

History of Old Sumner Bledsoe's Creek, Part Two

Isaac moved quietly along the creek until he found a place to ford. Fresh venison would make a welcome change from the dry jerky he and Kasper Mansker had gnawed as they bushwhacked down the creek from Kanta-kee. Glancing at the lowering sun he reckoned he had two hours until dark, and only a buffalo trace to guide him to his rendezvous with his fellow hunter eight miles west.

Kasper had a fire going when Isaac finally found him at dusk along the creek at the foot of the large bluff under a hill where they had parted that morning. Tomorrow they would build a lean-to and set up their base camp; tonight they would feast on deer haunch, corn pone and their discoveries. Their stories were similar: Kasper had found another spring and salt lick eight miles west of here, along a large creek under a bluff, with buffalo and deer - two less than when he found it. Between the creeks were rolling meadows and forests of big trees, oaks, chestnuts, maples, beech, hickory, and butternut, indicating rich soil. Sycamores and canebrakes marked the creeks, and Cedars the rocky glades. Their rendezvous was at the foot of a knob later named Pilots, and the three creeks were from then known as Manskers, Station Camp, and Bledsoes.



Beyond The Settlements - David Wright, Artist

The year was 1772, and Isaac, at thirty-seven, was already experienced as a woodsman, soldier, surveyor, and Indian fighter. While middle aged by frontier standards, his most active years lay ahead of him. He and his brother, Anthony, had already pioneered one frontier, in the Holston River Valley, near Abingdon, Virginia. Now another one lay open before them in the remote wilderness along the middle Cumberland River country.

First he had unfinished business back in Virginia. Later that year he was to marry young Katherine Montgomery. A daring, plucky girl, she was born in Northern Ireland, the sister of Colonel John Montgomery, founder of Clarksville and of the county that bears his name, who turned back the Indians in many engagements, and who served with George Rogers Clark in securing the Illinois territory. It is said by Katherine's descendants that she was an excellent horsewoman who carried messages through the woods to General Washington during the Revolutionary War.

War was brewing in the Valley of the Holston. The British Governor, Lord Dunmore, was having a difficult time with his subjects in the Royal Commonwealth of Virginia, and was so angered by their revolutionary sentiments he dissolved the Virginia Assembly in 1772, 1773, and again in 1774. In 1775 he seized the colony's store of powder, thereby bringing about an armed uprising. Taking refuge aboard an English warship, he declared martial law, proclaimed freedom to slaves who would join the British, and proposed using the Indians against the rebels. Defeated at Great Bridge near Norfolk on Jan. 1, 1776, he ordered his ships to bombard the city, thereby setting it afire. (1) Royal government in Virginia was ended, even before the Declaration of Independence was signed later that year in Philadelphia.



Frontier Rifleman - David Wright, Artist

North Carolina was having its own Revolution. In May of 1775, one month after the battles of Lexington and Concord, a committee of patriots met in Mecklenburg County and passed a set of strongly worded resolutions which stated that ...'the political bands that connected us to the Mother Country...' were dissolved. (2)

The Indians eagerly adopted the British cause, and began massacring settlers – men, women and children - across the Blue Ridge in Virginia and North Carolina, along the Holston, Watauga, French Broad, Clinch, Nolichucky and Powell River Valleys, as well as in Kentucky. The British supplied them with guns, powder, knives and leadership, and all of the tribes welcomed this support from the enemy of their enemy. Britain was far over the ocean; the settlers were here, clearing and plowing, killing their game, building cabins and raising families. They deserved no mercy.

Americans who crossed the great mountains to escape British occupation and Tory revenge found themselves living in isolated valleys in lonely cabins or crowded into small stockades, surrounded by merciless savages ten times their numbers who

spoke no English and gave no quarter. A man who went forth to find his cattle might never know if he would return, or, if he did, whether he might find his wife and children weltering in their own blood, scalped, or kidnapped. Defense, beyond his log walls, consisted of gathering a few neighbors and going in pursuit, which often led to an ambush. To be strong everywhere was to be strong nowhere.



Photos taken at Martins Station State Historic Park courtesy of David Wright, Photographer

The settlers went on the offensive. In October of 1776 militiamen from the upper Holston mustered near present-day Kingsport, where they were joined by 300 militia from North Carolina. Placing themselves under the command of Virginia Governor Patrick Henry's brother-in-law, Colonel William Christian, they took up the march for the Cherokee towns. At the head of a company he had raised was Captain Isaac Bledsoe.

The Cherokee, instead of defending, retreated from their towns, and Colonel Christian burned five of the most hostile, sparing their sacred capital of Chota. Emissaries came down from the hills suing for peace, and it was granted. With peace of a sort returning, Isaac was off on another long hunt, this time for property.



Sycamore Shoals - Tennessee State Museum

Of the instruments of the white man's domination - the long rifle, the plow, the fence, or the log cabin - the one most hated by the Indian was the surveyor's compass. To them the man peering into a mounted glass, surrounded by others with poles or dragging measuring chains, meant one thing - the loss of their land forever. Surveyors became the special target of their wrath, and were sought out by war parties for their most exquisite tortures. After John Peyton and four companions were nearly annihilated by sixty Cherokee one night in February of 1786 on Defeated Creek he sent word to Hanging Maw, asking that he return his property. The Cherokee Chief responded that the horses were now his very own, and "As for his land stealer" the leader responded, "I have take it and broken it against a tree." (3)

To the landless Irish tenant, to the farmer longing for virgin soil and a new start, to the governments of North Carolina or Virginia short of cash to pay their militia, to the patriot who had bled for freedom, to the speculator eager to buy up and claim the soldiers' warrants, to Thomas Jefferson and the Continental Congress in Philadelphia looking for westward expansion of a young country, to all of these, land was the source of all wealth and an urgent necessity. But to use it they must first measure it, and both those who measured and those who guided and guarded them must be paid and paid well - with land.

To Isaac Bledsoe and other hunters who had explored and who knew the paths through the wilderness, it was the opportunity of their lives. In 1779, Isaac was back

along the Cumberland, marking out boundaries through the woods he had first explored seventeen years before.



Opening In The Forest - David Wright, Artist

Isaac was with James Robertson in Harrodsburg, Kentucky when they learned that the overmountain men had won a great victory over the British at Kings Mountain and had them on the run. "Both Robertson and I were a foot taller when we heard the work of Sevier and Shelby. We said to one another, 'If they can so handle the British and the Tories, can we not whip the Indians in the woods?'" (4) Indeed they had to, for the Cherokee and the other tribes were once more on the warpath.

In the winter of 1779-80 Isaac led the settlement of a dozen families around Bledsoes Lick. For this service he received from North Carolina the grant of several thousands of acres, as did his brother, Anthony. The arrangement was that each family was to build on their separate but nearby tract, and that all would cooperate to build a centrally located fortified stockade on a hill above a spring overlooking the

Lick. In the long years of hunting, guiding and exploring Isaac had never forgotten the Lick he discovered seven years earlier and he now made plans to move Katherine and his growing family there to a tidy two-story cabin on a hill to the south overlooking the lick itself. While this and the stockade were under construction they would shelter with their old friend Kasper Mansker in his stockade eighteen miles down river.

Brother Anthony settled his growing family in a smaller stockade two-and-one-half miles north overlooking a spring branch and fertile bottoms and called it Greenfield. Esquire John Morgan fortified three miles further up Bledsoes Creek at the mouth of Dry Fork. As more settlers trickled through Cumberland Gap then down through Kentucky the rich valley of Bledsoe was cleared, cultivated and cabined. The Ziegler family built two miles down and across the creek, James Winchester two miles west atop the bluff above the old buffalo crossing, while the Sanders and Whites built fortified stations up the tributary Desheas Creek.

Tired of treaties earnestly negotiated then casually broken, The Cherokee Nation took particular offense at these squatters plowing up what they considered to be their National Park. From the south came the even more murderous Creeks, still supplied through the Gulf by the British and abetted and aided by the Spanish in New Orleans. Not satisfied with the pace of murder, a group of the younger and more aggressive Cherokee broke away to form a new tribe, the Chickamauga, located below Lookout Mountain, near Chattanooga. The Choctaws and even the Chickasaws to the west joined the tribal confederation dedicated to scalping every white who tried to settle along the Cumberland.



Tight Spot - David Wright, Artist

With the War with Britain effectively over, the Cumberlanders had a far more serious one on their hands, one which swirled around them daily and which threatened their wives, children and homes. Despairing of help from North Carolina or the Continental Congress, they realized they were on their own. In May of 1780, at French Lick or Fort Nashborough, 250 men representing the seven stations signed the Cumberland Compact, a document by which the settlements governed themselves until North Carolina created Davidson County in 1783. Four years later fewer than 100 of these signers were left in the settlements. Harriett Arnow estimates that as many as two of three wives were made widows by the Indians.

Yet others came to replace them. Winding their ways through Kentucky or across Cumberland Mountain, a few even tried it by river, down the Tennessee and up the Cumberland. Most of these did not make it, as they had to run the gauntlet of the Chickamaugas, who knew the shoals better than they. By 1790 North Carolina realized that settlement was the key to westward expansion and authorized the clearing and fortification of a wagon trail from Knoxville to Bledsoes, and the settlers were pouring in. The War with Britain was over for now, but the Indian Wars, however, were only just begun along Bledsoe Creek.



Avery Trace - Billie Wright Young, Artist



Oil Sketch for painting in progress of Bledsoes Fort
Artist's conception based on archaeological dig at site
Bill Puryear

Next Month – A People Governing Themselves

- (1) Encyclopedia Britannica, 1966, Vol 715 p. 62
- (2) *ibid*
- (3) *Historic Sumner County, Tennessee*, by Jay Guy Cisco, 1909, p.167, as quoted by Walter Thomas
Durham in *The Great Leap Westward, A History of Sumner County Tennessee From Its Beginnings to 1805*
- (4) John Carr, *Early Times in Middle Tennessee*, 1857, p.94

Bibliography:

In addition to the sources specifically cited above, I have drawn generally from the following sources in writing this article:

- Wynnewood*, 1994, Walter T. Durham, Bledsoes Lick Historical Association
The Southwest Territory, 1790-1796, Walter T. Durham, Rocky Mount Historical Association, 1990
Daniel Smith, Walter T. Durham, Sumner County Library Board, 1976
Tennessee, The Dangerous Example, Watauga to 1849, Mary French Caldwell, Aurora Publishers
Seedtime On The Cumberland, Harriette Simpson Arnow, The Macmillan Company 1960
Historical Background of Bledsoe's Lick, A Cooperative Project of the Bledsoe's Lick Historical Association, Sumner County and Middle Tennessee State University, Project Director, Kevin E. Smith
Early History of Middle Tennessee, Edward Albright, 1908
Historic Sumner County, Tennessee, Jay Guy Cisco, 1909
Historical Sketches of Southwest Virginia Publication 5 – March 1970, The Long Hunters
Early History of the South-West by General William Hall, The South-Western Monthly, 1852
Draper Manuscripts, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin
History of Tennessee, The Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1887
Bledsoe Station: Archaeology, History, and the Interpretation of the Middle Tennessee Frontier, 1770-1820, Kevin E. Smith, Tennessee Historical Quarterly, Fall 2000, Vol 59, issue 3