

# Early History of Middle Tennessee

By Edward Albright, 1908

## Chapter 12

James Robertson

The Arrival at French Lick

James ROBERTSON, the leader of the expedition about to be described, and who from henceforth will play an important part in the Cumberland settlement, is called by some historians the "Father of Tennessee." With equal propriety he may be called the "father of Middle Tennessee". He was born in Brunswick County, Virginia, June 28, 1742, and while yet a youth removed with his parents to Orange County (now Wake County), North Carolina. In 1768 he married Miss Charlotte REEVES, of that State. Having heard and answered the alluring call of the West he journeyed in the spring of 1770 from North Carolina to the Holston river in East Tennessee. There he lent his aid to the SHELBYs, SEVIERS and others in founding Watauga, the first colony west of the mountains. For nine years previous to his coming to the Cumberland he had heroically braved the dangers of the wilderness and suffered innumerable privations because of the ravages of hostile Indians, being exposed to the cruelties of these savage foes.

Of him Judge John HAYWOOD, his contemporary and intimate friend, has said: "Like almost all those in America who have attained distinction ROBERTSON could boast of neither noble lineage nor splendid ancestry. But he had what was far more valuable, a sound mind, a healthy body, a robust frame, an intrepid soul and an emulous desire for honest fame."

In personal appearance ROBERTSON was tall, of fair complexion, light blue eyes, and dark hair. Though quiet and retiring in manner, he was by nature a leader of men and master of affairs. That pioneer Frenchman, Timothy DEMONBREUN, once said of ROBERTSON: "He always know savoir faire, vat to do and he do him."

But let us return to the immigrants. Late in October, 1779, the overland party, about two hundred strong, left Watauga. The route chosen was a difficult one, leading as it did, by way of southern Kentucky. Passing along the well-beaten trace through the mountains at Cumberland Gap they traveled what was then known as the Kentucky Trace to Whitley's Station on Dick's river, thence to Carpenter's station on Green River, and thence to Robertson's Fork on the north side of Green River. From there they journeyed down the river to Pittman's Station, descending the stream to Little Barren, which was crossed at Elk Lick. From thence they passed over to Big Barren and then up Drake's Creek to a noted bituminous spring, thence to a location in Simpson County called Maple Swamp. From the latter place they crossed into Robertson County, Tennessee, and traveled along Red River to Cross Plains, going south by way of Goodlettsville, and passing over Cumberland river at the bluff where Nashville now stands. This, the end of their journey, was reached the latter part of December, probably on Christmas Day, 1779, and quite two months after their departure from Watauga. The weather during the months of November and December had been extremely severe, a large part of the journey having been made through snow. The party had suffered much from cold. This season has ever since been known throughout the Eastern States as the "hard winter." However, ROBERTSON and all his followers arrived in safety, having traveled about five hundred miles. No deaths had occurred and they had been free from attacks by the Indians.

Cumberland River was frozen solid from bank to bank, and the entire party crossed over on the ice. When they were in mid stream the ice began to break with a cracking sound that might have been heard for many miles, and all the company were badly frightened lest they should be plunged into the river. It only settled a little, however, and finally landed them safe on the other side.

Soon after leaving Watauga, ROBERTSON and his companions had been overtaken by a party from New River under the leadership of John RAINS. The latter had with them both horses and cattle, and were bound for Harrod's Station, which was located at the present site of Harrodsburg, Mercer County, Kentucky. ROBERTSON prevailed on them to change their plan and accompany him to French Lick. RAINS had formerly visited both locations, and in discussing the matter with ROBERTSON declared that he felt like a man who wished to get married and knew two beautiful women either of whom he could have, and both of whom he wanted.

During the same winter Kasper MANSKER, Daniel FRAZIER, Amos EATON and a number of other immigrants followed the route pursued by the first company, and after suffering great privations reached the Cumberland country about the first of January. Near the same time there arrived from South Carolina a party consisting of John and Alex BUCHANAN, Daniel and Sampson WILLIAMS, John and James MULHERRIN, Thomas THOMPSON and others whose names are now unknown, all of whom had come to cast their fortunes with the new colony. Many ties of kinship were afterwards disclosed as existent between various members of these several companies, and it is more than likely that this seeming coincidental movement westward by those from widely separated localities was brought about by a previous natural correspondence resulting from such relations.

There were a few women and children with the RAINS and MANSKER parties, but none with those led by ROBERTSON and BUCHANAN.

Seeing no signs or Indians on their arrival, and having been unmolested on their journey thither, the settlers were inclined to scatter over the country, locating on any body of land they might fancy within a radius of twenty or twenty-five miles of French Lick. ROBERTSON, however, believed there was trouble ahead, and therefore advised the building of a stockade into which all should come for protection at night. By many this advice went unheeded, and as a result they soon came to grief.

It was agreed, however, that the stockade at the Bluff should be headquarters for the colony. This fort, which was called the Bluff Station, was located at the foot of Church Street, in what is now the city of Nashville, and near a bold spring, the water of which at that time flowed out of the bank and down a precipice into the river. This spring was filled and lost sight of while the city was in progress of building, but was again uncovered a few years ago by workmen who were excavating for the foundation of a new structure in that vicinity. This fort was to be a place of general council, the seat of government, and together with the small village which sprang up immediately around it was officially called Nashborough in honor of General Francis NASH, a former Governor of North Carolina, and Brigadier General in the Revolutionary Army. He was mortally wounded and died at Germantown, October 4, 1777.

The main building in the Bluff fort, which was at first occupied by ROBERTSON and two or three companions was a log structure two stories high, with port holes around the walls both above and below. These were for rifles in case of attack. On top was a lookout station from which sentinels might discover the approach and movements of the enemy. Other cabins were built round about, the whole being inclosed by a circlet of cedar pickets driven firmly into the ground. The upper ends of these pickets were sharpened to a point, making it practically impossible to scale the rude wall thus formed. There was but one entrance to this enclosure; a gate, which by means of a heavy log chain was securely fastened at night.

From the lookout on this fort the settlers might have a commanding view of the surrounding country. To the west and south beyond Broad Street, the scene was much obstructed by a forest of cedars under which was a thick growth of bushes. On the uplands and slopes around and beyond this was an abundance of timber of all varieties, and of gigantic size. The bottom lands along the river and to the east and north were covered by a thick growth of cane from ten to twenty feet in height, presenting a picture quite in contrast to that which might be viewed to-day from a similar elevation.

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