

Watauga Settlement ^[1]

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by David L. Cockrell, 2006

See also: [State of Franklin](#) ^[2]; [Battle of King's Mountain](#) ^[3]; [Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail](#) ^[4].

The Watauga Settlement was the first community established in North Carolina's western frontier and holds the distinction of being perhaps the first American settlement west of the [Appalachian Mountains](#) ^[5]. In the mid-1700s a mixture of English, [Highland Scot](#) ^[6], and Scotch-Irish pioneers came to the Watauga River Valley, bringing with them a strong sense of self-reliance and a fierce desire for self-government. In fact, these hardy settlers temporarily established one of the first self-governing political bodies to emerge in the American colonies. The settlers' energetic ability to defend their territory helped maintain the integrity of North Carolina's western border during the [revolutionary](#) ^[7] period and advanced the cause of European settlement in the [mountainous regions](#) ^[8].

An enterprising Virginian named William Bean was the first recorded traveler to the Watauga area. Others followed his lead, among them [Daniel Boone](#) ^[9], who reputedly killed a bear in the vicinity. Political unrest in the [Piedmont](#) ^[10], including the [Regulator Movement](#) ^[11], brought an infusion of immigrants to the mountains. The nature of this migration led British colonial authorities to issue royal edicts forbidding settlement of the western lands by "absconded debtors, indentured servants, and outlaws," or "overmountain people," as they were generally called. Bean and [James Robertson](#) ^[12], who had come from [Orange County](#) ^[13] in 1770, were not to be undone, however, and shrewdly began negotiations with the local [Cherokee](#) ^[14] tribes to lease the land they had settled. Thus, in 1772 was born the [Watauga Association](#) ^[15], an independent political entity that constructed its own laws and enforced them by its own court system. Many historians have hailed this as a milestone event in American history, representing a pioneering effort at establishing self-government.

Western settlement increased as the Cherokee's influence waned after their defeat in [Lord Dunmore](#) ^[16]'s War and as eastern political turmoil, soon to crystallize into a revolutionary movement, drove more colonists to seek isolation in the mountain region. In 1775, ^[17][Richard Henderson](#) ^[18], with the assistance of Daniel Boone, negotiated a large land purchase from the Cherokee. Simultaneously, the Watauga settlers acquired from the Cherokee legal ownership of their area for the sum of two thousand pounds.

The outbreak of war between the colonists and England thrust new responsibilities on the mountain men. No longer able to avoid the conflict, they became the protectors of the new state of North Carolina and its western borders. To formalize their political status, the Wataugans created the Washington District (probably the first political entity to bear the name of the future president) and sought annexation by the state government. In 1776 British influence led the Cherokee into a futile effort to regain the vast mountainous lands. The tribe began to attack western settlements but achieved nothing beyond provoking a furious response by the westerners, aided by troops sent by four nearby states. This crushing defeat of the Cherokee set the stage for their ultimate removal several decades later.

Eminent Wataugans, such as [John Sevier](#) ^[19], who had played a key role in the Cherokee Campaign, soon turned their energies to the defeat of the British. In 1780 England again invaded the southern colonies in a last-ditch effort to win the war. Continental defeats earlier that year left only the Carolinas' irregular military forces to contest the British advance. As the westward wing of [Lord Charles Cornwallis](#) ^[20]'s army penetrated the mountainous areas, the Wataugans gathered together to meet the threat. The result was the [Battle of King's Mountain](#) ^[3] (7 Oct. 1780), in which the British force was annihilated. Thus the Wataugans played a significant role in the failure of the British master plan of 1780 and the subsequent collapse of efforts to subdue the rebellious colonies.

After the Revolution, the independent nature of the Wataugans again became apparent as a group of them sought to create their own state of Franklin. In August 1784, at a convention held in Jonesborough, a state government was hastily constructed, with Sevier assuming the governor's seat. North Carolina, seeing most of its western lands usurped by the unruly mountain men, contested the existence of the fledgling state. Franklin's lack of recognition by the Confederation government sealed its fate, and by 1788 the state ceased to exist (its territory later became part of the state of Tennessee).

The legacy of the Watauga Settlement remains strong in western North Carolina, where many people adamantly retain their clannish nature but tourism now largely fuels the economy. Western counties that once composed the settlement area now carry the names of early pioneers, such as Henderson and McDowell. The county of [Watauga](#) ^[21] stands as a reminder of the region's heritage of being part of the first community west of the Appalachians.

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Additional Resources:

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