

## Before Tennessee Statehood: The Watauga Era 1772-1776

by Paula Gammell

We are fascinated by the Revolutionary War era, and our ancestors' actions and reactions on their journey from being British subjects to self-governing.

But are you all aware that the Revolution was not the first attempt at self-governance?

No; the first self-governing body was right here in East Tennessee! It was known as the Watauga Compact, it was created by the Watauga Association, and it lasted about five years, from 1772 to 1776.

How did it come about and what happened to it?

1769 is the year – more by tradition than sound proof – of the first permanent white settler in this area. Thereafter settlement increased rapidly. Settlers on the north side of the Holston River (in now Sullivan and Hawkins counties) considered themselves in Virginia.

But settlers around the Watauga River were on their own, far from any governmental protection or advantages. They were squatters on land they did not own and were, in fact, settled illegally.

They quickly remedied their situation to the best of their abilities. In the spring of 1772 they organized themselves into the Watauga Association and agreed on a form of government. This is known as the Watauga Compact.

We know all too little about it, but we do know that it had a functioning government of five commissioners, a majority of whom decided matters at regularly scheduled sessions, and we know they had a sheriff and clerk.

We also know that our Wataugans leased their lands from the Indians for 8 years; this would have secured their lands until 1780. But before that time elapsed they had an opportunity, or so they thought, to purchase those lands.

In March, 1775, encouraged by Richard Henderson's private purchase of land, the Wataugans then purchased their heretofore-leased lands. This is known as the Watauga Purchase.

The approaching Revolutionary War, however, put an end to the Watauga Compact. The British

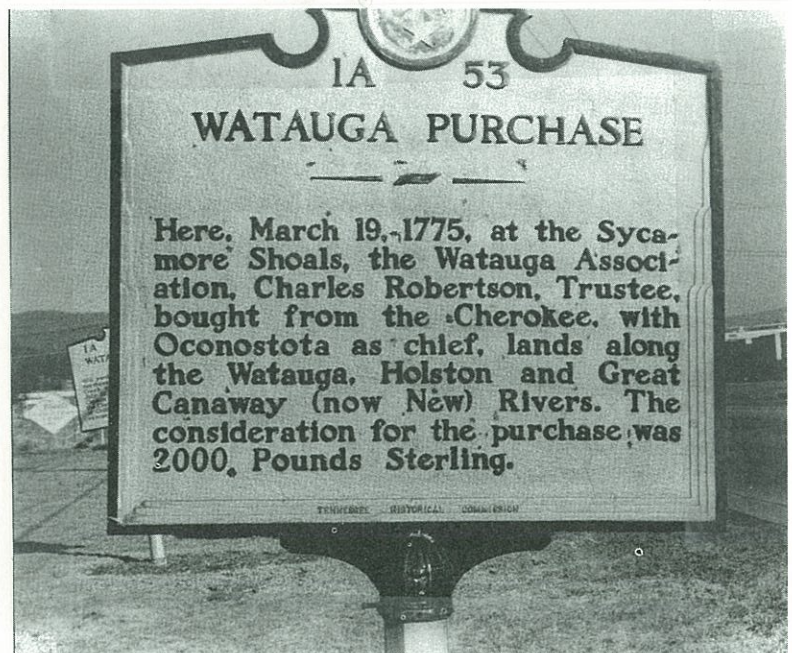
encouraged the Cherokee to disavow that 'sale' of lands and turn hostile towards the Wataugans.

So, although no battles against the British had been fought on Watauga soil, the Wataugans realized that in order to secure their future, the British had to be defeated; they realized they *had* to help in that fight – and to do that they *had* to be part of something bigger than their little association.

So on 19 Nov 1776 North Carolina accepted the Wataugans' petition and created this area into Washington District. Thus the Watauga Compact came to an end.

Most of these Wataugans in the passage of time became leaders of Washington District, then of Washington County; some were Franklinites and others were not. Many, such as John Sevier, were still around 20 years later when Tennessee became a state.

But those are other topics for other days.



The Tennessee Historical Commission has placed this Watauga Compact marker at the entrance to the Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area in Elizabethton.