

## INTRODUCTION

In the years prior to the American Revolution, settlers primarily from Virginia filtered down the Holston Valley to inhabit the fertile areas along the Watauga and Holston Rivers. As Wataugans went about the business of settling their families, developing their lands, and co-existing with the Cherokees, they sowed the initial seeds of democracy and self-governance in the West and, specifically, the land that was to be Tennessee.

The Watauga settlers who gained a foothold in the area around 1769 occupied a tenuous position. King George's Proclamation of 1763 forbade settlement west of the Appalachian divide, and though it could be argued that two later treaties with the Cherokee nullified this order, the Wataugans' status might still be considered that of squatter. In addition, the Watauga inhabitants feared their settlement would become a haven for debtors and criminals. Moses Fisk, a nineteenth-century historian, described them "as little protected, controlled, or recollected by any government whatever, as their co-tenants the bears." The order, justice, and security that a form of government would provide proved enticing.

Their rationale in place, and with John Carter as their chairman, the Wataugans formed the Watauga Association in May of 1772. Though their actions may have been considered a temporary emergency resolution, with this endeavor and with their written Articles of Association, the settlers of Watauga drafted the inaugural constitution of civil government west of the Alleghenies, and formed what some have called the "first free and independent government in American."

The text of the Articles of Association did not survive, but other documents, such as the Association's later petition for annexation by North Carolina in 1776, provide insight into the operation of this self-government. A magistrate's court was formed with the consent of the people and was manned by five judges. This body executed, by majority, judicial and legislative functions and carried out public business and land affairs. They adopted the laws of Virginia as the basis for their rulings.

Unrest surfaced, however, when a survey done by Anthony Bledsoe determined that the land of the Watauga settlers rested with North Carolina, not Virginia. Alexander Cameron, an agent for the English government who

lived with the Cherokee, ordered the settlers off the land. The Cherokee Indians proved indulgent in this case and offered to allow the settlers to stay if they moved no further west.

The Proclamation of 1763 prohibited the purchase of land from the Indians, so the Watauga Association negotiated a ten-year lease. This resolution provided a bit of security, but the rise of land companies pointed the way to the future. When Richard Henderson and his Associates gathered amidst twelve hundred Indians at Sycamore Shoals and signed a treaty with Cherokee chiefs on March 17, 1775 securing vast territory in Kentucky and Tennessee for the Transylvania Colony, the Watauga Association followed suit. Two days later, the Association's Trustee, Charles Robertson, arranged the Watauga Purchase with the Cherokee chiefs to secure the land along the Watauga, Holston, and Great Conaway Rivers.

The next two years would find the Wataugans forming a "Committee of Safety" to carry out military functions, designating their physical boundaries as the Washington District, and petitioning for and receiving annexation by North Carolina. The Washington District came under the full jurisdiction of North Carolina as of 1777, and the next phase of political development began for present-day Tennessee.

The legacy of the Watauga Association proves a rich one. Democracy gained hold in the West, and the American spirit of independence bloomed on the banks of the Watauga River at Sycamore Shoals. The Wataugans followed the path illuminated by the Pilgrim Fathers when they formed the Watauga Association in 1772, and the political history of Tennessee began. The tutelage in self-governance that people like John Sevier and James Robertson received at Watauga proved vital to the development of the future state and resonated for generations.