Tennessee farmers also converted corn, the state's most important crop, into meal, whiskey, or (by feeding it to hogs) cured pork and shipped it by keelboat or flatboat to Natchez and New Orleans. Landlocked as they were and plagued by poor roads, early Tennesseans relied mainly on rivers to move their crops to market. Most types of manufacturing—spinning cloth, soap-making, forging tools—were done in the farm household. Even larger enterprises like gristmills, sawmills, tanneries and distilleries centered around the processing of farm products.

Slavery

1790-1830 Slavery: Slavery played a major role in Tennessee's rapid expansion. The territorial census of 1791 showed a slave population of 3,417 - 10 percent of the general population. By 1800, it had jumped to 13,584 (12.8 percent), and by 1810, slaves constituted over 20 percent of Tennessee's people. More slaves were brought to the state following the invention of the

cotton gin and the subsequent rise of commercial cotton farming. Slavery, because it depended on the cultivation of labor-intensive crops such as tobacco and cotton, was always sectional in its distribution, and it quickly became more prevalent in Middle Tennessee than in the mountainous East. By 1830, there were seven times as many slaves west of the Cumberland Plateau as in East Tennessee.

In the early 1830s, two events had signaled a hardening of Tennessee's position on slavery. The Virginia slave uprising led by Nat Turner badly frightened slave owners, prompting whites in Tennessee to step up "patrols" for runaways and tighten the codes regulating slave conduct, assembly and movement.

Free African-Americans

In addition to slaves brought involuntarily into the state, a sizeable number of free African-Americans lived in early Tennessee. The 1796 Constitution had granted suffrage and relative social equality to free African-Americans and made it easy for owners to manumit, or free, their slaves. With the growing commercial success of slavery, however, laws were passed that made it difficult for an owner to free his slaves, and the position of free African-Americans in Tennessee became more precarious. A reaction against the expansion of slavery developed with the emancipation movement, which made early headway in the eastern section. In 1819, Elihu Embree established at Jonesborough the first newspaper in the United States devoted entirely to freeing slaves, the *Manumission Intelligencer* (later called the *Emancipator*). By the 1820s, East Tennessee had become a center of abolitionism, a staging ground for the issue that would divide not only the state but the nation as well. Amendment of the state Constitution in 1834 to prohibit free African-Americans from voting reflected whites' growing apprehensiveness over the African Americans living in their midst. Free African-Americans were pressured to leave the state, and rumors of planned slave insurrections kept tension high

1840-1860 Slavery: In Tennessee, the slave population had increased at a faster rate than the general populace, going from 22.1% of the state's inhabitants in 1840 to 24.8% in 1860. Ownership of slaves was concentrated in relatively few hands: only 4.5% of the state's white populace (37,000 out of 827,000) were slaveholders in 1860. As the world cotton market and the plantation economy that supplied it geared up, the value of slaves (and, hence, their importance to slave owners) rose. Nashville and Memphis became centers of the slave trade. The profitability of cotton and slave labor made planters determined to resist Northern attacks on their "peculiar institution." Tennessee was by the 1850s becoming sharply polarized between anti-slavery advocates in East Tennessee and diehard defenders of slavery in West Tennessee.

Resources: State of TN 2005-06 Bluebook; TN GenNet Inc."Indian Land Cessions," Wilma Dunaway, *The First American Frontier* (1996); Helen Bullard and J.M. Krechniak, *Cumberland County's First Hundred Years* (1956.)

The Obed Community Association has as its purpose community appreciation and volunteer involvement in ongoing appreciation for our natural and cultural heritage of the Obed River watershed within Cumberland County. Louise Gorenflo, OWCA community educator, 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.