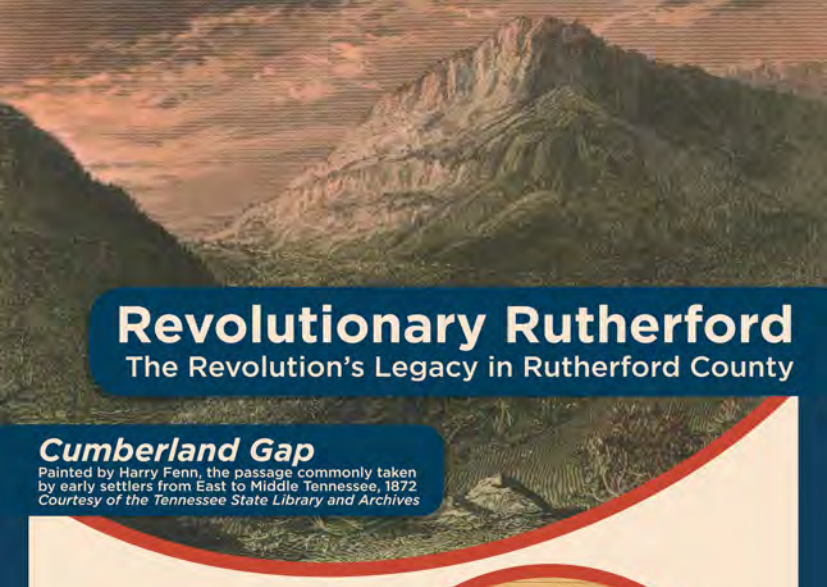


Revolutionary Rutherford

The Revolution's Legacy in Rutherford County

Cumberland Gap

Painted by Harry Fenn, the passage commonly taken by early settlers from East to Middle Tennessee, 1872
Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives

Although Tennessee became a state in 1796 and Rutherford County was established twenty years after the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the war greatly shaped this region. It affected the Native Americans who used this land, the settlers who followed, African Americans (both enslaved and free), and the communities these groups built. This exhibit explores the Revolutionary War's impact on Rutherford County history and how residents have worked to preserve this legacy.



Early Map of Tennessee
Showing area of modern-day Rutherford County, including Cherokee-claimed hunting grounds, 1795
Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives

First Peoples and Early Settlement

For more than ten thousand years before the founding of Rutherford County, Native American communities lived throughout Middle Tennessee, from early Paleo-Indians to later Mississippian cultures and into the era of European contact. Many groups occupied the Central Basin over time, and by the late eighteenth century the land—then part of North Carolina—was used primarily for seasonal hunting and fishing by Cherokee and Chickasaw hunters, as well as Shawnee, Creek, and Choctaw peoples.

Black Fox's camp was a well-documented eighteenth-century site located at a natural spring now known as Black Fox Spring. Later Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Black Fox and his hunters used the camp seasonally while hunting in the area.

Early Colonial Settlement

By the early 1700s, French traders were among the first European colonists in Middle Tennessee, operating from the French Lick, the salt spring and surrounding land that later became Nashville. These traders built posts along the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers, exchanging goods with Native American communities for animal pelts. By the mid-1700s, English hunters and settlers arrived from the eastern colonies, establishing farms and permanent settlements across the region. Both groups sought trade and alliances with Native nations, but as settlers pushed farther into Native lands, expansion sparked growing tension and conflict between settlers and Native American communities.

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Rutherford Countians in Revolution

Soldiers in Uniform

Painted by Jean Baptiste Antoine de Verger, depicting a soldier of African descent from a Rhode Island Regiment, ca. 1781–1784
Courtesy of the Library of Congress

By its end in 1763, the French and Indian War left Great Britain deeply in debt, prompting tighter control and new taxes on the American colonies. Alongside growing ideas about natural rights and resistance to tyranny, relations between the colonists and Great Britain worsened. In April 1775, skirmishes at Lexington and Concord began the armed conflict, marking the start of the Revolutionary War. In the years that followed, people from many backgrounds, including future residents of Rutherford County, joined the struggle.



Peter Jennings: Fought in the War's Key Moments

Initially, Continental Army leaders barred people of color from enlisting, including enslaved and free Black men, due to prejudice and fears of armed resistance. In 1776, troop shortages forced leadership to reverse the policy. One soldier to enlist after this change was Peter Jennings, a free Black man from New England who joined a Rhode Island regiment largely composed of soldiers of color. Jennings crossed the Delaware River, fought at Trenton and Princeton, endured winter at Valley Forge, and served at the Siege of Yorktown. His experience highlights the essential role soldiers of color played in securing the nation's independence.

The Headstone of Veteran Peter Jennings
Fifth Rhode Island Artillery Regiment, erected 1976
Photograph by the Rutherford County Archives



Elijah Smith: Kept His Fellow Soldiers Alive

New Jersey native Elijah Smith enlisted as a private in a light horse corps. Alongside Jennings, Smith was present at the encampment at Valley Forge from December 1777 to June 1778. The harsh winter and scarce provisions made the encampment difficult, with many soldiers dying from starvation and malnutrition. Under the commissary, Smith worked as an assistant forage master, securing food and feed for soldiers and animals. His efforts were vital to the army's survival during the winter, enabling General George Washington's forces to continue the fight in subsequent conflicts.

Return of the Scout to Valley Forge
Painted by Harrington G. Fitzgerald, the encampment at which Elijah Smith served as assistant forage master, ca. 1880–1900
Courtesy of the Library of Congress



John Sack: Became a Prisoner, Deserter, and Privateer

An English-born silk weaver, John Sack enlisted in the Georgia Continental Line in 1776. Sack served until the capture of Savannah, Georgia, in 1778, when he was taken prisoner and placed aboard the British prison ship *Betsy*. Sack was later forced into service on British naval vessels, including the *HMS Vulture*, but repeatedly escaped to rejoin American forces. He fought in several engagements, including Frederica Island, Amelia Island, and Midway Meeting House. His story showcases the hardships of captivity, shifting loyalties, and the resilience needed to continue serving in the war.

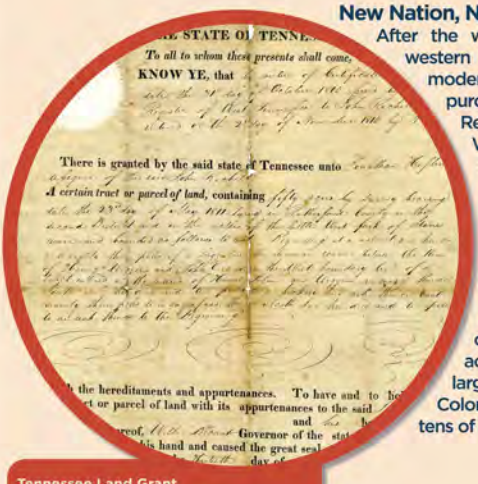
Plans for the British Sailing Ship, the *HMS Vulture*
ca. 1775–1776
Courtesy of the Royal Museums Greenwich

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Carving Up the Central Basin

New Nation, New Opportunity

After the war, North Carolina opened western territories that make up modern-day Tennessee for purchase and as payment to Revolutionary War veterans. While some veterans opted to sell their land, many others moved to the area that would become Rutherford County, seeking to establish homes and communities within the newly formed nation. Landownership varied widely; many veterans only acquired hundreds of acres from land grants, while large landowners, including Colonel Hardy Murfree, acquired tens of thousands of acres.



Tennessee Land Grant
For 50 acres in Rutherford County
for Jonathan Heflin, 1811
Courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives

Expulsion of Native Americans

New waves of immigrants and expanding settlement in the Central Basin heightened tensions and sparked conflict with Native American communities. In 1794, war veteran and Nashville founder James Robertson ordered a campaign to remove the Native American presence in Middle Tennessee. As part of this effort, the militia occupied Black Fox's camp. They then continued eastward, where they destroyed Cherokee towns and killed Native American residents.

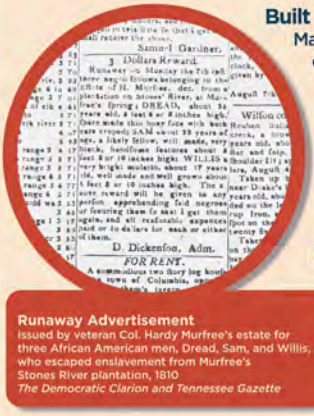
Though Black Fox survived the occupation of his camp and the destruction of these towns, the campaign marked the removal of most Native Americans from the area that would become Rutherford County. In 1801, the site known as Black Fox Spring was purchased by veteran William Kelton and his wife, Elizabeth.



Black Fox's Spring and Surrounding Land
c. 1779–1804
Courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives

Built Upon Enslavement

Many early settlers enslaved African Americans to clear land and construct homes on the frontier. This included large plantation properties like that of veteran Colonel Hardy Murfree, who enslaved fifty-six people by 1800, to smaller landholding veterans such as William Burnett and John Sack, who enslaved fewer persons. The enslaved communities of the county tended fields, crafted furniture, and performed a wide variety of other skilled and unskilled labor. While land grants offered opportunity for some, they reflected the continued denial of freedom for others.



Runaway Advertisement
issued by veteran Col. Hardy Murfree's estate for three African American men, Dread, Sam, and Willis, who escaped enslavement from Murfree's Stones River plantation, 1810
The Democratic Clarion and Tennessee Gazette

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County and Courts

Plan for the Town of Jefferson
The first seat of Rutherford County, 1804
Courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives

Petitioning for a County

In 1803, residents of the region petitioned to create a new county from parts of surrounding counties. Many petitioners were Revolutionary War veterans who had established homesteads through land grants.

"...the vast extent of said counties renders it inconvenient for your petitioners to attend Courts, General Musters, Elections, etc.... We your petitioners therefore pray that you will consider our situation and grant us a new county...."

The petition succeeded, and on October 25, 1803, the Tennessee General Assembly established Rutherford County. Jefferson served as its first county seat until Murfreesboro's founding in 1811. Veterans and their families continued settling in the area, including Peter Jennings, who moved to Murfreesboro in 1822, established a bakery, and was one of twenty-three households in the county's free Black community.



Charter
Designating Rutherford as a County of the State of Tennessee, 1803
Courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives



Powder Horn
Owned by Ephraim Foster Lytle, grandson of Captain William Lytle, whose donated land became the second county seat, Murfreesboro, 1837
Courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives

Courts for Support

After the Revolutionary War, many Rutherford County veterans struggled with age, injury, and poverty. Federal pension and disability laws offered relief, but veterans had to prove their service. Veterans presented records and relied on fellow soldiers to testify. Elijah Smith, for example, confirmed Peter Jennings's presence at Valley Forge, helping him finally secure a long-sought pension.

Clarissa's Home
On the plan for the Town of Jefferson, 1804
Courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives



Courts for Freedom

County courts could also be a means of freedom and tragedy. Clarissa (last name unknown), born free in the French colony of Guadeloupe. She was kidnapped, enslaved, and sold to William Edwards, a signer of the county's founding petition. In 1809, Clarissa sued her enslaver under French law and won, securing freedom for herself and her son, Seac. Four years later, Edwards used the same courts to counter-sue for ownership of Seac and succeeded, tragically separating mother and child.

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Preservation and Commemoration

In the centuries following its founding, citizens of Rutherford County have worked to memorialize its Revolutionary War legacies. Through research, preservation of historic resources, and commemoration, individuals and organizations have sought to ensure that the stories of the county's Revolutionary past are preserved for future generations. Below are some of the efforts made to remember this legacy.



DAR Officers
Representatives of the Colonel Hardy Murfree, Captain William Lytle, and Stones River Chapters of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 1981
The Morning Press

Local Chapters of the DAR

Many efforts to preserve Revolutionary War history were led by women, including members of the Colonel Hardy Murfree, Captain William Lytle, and Stones River chapters of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution. These local leaders continue to organize social, educational, and preservation initiatives to commemorate the county's Revolutionary War legacy.



Headstones of Eight Rutherford County Veterans in Old City Cemetery
Erected by the DAR in celebration of the U.S. Bicentennial, 1976
Photograph by the Rutherford County Archives

Veteran Memorials and Preservation

One of the main ways the county has preserved this legacy is by erecting memorials and preserving burial sites. For the United States Bicentennial in 1976, local members of the DAR researched Revolutionary War veterans and erected memorial headstones to honor their service. Community members also worked to restore the Lytle and Old City cemeteries.



The Leeman House at Cannonsburgh Village
One of the many buildings relocated to Cannonsburgh for the U.S. Bicentennial, 1977
The Tennessean

Cannonsburgh Village

Cannonsburgh Village was a United States Bicentennial project developed through a partnership between the City of Murfreesboro, Middle Tennessee State University's newly formed Historic Preservation program, and local groups. Supported by federal funding, it was designed as a living-history museum interpreting early county village life and continues today as a local history and tourism site.



Cake Cutting at the Historic County Courthouse
For the Rutherford County Bicentennial Heritage Festival, county residents commemorated local legacies, 2003
Daily News Journal

Beyond the Bicentennial

Since the United States Bicentennial, local groups continue to produce exhibits, programs, and publications on Revolutionary War history. For Rutherford County's Bicentennial in 2003, Bradley Academy Museum and Cultural Center presented a program on veteran Peter Jennings, and later the Center for Historic Preservation created resources like the driving tour *Forgotten Places, Living Traditions*, which includes veteran burial sites.

Towards 250

As we approach America's 250th anniversary, it is important to reflect on the Revolutionary War's legacy in Rutherford County. Its veterans were foundational to early settlement and the establishment of key institutions. Yet, veterans were also central to the displacement of Native Americans and the enslavement of African Americans. By reflecting on these intertwined experiences, we deepen our understanding of the Revolutionary War's impact on county legacies.

Sponsored By:
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Developed By:
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