

Tennessee

THE land in Tennessee was included in the grant by Charles II to the eight Carolina grantees. The portion unsold by them was subsequently bought by the British crown. By treaty with France in 1763, the western limit of Tennessee was restricted to the Mississippi River, instead of the South Sea.

Despite inter-Indian wars, and those against and by the whites, there began, about 1769, a steadily increasing migration of Carolina people across the mountains into Tennessee. Each month, each week, brought men, women and children as new settlers. They spread down the Watauga River from valley to valley, from creek to creek. They were after free land, by which to improve their condition, and they were willing to risk what might happen to them if they could get land on which to build their homes.

[117]

By treaty, about 1772, the Indians granted the use of land to Charles Robertson, who then made land allotments to the settlers, who afterwards perfected their titles at the Watauga land office.

James Robertson led a group of settlers from North Carolina to Tennessee in 1779, and founded Nashville. The rapidity with which the settlement increased and spread was phenomenal.

Throughout the Revolutionary War era, North Carolina claimed as part of its domain all the land in Tennessee, and the politics of that state were tainted with speculation in Tennessee land. Politicians, in league with surveyors and Indian fighters, controlled the government and divided the spoils.

Land had been promised the soldiers of the Revolutionary War but, in 1782, when the lands were to be allotted, it was found that "sundry families had already settled on the proposed grants and it became necessary to allow them to retain their entries to the usual limit of 640 acres."

The early history of Tennessee is filled with accounts of the troubles and conflicts which arose from different claims. Sometimes five or six claimants would appear for the same land—one claiming under a grant by the Carolina lords proprietors; one under an unrecorded grant by Lord Granville (see Carolinas); one under the laws of North Carolina; one by executors' sale, and one in possession. The various treaties with Indians, and the little regard for them by the settlers, added to the causes of confusion. [117]

In the 1780's some roads were cut through, which facilitated immigration. A land office was opened by North Carolina in 1783 for the sale of lands in Tennessee, though the Indian claim to a large part of it had not been extinguished.

Tracts of 640 acres were offered to any settler, and a hundred acres additional to his wife and each of his children, at £2 per hundred acres, being less than 10¢ per acre; preference being given to those who had already located on the land. [50] But purchases at that time were made mostly in large tracts by speculators, to be held for higher prices as population increased.

By rushing to the land entry office, even before North Carolina had ceded the land to Tennessee, the land jobbers looted the Tennessee domain of the best land. [165]

Speculators and settlers overran the Cherokee Indians, driving them into the woods, murdering their women and children, as if to extirpate these poor wretches. The Cherokees then attacked the troops sent in pursuit and only three Americans escaped. [119]

In the great bend of the Tennessee River there was a fine body of land, for which Georgia and South Carolina were rival claimants. William Blount and John Sevier were in the forefront in exploiting that region. [165]

Blount, in 1783, wrote: "This dispute between the two states will, in my opinion, be very favorable to our designs in obtaining title. . . . It now seems that every person I have seen envies us

the purchase and wishes to own a part of the bend of the Tennessee."

The lands in the great bend continued to attract and engage attention for two decades. Phases of this history of Tennessee and the State of Franklin can be understood only in the light of this fact. [165]

Three years after 1783 land along the Tennessee River was selling at 15 6d (37¢) per acre, but as demand by settlers and speculators increased, the price of desirable locations rapidly rose.

To sever connection with North Carolina, the settlers in the Tennessee region organized the State of Franklin in 1785, and elected John Sevier as governor. It continued as such until March, 1788, after which, for six years, the region was governed by North Carolina.

In ceding to Tennessee the land in that territory, the North Carolina politician-speculators stipulated that absentee-held land in Tennessee, of which they held large areas unused, should not be taxed more than other land. [69]

There was opposition by holders of land in west Tennessee to North Carolina's ceding to the national government land west of the Allegheny Mountains; and North Carolina was the last of the seaboard states to do so. But that cession proved to be the shell without the kernel, because, before being transferred to the national government, nearly all of it had been allotted to private holders. What little was possessed by the State was sold for internal improvements.

In 1792 Governor Sevier and Landon Carter, an official of the land office, held in partnership land warrants for 128,000 acres. Charges were made that Sevier (whom the State of Tennessee has honored by a statue in the capitol at Washington) was deeply implicated in fraudulent land warrants, and the charges were pressed against him. [117]

Tennessee was admitted as a State of the Union in 1796, and William Blount was elected to the United States Senate. Because his avaricious land speculations involved him in intrigue with the British (as cited in the chapter on the Gulf Region), he was expelled from the Senate.

John Rice, an Indian trader, entered a claim in the North Carolina land office, in 1783, for five thousand acres, which included a bluff along the Mississippi River, now within Memphis.

That same year, a claim for an adjoining five thousand acres was entered by John Ramsay and John Overton. The state of North Carolina was paid £10 per hundred acres, or 49¢ per acre, for these lands which, in substance and in fact, were made saleable by the national government. [165]

North Carolina had no right to sell the west Tennessee land, for until 1818 the Chickasaws were recognized by the United States government as the owners of the land, and any court would have declared the Rice and Ramsay grants illegal. [25]

Overton bought the Rice tract for \$500 in 1795, and two years afterwards sold one-half of it to General Andrew Jackson, later President of the United States, for \$100. Jackson, after holding it twenty-one years, sold one-eighth for \$5,000. [25]

Memphis was laid out on the Rice tract, in 1819, and that year conveyance of the first lot was made. [117]

Many of the settlers on the Memphis tract had previously acquired locations from the Indians and consequently had a better claim to the land than had the more recent purchasers. To avoid litigation, the Rice holders gave lots to the old settlers. [25]

Overton, a retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Tennessee, and General Jackson were partners, for thirty years, in land deals that were sometimes questionable. Overton became the wealthiest man in Tennessee. [25]

One of the surveyors of the time located and claimed 365,000 acres of land. The total of choice lands put under entry in west Tennessee must have been a staggering one. [165]

To extinguish the Chickasaws' claim to all the land in Kentucky and Tennessee, the United States government in 1818 agreed to pay them \$20,000 annually for 15 successive years.

Promptly thereafter, North Carolina speculators sent agents into Tennessee to locate lands. It was stated: "By this Indian cession many speculators are at once made rich. One person obtained 123,000 acres worth, at a moderate calculation, more than a million dollars." [165]

The demand, mainly by speculators, was so great that land

along the Mississippi River in Tennessee was soon selling at an average price of \$10 per acre—land which only five years previously had sold at 12½¢ to 25¢ per acre.

One of the first Carolina settlers in the Chickasaw area stated that: "of the six million acres obtained from the Chickasaws, less than two million acres fit for cultivation would remain after all the Carolina entries and warrants were satisfied. The truth is the rich soil has been divided among a few, very few. It is all a mystery, even to the people in Nashville." [165]

So many North Carolina warrants for land in Tennessee had been issued, many of them illegally, that every new area of land opened for disposal was immediately absorbed in satisfying them.

Claimants entitled to land by pre-emption in Tennessee were, in 1841, confirmed in that privilege for not exceeding two hundred acres each. The lots were on the frontier, claimants paying to the state 12½¢ per acre. After 1841 the state publicly offered land at that price. [146]