

Col. Samuel Wear Explains the Death of Cherokee Sassa

by Paula Gammell

In 1802 Indian-White relations, while much less hostile than earlier, could hardly have been called friendly. Strained, perhaps. Or restrained. Death of either Indian or white person could tip the fragile peace and cause renewed hostilities on both sides. So when a Cherokee Indian, Sassa or Sammy, died, apparently the result of an accidental injury that occurred at Col. Samuel Wear's house, Col. Wear needed to address the issue before it got out of hand. He described what happened in a letter to James Carey, who was at the time interpreter at the Tellico Block House. Parts of Col. Wear's letter are as follows:

Sevier County, July the 28th, 1802

Dr. Sir,

Two Cherokee men one who called himself Johny, the other Samy or Sassa a Cherokee name, Who Says they both Lived In a Town named Equoneetle, they came to my house on the Night of 15th Instant on the business I understand to bring In a horse belonging to a certain Captain Mclaughlin.... and in their performing So friendly an act to the Whites I Got Some Whiskey and treated them the Same night of Which they Drank Very freely Almost all night In friendship and Good Humour, and on the next Morning... a number of white people came In and they all Drank Whiskey prety freely.... [In] the Evening... a Small man by the Name of Barefoot Runions Whom I took to be Very Much Intoxicated... began as I thought in play... with the Cherokee named Johny. The Said Johny... made an attempt as if he Intended to draw [his] Sword... which I Observed and Spoke to the Indian and told him not to do So. The Indian Johny then Asked me if the Said White man was Not Angry, and a bad man, on which I answered him that he was But a Small man and that he had Got Too Much Whiskey and that he was no Ways Dangerous on Which Johny then Delivered Me his Sword and Knife and I Laid them Away. In a Short time afterwards the said White man and the said Indian Johny Joined to Restle or Scuffle through the floor, when the Said White man Sometimes flung the Indian and sometimes the Said Indian flung the Said White man and During that time they Frequently went to the Table and Would drink Whiskey Together, Still In friendship and Diversion as it appeared to Me.... After Sometime... they Began to Strike prety hard and Roughf which then appeared to Me that it Come to a Fight In Earnest Between them the Said Indian Johny and the Said White man Runions... I Immedeatley Interfered and Layed hold of the White man and Drew him away.... In this time the Other Indian... Jumped Up, and the White man got Loose from Me and Immediately him and the Other Indian Samy or Sassa Inclosed... Someway In the Scuffle Sassa or Sammy they Said fell on the Short posts of a Chair... I could not nor Did I See how it happened as I Was Engaged holding the other off. But I was Informed by others who were in the house... that he fell on the Short posts of a Chair With his belly on which he Immediately Slipt out of the house Into the porch and Lay Down and Complained of his belly. The Said Indians still continued to Stay with me all night afterwards In My house and the next day morning they Started to Go home, But the Said Indian Samy Seemed to Complain Much of his belly being hurt. I Examined him All over but could not Discover any Breach or Mark on him or hurt whatsoever Outwardly. Notwithstanding, they Traveled but a Little More than three Miles from My house where they Encamped and remained Untill Thursday the 22d Instant When I was Informed that he Died and Some of the Whites Assisted in burying him. I myself was not at home the time when he Died. I am Dr. Sir, your Obedient + Humbl. Servt.

Sam Wear to Mr. Carry Interpreter.

Col. Wear concluded his letter by expressing his regret and stating once again that he believed Sassa's death was an accident. Read his entire letter in Vol. 7, No. 1 of "East Tennessee Roots."

Detailed accounts such as this of Indian-White relations here in East Tennessee are much too rare. We publish as many as we can find!