

# Steps to Tennessee Statehood

*Standards: 4.45, 8.39*

*Essential Question: What people and events contributed to Tennessee gaining statehood in 1796?*

The formation of the State of Tennessee was a direct result of the fledgling United States' drive toward westward expansion. The discovery and mapping of the **Cumberland Gap** was a watershed moment in the young nation's history, as it opened the first viable path across the sprawling mountain ranges which divided the 13 states from the rest of the continent. Once this gateway was opened, settlers began flooding into the west, as hundreds of thousands of acres of fertile, unspoiled land now became available.

However, as the western holdings of North Carolina increasingly filled with settlers tensions mounted as the settlers felt abandoned by their parent state. Without protection or financial aid, the western settlers could rely only on themselves to construct settlements and defend themselves from Indian attacks, yet North Carolina still demanded taxes from the settlers. When North Carolina ceded its western territory to the national government as payment for war debts in 1784, the settlers saw an opportunity to form an independent government. A convention was called in the town of Jonesborough, and **John Sevier** (see Early Tennessee Sources packet, page 6), a hero at the Battle of Kings Mountain during the Revolutionary War, was elected president of the convention.

After a vote to secede and establish an independent government passed unanimously, a temporary government was established. North Carolina however, voted to punish the westerners for their insubordination by rescinding the Cession Act and reclaiming the western land. In December of 1784 a second convention was called and, again under the leadership of John Sevier, the settlers established themselves as a new government, independent from North Carolina, which would come to be known as Franklin. Though the State of Franklin ultimately collapsed in a few short years, it represented the first organized attempt to form a new state in the territory which would become Tennessee. John Sevier was elected as the unofficial state's first and only governor, and later served as the first governor of Tennessee.

Following Franklin's collapse and the ratification of the United States Constitution, North Carolina again ceded its western lands to the newly formed federal government. This time the lands were accepted by the government, and the area was quickly established as the **Territory South of the River Ohio (or Southwest Territory)** on May 26, 1790, and **William Blount** was appointed by President George Washington to be its first and only governor, as well as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Blount was a respected businessman, prominent member of the North Carolina state legislature, representative to the Continental Congress, and a signer of the United States Constitution. **Rocky Mount**, a house and piece of property owned by William Cobb located near what is today Johnson City, was established as the temporary capital for the Southwest Territory. During his tenure as Governor, he engineered and oversaw the signing of the **Treaty of the Holston** with the Cherokee Nation in 1791. The treaty was intended to update and correct weaknesses and oversights in the earlier Treaty of Hopewell from 1785, which itself was a response by the federal government to the Treaty of Dumplin Creek from earlier in 1785, between the Cherokee and the short lived State of Franklin.

The Treaty of Dumplin Creek established generous land cessions from the Cherokee and greatly increased Franklin's territorial boundaries. However, given Franklin's lack of legal recognition from the national government, this treaty was also unrecognized by the national government, which shortly thereafter signed the Treaty of Hopewell, retaining some land cessions from the Dumplin Creek Treaty, but establishing territorial boundaries that were significantly less expansive. Many settlers from the State of Franklin had already moved in and settled in the land established under Dumplin Creek however, believing their land claims to be valid, but were viewed as illegally settling by both the Cherokee and the national government.

Thus, in order to correct this and smooth hostilities with the Cherokee, William Blount and 41 tribal chiefs of the Cherokee Nation signed the Treaty of the Holston on July 2, 1791. The treaty officially established Cherokee land cessions covering much (though not all) of the land they ceded in the unrecognized Treaty of Dumplin Creek, legitimizing many of the settlers' land claims. For this cession the Cherokee were to be paid an annual sum of \$1000, which was later raised to \$1500 and then \$5000. The treaty also required that the Cherokee Nation swear allegiance to the United States, promised protection for the tribe, and established a program whereby the United States would supply the Cherokee with equipment for farming and cultivation and also train them in agricultural techniques, with the goal of "civilizing" the Cherokee by transforming them into a farming society rather than continuing as hunters. This was unquestionably the most consequential provision of the treaty, as the introduction of white agricultural

methods would ultimately lead to the adoption of many more aspects of white culture and society among the Cherokee and several neighboring tribes.

**With the Southwest Territory's population booming**, William Blount called the territorial legislature for a special session in June, 1795 and called for a census to be taken to determine if the territory's population was sufficient for a statehood bid. The Treaty of the Holston had not brought about the hoped for peace with the Cherokee, and Blount's desire for a forceful response was hindered by the federal government, and the governor came to believe that the only way the citizens of the territory could secure their interests was to make the final push for statehood. Under the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Congress would only consider a new state's admission to the Union if its population exceeded 60,000. After the census determined that the Southwest Territory exceeded the population requirement, a referendum was put to the citizens of the territory, who overwhelmingly voted for statehood. In January, 1796 a constitutional convention was held in Knoxville, and a state government modeled on North Carolina's constitution was established. Finally, on June 1, 1796, the territory's application for statehood passed both houses of the federal Congress, and was signed into law by President George Washington, establishing Tennessee as the 16<sup>th</sup> state in the Union.