

Tennessee and the Long, Hard Road to Statehood

By David Gorgani

Tennessee's struggle to attain equality and statehood arose from both territorial resident interest, repeated attempts to join the union and an unwillingness of external actors, including North Carolina and the federal government, to accede to the territory's wishes. As the first territory to join the union, Tennessee's admission as the sixteenth state set a precedent for future territories that aspired and desired to attain statehood and equal standing with those states already admitted. Although the United States Government experienced its most significant evolution during this period in the late 1700's – from foundation in the Articles of Confederation to the U.S. Constitution – the absence of federal support for statehood for Tennessee was consistently the most significant obstacle to Tennessee's admission.

Settlement of Tennessee began long before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. In the early 1770's, settlers along the Watauga River, near present day Johnson City, were alerted by the Virginia colonial government that they were located beyond Virginia boundaries and were ordered to move their settlement away from Indian territory. The settlers, comfortable in their new settlement, opted instead to organize their own local government, and acquire the lands from local Indian tribes by their own separate accord. Thus, the Watauga Association was established as a local government on the frontier of the colonies "by the consent of the people" and adopted Virginia laws "by the consent of every individual."¹ But despite their stable, somewhat autonomous government, the Watauga Association was repeatedly unsuccessful in its appeal for accession into the union of colonies that would soon form the United States of America.

¹ Ramsey, J.G.M.. (2007). *Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (p. 136). (Electronic ed.). Rockwood, TN: [EagleRidge Technologies](http://www.roanetnhistory.org/ramseysannals.php?loc=RamseysAnnals&pgid=68). (Original work published 1853). Retrieved July 11, 2008, from <http://www.roanetnhistory.org/ramseysannals.php?loc=RamseysAnnals&pgid=68>

During the Revolutionary War, the Watauga Association and other settlements in current-day Tennessee sent troops to fight alongside the Whigs despite their status as unincorporated settlements. One of the most notable contributions of these settlers was at the Battle of Kings Mountain, where an outnumbered Whig militia prevailed against the better trained, better equipped Loyalist forces led by Patrick Ferguson. After the battle was won, Joseph Greer of the former Watauga Association embarked on a 1,000 mile expedition to Philadelphia to inform the Continental Congress of the Whig victory at King's Mountain. This military victory expressed and demonstrated the commitment of the Watauga Association, now Washington County of North Carolina, to the revolutionary cause, and expressed their loyalty to the United States of America.

North Carolina's newly annexed western counties, including Washington County, were isolated from the rest of North Carolina by the southern Appalachian Mountains, which made travel between the two parts of the state difficult. In 1784, North Carolinians voted to transfer this land to the federal government to assist the payment of debts resulting from the Revolutionary War. However, when the Continental Congress showed signs that it was considering sale of this land to France or Spain as a quick budgetary fix, North Carolina promptly rescinded its offer.² Frustrated with the inconsistency of its status, the services that were neglected and dismissed in this inconsistency, residents of North Carolina's western counties formed a state independent from North Carolina, with the intention of unilaterally petitioning for separate admission to the union. To make clear that it did not intend to secede

² Arthur, John Preston. (1998). *History of Western North Carolina – Ch. VI – The State of Franklin*. (Electronic ed.). Digitalized by Jeffrey C. Weaver. (Original work published 1914). Retrieved July 11, 2008, from <http://www.newriversnotes.com/nc/wnc6.htm>

from the union, the new state of Franklin included a section in its constitution on representation in the United States Continental Congress:

*“The delegates of this State to the Continental Congress, while necessary, shall be chosen annually by the General Assembly.”*³

But the petitions of the independently formed state of Franklin were turned down, and it was left to its own weak self-government, which gradually dissolved as North Carolina once again exerted its control over the region, which it maintained until the U.S. Constitution was adopted.

After North Carolina’s ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1789, these western counties were forfeited to the federal government and were designated as part of the Southwest Territory. According to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, any territory with 60,000 or more inhabitants could be granted statehood with congressional approval. This ordinance was only slightly modified in the Constitution, which stated, “New States may be admitted by Congress into this Union,” and that states seeking admission must have a republican government.⁴ Tennessee conducted a census and began reforming its government to fulfill the federal mandate, and petitioned the federal government for admission to the union.

In 1795, a territorial census indicated sufficient population to meet the statehood threshold and results of a referendum showed a majority in favor of Statehood and integration to the Union. Governor Blount who had been appointed territorial governor by President Washington, called for a constitutional convention in Knoxville and a model state constitution and democratic bill of rights was drawn up by delegates from all the counties. Territorial voters chose Sevier to be their governor while the newly elected legislature elected Blount and William Cocke as their U.S. Senators and future President Andrew Jackson would be their Representative in the U.S. House. By doing so, Tennessee and its leadership

³ Ramsey, 33

⁴ Anonymous. *Tennessee’s Admission to the Union*. Tennessee State Library and Archives. Retrieved July 11, 2008, from <http://tsla-teva.state.tn.us/landmarkdocs/files/24.php>

converted the territory into a new state, with an organized republican form of government and constitution, before applying to Congress for admission.

Since the Southwest Territory was the first Federal territory to present itself for admission to the Union, there was some uncertainty in Congress about how to proceed, and Congress was somewhat divided on the issue of Tennessee's statehood. In addition to Federalist Party concerns that a new Jeffersonian state would disrupt their majority in Congress, the Senate committee considering the issue stated that "only Congress should initiate the statehood process," and that the census taken by Tennessee's officials "was not valid since it was not directed or supervised by the Federal Government."⁵ The committee drafted Senate Bill 46, which required a federally overseen census of the territory prior to admission. Nonetheless, a bill supporting statehood was passed by the House, and in conference the two chambers resolved that Tennessee would become a state provided that one elector and one representative were removed from the Tennessee delegation. On June 1, 1796 Tennessee was admitted to the union as its sixteenth state.

The precedent set by the admission of the State of Tennessee to the union was one of federal oversight in the admission process, and was important since Tennessee was the first United States' territory to be admitted to the union. Entities within Tennessee had on many occasions made their desire for statehood clear, and had organized stable republican governments and provided it's representatives to the Congress to back their efforts. Faced with these developments the Congress was moved to action and support of Tennessee's cause and statehood was granted with relative ease. The precedent set by Tennessee's experience remains relevant today as we consider the future of current U.S. territories.

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⁵ Anonymous