

# FROM WILDERNESS BORN



**JOHN SEVIER,**  
A TENNESSEE FOUNDING FATHER

By Lena Anthony

**R**evolutionary War hero, defender of the frontier, respected statesman—all of these titles describe John Sevier, who led the Overmountain Men to victory at the Battle of King’s Mountain in 1780 and later went on to become the first governor of Tennessee. But there’s another title—less-known and more distasteful—that’s sometimes ascribed to Sevier. For his instrumental role as the leader of the state of Franklin, which attempted to become the 14th state of the new United States, Sevier also, technically, could be called a traitor.

## **PIONEER BEGINNINGS**

Sevier was born in 1745 in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley. He was descended from French Huguenots, but little else is known of his background or his childhood. In 1761, Sevier married Sarah Hawkins. They had seven children before moving west in 1773, eventually settling in Watauga, a region on the western side of the Proclamation Line of 1763 that was, therefore, squarely in American Indian territory. Located near present-day Elizabethton in northeastern Tennessee, Watauga was initially thought to have been part of Virginia, but a 1771 survey determined that the land actually belonged to North Carolina.

Sevier acquired several hundred acres of land, leased from the Cherokee, and established himself as a frontier merchant and trader with American Indians. He also became a leader in the frontier militia, protecting the settlements against frequent Cherokee attacks.

## **THE MAKINGS OF A LEADER**

In 1775, Sevier was elected to be one of five commissioners in the Watauga

Association, which was a semi-autonomous government created in 1772 to provide basic government functions to the region, since no other Colony would claim it.

“The primary focus of the Watauga Association was the practical needs of routine government; it made no claims to independence from Great Britain,” Michael Toomey wrote in an article for the North Carolina History Project. “Even so, Wataugans were under the authority of no other government and thus represent the first autonomous white government in the British colonies.”

But their autonomy was short-lived. When relations with the Cherokee Nation soured around 1775, the Watauga Association rebranded as the Washington District and appealed to its neighboring Colonies for help. North Carolina responded, annexing the Washington District in 1776 and creating Washington County the following year.

Sevier, who was instrumental in gaining support for Watauga, was elected to



serve as one of the Washington District’s two representatives in North Carolina’s House of Representatives. Later, he was appointed lieutenant colonel of the Washington County militia—a role that would become instrumental on October 7, 1780, at the Battle of King’s Mountain.

“In a little more than one hour, using battle tactics that Sevier and his Overmountain Men had learned while fighting the Cherokees, these frontier Patriots totally decimated British Major Patrick Ferguson’s American Tories, with every last man either killed or taken prisoner,” wrote Gordon T. Belt

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in *John Sevier: Tennessee's First Hero* (The History Press, 2014).

Indeed, of the 1,105 British who participated in the Battle of King's Mountain, there were 290 killed, 163 wounded and 668 captured. On the Patriot side, whose force numbered 900, the casualties were smaller: 28 killed and 60 wounded.

This quick, decisive victory earned Sevier the mantle of war hero and helped launch his political career and ambitions, Belt wrote. Sevier's wife, Sarah, died in 1780, shortly after giving birth to their 10th child. He remarried quickly, to Katherine "Bonny Kate" Sherrill, with whom he had another eight children.

### THE LOST STATE

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, Congress asked the states to cede their western lands to the federal government, which would sell them to help pay war debts. North Carolina ceded its western lands, including Washington County, in 1784. The land became known as the Southwest Territory.

"The cession not only resulted in an unprecedented speculation by wealthy landowners, but also left the poor settlers of Watauga and the surrounding area effectively abandoned by their state government and unprotected from attacks by the Cherokees inhabiting the region," Belt wrote. "Disillusioned with North Carolina's governance of the territory, the settlers in North Carolina's western counties formed their own government, creating a separate, independent state of Franklin on August 23, 1784."

Named for Benjamin Franklin, the proposed state was made up of the western North Carolina counties of Washington, Greene and Sullivan. The people elected John Sevier as their governor, while William Coker was their delegate to the Congress of the Confederation. It was Coker who petitioned Congress for Franklin's

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statehood. Congress wouldn't allow it without North Carolina's permission, and North Carolina was opposed to the idea. In fact, North Carolina Governor Alexander Martin called Franklin's declaration of independence a "black and traitorous revolt," according to Belt.

But that's not the only time Sevier was called a traitor during his reign as Franklin's governor. After tensions rose between Sevier and John Tipton, who led the opposition against Franklin's push for statehood, Sevier made a last-ditch appeal to Spain to form an alliance. In an April 1788 letter to a Spanish agent, Sevier wrote that Franklin's citizens were "unanimous in their vehement desire to form an alliance and treaty of commerce with Spain, and put themselves under her protection," according to Belt.

Three months later, there was a warrant issued for Sevier's arrest. The charge was high treason.

"Even though Franklin's attempt at statehood failed, it was successful in forcing North Carolina to realize that they were going to have to let go of that area," said Carole Bucy, professor of history at Volunteer State Community College in Gallatin, Tenn. "It was definitely a signal to North Carolina that they were incapable of managing people living on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains in Indian Territory. They couldn't help them with their land claims, and they couldn't provide enough protection against American Indian attacks."

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that it demonstrated the failings of the Articles of Confederation and their lack of provisions for admitting new territories and states to the young United States—hence the call to revise them in 1786, the product of which ultimately became the U.S. Constitution.

### REMAINING A PUBLIC SERVANT

It may have been the end of the State of Franklin, but it wasn't the end to Sevier's public service. He was one of five men selected by George Washington in 1793 to serve on the council of the Southwest Territory. He also became the territorial militia's brigadier general. When the Southwest Territory became the state of Tennessee in 1796, Sevier was elected its first governor, serving from 1796 until 1801 and from 1803 to 1809. During this period, he developed an intense rivalry with Andrew Jackson, who at one point challenged Sevier to a duel, which Sevier accepted. Fortunately, no blood was shed.

Sevier died in 1815 in Fort Decatur in the Mississippi Territory while surveying land in what later became Alabama. He was buried there, but his remains were re-interred at the county courthouse in Knoxville, Tenn., in 1889. The remains of his second wife, Bonny Kate, were moved there in 1922. And in 1946, thanks to efforts led by Sevier's great-great-granddaughter Mary Hoss Headman and Sarah Hawkins DAR Chapter, Johnson City, Tenn., a monument to Sarah Hawkins Sevier was installed on the same lawn. 🌿