

## **History of Old Sumner Bledsoe's Creek, Part Six - Attack and Counterattack, Chapter 2**

*To be strong everywhere is to be strong nowhere*  
- Sun Tzu, 400 BC

The settlers along Bledsoe Creek might well have regarded 1793 as their low point.

Their two leaders, Anthony and Isaac Bledsoe had been assassinated by Indians. Isaac's widow, the plucky Katy Montgomery, was now left with a fort and a family to manage. In a letter to her friend, General Smith, Secretary of the Territory, she proposed to give it all up and return over the mountains to safety if troops are not sent to protect the vulnerable Cumberland settlements.

Anthony's widow married widower Nathaniel Parker and they combined their large families at Greenfield Fort, which narrowly escaped destruction in April, 1793 by some 250 Indians. Later that year she was intercepted and threatened by a party of Indians while riding in company with Robert Jones and Thomas Spencer along the trail from Walnutfield Station to Greenfield. 'The Indians opened fire and Jones fell dead from his horse. With raised tomahawks they rushed toward his two companions, but recognizing Spencer, of whom they stood in mortal dread, called a halt. Ordering Mrs. Parker to turn her horse and run toward Gallatin, Spencer covered her retreat by dashing back and forth in front of the savages, pointing his gun as though he intended to shoot. This was kept up until she was beyond their reach. Then wheeling his own horse about Spencer followed his companion to a place of safety.'<sup>1</sup>

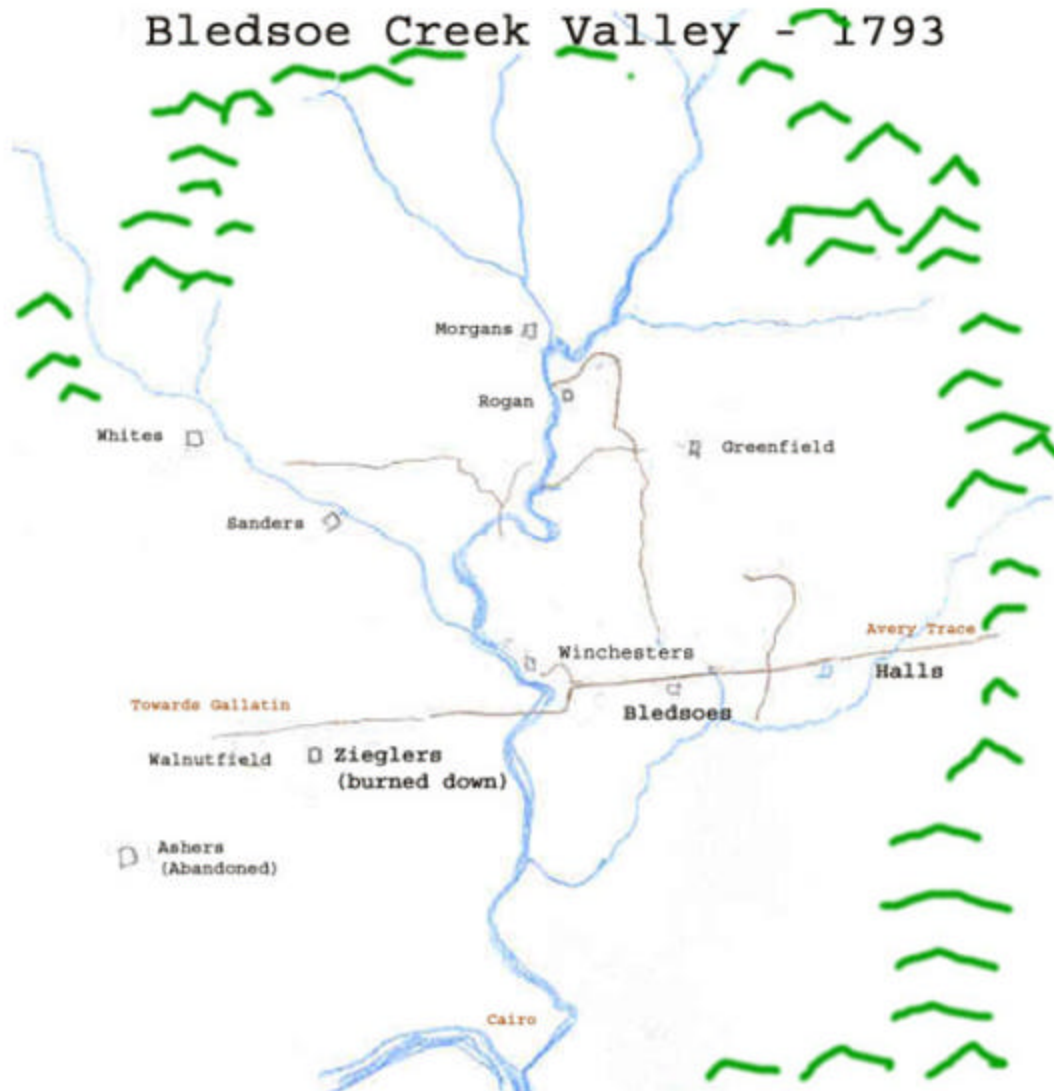
Thomas 'Bigfoot' Spencer, a huge man whom the Indians feared and the settlers all respected, was one of the first, if not the first, long hunter to build, plant and settle Sumner County. He was thought by many to be bulletproof, but was ambushed and killed while by Indians April 1, 1794, while crossing Cumberland Mountain at Crab Orchard.

Tragedy stalked the Bledsoe family. In March 1794 two young sons of Anthony and Isaac, both named Anthony, were killed while returning to Rock Castle, General Daniel Smith's home where they were boarding while attending a nearby school on Drakes Creek. A month later, Thomas, son of Col. Anthony Bledsoe, was surprised and mortally wounded near his deceased father's station at Greenfield.<sup>2</sup> The Bledsoes, having received vast grants of land for their services in opening the frontier, had paid a far greater price for it in blood.

Other settlers paid the ultimate price as the killing continued through 1793 and 1794.

'In the summer of 1793, James Steel, his daughter and son and his brother, Robert, left Greenfield to go to Morgan's station. William Hall and seven others of the light horse were eating dinner when the Steels announced they were leaving. Hall attempted to persuade the Steels to wait until the soldiers could finish eating so they could serve as an escort. James Steel insisted that there was no danger and left.

The men were still at dinner when gunshots were heard. Rushing down the road they found James Steel lying dead, shot through the heart, and scalped. His beautiful seventeen-year-old daughter Betsy was lying on the ground mortally wounded and scalped. Her brother was wounded in the shoulders but escaped with his Uncle Robert.<sup>3</sup> Betsy apparently fought her attackers with her bare hands as they were found cut and bleeding and clutching wisps of Indian hair.<sup>4</sup>



The settlers, thinly spread amongst their cabins and forts, daily sending their sons to the fields, their daughters to the spring, their servants to clear land, were in a perilous state, ill equipped for defense. They fought back as best they could. In response to the urgent request of Colonel James Winchester of Cragfont, General James Robertson mustered a company of 80 cavalry and sent them east to intercept war parties crossing the river from the Cherokee nation near present day Gainesboro. Later Fort Blount was established here to guard the crossing and to act as a way station for travelers along the Avery Trace.<sup>5</sup>

A few days later Old Abraham, who had proved his mettle in the repulse of the attack at Greenfield, was passing at nightfall from Bledsoe's Lick up to Greenfield. When in the midst of a dense thicket about halfway between he came face to face with two well-known Cherokee Chiefs, Maddog and John Taylor, the latter a half-breed known to many in Nashville and a noted plunderer. Old Abe leveled his gun and fired, killing Maddog dead at about ten paces and fled before John Taylor recovered from the sudden firing.

Taylor carried away and buried the body of his comrade. This done, he returned to his nation, and was never seen again in the settlement. <sup>6</sup> Abraham, a slave who belonged to Anthony Bledsoe, and who had come over the mountains with him was described by Gov. Hall as 'one who was really a very bright, intelligent fellow, who was indeed a good soldier and marksman....'

These parries were not enough to slow the brutality inflicted by the war parties roaming the isolated settlements along Bledsoe. In separate attacks in Sumner County the son of Hugh Strother on Station Camp Creek, Hugh Webb, and a frontier spy along Bledsoe Creek were all killed. <sup>8</sup>

Then on the morning of July 9, 1794, Major George Winchester, commander of the local Militia and brother to General James Winchester of Cragfont, was on his way from Bledsoe's Lick to a meeting of the Sumner County Quarterly Court, of which he was a member. As he neared Gallatin, at the junction of present day Hartsville and Scottsville Pikes, he was ambushed, killed and scalped. He was the last, but by one, to be thus killed, according to Colonel William Martin, the sometimes blunt commentator, who described him as "...a superior man in every way to the General."<sup>9</sup>

The crowd assembling for the court meeting in Gallatin was outraged when the news reached them, and a company of fifty men was assembled by Major George Blackmore to pursue the murderers. But with their head start and freshly stolen horses, the Indians were back across the river into their nation and sanctuary before the militia could overtake them.

Scarcely a family had escaped the brutal loss of one or more members, and the settlements were by now in an uproar for revenge. Petitions with names of the murdered gathered dust in the new nation's capitol, where the congress was composed of members from seaboard states, protected by the Appalachian Mountains from the savagery of the frontier. President George Washington urged peaceful negotiation of differences with the tribes and respect for their lands.

Tennessee Governor Blount in Knoxville continued to have faith in the councils and negotiations he was still conducting with the belligerent tribes, and lent a listening ear to all made-to-order 'peace talks' from the chiefs. On April 15th 1794 he wrote General James Robertson as follows: "An attack on Cumberland by a large party of Indians, either Creeks or Cherokees, or both, is not to be apprehended this summer. Small parties, however, I fear will yet infest your frontier. I entreat and command you to let neither opportunity nor distant appearances of danger induce you to order out any party of the militia unnecessarily large. Economy is a republican virtue which from the injunction laid upon me by the Secretary of War I feel myself bound to enjoin on you the observance of."<sup>10</sup>



Governor William Blount



General James Robertson - Tennessee State Museum

James Robertson, General and chosen leader of the Cumberlanders, was himself no stranger to the violence and treachery of his enemies. He had lost two brothers and two sons to the Indian ambushes and attacks. A third son was scalped and he himself was attacked and wounded in the foot and in both wrists. Notwithstanding his personal losses, he was a peacemaker, and his 1781 agreement with Piomongo, respected Chief of the Chickasaws, resulted in permanent peace and alliance with that tribe, which still maintains a presence today in West Tennessee. He hosted a 1783 Council of Peace at his farm on what is now Charlotte Pike in Nashville with the chiefs and head warriors of the four southern tribes – Cherokee, Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. Lacking unified governance, the Indians soon splintered into factions and resumed their attacks.<sup>11</sup>

All descriptions of his personality point to and who was soft spoken and even-tempered, a person who maintained an inner composure regardless of external circumstances. He had plenty of opportunity to demonstrate it. Forced by speculators to vacate the land he had settled, plowed and fortified, he moved to a new farm and started over. There he patiently set about working his contacts in the North Carolina Legislature to secure pre-emptions and grants for those hundreds of similarly displaced settlers – those who had secured with blood and sweat the land which speculators who had stayed in North Carolina secured with their pens and patronage.

Even a patient man has limits, and Robertson's had been reached. The American Revolution, had lasted six long years; the wars with the southern Indian tribes had by 1794 been raging fourteen years, more than twice as long. Furthermore, after Tennessee had contributed so much to that effort, not least at King's Mountain where they gave the British Southern Campaign its first defeat and launched Cornwallis on a course which ultimately ended at Yorktown, the fledgling United States, now sheltered by the Appalachians, seemed unconcerned and unwilling to offer much more than advice to the frontiersmen, who were daily in peril of their lives.

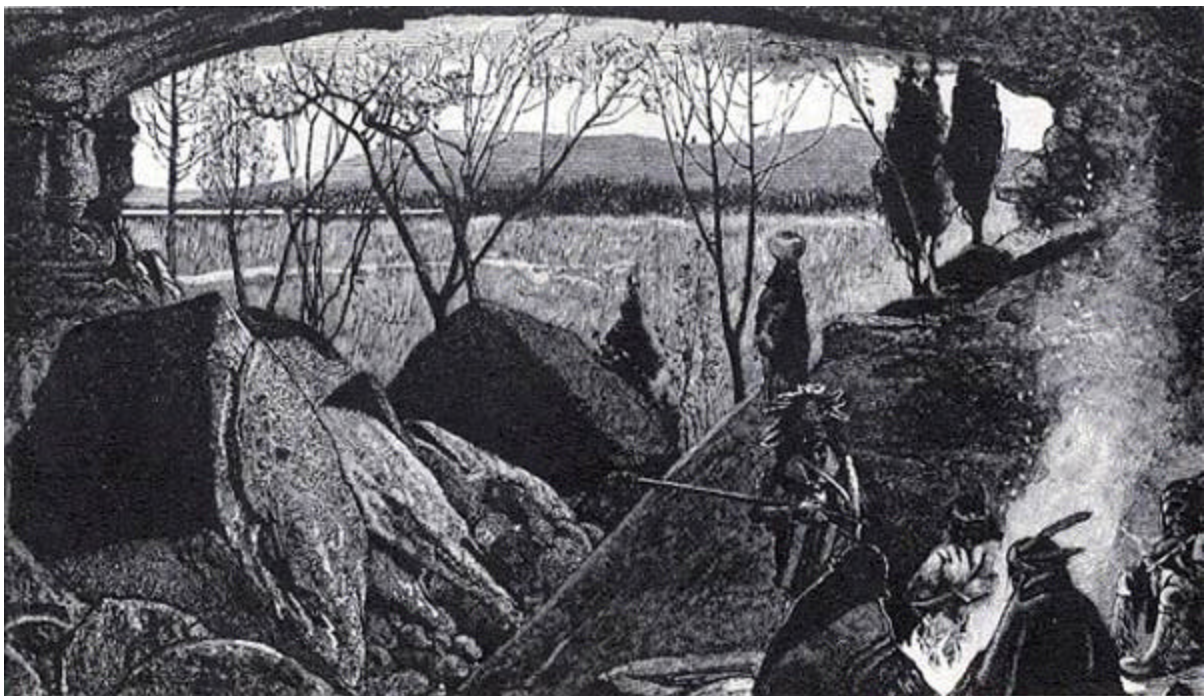
It was time to take matters into their own hands. Only a bold counterstroke, similar to that at King's Mountain, could end the war. The Western Frontiersmen would have

to turn once more to their only reliable source of help – themselves. James Robertson set about raising an expeditionary force.

From Kentucky came troops under Colonel Whitley. Col. John Montgomery (Mrs. Isaac Bledsoe's brother) raised a company near Clarksville, Colonel Ford levied troops in what is now Robertson County, and James Robertson himself raised troops in Davidson County. Major George Blackmore called for recruits in Sumner, and volunteers included William Trousdale, later Governor of Tennessee, Hugh Rogan, Stephen Cantrell, Thomas Maury, and William Pillow.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime Governor Blount had detached Major Ore, of East Tennessee, with a command of sixty men to range along the Cumberland Mountains, and thus aid in preventing the Indians crossing the Mero District. However, for reasons never satisfactorily explained to the War Department, Ore's men kept going until they rendezvoused with the other troops assembled at Brown's Block House, two miles east of Buchanan's Station.<sup>12</sup>

The combined troops amounted to some five hundred fifty men. On the morning of September 7th they began their southward march. The target was the lower towns of the Cherokee - Nickajack and Running Water towns - under the shadow of Lookout Mountain. Here were gathered renegades from the Creeks and Cherokee Tribes, outlaws, half-breeds, murderers and younger Indians who had rebelled against the admonitions of their chiefs and elders. This polyglot called themselves Chickamaugas, which translated as "River of Blood", and for fourteen years Nickajack had been the place where the marauders upon the Cumberland settlements had been supplied by the British and Spanish and from which they staged their bloody excursions.<sup>12</sup>



Nickajack Cave

Joseph Brown, who had been captured by the Chickamaugas when his family's boat foundered on the shoals years before, guided the army to a point several miles down the Tennessee River from Nickajack. There the men built rafts for their supplies, swam their horses across the river on the morning of the 13th, and moved into the village of Nickajack under Lookout Mountain, taking the warriors and inhabitants by complete surprise. The left wing moved downriver cutting off retreat. The warriors in Running Water, hearing the firing, move to the relief of their comrades in Nickajack, but were met by Ore's men moving along the road. A battle ensued, in which the Indians suffered great loss and scattered to the mountains, never to return to the lower villages.<sup>12</sup>

Seventy Indians were killed, twenty captured and two hundred put to the rout. The villages were burned and horses, guns, food and military supplies furnished by the Spanish and British were carried back to the settlements. A single member of the expedition was killed and two others were wounded. The destructive power of the Chickamauga was destroyed, and, isolated incidents notwithstanding, the fourteen-year Indian wars were over.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Next Issue – Classicism on the Cumberland***

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<sup>1</sup> *Early History of Middle Tennessee, Edward Albright, Chapter 36, Events of 1793*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid., Chapter 37, Events of 1794.*

<sup>3</sup> *William Hall, Early History of the Southwest, Published by The South-Western Monthly, 1852,*  
*reprinted 1968 by The Edward Ward Carmack Sumner County Public Library,*  
*Nashville, 1968.*

<sup>4</sup> *Draper MSS, 32S 485*

<sup>5</sup> *Durham ibid pp*

<sup>6</sup> *Albright, ibid, Chap 36*

<sup>7</sup> *Hall, ibid, p.27*

<sup>8</sup> *Durham, ibid, p119*

<sup>9</sup> *Draper MSS p855*

<sup>10</sup> *Albright, ibid, Chap 37*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid, Chaps 22, 24*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid, Chap 38*