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The Carter Mansion Revisited

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of History

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

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Master of Arts in History

by

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Colonel John Carter, Elizabethton

ABSTRACT

The Carter Mansion Revisited

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The Historic John and Landon Carter Mansion, a satellite property of Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area in Elizabethton, Tennessee, is one of Tennessee's earliest historic homes.

Because the house is not open year-round, the state park service has expressed a need for an interpretive kiosk to stand on the property and provide visitors with information on the Carter Mansion. This project represents an effort to summarize existing knowledge on the house, to address common misconceptions, and to create an interpretive kiosk design based on historical research.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the late summer of 2005, Dan Webber, Exhibits Program Administrator for Tennessee State Parks, asked me to design an interpretive kiosk for the Historic John and Landon Carter Mansion in Elizabethton, Tennessee. I was delighted. This kiosk would inform visitors about the Carter Mansion, a property of Sycamore Shoals State Historic area. I had at that time worked for Tennessee State Parks for three summers and had come to love and appreciate a local history of which I had no prior knowledge. The Carter Mansion is a major landmark for Carter County and for all of Tennessee and claims many important “firsts” in the state. It is supposedly the oldest frame house in Tennessee, built “ca. 1775” by Colonel John Carter, who is hailed as the first Chairman of the Court of the Watauga Association, which, in turn, is famous for being the first “free and independent” community on the continent.

Through the course of my research, however, I came across pieces of information that cast at least *some* doubt on most of these assertions. With this realization, I was also able, probably for the first time, to really define what I believe to be the primary challenge in public history: the balance between accuracy and public expectation.

I do not mean to imply that public expectation is always opposed to what is accurate, but that accuracy almost invariably requires lengthy explanation. It is very difficult to condense several pages of arguments into two or three digestible lines of text. It is important to be accurate, but it is also important to be interesting. It is important to be thorough, but it is also important to be concise. It is important to explain how we know what we know, but it is equally important to acknowledge discrepancies in the historical record. It is as important to connect

with people as it is to break down historical stereotypes. History is argument and uncertainty; always challenged by new theories and new sources, while public perception is influenced by more tangible things, connections made through the senses and emotions. People want to walk away from a historic site with a *sense* of the past, and I have endeavored to provide both an interesting and an accurate one.

The kiosk itself is a four-paneled, L-shaped sign. The two smaller panels measure 60 x 48 inches, and the other two measure 96 x 48 inches. I was left with total freedom of design and freedom to choose what information to include on the kiosk, although I was expected to consult regularly with the Sycamore Shoals staff.

I decided to organize the four panels along four themes: setting, people, features, and archaeology. Setting was important in order to put the house and the local events of the Watauga frontier into the larger events of the Revolutionary War. The people who lived in the house also warranted a closer look because their stories, that elusive “human element,” can imbue visitors with a living sense of a dead and forgotten place. Only one of the panels, albeit a large one, is devoted to the interior features of the house, while the final panel discusses changes to the site over time, beginning with the native people who once lived there.

The chapters in this thesis correspond to each panel. Chapter Two, “Over the Mountains,” provides a history of the Watauga settlement within the larger context of the American Revolution. Most of my research, especially some very interesting tidbits on the Regulator movement, did not make it to the final version of the kiosk; however, I did think it important for people to understand why the colonists settled here, what obstacles they faced, and how much of a gamble the settlement really was. The chapter and its corresponding panel are

meant to introduce the region and time period to viewers who might have only a passing familiarity with the American Revolution.

Chapter Three, “The Carters of Watauga,” investigates the people who lived on the site during the tumultuous era of the American Revolution. The details of these lives have been difficult to research and even more difficult to sort out. Sources are often contradictory or imprecise, and the overall body of secondary source works on Landon Carter is lacking, in spite of his prestige as Carter County’s namesake.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of this chapter to convey in the kiosk, however, was the “human side” of each of these figures. Their political accomplishments are well-documented, but the records of the Carter family were destroyed in a fire sometime between 1820 and 1840, and they have never been replaced.¹ Very little remains in the way of personal correspondence for John and Landon and none at all for Elizabeth, who could not read or write.² In this chapter I have made some bold statements about John Carter’s character based on my interpretation of his actions; the kiosk, however, simply relates the evidence and allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about him. This research does not closely examine Landon Carter’s life after the death of his father; my primary concern has been the Revolutionary War period, which seems to more closely correspond with the Carter Mansion itself.

Chapter Four, “Through the Carter Mansion,” features the house itself. Three major architectural studies have been conducted on the house: Charles Warterfield’s 1972 study, the National Heritage Corporation’s 1974 research, and “The Carter Mansion,” from Roger G. Kennedy’s 1985 book *Architecture, Men, Women, and Money in America, 1600-1800*. I am deeply indebted to all of these.

¹ Pollyanna Creekmore and Muriel Spoden, “Unpublished Research for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation,” (Elizabethton, TN: Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area, 1974), 830.

² Physical descriptions of these key figures are also lacking, although at least one portrait of Landon Carter survives.

This third kiosk panel was the most challenging to create. Visuals were especially important in this scenario since the Carter Mansion is what people come to...well, *see*. This panel, therefore, includes more images than any other. I thought about the questions people most often ask: how old is the house? Is this the original location? How much of the house is original? I also included interesting tidbits that people might not think to ask, such as the fact that the walls are filled with brick noggin or that the house might have served as a fort. The paneling and elaborate chimney pieces are popular subjects of conversation, so I have attempted to include plenty of photos of the house's fine interior.

I declined to discuss the mysterious appearance of an early Palladian panel and the various theories associated with the house's dating because I believe that such a discussion would detract from the overall experience. The theory that the house was reconstructed from an older mansion is just that—a theory—and it is a theory that cannot yet be proven. Most visitors simply want to know what the rooms were used for and how the Carters lived. I have tried to keep text to a minimum so that more space is available for photos, while at the same time offering a little information on each room.

The fifth chapter, "Archaeology at the Carter Mansion," is based almost exclusively on archaeological studies conducted at the site. The Mansion stands on the remains of at least two Indian villages, one of which appears to date from very early historic times.

It was important for the kiosk to stress the site's prehistoric elements. The fertile river valley was inhabited long before the Carters arrived, and yet the identity of these inhabitants is unknown. Unfortunately space was at a premium since this is one of the small panels, and some intriguing information on the unearthed Native American burials did not make the final cut. It was not possible to reproduce photographs of native burials on the kiosk; however, the Division

of Archaeology supplied me with some delightful pictures of the historic archaeological digs which provide glimpses of the Carter Mansion in its unrestored state. I included some of the house's history in this section rather than the Mansion panel for two reasons. First: I ran out of space on the big panel. Second: the Archaeology panel already includes some wonderful pictures of the house as it is being reconstructed—a perfect setting for a discussion on how the house and the site have changed through time.³

The kiosk designs themselves are shown at the conclusion of this work.⁴ This paper is not necessarily a “thesis” as such. I have no central point to argue but instead have endeavored to faithfully present the research behind the final product: the Carter Mansion kiosk.

³ Much thanks to Sam Smith at the Tennessee Division of Archaeology for providing the photos.

⁴ I chose to lay out the preliminary designs in Microsoft Publisher, but when the kiosk panels are actually printed, the designs will be converted to a more sophisticated layout program.

CHAPTER 2

OVER THE MOUNTAINS

The aftermath of the French and Indian War left the majority of American colonists in extreme disappointment. The bitter struggle against the French and their native allies came at great cost: to the British, exhausted from a series of conflicts, and to the Americans, whose frontiers were ravaged and whose elites had invested heavily in the cause.

It seemed only natural to the colonists—perhaps imbued with an inflated sense of their own contributions—that they should partake in the spoils of such a hard-earned victory. Thus, to the colonists, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 came as a shock and a cruelty. Of principal interest to land-hungry colonials was this passage:

And whereas it is just and reasonable, and essential to our Interest, and the Security of our Colonies, that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested or disturbed in the Possession of such Parts of Our Dominions and Territories as, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us, are reserved to them. Or any of them, as their Hunting Grounds.—We do therefore, with the Advice of our Privy Council, declare it to be our Royal Will and Pleasure. That no Governor or Commander in Chief in any of our Colonies of Quebec, East Florida. Or West Florida, do presume, upon any Pretence whatever, to grant Warrants of Survey, or pass any Patents for Lands beyond the Bounds of their respective Governments. As described in their Commissions: as also that no Governor or Commander in Chief in any of our other Colonies or Plantations in America do presume for the present, and until our further Pleasure be known, to grant Warrants of Survey, or pa [*sic*]

And We do further declare it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure, for the present as aforesaid, to reserve under our Sovereignty, Protection, and Dominion, for the use of the said Indians, all the Lands and Territories not included within the Limits of Our said Three new Governments, or within the Limits of the Territory granted to the Hudson's Bay Company, as also all the Lands and Territories lying to the Westward of the Sources of the Rivers which fall into the Sea from the West and North West as aforesaid.

And We do hereby strictly forbid, on Pain of our Displeasure, all our loving Subjects from making any Purchases or Settlements whatever, or taking Possession of any of the Lands above reserved. Without our especial leave and Licence for that Purpose first obtained.

And. We do further strictly enjoin and require all Persons whatever who have either wilfully [sic] or inadvertently seated themselves upon any Lands within the Countries above described. Or upon any other Lands which, not having been ceded to or purchased by Us, are still reserved to the said Indians as aforesaid, forthwith to remove themselves from such Settlements.⁵

In short, the Proclamation forbade English colonists to settle west of established colonial boundaries, which extended only to the Appalachian summit. From the Crown's point of view, the Proclamation was a logical expedient for imperial needs. The eventual English settlement of western lands was a foregone conclusion; the Proclamation itself insinuated as much. The Crown, however, reserved the right to determine *who* would settle beyond the mountains and *when* settlement could occur. Rampant squatting and speculation were unacceptable: new settlements must operate under a carefully-crafted British administration. The Crown's primary motivation in regulating settlement, however, was not to exercise authority for its own sake. The chief purpose of the 1763 Proclamation was to appease the Indians.⁶

Indians west of the Appalachian watershed had ample reason to fear. British settlers persistently encroached on their lands, a fact that sparked Indian attacks on colonial borders before and during the war. With the removal of French authority in the Americas, Indian groups could no longer benefit from European rivalries. The Indians, most of whom had cast their lot with the less-obtrusive French, resented the French officials' casual cessions of "their" tribes and lands to the British.⁷ Suddenly abandoned, the Indians were prepared to act desperately in defense of their lands and freedoms, as did the northern Indians in 1763. Though Pontiac's

⁵ "The Royal Proclamation – October 7, 1763," The Avalon Project at Yale Law School <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/proc1763.htm> (Last accessed 9/13/06).

⁶ I. R. Christie, *Crisis of Empire: Great Britain and the American Colonies 1754-1783*, Foundations of Modern History, ed. A. Goodwin (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 43.

⁷ Christie, 41.

Rebellion ended in a British and American victory, to imperial policymakers it confirmed the need to mollify the native peoples. Indian wars were costly and troublesome.

The Proclamation of 1763—from a British perspective—offered a reasonable compromise to all. The Proclamation did not close off all new lands for settlement; it also created four new colonies: Quebec, East Florida, West Florida, and Grenada. In theory, land-seeking Americans would settle in these colonies, leaving the Indians unmolested and keeping Anglo-Indian conflicts to a minimum. To British leaders, American colonists bore much of the blame for the war and Britain deserved the credit for winning it. Colonial land hunger certainly had a hand in bringing the wrath of the Indians and French upon the colonists, obliging the mother country to bail them out at considerable cost to the already-strained empire. To the British, the opening of four new colonies was a generous offer.

Reasons for colonial anger and disappointment over the Proclamation are equally apparent. Land companies and colonial governments had already laid claim to vast amounts of territory and, after the Proclamation, wealthy investors saw the promise of profit dashed before their eyes. In addition, poorer settlers who arrived too late for allotments in the east could no longer look westward for the hope of their own farms and homesteads. All who had fought, invested, or suffered in the French and Indian War felt doubly disappointed by the rationale behind the Proclamation. After innumerable sacrifices on the part of the colonists, the British government seemed eager to protect—not the interests of the colonies—but the interests of hated enemies.

In declaring the summit of the Appalachians as the boundary line of settlement, the British had introduced an unenforceable decree. Patrolling the entire Appalachian range would require great numbers of troops that the British could not spare. Nor did the British have any

effective means of removing colonists from Indian lands short of force, which they were reluctant to use. The British counted instead on the good sense and goodwill of their people to respect the king's wishes. This proved a disastrous miscalculation. During the late 1760s the fringe of westward settlement crept ever closer to the Proclamation line, and a few daring pioneers even settled beyond. Not all of these transgressors are remembered, but the first permanent settler on record in what is now Tennessee was William Bean.

William Bean was a "substantial landowner" from Pittsylvania County, Virginia. In 1768 he cleared land and constructed a cabin on Boone's Creek in the forbidden country beyond the mountains, land he had seen some years before on a hunting expedition with Daniel Boone. Bean departed for Virginia after clearing land around the cabin, and the following year (1769) he returned to the lower Watauga with his family.⁸

Others soon followed Bean into the Watauga and Holston valleys. James Robertson, later dubbed "The Father of Tennessee" for his actions in the eastern regions and his settlement of Nashville, arrived at the Watauga River in 1770. Robertson was pleased to find such fertile land, "already with a scattering of cabins." He built a small homestead, planted a crop of corn, and left to fetch relatives and family from across the Proclamation line. Others soon followed his example, moving into the fertile Watauga, Holston, and Nolichucky river valleys. By 1772 there were possibly 70-80 families in the vicinity and more arriving. John Carter was one of the westernmost settlers, having chosen Carter's Valley, near present-day Rogersville, as his initial home.⁹

⁸ Max Dixon, *The Wataugans*, Tennessee in the Eighteenth Century: A Bicentennial Series, ed. James C. Kelley and Dan E. Pomeroy (Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 5-6, 13. Bean's reasons for leaving his prosperous life are unclear; I doubt that dreams of being a "true colonizer" alone would have induced Bean to leave a comfortable Virginia plantation in order to hack a living out of the backcountry wilderness.

⁹ Dixon, 9-11.

Some prominent Tennessee historians account for this steady influx of people by asserting that many of these settlers were those disappointed Regulators of the western Carolinas, moving further west to escape “British” tyranny. The Regulator movement in North Carolina began during the 1760s when small farmers of the piedmont protested the exorbitant taxes and unfair laws forced upon them by eastern elites. These protests eventually turned violent as the Regulators, who desired to “regulate” existing corruption, exhausted all other legal channels of appeal. The violence culminated in the battle of Alamance in 1771, where an army under North Carolina’s governor Tryon crushed the ill-equipped and poorly-organized Regulators. J.G.M. Ramsey, in his *Annals of Tennessee*, applauds the Regulators as the link between protest and outright war.¹⁰ Other historians have followed suit, connecting the Wataugans’ later patriotism with the earlier Regulator movement. Some recent historians, however, downplay the Wataugans’ connection to the defeated Regulators because it reflects no credit on the Wataugans.¹¹

Both groups, however, miss an important point: the Regulators did not necessarily rebel against *British* control or tyranny. In many cases, those whom the Regulators opposed were the eastern colonial elites, the same men who later joined the patriot cause. The North Carolina Sons of Liberty condemned the Regulators and sought to disassociate themselves from the lower-class movement.¹² Many who fought in Governor Tryon’s army later took up the cause of American liberty,¹³ and when hostilities between the Americans and British did erupt, the Americans forced the removal of Governor Josiah Martin, a man who sympathized with the Regulators and

¹⁰J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Charleston, SC: Walker and Jones, 1853. Reprint, Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1967), 101.

¹¹ Dixon, 7.

¹²Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 208-9.

¹³ Kars, 155; 197-8

had taken measures to support the small farmers at the expense of the traditionally privileged classes. The Regulator movement was not so much an example of “American” versus “British” but East versus West, a dichotomy that resurfaced again in Shays’ Rebellion (1786-7) and the Whiskey Rebellion (1794). Some Wataugans probably were Regulators, but this does not mean that the Regulator movement spawned the Wataugans’ quest for liberty. Regulators were just as likely to be Tories as Whigs: as one North Carolina man put it, “he never had justice done him from the States.”¹⁴

Despite their varied political pasts, the fact remained that the overmountain settlers were illegal squatters on Indian land, living in defiance of the King’s Proclamation and the colonial governments. The presence of these settlers created dilemmas for all involved: the Cherokees, the British, and the settlers themselves.

The Cherokees had suffered encroachments on their lands since the French and Indian War. They began that conflict as halfhearted allies of the British but turned on their former comrades after suffering land thefts, insults, and the murder of their warriors by out-of-control colonists.¹⁵ Even James Grant, the Scottish commander who finally subdued the Cherokees in 1761, noted ruefully that the Indians “were more sinned against than sinning.”¹⁶ After this crushing defeat, the Cherokees largely abandoned their eastern lands and retreated beyond the mountains.¹⁷ In spite of the Proclamation of 1763, white settlers boldly came ever closer to the heart of the Cherokees’ domain.

John Stuart, the British Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Department, was sympathetic to the Cherokees and believed that the colonists brought Indian wars upon

¹⁴ Kars, 212-213.

¹⁵ Kars, 14-15.

¹⁶ J. Russell Snapp, *John Stuart and the Struggle for Empire on the Southern Frontier* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 56.

¹⁷ Kars, 15.

themselves chiefly by their own greed. Squatters would illegally move on to Indian lands, while unscrupulous traders allowed Indians to rack up enormous debts. Land companies then settled these debts through land cessions—unofficial and often unsanctioned by tribal or royal consent. Stuart’s ultimate goal was the peaceful co-existence of Indians and English, a goal he shared with his long-time friend, the Cherokee chief Attacullaculla, and he believed the surest way to this goal was strict British management of the colonists’ trade and settlement.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, Stuart’s views conflicted with the independent and entrepreneurial settlers who pushed further westward in search of land and opportunity. Stuart’s policies ensured that he was universally hated by Americans, but his actions reveal a man who was willing to compromise—perhaps too far—in pursuit of peace.

In order to legitimize some of these squatters’ claims, Stuart negotiated a series of treaties with the Cherokees, each offering greater land cessions to the white settlers. The treaty of Hard Labor (1768) re-established the Virginia boundary line further west, but by 1769 the colonists were already flaunting an open defiance of the boundary. In July of 1769, Chief Oconostota wrote to Stuart:

Father: The white people pay no attention to the talks we have had [Treaty of Hard Labor]. They are in bodies hunting in the Middle of our Hunting Grounds. Some of our people went as far as Long Island, but were obliged to come Home, for the whole Nation is filling with the Hunters, and the Guns rattling every way on the path, both up and down the River. They have settled the Land a great way this side of the line.¹⁹

The line was extended again at the Treaty of Lochaber (or Lockaber) in 1770. This treaty legitimized some landholdings along the Holston River but did not affect the Watauga

¹⁸ Snapp, 3.

¹⁹ Samuel Cole Williams, *Dawn of Tennessee Valley and Tennessee History* (Johnson City, TN: The Watauga Press, 1937), 358.

settlement.²⁰ While these measures on the part of Stuart and Attacullaculla were well-intentioned, the cessions only encouraged more settlers to enter the region in the hopes that they, too, might benefit from a future treaty. Stuart's dilemma was acute: he was responsible for maintaining peace and serving the mutual interests of the King and the Cherokees, yet the King's subjects continued to flaunt royal authority. Compromise was ineffective: any concessions only encouraged further disobedience. The settlers had no regard for the illegality of their situations as long as the British had no real authority in the area: the only way to remove the colonists was by force, and Stuart was both unwilling and unable to resort to this.

It seems the Cherokees themselves understood this dilemma. Oconostota wrote again to Superintendent Stuart in 1772:

[T]hey are daily insisting for Plantations that are left out on Watoga; we think the Virginia People don't care to hear your talks nor mind, nor do they seem to care for King George's... We would that they would move off our Lands and let us alone; it's what we want.²¹

The Cherokees were weak and divided. In 1769 they had waged a disastrous campaign against the western Chickasaws and lost half their warriors. Additionally, the series of land cessions had cut a wide gulf between the chiefs of the nation. Older chiefs such as Attacullaculla trusted in British protection and favored accommodation, while many younger warriors were dismayed at the rapid loss of their lands.²²

Though faced with concerns of their own, the Watauga settlers, for the most part, negotiated from a position of strength. They had found good land at a good price (free), and the British government had no real means, at the moment, to remove them. The threat of eviction hung loosely about the land, but there was always the hope that later treaties would recognize

²⁰ Dixon, 10. The Donelson survey of the treaty lines in 1771 removed any room for doubt: the Wataugans were illegal squatters.

²¹ Williams, *Dawn*, 350.

²² Dixon, 7, 15.

squatters' claims. A message from Stuart's deputy Alexander Cameron, however, temporarily disrupted the Wataugans' complacency. Cameron warned that the recent Donelson survey clearly marked their claims as illegal: they must remove from the lands at once.

The Wataugans stalled as long as they could, asking permission to harvest their crops before moving. But the crops came in and they still did not leave. They had developed a plan—a daring plan—to bypass royal authority altogether. The Watauga settlers were considered squatters by the Indians but were forbidden to purchase the lands by the 1763 Proclamation. The solution was simple: they would go directly to the Indians and obtain the lands through a lease. Their plan was successful, and the Wataugans were granted the use of the lands for ten years.²³

In order to manage the affairs of the land lease and to deal with the Indians, the Watauga leaders recognized the need for some form of government. In May of 1772 the Watauga settlers met to adopt the “Written Articles of Association” which established a governing court to handle “public business.”²⁴ This government was thereafter known as the Watauga Association.

The events surrounding the Watauga Association are well known in Tennessee history. The original records of the Association have been lost, but historians have used the model of the later Cumberland Compact (1780) to determine what precedents the Watauga Articles might have set. After all, many of those who formed the Cumberland Compact had been key members of the Watauga Association. It seems that the Watauga Association provided regular courts in each township. All free males over the age of twenty-one were allowed to vote and own property, and all males over sixteen were required to serve in the militia. The militia would act

²³ Dixon, 12-14.

²⁴ Ramsey, 136.

as the settlement's police force and execute the sentences of the court. There could be no appeals.²⁵

The Wataugans continued to live under the Association, that “dangerous example,” for several years. Events on the Watauga were relatively quiet until 1775. A few Wataugans joined in Lord Dunmore's War against the Shawnees in 1774. This conflict had caused some alarm among the Cherokees, though they took no part in it, and perhaps explains their increased willingness to placate the land-hungry whites. In the early months of 1775 Daniel Boone visited the Overhill Cherokee towns and made a proposal of sale on behalf of Richard Henderson, a North Carolina judge and land speculator.²⁶ On March 1, 1775, Cherokee leaders, with a large band of warriors, met with Henderson at Sycamore Shoals. The actual negotiations began on March 14. Many older chiefs seem to have met with a kind of quiet resignation about their dwindling lands and loss of power. To them, the large amounts of goods offered by Henderson would alleviate some of the shortages suffered by the people since the Chickasaw war of 1769.²⁷ Other, younger Cherokees protested the actions of their docile elders. Foremost among them was Attacullaculla's son Dragging Canoe, who gave an eloquent and prophetic speech on the white man's insatiable desire for land. The purchase continued, however, and Richard Henderson's Transylvania Company acquired 20 million acres of land, most of it in Kentucky, for 10,000 pounds. Only two thousand of this was in actual currency; most of the purchase was made in trade goods.²⁸

²⁵ Dixon, 18, from the Cumberland Compact.

²⁶ Richard Henderson was among those wealthy elites who were especially hated by the Regulators. Kars, 216.

²⁷ Dixon, 28-29.

²⁸ Williams, *Dawn*, 409. According to Williams, the actual deed only reports the two thousands pounds money. The additional eight thousand pounds worth of goods is tradition. The lands in questions were also claimed by the Shawnees, which might help explain why the Cherokees were willing to part with them so easily.

The Wataugans also benefited from the Cherokees' giving mood. They were able to purchase the lands they currently leased, and add some more besides. The British government, on the other hand, was furious with Henderson for making the illegal purchase and almost as furious with the Cherokees for allowing it. Shortly after receiving news of the Transylvania Purchase, Governor Martin and Alexander Cameron clamored for Henderson's arrest.²⁹ As for the Cherokees, they walked away with increasingly deep divisions within the nation.

With the onset of the Revolution, all pre-existing tensions were in danger of erupting into violent conflict. The Wataugans kept a close watch on Indian activities because the Indians overwhelmingly supported the British. The overmountain settlers became keenly aware of the illegality of their purchases and of their proximity to the British-allied Cherokees. They were also conscious of this grand opportunity to rid themselves, once and for all, of British rule and the threat of Indians. Although some Wataugans harbored Loyalist sympathies, most sided with the Americans, who would most certainly recognize their land claims. The leaders met in late 1775 or early 1776 in order to form a "Committee of Safety." They also renamed their settlement "Washington District."³⁰

The British Indian agents were also busy after the outbreak of war. On May 7, 1776, deputies Henry Stuart (the brother of John) and Alexander Cameron sent letters to the Wataugans, warning the illegal squatters to leave within twenty days. The Wataugans stalled for time while strengthening their fortifications. They had no intention of leaving their lands.³¹

²⁹ Williams, *Dawn* 419.

³⁰ Samuel Cole Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*. With an introduction by Frank B. Williams, Jr. and an index by Muriel Spoden (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1944. Reprint, 1974), 16-18.

³¹ Philip M. Hamer, "Correspondence of Henry Stuart and Alexander Cameron with the Wataugans" *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 17, No. 3 (December 1930), 452-3.

Until this point, the Wataugans had little use for the colonial governments, preferring to manage their own affairs.³² With the coming of war, however, the settlers sought aid and legitimacy from the rebel colonies. The Wataugans first petitioned Virginia for admittance. This occurred in May of 1776 and probably reflects the influence of Virginians such as John Carter. The Wataugans promised to, “when called upon, with their lives and fortunes lend every assistance in their power” in return for official sanction and protection. Virginia, however, still recognized the land claims of both the Cherokees and North Carolina and turned down the Wataugans’ request.³³

In the meantime, another letter bearing Henry Stuart’s signature had circulated through the settlement. This letter claimed that all those who did not join the King’s cause would be set upon by an army of “His Majesty’s Forces” and Indians. Now, it is a definite trend in early American history that violence done by Americans to Indians was a “battle,” but when Indians attacked Americans it was a “massacre.” Henry Stuart later claimed the letter was a forgery, and it very well may have been, but in the minds of the Americans, there was no worse crime of war than to set the Indians to attack white people. Rather than persuading the Wataugans to leave their homes, the letter actually gave them the very support they needed from the colonies. After hearing of the letter, Virginia became much more sympathetic and sold ammunition and supplies to the Wataugans, though the colony stopped short of admitting the Wataugans into Virginia. The Wataugans then prepared a petition to North Carolina in early July, which they did not have the chance to deliver until late August.

The petition process was delayed because of a disturbance that is sometimes called “The Cherokee War” although another engagement during the French and Indian War probably carries

³² Williams, *Dawn*, 386.

³³ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 17-19.

a better claim to the title. In July of 1776, Chief Dragging Canoe led a three-pronged attack on the overmountain settlements. Dragging Canoe himself attacked Long Island, The Raven attacked Carter's Valley, and Old Abraham (or old Abram) attacked the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements. The settlers were prepared. Nancy Ward, a *Ghighau* or "Beloved Woman" of the Cherokees, sympathized with the Wataugans and sent word to the settlers of the coming invasion. All three attacks failed.

From late July to October, forces from Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Virginia each campaigned against the Cherokees. A small contingent of Watauga settlers rode with the Virginia company under John Sevier. These punitive expeditions failed to neutralize the threat of Dragging Canoe, but they did succeed in destroying much of the Indians' crops and intimidating the elder chiefs still left in the towns into another disadvantageous treaty. From this point on, the western settlers had the upper hand in dealing with the Indians.

Once free of Dragging Canoe's threat, the Wataugans resumed their petitions. The sequence of events is difficult to sort out, but it appears that North Carolina accepted the "Washington District, Watauga Settlement" on November 19, 1776.³⁴ The Watauga delegates certainly appeared at the right time: the Provincial Congress of North Carolina was in the process of drafting the state Constitution. Members of the court were named for the new "District of Washington." In December of that year an act was passed to confirm the establishment of this temporary government. The first official Court of the Washington District met in August of 1777, but this government was short-lived because in April of that year, North Carolina had passed an act to establish "Washington County" in place of "Washington District." The first court of Washington County, North Carolina held session on February 23, 1778.³⁵

³⁴ Dixon, 48-49.

³⁵ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 75-6.

Between 1778 and 1780, the new Washington County settlers played small parts in the overall scheme of Revolution. Some fought the Chickamaugas, a splinter group of the Cherokees that sought to retake their ancestral lands from the whites. Other Wataugans joined in the fight against the British in the Carolinas.³⁶ By 1780, however, the Wataugans did not have to venture far to fight in the Revolution. In the late summer of that year, a serious threat was very close to home.

Colonel Patrick Ferguson was recruiting Loyalists in the Carolinas and threatened the “backwater men” that he would “lay waste their country with fire and sword” if they did not stop in their rebellion toward the king. His threat, however, had the opposite effect intended and only made the overmountain settlers more eager to fight. Those near the Watauga settlement mustered at the Sycamore Shoals of the Watauga on September 25, 1780. From there, about seven hundred³⁷ Overmountain Men left to meet Ferguson in battle, picking up about the same number of Virginia and North Carolina militiamen along the way. When they met Ferguson, he had taken refuge on a bald-topped plateau in South Carolina called King’s Mountain. There on October 7, about 1500 American militia, half of whom were Overmountain men, thoroughly defeated Ferguson’s 1,000 Loyalists. Ferguson himself was killed in the battle.

Most of the Overmountain Men returned home after King’s Mountain, but a few answered the call of their fellow patriots and participated in campaigns in the South. Some served under General Nathaniel Greene, and many more served under the “Swamp Fox,” General Francis Marion. Still others stayed close to home and conducted further campaigns against the Cherokees in 1782.

³⁶ Dixon, 56.

³⁷ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 145. Williams offers only a rough estimate

After the British surrender at Yorktown in 1783, troubles increased between the Overmountain settlements and the government of North Carolina. The Overmountain settlers were upset that North Carolina was giving away large amounts of western lands to veterans and land speculators. At one point, the North Carolina governor even ordered the squatters off of Indian lands in order to appease the Cherokees. These actions infuriated the western settlers and led many of them to push for a state of their own.³⁸

The proponents of the new state met in March of 1785 and chose John Sevier as the state's first governor and Landon Carter as Secretary of State. The new state's proponents met again in August to establish a constitution. They even adopted a name for their new state: Franklin.

The Continental Congress, however, would not recognize the new state without North Carolina's approval. Meanwhile, troubles also brewed at home for the Franklinites. Not everyone in the western settlements was in favor of separating from North Carolina. Two rival factions emerged: the group under Sevier held a government in the name of Franklin, while John Tipton continued to uphold the authority of North Carolina. In 1788 the rivalry descended into outright violence at a small skirmish at Tipton's farm, afterwards called the "Battle of the State of Franklin." Tipton's group defeated the men under Sevier and support for Franklin dwindled. The Overmountain Men, however, continued in a semi-autonomous state for the next several years, even opening diplomatic channels with the Spanish. The dreams of the Franklinites were finally realized in 1796, when Tennessee was admitted as the 16th state.³⁹

³⁸ Dixon, 63.

³⁹ Dixon, 65-8.

CHAPTER 3
THE CARTERS OF WATAUGA

John Carter

Historical records on John Carter's background and character are almost nonexistent. He left very little of himself for scholars to interpret other than some meager scraps of political correspondence. His wife may or may not have been alive when the family moved to the Tennessee country. He may or may not have had three sons. He may or may not have come from an elite Virginia family, and he may or may not have been born in 1737. But while few accounts of Carter's *person* have survived, the records of his *deeds* have fared far better and allow historians to begin to guess at who this man John Carter really was.

John Carter left Virginia and crossed the mountains around the year 1770. He passed through the Watauga settlement at that time but did not immediately settle there. Carter chose instead to move further west to a fertile valley near present-day Rogersville: an area that has ever since borne the name Carter's Valley. There Carter, with his family and a business partner by the name of Parker, set up a store to trade with Indians and westward travelers.⁴⁰

In so doing, Carter was in direct violation of British trade policy. John Stuart, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, required traders to be licensed by the British Empire and trade only in designated towns. Dishonest traders had, in the past, damaged Indian-colonist relations, and Stuart pointedly objected to men like Carter who threatened to destabilize the tenuous peace by independently trading with the Indians.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The first name of Mr. Parker is unclear. Ramsey calls him William Parker (p. 806), while S. C. Williams lists his first name as Joseph (*Dawn*, p. 348).

⁴¹ Snapp, 61.

In 1771, the Cherokee chief Attacullaculla wrote to John Donelson, who had surveyed the boundary lines between Indians and whites:

A Trader who lives now below the Great [Long] Island solicits [sic] us to remain there. But we cannot allow of it. The enemy passes and re-passes that way; they may rob and kill him and all his people. But if he is inclined to trade with us, he must go to our Towns, and we shall be very glad of it.⁴²

This is most likely a reference to John Carter. Another Cherokee chief, The Tassel (or Old Tassel) complained to Superintendent Stuart about Carter in April of the following year:

I received your Talk [letter] about Mr. Carter and I must thank you for your advice. I will order my young people not to lay out their hunts [trade] with him any more as it greatly hurts our Traders that has been [sic] among us and supply'd us for many years. If he comes into our Towns to deal with us its what he will.⁴³

Carter and Parker made no motion to leave until 1772 when the store was robbed by Indians.⁴⁴ After the robbery, Carter retreated to the greater safety of the Watauga settlement. Parker settled there as well; he had a home on Stoney Creek adjacent to the properties of John Sevier and Landon Carter.⁴⁵

Upon arriving at Watauga, Carter became an active leader in political affairs. The original “Written Articles of Association” of the Watauga government have been lost, along with the names of that governing body’s first members. J. G. M. Ramsey, who published his *Annals of Tennessee*, in 1853, assumed that John Carter served as the court’s first chairman, and most historians have followed his lead. The Watauga Association adopted the laws of Virginia as its basis. It seems likely that Carter would have been a driving force in this decision. He was, after all, a Virginian from the Tidewater region, steeped in the traditions of that old, landed

⁴² Williams, *Dawn*, 349-350.

⁴³ Williams, *Dawn*, 350.

⁴⁴ Ramsey, p. 11, states that “the depradators were supposed to be Cherokees, but of this no certain proof was obtained.”

⁴⁵ Creekmore and Spoden, 823.

aristocracy. Let us not forget that the Wataugans petitioned Virginia twice for admission before turning to North Carolina, though North Carolina had the stronger claim to the land.

For Carter, 1773-1774 were relatively quiet years. In 1775, however, he was again at the forefront of events. At the Transylvania Purchase, Carter requested compensation from the Cherokees for goods taken from his store in 1772. He wanted a land cession of “Carter’s Valley,” that fertile western land where he had set up shop five years before. He offered to cancel the debts owed to him by Cherokee warriors and to pay an additional amount for the land. At first the Cherokees refused to sell. Carter’s request also conflicted with Judge Richard Henderson’s plan to acquire the valley as part of the Transylvania Purchase; however, the two businessmen made a deal. Henderson included the Carter’s Valley tract in his purchase and promised the Indians that Carter and Parker would cancel their debts. Carter and Parker then took in Robert Lucas, another Wataugan, as a partner to help repay Henderson for the land.⁴⁶

After the purchase of Carter’s Valley, Carter and his partners divided the land and then offered to let out the homesteads to newcomers. A few settlers ventured into Carter’s Valley in 1775, but these farms were later abandoned for fear of Cherokee attacks.⁴⁷ Ramsey writes that “[i]t was, however, afterwards ascertained that the lands thus leased lay in North-Carolina [*sic*] and not in Virginia; and the purchasers refused to hold under them, and drove them off.”⁴⁸

While Carter ultimately lost most of his holdings in Carter’s Valley, he did receive his share of “ten thousand acres at the lower end of the boundary of the Path Deed.”⁴⁹ Some of these properties appear under Carter’s name in the 1779 tax records of Washington County.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Williams, *Dawn*, 411. It is unclear to what “debts” Carter referred. He might have meant the debts which had accrued while he operated the store in Carter’s valley, or perhaps he continued to operate a store after he moved to the Watauga.

⁴⁷ See Williams, *Dawn*, 427-428 for a list of the early settlers of Carter’s Valley.

⁴⁸ Ramsey, 119.

⁴⁹ Williams, *Dawn*, 412.

⁵⁰ Creekmore and Spoden, 56-7.

The 1775 Watauga Purchase at Sycamore Shoals, which immediately followed the Transylvania Purchase, allowed the Watauga settlers to finally *own* the lands they had previously leased. Soon after the Watauga Purchase, the Wataugans opened a land office under Charles Robertson to issue warrants for the lands. The records of this office show that in Watauga itself, John Carter owned several properties. In April of 1775 he applied for a warrant on the 640-acre tract of land on which the Mansion now stands. He received the warrant on December 28 of that year. Carter also entered lands “in conjunction” with John Sevier.⁵¹

The Wataugans’ exuberance over the new land titles was short-lived. When war broke out between Britain and her colonies in 1775, many in the community feared that Stuart’s restraining influence on the Indians would turn to open support against the settlers. John Carter’s strong leadership ensured that the Watauga settlement would come down firmly on the side of the patriots. He was certainly not a man who respected or desired British authority. In fact, ever since he tracked westward over the mountains, John Carter lived his life in open defiance. His considerable property and prosperity were under threat as long as Britain held sway over the land.

After the outbreak of war, the Wataugans under Carter’s leadership in late 1775 or early 1776 formed a “Committee of Safety” comprised of thirteen members. John Carter was elected chairman. Carter was also a guiding force in the Watauga Petitions⁵² and in local military affairs. When the Watauga and Nolichucky settlers met in the fall of 1775 to declare themselves the Washington District in honor of the Patriot cause, John Carter was appointed Colonel of the district militia. He seems to have had little or no military qualifications other than the fact that he was rich and important.

⁵¹ Williams, *Dawn*, 432.

⁵² Ramsey, p.134, claims that the signature of John Carter on the petition “is written by a palsied hand,” although he makes no later mention of this.

Carter, however, took his leadership positions very seriously. His political and leadership skills were put to the test in May of 1776, when a new threat emerged. Deputy Henry Stuart, the younger brother of Superintendent John Stuart, arrived at the Cherokee capitol of Chota with a caravan of supplies that included military goods.⁵³ It seemed that the worst fears of the Wataugans had come true; they now had evidence of a Cherokee-British alliance, with the British arming and encouraging the Cherokees to attack the settlements.

On May 7, 1776, Henry Stuart and Alexander Cameron wrote the following letter to the settlers in Washington District:

Humanity and a sincere desire to preserve innocent and wrong informed people from the great danger that seems to threaten them are our only motives for writing to you at this time.

We have lately found a general discontent among the Indians particularly among the Young people on account of new Settlements made on this side of the boundary line especially those of Watauga and Nonatluchky which are more immediately in their neighbourhood, which had it not been for us might have proved fatal to many before [this] time.... We promised that we would write to you to remove to a Country more favourable to industrious White people [Florida] and that we did not doubt but we should obtain a favourable answer; in the meantime we begged that their young Fellows might be restrained from Committing any acts of Violence.

We are sensible that your removing at this season of the Year must be attended with a great deal of trouble and inconvenience, but this consideration is but trifling when compared to the danger to which Yourselves your families and effects must be exposed from a Mercyless & enraged Enemy, if you should think of remaining longer on their land, to which the Indians never will acknowledge your claim. A Claim in which You never can hope to be supported by Government or the Laws of your Country. They have now sent you a talk which we inclose.⁵⁴

Tho Nothing in our power shall be wanting to prevent the Indians from [doing] you any injury We can have no hopes of any application of ours in Your behalf having any effect should not your answer prove Satisfactory.

The Indians expect that you will remove in twenty days.⁵⁵

The letter, naturally, caused great concern among the Wataugans. Carter answered the letter on May 13, and one can detect a note of mockery and sarcasm in his reply:

⁵³ Dixon, 38.

⁵⁴ This "talk" was never found.

⁵⁵ Hamer, 463.

Gentlemen

On the 12th of May we received [your letter] ...informing us that our Brother the Cherokees as we always looked upon them...are a Mind to destroy our innocent Women and Children if possible and likewise ourselves who have long since been in brotherly Love with them and always expected to be so until this unhappy Crisis has approached that is between Our Mother Country and America, that they should now want to wash their hands of us is amazing when they have for a long Time been in Peace with us. We Gentlemen from⁵⁶ the warning we have received from you is so laudable that it certainly must be handed down to Posterity after we shall be no more. ... we rely upon the Contract that was made with Our Brothers the Cherokees, if it is not binding we are willing to give it up, when we are legally called upon, whenever our Brothers will meet as Brothers.

...Subjects must Obey Their Sovereign, which We as Subjects sincerely determine to do, as Our Brothers the Cherokees has given us such short Warning to leave this Place which you Gentlemen must be certain it is impossible for us to perform, therefore we hope you Gentlemen who is endowed with Humanity and themselves will give us a longer Respite...we pray that they will let us know by some Express immediately after you receive this where we shall make an Asylum for we, (some of us at least) are determined to support His Majesty's Crown & Dignity, this the Majority desire me to relate to you.⁵⁷

Carter shows himself to be quite crafty. His assertion about supporting “His Majesty’s Crown & Dignity” was misleading but not *altogether* false: Carter was well aware that there were *some* Loyalists within the District, particularly on the Nolichucky. Carter could therefore write that “some of us” supported the king, a fact which “the Majority desire me to relate to you.” Stuart and the Indians granted the requested time extension, which the settlers used to strengthen their defenses. The Wataugans had no intention of leaving. On the Watauga, the settlers built a fort near Sycamore Shoals, while the Nolichucky settlers hastily erected Fort Lee. It is possible that additional forts existed, including one on Carter’s “plantation.” Meanwhile, the Wataugans sent a petition for admittance to Virginia.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Hamer believes this is a “copyist’s misreading of ‘think’.”

⁵⁷ Hamer, 454-455.

⁵⁸ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 19.

The attacks finally came in July of 1776. John Carter, who had been appointed Colonel by the Committee of Safety, had command of Fort Watauga. This was apparently the only action Carter saw during the Revolution. The Draper Manuscripts, collected during the mid-nineteenth century, refer to Carter as a “Rather old man” who, “being also the entry-taker for the county, never went out on campaign.”⁵⁹

Carter did, however, “go out” for other reasons. He moved quickly to advance the cause of his home region and also to increase his own station in life. The North Carolina Provincial Congress invited the Watauga settlers to send delegates to Halifax in November to plead their case. Carter was one of these chosen. This same governing body was in the process of drafting a new constitution, and it appears that Carter’s group actively contributed to the document. Some clauses are unmistakably designed to suit the interests of the overmountain people; for instance, it allowed the possibility of carving future states out of the western territory, and also ignored Indian land claims.⁶⁰

In December, the Provincial Congress named members of the court for the newly-accepted Washington District. John Carter was named a Justice of the Peace and was foremost among the court. In 1777 an act was passed to organize another court with a similar membership, and Washington District became Washington County. John Carter, unsurprisingly, was appointed Chairman. John Carter was also a delegate to the North Carolina Senate, making him “the first state senator in the Tennessee country.” When the first Court of Washington County, North Carolina opened in 1778, John Carter was its chairman. Carter was also appointed entry-taker⁶¹ and Colonel of the county militia.⁶²

⁵⁹ Creekmore and Spoden, 826.

⁶⁰ Dixon, 51.

⁶¹ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 76. This was a position similar to the Register of Deeds.

⁶² Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 75-6; 83.

Carter's unique position as Colonel and entry-taker allowed him to mold the community into a Patriot stronghold. Many refugees from the war were by this time streaming into the Washington District, and some of these were Loyalists who sought to escape conscription or a forced oath by their Patriot neighbors.⁶³ There had also been Loyalists in the area since the settlements' early days: some on the Watauga and more on the Nolichucky.⁶⁴ Even under the Watauga Association, the overmountain settlements had fiercely persecuted Loyalists. In 1776 companies of armed men under James Robertson and John Shelby called at seventy Loyalist homes and forced the inhabitants to swear an oath of allegiance to America in an effort to discourage Loyalist activity.⁶⁵ Once Carter had the full backing of North Carolina, however, the conflict at home escalated further still.

According to Ramsey, the "tories from the disaffected counties of North Carolina and other States" had joined with "thieves and robbers" in the Watauga and "committed depredation and murder with impunity." The "law-abiding and honest people," however, chose a committee to defend them and granted this committee "unlimited power" and the authority "to adopt any measures to arrest the growing evil." Patrols were organized to "capture and punish with death all suspected persons who refused submission or failed to give good security for their appearance before the committee. Slighter offenses were atoned for by the infliction of corporal punishment; to this was superadded, in cases where the offender was able to pay it, a heavy fine in money." Ramsey also relates that some of those caught "disclosed the names and hiding places of their accomplices" before their executions.⁶⁶ There was no safety for Loyalists in

⁶³ Dixon, 55-6.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 16.

⁶⁵ Dixon, 41.

⁶⁶ Ramsey, 178-9. This suggests that false promises of freedom might have been made to them.

Watauga. If Carter did not himself order these patrolling “committees,” then they at least operated under his consent as colonel of the militia.

As entry-taker, Carter was authorized to enter “lands which have accrued or shall accrue to the State by treaty or conquest,”⁶⁷ and he used this authority to ensure the settlers’ patriotism. In 1780, Tory properties were declared “subject to interest.” Carter and Sevier “entered a good deal of these lands,”⁶⁸ and the loyalists were prepared to take drastic action to keep their homes. The loyalists planned to visit Carter’s office and, if their properties had indeed been taken, the Tories planned to kill Carter and Sevier. The wife of one of the men, however, betrayed the plan to Sevier, who had “befriended her, and furnished her with the necessaries of life” while her husband was away. Carter and Sevier decided that the best course of action would be to copy the record books, leaving the spaces beside the Tory properties blank, and hide the genuine records in the woods. The plan, however, hit an unexpected obstacle: Carter caught smallpox in late 1780 and died in early 1781.⁶⁹ He was the only person who knew the location of the hidden books, and he took the secret to his grave.⁷⁰ Carter’s death was unexpected, but he had trained his son well. Landon would also become a leader in the new order which his father had established.

What sort of a man was John Carter? His letters to Henry Stuart and Alexander Cameron show that he was crafty; Carter seemed to profess allegiance to the Crown in a letter that, if read

⁶⁷ Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 76.

⁶⁸ One of Carter’s sons might have been entry-taker at this point—in any case, the Carters still used this position to their advantage.

⁶⁹ Creekmore and Spoden, 826-7; Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 193: “On the 3rd of February, 1781, Sevier was commissioned by Abner Nash as full colonel of Washington County, in place of John Carter, deceased...”

⁷⁰ Later court records attest to the problems caused by these lost books; for instance, in the 1813 case of *Duncan and Mills v. Blair*, “Duncan and Mills claimed a tract of land based on a grant to Robison. Because the entry book of Carter’s land office had been lost or destroyed, a copy was used to prove Robison’s grant. Blair objected to the validity of the copy.” Charles A. Sherrill, *Tennesseans in Court: 2,500 Settlers Found in Supreme Court Reports, 1791-1820* (Mount Juliet, TN: Charles Sherrill, 1999), 51.

with the correct understanding, never actually states a falsehood. Carter was undoubtedly bold. Moving beyond the fringes of European settlement, defying the orders of a sovereign power, and thereby carving out a legacy for himself and his descendants leaves no doubt of his courage. All of the actions of the Wataugans from 1772 onward are linked with Carter, even though few of the records survive. Carter was also opportunistic—if nothing else, his confiscation of Tory properties demonstrates as much.

He seems to have been a proud individual, perhaps to a fault. In 1777, after perceiving that a company of soldiers had somehow defied his authority, Carter wrote in protest to North Carolina's Governor Caswell:

Your Excellency may be assured that I will do everything in my power for regulating the militia, for the defence of our frontier, and for the benefit of the United States, but if my dignity is to be sported with under those circumstances, I have no need of your commission as commanding officer for Washington District.⁷¹

Carter was touchy about his “dignity” even when there were larger problems lying in wait. While his attitude does not seem practical from a military standpoint, it does suggest something about Carter's character. Here is a man, it seems, who is convinced of his own importance and who has managed to convince others of the same. Carter was, first and foremost, a leader. He was a leader in a real sense, a leader whom these backwoods men—accustomed to taking justice into their own hands and living as they pleased—would follow. Carter had the skill and ability to stay in power year after year; time and again he was elected by his peers for the highest offices. His strength, however, was not physical. He was not dashing and robust like John Sevier or James Robertson. Williams records that Carter was “old and feeble,”⁷² while the Draper Manuscripts describe a “Rather old man” who “never went out on campaign.”

⁷¹ Ramsey, 177.

⁷² Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 184.

So where, then, did Carter's prowess lie? In this question, Carter's person and the enigmatic Carter Mansion are connected. Carter was respected, in part, for his status as a *gentleman*; his education, his business acumen, his knowledge of government and his knowledge of law. The Mansion itself set John Carter apart from his peers by adding a glimpse of eastern finery to the rugged backwoods counties. By his life and, consequently, through his house, Carter had established—real or manufactured—a connection to the great families of Virginia.

Carter's Mysterious Past

An accepted given date for John Carter's birth is 1737, though it seems unusual for historians to have a firm date for Carter's birth but no similar evidence of parentage.⁷³ Carter's original tombstone, which was standing in 1974, offered no birth date, but gave the year of Carter's death as 1781.⁷⁴ Tradition says that Carter was reticent about his birth and background, and any records that might have held answers were devoured by flames long ago.

In 2004, however, the Alfred Moore Carter House, named for a prominent grandson of John Carter, was sold at auction and the sellers donated a collection of papers to Sycamore Shoals State Park. Some Carter descendants had gone to great lengths to collect and record data in search of the true origins of John Carter, and these papers represented long years of research. I hoped that through careful analysis, this collection might provide leads to the Carters' backgrounds. The research that follows is an evaluation of the papers contained in the Sycamore Shoals files and the cases presented for alternate versions of Carter's parentage, supplemented with information from relevant published works.

⁷³ I have been unable to locate the original source of this information, but the date "1737" appears in Dixon, p. 13, Creekmore and Spoden, p. 831, and the *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*.

⁷⁴ Creekmore and Spoden, 822. The Creekmore research included this 1781 date even at a time when the accepted date of Carter's death was 1780.

Two main theories for John Carter's origins exist. The first is that John was descended from the Giles Carter clan, one of the four original Carter families in Virginia.⁷⁵ Tennessee historian Samuel Cole Williams held this belief: he wrote that John Carter hailed "from Amherst...where he had merchandized as a member of the firm of Carter and Trent." Note the connection to the Carter and Trent firm that Williams follows: the home of Alexander Trent was named "Barter Hill," and in 1753 "Theoderick and Joseph Carter resided there and one of the two is believed to have been the father of John Carter, the merchant." Williams thus established a connection with that firm on the *Trent*, rather than *Carter*, side of the business.

The strength of this claim is its simplicity. Although Williams asserted that the "Trent and Carter families were leaders in [Cumberland and Amherst] counties," the Giles Carter family was not as distinguished as some of its wealthier counterparts, and so remains in relative obscurity. Little evidence is available to either attack or uphold this assertion, and will remain so until exposed to further research.⁷⁶

The second explanation of John Carter's ancestry simultaneously bears the strongest evidence *and* heaviest criticisms. Many authors, researchers, and genealogists link John of Watauga not with Theoderick Carter but with an even more distinguished family: the Robert "King" Carter clan of Virginia's Northern Neck. John Carter, as stated earlier, was employed in the firm of Carter and Trent. The "Carter" in the firm was Edward, Son of John II and grandson of Robert "King" Carter. It is possible that John Carter was granted a position in this firm because of a connection to these illustrious Carters.

⁷⁵ Robert T. Nave to "Mildred," June 1980, Genealogy File, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

⁷⁶ Williams, *Dawn*, 348.

Robert “King” Carter (1663-1732) raised himself from the comfortable but unpromising status of a younger son to become the wealthiest and most influential citizen of Virginia.⁷⁷

Thrifty, acquisitive, and assertive, Carter amassed a fortune in lands and goods for himself and his sons: John II of Shirley Plantation, Robert, Jr. of Nomini Hall, Charles, Landon of Sabine Hall, and George.⁷⁸ It is to one of these sons that John of Watauga might have been born—possibly out of wedlock—and striking amount of evidence does suggest this link.

First there is simply tradition: local legend in Carter County has tenaciously held that John Carter was descended from the King Carter clan. Second, the name “Landon” reappears in the descendants of John Carter, while the names “Theoderick” and “Giles” do not. Furthermore, a set of chairs owned by the Carter family of Watauga bore the symbol of a wheel, very similar to “King” Carter’s family Crest. Additionally, one of Landon Carter’s daughters built a nearby home and named it “Sabine Hill,” recalling the grand Sabine Hall of Landon Carter in Virginia. Finally, there is evidence of a connection literally *in* the walls of the Carter Mansion itself. Roger G. Kennedy, whose excellent study of the house is discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter, theorizes that elements of the Mansion are characteristic of older houses built during “King” Carter’s lifetime or shortly thereafter. Kennedy argues that pieces of the mansion were taken over the mountains from Virginia, and that the house might provide a tangible link to the Robert “King” Carter family.⁷⁹

In spite of the tantalizing hints of a “King” Carter connection, however, there is simply no firm proof. The Sycamore Shoals papers first led me to investigate Landon Carter of Sabine Hall. According to private research stored in the park files, Landon Carter’s diary revealed that

⁷⁷ Thomas Tileston Waterman, *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1945), 103.

⁷⁸ Louis Morton, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall: A Virginia Tobacco Planter of the Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA: Dominion Books, 1941. Reprint, Dominion Books, 1969), 21-22. Morton indicates that Robert King Carter might have had other sons. The book does not provide a complete list of Carter’s children.

⁷⁹ Kennedy, 292-305 passim.

he “had a son named John who in turn had a son named Landon,”⁸⁰ a description that fit the Carters of Watauga. The verdict, however, awaited a search through the elder Landon’s diary. Landon of Sabine Hall did have a son named John by his first wife Elizabeth, but this John’s life was well-documented: he lived in Prince William County, married Janet Hamilton, and died in 1789.⁸¹ This was not Landon Carter of Watauga, and so the lead proved false.

Most of “King” Carter’s other sons also led well-documented lives with no apparent room for a John of Watauga. An exception was John Carter II of Shirley Plantation. He was the eldest son of King Carter and did have a son named John who was born around 1726. The child is mentioned in a 1728 revision of King Carter’s will which mentions a grandson John, son of John, and also in King Carter’s diary:

I scolded my Son [John] for fooling aw[ay] so much time abroad[.] He told me he w[ould] not serve as Naval Officer if he might not be absent when he pleased...He pretends his Child was taken Sick...⁸²

Mrs. J. Frank Seiler, a Carter descendant whose lifelong research on the Carters appears in the Sycamore Shoals collection, believed that John of Watauga was this son.⁸³ She might have found confirmation of her belief in at least one Carter genealogist, who identified a John, son of John II, as a son by a first wife who died before John II married Elizabeth Hill of Shirley,⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Richard E. Hickman, Senior Analyst, Senate Finance Committee, to Superintendent, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area, postmarked 27 August 1988, Carter History file, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

⁸¹ Jack P. Greene, ed., *The Diary of Colonel Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1965), 130 fn.

⁸² Edmund Berkeley, Jr., ed, “The Diary, Correspondence, and Papers of Robert ‘King’ Carter of Virginia 1701-1732,” transcribed by Edmund Berkeley, Jr. Diary of Robert “King” Carter, May 21, 1727, and 1728 Codicil to “King” Carter’s Will. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/users/berkeley/public/> (accessed 12 November 2006).

⁸³ Pollyanna Creekmore, the researcher who compiled primary source material for the TDEC, recognized Mrs. Seiler as the most knowledgeable person on the Carter family: see Mrs. Joseph C. (Sylvia) Baird to Mrs. J. Frank Seiler. John Carter collection, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

⁸⁴ Robert T. Nave to “Mildred,” June 1980, Genealogy File, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area; Seasonal Interpretive Ranger Shane Perkins, “Note to Future Researchers,” Genealogy file, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

though Mrs. Seiler's notes indicate that she believed John to be a son by Elizabeth Hill.⁸⁵ This child John, however, apparently died before 1730 because his name does not appear in King Carter's wills or any other family records after that date. Had this child survived into adulthood, his life would have been well-documented, and he would have lived an extravagant lifestyle on the Virginia plantations. Had John of Watauga been the legitimate son of John of Shirley, he would certainly have moved in the same circles as his father. As it was, John of Watauga effectively named himself an outlaw by moving past the Proclamation Line of 1763. He and the rest of the Watauga community squatted on Cherokee territory and participated in illegal land deals. This was unlikely behavior for a wealthy Virginia heir—not because planters were above illegal deeds, but because being an outlaw on the frontier was neither comfortable nor extremely profitable. Land speculators did not need to live in the wilderness to amass their fortunes: Richard Henderson was proof of that. The idea that John Carter of Watauga was a legitimate, accepted member of the “King” Carter family is untenable.

Kennedy offers an alternative explanation: he postulates that after the death of his first child by the name of John, John Carter II had another son out of wedlock—possibly when he lived in Williamsburg—who was also named John after his father. This son was raised and educated in Williamsburg and given a place in the family firm of Carter and Trent.⁸⁶ This seems consistent with behavior toward illegitimate sons: often denied full inheritance, they still might be provided certain benefits. Illegitimacy might also explain Carter's desire to establish himself as frontier gentry at Watauga, a place where his birth would not bring reproach and his talents could earn him distinction and honor.

⁸⁵ See Mrs. Seiler's notes and D.A.R. application, Mrs. J. Frank Seiler, personal papers, John Carter collection, Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area. The lack of dates on many of Mrs. Seiler's papers make it difficult to track any progression of her research.

⁸⁶ Roger G. Kennedy, *Architecture, Men, Women, and Money in America, 1600-1860* (New York: Random House, 1985), 304.

In spite of the circumstantial evidence to support John Carter's connection to the wealthy "King" Carter family, one must exercise caution. It is entirely possible that the strange coincidences linking John of Watauga to this eminent family are just that—*coincidences*—and John descended from an unrelated line. "John" was a common name, then as now. The connections to the Giles Carter or "King" Carter clans are only two possible explanations for Carter's origins. In this case, a major hindrance to historical knowledge is the over-eagerness of Tennesseans to establish a connection to the wealthy elites of Virginia: such a connection adds legitimacy and prestige to Tennessee's rather unsavory formative years. This eagerness is also manifested on a personal level: although she undertook an extraordinary amount of research, as a descendant of John Carter, Mrs. J. Frank Seiler had a vested interest in establishing a link to the "King" Carter clan.⁸⁷ John of Watauga might have been a remarkable man; he was certainly shrewd in his political affairs and a demonstrated leader, but that is not necessarily the result of a prestigious ancestry.

Ultimately, however, the argument for a "King" Carter connection has strong support. Roger G. Kennedy does well to point out the association of place and identity. A fine house can convey a persona—real or carefully fabricated—to an individual, and in this case, the Carters' "Virginia" mansion suggested a higher, more refined origin than the surrounding backwoods cabins. I believe that the available evidence suggests that John Carter built the Mansion. Landon, educated in North Carolina and having lived most of his life on the frontier under North Carolina's jurisdiction, probably felt the ties to Virginia less strongly than his father. But John

⁸⁷ Mrs. Seiler was a wealthy woman who placed an importance on pedigree and seemed to surround herself with others who held the same views. She was a member of several exclusive organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, and her application states that her ancestor was a son of John Carter of Shirley by Elizabeth Hill, though all of Elizabeth Hill's children are accounted for. Mrs. Seiler was interested in establishing connections to British nobility through other ancestors, such as the Maclins and the Ludlows. She also believed that John Carter had received his education in England, after the manner of wealthy Virginia sons, though the historical record contains no evidence to support this claim.

Carter was continually trying to recreate the old order. He stands in stark contrast to men like Daniel Boone, for whom the frontier was an escape, a new place—for whom the emptiness was a comfort and a dream. To John Carter the frontier was an opportunity to replicate the old ways of the eastern seaboard. The Watauga Association adopted Virginia laws, probably under Carter’s direction. He pushed for admittance to Virginia even when North Carolina was a more practical choice, and when he failed, he tried yet again.

Tennessee ultimately lost its connection to Virginia. It never attained that “Tidewater respectability” that John Carter so desired. Even in the heyday of Jackson, Tennessee was a backwater, rough around the edges. The Carter Mansion, however, that strange little “Virginia” house in the midst of the wilderness, stands out as a testament to one man’s dream.

Landon Carter

Landon was probably the eldest of John Carter’s sons.⁸⁸ He is certainly the best-remembered. While John, Sr. lived, however, the young Landon stayed largely in his shadow. John Carter died when Landon was only twenty-one years of age.

It seems that John Carter was intent on raising a son who would follow closely in his footsteps. He presumably received some schooling in his younger years, possibly from John Carter’s clerk, William Tatham. Landon received a more formal education at Liberty Hall (now Davidson College) in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina.⁸⁹ In 1776 Landon signed his name to the Watauga Petition to North Carolina. He was then only sixteen years old.

⁸⁸ Landon seems to have inherited the bulk of his father’s estate. Two conflicting dates for his birth have been offered: 1760 and 1762. The earlier date is supported by the strongest evidence; Elizabeth Carter states in her pension request that her husband was born in 1760. HeritageQuest Online – Revolutionary War. “Carter, Landon” Series M805 Roll: 167. Image 63. File: W900.

⁸⁹ Ramsey, 666; Kennedy, 302. The dates of Landon’s attendance are unclear; he was present at the signing of the Watauga Petition in 1776 and was also very involved in the events of 1780-81.

Landon was also sixteen years old during the siege of Fort Watauga, and it is likely that he helped his father defend the fort, although no record of his actions survive. He did travel with the Overmountain Men to King's Mountain (1780) where he held the rank of lieutenant.⁹⁰ He probably owed his rank more to his family's prominence than to his own abilities, since he was yet untested on the field of battle. Nevertheless, Landon Carter quickly demonstrated his capabilities. Later that same year he took part in two offensives against the Indians: he fought the Cherokees and Chickamaugans first at the Battle of Boyd's Creek under Col. John Sevier, then continued to fight Indians under Col. Arthur Campbell.⁹¹ Landon may not have seen his father before he died: Landon was on campaign late in 1780 and perhaps into early 1781. John Carter was dead before the beginning of February of that year, and Landon did not administer his father's estate until February of 1782.⁹²

Landon's military career continued, however, after his brief respite. He served in the south under the cunning "Swamp Fox," General Francis Marion,⁹³ and continued to campaign against Indians. He served again under Sevier's command from 1791 to 1793, and by the end of his life he had achieved the rank of general.⁹⁴

Landon's political accomplishments were equally impressive. In 1785 he was elected Secretary of State and Speaker of the Senate for the new separatist government of Franklin.⁹⁵ He also supported education, being a trustee of Greeneville College and Washington College. After the Franklin movement degenerated, Landon again rose to the forefront as a Washington County representative to the Tennessee Convention of 1796. He was elected Treasurer of Washington

⁹⁰ Creekmore and Spoden, 592.

⁹¹ Creekmore and Spoden, 827, 608.

⁹² Records of Washington County, Inventories of Estates, 1779-1821, roll 113, Vol. 00, Tennessee State Library and Archives.

⁹³ *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*.

⁹⁴ Ramsey, 666.

⁹⁵ Ramsey, 293-6. Landon Carter's signature appears on the State of Franklin's Declaration of Independence from North Carolina.

and Hamilton Counties, and Carter County (1796) was named in honor of General Landon Carter.

Landon's considerable political accomplishments, however, pale to his talent for acquiring property. He owned and operated several businesses on the 640-acre tract he inherited from his father and on which The Mansion now stands. Among Landon's businesses were a tub mill, a saw mill and grist mill, a threshing machine, a "tilthammer at the race dam," and an iron forge, which burned in 1796, was rebuilt, and burned twice again. Among his business partners were William Cocke and William Maclin, the father of Landon's wife.⁹⁶

Landon Carter's true wealth, however, was in land, and he accrued a vast deal throughout his lifetime. The 1779 tax list for Washington County shows that Landon Carter's total estate was valued at £1660. He owned two plots of land totaling 740 acres; four horses which together were worth £900; twenty pounds worth of "ready money," and no slaves of his own.⁹⁷ By 1799, one year before his death, Landon owned 10,450 acres of land and seven slaves.⁹⁸ Landon Carter died in 1800 of unknown causes, and his death was a shock to his family and community. He was the largest landholder in the county and perhaps the largest landholder west of the Appalachian Mountains. Like his father, Landon Carter left few personal records. He seems, for lack of better evidence, a man consumed by his public role as a statesman.

Elizabeth Maclin Carter

Elizabeth Carter was born in 1765 to William and Elizabeth Maclin. The Maclin family farm bounded John Carter's estate on the southeast. William Cocke, a relative, actually held title

⁹⁶ Creekmore and Spoden, 759.

⁹⁷ Creekmore and Spoden, 55.

⁹⁸ Creekmore and Spoden, 49.

to the land but granted its use to the Maclins. William Maclin later became the first Secretary of State to the newly-formed state of Tennessee.⁹⁹

The younger Elizabeth Maclin married Landon Carter in 1784. The couple had seven children, six of whom survived into adulthood. Elizabethton, the governmental seat of Carter County, was named for Elizabeth Maclin Carter. Many of Landon and Elizabeth Carter's children became themselves influential citizens in the fledgling state of Tennessee.

Landon Carter's death in 1800 was sudden and unexpected. He left no will, and Elizabeth and her children were left to cope with the burden, bereft of father and husband. The youngest child, Mary (Polly) was an infant of seven months at the time of her father's death. Eliza was three years old; George W. was six; William Blount was eight; Sarah was eleven; and Elizabeth's oldest child, Alfred Moore Carter, was only sixteen years old. Alfred Moore, a young teenager, was given the responsibility to manage the family's financial affairs since his mother Elizabeth was unable to read or write: both her 1838 pension statement and 1841 will are signed with an "X." Elizabeth probably lived in the Mansion her death in 1841 or 1842. She is buried in the Carter family cemetery.¹⁰⁰

Possessions

By frontier standards, John Carter was a wealthy man: the 1779 Tax List for Washington County shows that Carter owned seven horses, 42 head of cattle, and £400 "ready money." His

⁹⁹ Ramsey, 662.

¹⁰⁰ Creekmore and Spoden, 770. Interestingly, the same cannot be said without absolute certainty for John and Landon Carter. The Carter Cemetery presumably contains their remains, but the grave marker (a gift of the D.A.R.) does not actually specify this. Another local cemetery is also said to contain the bodies of John and Landon Carter. Elizabeth's tombstone bears the date "1842."

total estate was valued at £20455.¹⁰¹ The inventory of Carter's estate, filed after his death, provides a more complete listing of Carter's possessions:

A inventory of the personal estate of John Carter Decd drawn August 13th 1781 North Carolina Washington County –

One negroe named Will one negro boy named Austin; one negroe boy namd. Charles One black horse, one bay horse called Slim sorrel, half a certain high blooded covering horse half of a certain Janus mare bay colored of cattle Little & by fifts two head of Sheep Sixteen head of hogs little & by about Sixty Seven head, four beds, Six bed blankest five sheets & three counterpanes three bed Steads two Chest & trunk one table half dozen chairs fourteen plates two dishes half dozen Knives & forks half dozen Spoons a tea kettle & coffee pot one Spire mortar & pestle two flax wheels three "pales" two pots, one "kittle" a "duch" oven & a Skillet or frying pan an old wagon & "geers" two bar Shear plows one Crosscut saw two falling axes three wedding hoes one Sythe blade two pair of cards two flat irons one pair of "Sunffurs" two mattocks two "Shreating" hoes. One lock chain one pair of Steelyards an old Loom keys [?] & "harnis" the body of the North Carolina cows Davy [or Davis] ? [Justice ?] one entitled to the whole duty of man one Dr. Barltests "Farreay" one hone one curry comb one cotton wheel one pair of large shears one pair of movg. Scales.

Filed February Sessions 1782

A true Inventory certified

P me Landon Carter Admn.¹⁰²

Slavery on the Carter Homestead

John, Landon, and Elizabeth Carter, along with other wealthy landowners of the region, constituted a small slaveholding class. Although the terrain and soil of the Appalachian foothills is unsuitable for large-scale cash crop farming, some slaves were present on the Tennessee frontier. Owning slaves was a mark of high status that few frontiersmen could afford. Tax records of 1779 show John Carter owning four slaves: two whose ages fell between ten and forty years of age, a six-year-old boy, and a three year old boy. The sex of the two "adults" is not

¹⁰¹ Creekmore and Spoden, 56. John Carter has several properties listed under his name with the phrase "Entered in name of J. C. for [insert name of settler]." It seems these settlers are paying Carter for the use of the land, perhaps as renters.

¹⁰² Samuel D. Smith, "Summary of Archaeological Explorations at the Carter House" (Unpublished report by the Tennessee Department of Conservation Division of Archaeology for the Planning and Development Division and Historical Commission, Tennessee Department of Conservation, 1979), Sycamore Shoals State Park, 4-5.

given.¹⁰³ The inventory of John Carter's estate, taken after his death and filed in February of 1782, shows that by that time John Carter only had three slaves: Will, Austin, and Charles.¹⁰⁴ Austin and Charles are probably the "boys" referred to in the 1779 lists, while Will is one of the two adults.

Over the next two decades, the Carter family's fortunes increased even further. Landon Carter, who owned no slaves in 1779, owned seven in 1799 between the ages of ten and fifty, while Landon's brother, John Carter, Jr., owned six slaves.¹⁰⁵ There were seventy "able-bodied" slaves reported for Carter County that year.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, nothing else is disclosed about these slaves, not even their names.

The will of Elizabeth Maclin, dated March 22, 1841, lists the following slaves among her estate:

Celia, called Sealy and her three children:

Annette

James

Harriet

Charlotte

Betsy, daughter of Charlotte

Eady

Martha, daughter of Eady

Sabra

Fanny & her children

Nelson, son of Charlotte

Landon, son of Charlotte

George, son of Charlotte

Noah, son of Eady

It is interesting to note that one of Charlotte's children was named "Landon" after Landon Carter. Elizabeth requested the following in her 1841 will:

¹⁰³ Creekmore and Spoden, 55.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, "Summary," 4-5.

¹⁰⁵ Creekmore and Spoden, 49. The tax lists specified those ages as slaves who would be counted: Landon may have owned others who did not fit the age range.

¹⁰⁶ Creekmore and Spoden, 875.

[I]t is my will that my negro woman Eady be emancipated, if the laws of the land will permit it, and I do hereby require my Executors hereinafter named, to carry the same, my will respecting Eady, into effect; but if they cannot, then I give the said Eady to my daughter, Mary C. Taylor, and wish the said Mary to let her work for herself the balance of her life (the life of Eady), & to have & enjoy the proceeds of all such her labor.”¹⁰⁷

It is unknown whether or not Eady was granted her freedom. Of the “major” Carters themselves, we have little personal information, but we do know of their public deeds. Of their enslaved servants, however, not even their tombstones remain. That is why further research is vital: archaeology and historical study will continue to shed light on the daily lives of the people who owned and the people who worked the fertile Watauga soil.

¹⁰⁷ Creekmore and Spoden, 875.

CHAPTER 4

THROUGH THE CARTER MANSION

The Carter Mansion is a valuable cultural and historical landmark. No older frame houses exist in Tennessee, if any ever did. Log houses were much easier and cheaper to build than frame houses, which require carefully-cut boards of specific lengths and thicknesses. Even prominent men such as Col. John Tipton and William Cobb, who also lived in the region during the late eighteenth century, dwelt in log homes. Though by today's standards the Carter house seems far too small to bear the title "Mansion," it comes equipped with an elegance and allure that few houses can match. Each room boasts its own unique features and its own unanswered questions. The Carter Mansion is unusual: it is a mystery and a challenge.

The single most important question surrounding the Carter Mansion is simply this: when was it built? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Local tradition holds that John Carter built the mansion around 1775-1780; however, no manuscript yet found can pinpoint or verify any date of construction. Researchers must therefore glean information from a scant supply of documents and architectural studies.

Historical documents provide meager clues in untangling this puzzle. In 1775 John Carter entered a land warrant for the 640-acre land tract on which the house now stands. North Carolina Warrant #228, dated 1778, states that Carter's land tract included "the plantation wheare [sic] the said Carter now lives."¹⁰⁸ This warrant helps explain the persistent belief that the Carter Mansion was built in 1775, but there is no indication that the "plantation" included the Carter Mansion proper. Similarly, the Washington County, North Carolina tax list of 1779 lists a

¹⁰⁸ C & S, 750-751. The National Heritage Corporation's study of the house (1974) claims that John Carter entered the land warrant in (December) 1772, the same year in which he arrived in Watauga.

“Manor Plantation” among John Carter’s properties. This document, however, might not refer to the Mansion itself. The label “Manor Plantation” does not imply any uniqueness or superiority of the Carter estate: “Plantation” was merely another word for farm or homestead in the eighteenth century, and many other “Manor Plantations” appear in the same tax list.¹⁰⁹

Additional evidence suggests that the house was not built, or at least not completed, by the early date of 1775. In 1777 the Watauga settlement was accepted into North Carolina as Washington County. John Carter was chairman of this new civil government which in 1778 met at the home of Charles Robertson near present-day Johnson City. The court also met at the home of Matthew Talbot at times, but there is no mention of John Carter’s home. It seems likely that the court would have met in the finest house in the county, John Carter’s “Mansion,” had it existed.¹¹⁰ Even with the finer details incomplete, the spacious house could easily have served the needs of the county government.

Other critics suggest that the house was not built during John Carter’s lifetime at all, but by his son Landon, possibly as a wedding gift for his bride Elizabeth.¹¹¹ If so, it would put the date of the house’s construction between 1781 and 1800. In 1796 the noted French botanist Andre Michaux wrote of “Major Carter of Watauga, at whose house I had lodged several years previously with my son, and Colonel Avery.”¹¹² There is, however, still no specific reference to the Carter Mansion itself. The first direct reference to the Carter Mansion proper is found in the

¹⁰⁹ C & S, 55-57

¹¹⁰ C & S, 55.

¹¹¹ National Heritage Corporation, “Restoration of the John and Landon Carter House: A Preliminary Restoration Study,” (Elizabethton, TN: Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area, 1974), 5. The study mentions the possibility of Landon building the house after John’s death, but concludes that the house was probably built during John’s lifetime. Subsequent references will appear as “NHC.”

¹¹² Samuel Cole Williams, *Early Travels in the Tennessee Country, 1540-1800*, (Johnson City, TN: The Watauga Press, 1928), 342.

diary of John Sevier, Tennessee's first governor. Sevier wrote that on May 3, 1800, he attended a "ball at Carters." This was certainly the spacious Mansion.¹¹³

Fortunately, architectural studies help fill in the documentary gaps. During the early 1970s, the State of Tennessee began to investigate the House's potential as a historic site. Charles W. Warterfield, Jr., an architectural historian, inspected The Mansion on November 10, 1972 in order to ascertain the house's physical condition, evaluate its architectural character, establish its origins and relation to Carter family history, and to investigate its potential as a state historic landmark.¹¹⁴

Warterfield visited the house in its abandoned, dilapidated state but still managed to draw significant parallels to other "Tidewater" houses. Interestingly, he did not offer his own opinion on the date of construction but operated under the assumption that local traditions were accurate: the house was completed around 1780 by John Carter, a scion of the Robert "King" Carter clan.

In 1974 the National Heritage Corporation (NHC), a West Chester, PA-based firm devoted to historical preservation and architectural restoration, conducted a more thorough study of the house on behalf of the State of Tennessee. With regards to the dating of the houses, the report states:

It is thought that Colonel John Carter built The Mansion shortly after he settled in Watauga County and before he died of smallpox in 1780. This cannot be proven, but architecturally it would seem to fit this period more comfortably than a later one.¹¹⁵

The report also states:

¹¹³ C & S, 769.

¹¹⁴ Charles Warterfield, "'The Mansion:' Home of John and Landon Carter, Elizabethton, Carter County, Tennessee." Unpublished architectural study for the Tennessee Historical Commission, 1972. (Sycamore Shoals State Park), 1.

¹¹⁵ NHC, 4. At the time the report was written, the accepted date for John Carter's death was 1780. The researcher(s) are in error to list Washington County as "Watauga County." The National Heritage Corporation also conducted studies for the National Park Service during the 1970s (www.nps.gov). The company changed its name to John Milner Associates, Inc. in 1977 (www.acra.crm.org).

It has been theorized by some that it was Landon Carter who built The Mansion for his bride some time before his death in 1800; although there is yet no proof to reject or uphold this hypothesis. From strictly an architectural point of view it would not seem likely that this house was built after the Revolution.

The researchers ultimately give a wide berth for the probable construction date: “circa 1775-1800.” The age of the house is difficult to pinpoint, according to the 1974 study, because the house incorporates elements from three centuries. Seventeenth-century traces include high window sills, a “plain, inordinately high wainscot,” and the house’s asymmetrical exterior. The Mansion exhibits eighteenth-century characteristics in its “extensive use of paneling and classical orders” and the “profile of . . . mouldings and exterior chimneys,” whereas the second floor exhibits “very late 18th and early 19th century work” in its painted veneers.¹¹⁶

The study indicates, however, that the presence of nineteenth-century elements does not automatically classify the Carter Mansion as a nineteenth-century house. The author(s) believed that the second floor was finished at a later date than the first floor and might also have been the work of another, less “academic” architect. The researchers hypothesized that the Carter Mansion was the work of two builders: an older man whose tastes tended toward the classical and “academic,” and a younger architect who was well-versed in “vernacular” styles.¹¹⁷

Dr. Calvin W. Dickinson, a historian formerly at Tennessee Technological University, now retired, echoes the findings of the National Heritage Corporation study in a more recent article for the *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* entitled “Frontier Splendor: The Carter Mansion at Sycamore Shoals.” Dickinson provides a useful summary of the known facts about the Carters and the Carter Mansion, but offers very little new information except to call attention to the house’s floor plan, a detail on which the 1974 study failed to comment. Dickinson notes that the

¹¹⁶ NHC, 5-12.

¹¹⁷ NHC, 10-11.

rooms on the ground floor are arranged in an asymmetrical fashion typical of the seventeenth century rather than the eighteenth.¹¹⁸ The *Tennessee Encyclopedia* (1998) also mentions this asymmetrical “Penn” floor plan, a common layout in Pennsylvania homes.¹¹⁹

The most recent in-depth study of the Carter Mansion is found in Roger G. Kennedy’s *Architecture, Men, Women, and Money in America*. Kennedy, a museum director at the Smithsonian and a noted architectural historian, examines the social and economic contexts of American architecture. While the book provides some thought-provoking ideas on the house’s features, it tells little of the actual date. Kennedy merely reiterates the generic 1775-1800 date suggested by the National Heritage Corporation.¹²⁰ That is not surprising—Kennedy’s focus is not the age of the building itself but its curious interior features, many of which appear to have belonged to an earlier house. But while he admits that there is no documentation on the house’s age, Kennedy does believe that the house was standing in the late 1770s and that John Carter was its chief builder.¹²¹ It is unclear whether Kennedy builds *from* these assumptions or *to* them, but regardless, his study of the house is bold, fresh, and insightful.

Overall, the architectural studies of the Carter Mansion indicate that the house was built around 1780, possibly during the 1770s. The studies, however, cannot rule out the possibility that the house was a later construction. Archaeological work (discussed in detail elsewhere) is less helpful than anticipated: excavations have confirmed that the Carters did live on the site during the 1770s, but do not suggest a specific date for the Mansion itself.

¹¹⁸ Calvin Dickinson, “Frontier Splendor: the Carter Mansion at Sycamore Shoals,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, 41, No. 4 (1982), 323.

¹¹⁹ *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*.

¹²⁰ Kennedy 507, endnote. Kennedy actually references Sam Smith’s archaeological report, which drew its dates, 1775-1800, from the National Heritage Corporation study.

¹²¹ Kennedy, 293-5. Kennedy claims that a fort stood on the property in 1777 and that the house, with its brick nogging, was probably the fort in question. He does not provide a source for this information.

The lack of specific documentation presents an interpretive dilemma: should the State Park Service unabashedly claim the earliest date and its inherent prestige or grudgingly accept only what the documents reveal? Perhaps there is some middle ground—academically honest, yet inclusive of tradition and legend. I believe the best way to interpret this problem is to present the Mansion as a historical challenge: mention the strength of local tradition, the differing architectural styles within the house, and the lack of concrete documented evidence. When told faithfully, the difficulties surrounding the house’s date will not distract from the Mansion’s allure but increase its mystique.

The Carter Mansion consists of six rooms and a basement. Ninety percent of the house interior is original;¹²² an amazing statistic, given that the Carter Mansion was occupied from the time of its building (ca. 1780) to the late 1960s.¹²³ Unsurprisingly, the occupant families have made many changes—major and minor—to the house over the years. Some of these changes are discussed in this chapter, but I have by no means attempted to provide a complete list. Of the major changes to the Carter House, the first was a door cut between the hall and the office (ca. 1800-1850). Some time later, the Carters added a four-room North Wing to the rear of the house (ca. 1850-1865) and cut a second door out of the office to the new section. The North Wing is no longer standing; it was removed when the Carter Mansion was restored to its original condition.

The families who lived in the Carter house have also repainted and redecorated the rooms to varying degrees. The floor on the lower level was covered by a “modern” floor at some unspecified date.¹²⁴ Some rooms, such as the second-floor small bedchamber, seem to have been repainted at least once, while others have survived with the original finishes largely intact. The

¹²² NHC, 35.

¹²³ The house never had running water or indoor plumbing.

¹²⁴ NHC, 21.

National Heritage Corporation study estimated that some of the interior finishes were “changed in the Victorian taste” ca. 1850-1890.¹²⁵ The State of Tennessee completed the Carter House restoration in 1978 and the house now exhibits its original characteristics.

External Elements

The main entrance to the Carter Mansion faces the old country road that wound through the property, traces of which still remain. The back door of the house faces the Watauga River and leads out into a flat space on which many of the outbuildings once stood. Both doors have been re-created to match the originals: handsomely paneled and painted a rich, earthy shade of red-brown.¹²⁶

The house’s outer walls are thick and partially filled with a type of masonry called *oggin*. This brick infill did not offer any structural support, but did provide insulation and fire protection and kept rodents from infesting in the walls.¹²⁷ Nogging also provided protection from enemy bullets—a grim reality on the frontiers.

It is even possible that the Carter Mansion once served as a fort. Col. John Carter commanded a fort, alternately called Fort Caswell, Watauga Fort, or Carter’s Fort,¹²⁸ when the Cherokees attacked the Watauga settlement in 1775. Historians have generally assumed that this fort was the one whose remains were discovered near Sycamore Shoals—a re-creation of which stands at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

¹²⁵ NHC, 12-13. Since the North Wing was of a later period, none of the architectural studies gave it more than a passing glance.

¹²⁶ The original back door to the house had been re-installed as an entryway to the attic. It was used as the model for the present doors. NHC, 28-29

¹²⁷ NHC, 11.

¹²⁸ Dixon, 13; Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 29.

A recent master's thesis, however, outlines a different theory. Brian Compton, a recent graduate of East Tennessee State University, made note of some glaring discrepancies in accounts of Fort Watauga. Compton introduces the possibility that there were multiple forts on the Watauga River during the Cherokee attacks of 1776, one that stood near Sycamore Shoals, and another that stood near the mouth of the Doe River.¹²⁹ John Carter's homestead is close to the mouth of the Doe.

Roger G. Kennedy's findings support Compton's thesis. Kennedy claims that a fort stood on John Carter's property in 1777, and this fort was none other than the Carter Mansion itself. Kennedy writes that in 1782 the house was "still fortlike enough to commend itself as a 'public Magazine' for 'Gunpowder & 1,000 lbs of Lead.'" The house, Kennedy adds, is "unusual in the region for having lower walls of heavy timber filled with brick nogging, the sort of thing that one might expect to find in a house that could also serve occasionally as a fort."¹³⁰ It seems very likely that Carter, being a prominent citizen in the community, would not want to leave his property unguarded. Although the commonly accepted location of the fort is several miles away from the Carter House, the presence of the brick nogging and thick foundation walls of the Mansion make it a likely spot for one of Compton's "other" forts.

When the State of Tennessee obtained the house, the original weatherboarding had been replaced. Fortunately, workers recovered a piece of the original, eighteenth-century weatherboarding from behind the west chimney, and, on the recommendation of the National Heritage Corporation, the state was able to replicate the exterior and refit the house in period-correct materials. Unfortunately, the original shingle roof had been replaced by a metal one

¹²⁹ Brian P. Compton, "Revised History of Fort Watauga" (M.A. Thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2004), 59.

¹³⁰ Kennedy, 293-295. Kennedy offers no source for his assertion that a fort stood on the site in 1777.

sometime in the past,¹³¹ and no original exterior door or window trim was found, but the state installed pieces that would have been commonly used during the late eighteenth century.¹³²

Rooms and Interior Features

Cellar

The cellar has only one door, which leads outside—there is no direct passageway to the interior of the house.¹³³ Although there is a fireplace in the cellar, archaeological evidence indicates that the cellar served primarily as a storage area and that the family rarely cooked there. The cellar was possibly the location of the “public Magazine.” The thick stone walls of the cellar are ideal for defense and if besieged, the occupants could fire from the room’s small windows.

Hall

Visitors to the Carter Mansion first enter the hall, and the hall was designed to impress. The Mansion’s plain, stark, whitewashed exterior belies a flourishing and beautifully finished home. Elaborate paneling covers the room from floor to high ceiling. All three of the first-floor rooms are covered in paneling, but the hall is by far the largest and the grandest. The ceilings are high and bordered with dentil crown molding.

The hall paneling contains some subtle oddities. In the exterior walls, the paneling below the chair rail relates to neither windows nor the paneling above, as one could expect from a house of this period. Additionally, it appears that the paneling on the interior partitions and exterior walls below the wainscot were completed first, and some form of plaster was applied to

¹³¹ Warterfield, 2.

¹³² NHC, 17.

¹³³ This feature also occurs in John Tipton’s cabin at the nearby Tipton-Haynes Historic Site.

the adobe loggin in the meantime. The remaining panels were installed a short time later.¹³⁴

Despite its minor quirks, however, the paneling creates an environment of simple elegance. The details suggest, in the words of Roger G. Kennedy, that the owner “had been born to grander things.”¹³⁵

One striking feature of the hall is an elaborate chimney breast. Delicate carvings embellish this graceful piece that Charles Warterfield likened to “furniture and cabinetwork of the Queen Anne period.”¹³⁶ The National Heritage Corporation, however, called it a “totally personal conception” similar to other “unacademic” furniture pieces found in New England at this time. The researchers suspected that the craftsman who designed this chimney piece was not the same person who designed the piece in the parlor.¹³⁷

Another prominent feature of the hall is the main stairway, which exhibits some oddities of its own. Kennedy notes that the stair seems out of place. Indeed, some details suggest that the large stairway, while old, is not the earliest stairway to have stood in the room. First, the staircase clumsily overlaps a windowsill, a detail that a competent architect would not purposely design. Secondly, the stair runs awkwardly against the adjacent paneling as it descends. Furthermore, a shortened baluster was added to the hand rail in order to support the stairway above it like an impromptu column. This detail, while charming, is almost certainly an amateur improvisation. Finally, the floor of the small, under-stairs closet shows some curious markings where a simpler, smaller staircase might once have stood.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ NHC, 9.

¹³⁵ Kennedy, 295.

¹³⁶ Warterfield, 8.

¹³⁷ NHC, 11, 20.

¹³⁸ NHC 10, 21. The evidence of the older set of stairs does not appear in any study, but was shown to me by Mr. John Gilpin, a former manager of Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

Even the floors of the Mansion were meant to demonstrate the Carters' wealth. All of the first- and second-story floorboards are sawn thin and affixed with metal nails. A cheaper method would be to use wide boards, such as those found in the attic or on the second floor walls, but the Carters could afford not only to prepare the lumber but also the cost of additional nails.¹³⁹ Though the pine floors are over 200 years old, almost all of the floorboards in the Carter House are original and quite sturdy.

Parlor

The parlor is a small room adjacent to the main hall and has been described by architects as the most "academic" room in the house, with few of the hall's awkward characteristics.¹⁴⁰ It is the only downstairs room to retain its original finish. A pale, thin layer of grey-blue paint covers the paneling above the chair rail. This finish is much worn, but would once have been bright, if somewhat thinner than most interior paints we use today. The parlor also features an elegant, built-in corner cabinet of very good craftsmanship with curved shelving and other pleasant details on the inside as well as out. The parlor and office fireplaces are angled to share the same chimney.

The focal point of the parlor is a finely carved chimney breast. Warterfield points out that this lozenge-shaped pattern is nearly identical to a door panel found in a Goochland County, Virginia mansion called Tuckahoe.¹⁴¹ He is correct: a photograph of that same door panel is found in Thomas Tileston Waterman's *The Mansions of Virginia 1706-1776*.¹⁴² Roger G. Kennedy and the National Heritage Corporation noticed another surprising detail about the chimney piece: it appears to have been derived from the designs of the sixteenth-century Italian

¹³⁹ It is unknown where the lumber for the Carter Mansion was prepared.

¹⁴⁰ NHC, 22; Kennedy, 295.

¹⁴¹ Warterfield, 10.

¹⁴² Thomas Tileston Waterman, *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1945), 93. According to Waterman, Tuckahoe was constructed between 1712 and 1730 (p. 84).

master architect Andrea Palladio.¹⁴³ Palladio was famed for creating beautiful churches and villas, and English architects adapted many of his designs during the so-called “Palladian Revival” of the eighteenth century, during which several books featuring adaptations of Palladio were published. The Carter House panel bears similarities to plates XXIII and XXVI of William Salmon’s *Palladio Londinensis*, one such pattern-book published in the early 1700s.

Kennedy makes much of this coincidence. He believes that the Palladian design is too old to appear in the Carter House. Kennedy states Palladio’s patterns were rarely used in homes after the mid-eighteenth century, and yet here, in the Carter Mansion, appears “a perfect small Virginia room of about 1750.” Kennedy attributes the appearance of a Palladian design to the supposed connection between the Carters of Tennessee and the elite Robert “King” Carter family of Virginia. He notes that Palladian designs appear in many works commissioned by “King” Carter and his heirs, such as Christ Church, Corotoman, Rosewell, Sabine Hall, Nomini Hall, Shirley, Cleve, and Carter’s Grove.¹⁴⁴ Corotoman, the mansion of “King” Carter himself, suffered severe fire damage in 1729. It has been assumed that the house had burned completely down, but Kennedy postulates that some of the house survived. It was not unheard of for parts of older houses, especially paneling, to be shipped away and re-installed elsewhere. Kennedy theorizes that “King” Carter salvaged some of Corotoman’s interior, the pieces of which were eventually bequeathed to John Carter of Watauga.

The theory would nicely explain some of the oddities of the Carter Mansion such as its anachronistic floor plan. The apparent gap in quality between some of the house’s features—explained by the National Heritage Corporation as the work of two subsequent architects—might in reality be the result of superimposing older, finer work with new imitations. Kennedy’s

¹⁴³ NHC, 22; Kennedy, 292.

¹⁴⁴ Kennedy, 293-5.

theory might also explain why Charles Warterfield detected so many Queen Anne elements in the house: many of its elements might actually date from the Queen Anne period, or be attempts at imitation of that style.¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately for this convenient and bold theory, however, Kennedy's dates do not quite match up. While Kennedy claims that William Salmon's *Palladio Londinensis* appeared around 1700, the first edition of the book was seemingly not published until 1734,¹⁴⁶ long after the fire at Corotoman and two years after Robert "King" Carter's death. Therefore, it appears that the assumptions that the chimney piece came from Corotoman and derived from Salmon's book cannot *both* be true. Additionally, Kennedy's claim that Salmon's pattern-book "was very seldom used after 1765"¹⁴⁷ is somewhat shaky: subsequent editions of the book were published well into the late 1700s.

These revelations are not sufficient grounds to discard Kennedy's theory altogether: Palladian designs *were* popular during the early-to-mid 1700s and the fine paneling in the Carter House *might* very well have come from a Virginia mansion. Other Palladian books were published during the early 1700s, and while they might not contain the exact lozenge-shaped pattern of the Carter house parlor, these pattern books still could have influenced the craftsman who created the panel.¹⁴⁸ And we cannot yet accuse Kennedy of being totally in error on the dates of the *Palladio Londinensis*. Kennedy drew heavily from Thomas Tileston Waterman's *The Mansions of Virginia 1706-1776*, the same book that displays the photograph of the peculiar

¹⁴⁵ Warterfield, 8.

¹⁴⁶ A. Lawrence Kocher, Review of *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776*, by Thomas Tileston Waterman. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., Vol. 3, No. 4. (Oct 1946), 594.

¹⁴⁷ Kennedy, 292.

¹⁴⁸ John Harris, *The Palladians* (New York: Rizzoli Publications, 1982), 55. Harris, who seems like something of an architectural purist, gets very harsh with the English pattern-book makers who "plundered" the finer aspects of Palladian style. He indicates that the Palladian pattern-book craze began around 1725.

lozenge-shaped panel. Waterman, an eminent architectural historian of the mid-twentieth century, supplies the following information on Salmon's pattern-book:

This is a valuable handbook of the period with drawings and text covering decorative and structural problems. After Salmon's death (c. 1700-1725) the book was republished several times by his son. The original edition which seems to have been published early in the century, has not been available for the present work.¹⁴⁹

According to Waterman, an earlier version of the book was published close to the turn of the century, of which the later editions were presumably copies published by Salmon's son. It is unclear whether this information is accurate or if it is an error of Waterman's, who has been criticized for his light attention to historical documentation.¹⁵⁰ Perhaps there is a mysterious "first edition" of *Palladio Londinensis* floating out among the rare book shops of the world. There were certainly a large number of Salmon's derivations in the houses of Robert Carter and his children. And yet Kennedy himself provides a caveat to his theory: the Carter connection has never been concretely established, and the John Carter's appearance of "Tidewater respectability" might simply be a case of manufactured and "borrowed identity within an architectural persona."¹⁵¹ We may never know.

Office

It is purely by conjecture that we call this room an office. John and Landon served in important government positions throughout their lives and managed large estates in the meantime, so some form of office seems required. In its original state, this room was secluded from the rest of the house: one could enter only through the parlor. According to the National Heritage Corporation study, this room was the most heavily altered from its original state.¹⁵² The Carter family cut a door through the interior partition to the main hall sometime between

¹⁴⁹ Waterman, 109-10.

¹⁵⁰ Kocher, 592.

¹⁵¹ Kennedy, 293, 297.

¹⁵² NHC, 23.

1800 and 1850, and cut another door through the adjacent wall to the North Wing (1850-1865). These processes also altered the position of windows in the office, which the State of Tennessee has since restored to their earliest positions. The office apparently once held a corner cabinet similar to the one in the parlor. It was removed sometime in the past and is now part of a private collection.

The Mansion's residents had also, at some unknown time, repainted the chimney breast in the office. When this top layer of paint was removed, an old mural was discovered on the flat panel. The painting depicts three men in late 18th or early 19th century clothing strolling together on a tree-lined hill. On the right side of the scene is a large, columned porch.

The mural, though crudely and childishly executed, carries its own distinct charm. Its colors are bright and warm. A surprising amount of detail appears on the diminutive painted men: the observer can detect buttons, shoe buckles, curly wigs or hair, and rosy cheeks. One of the figures even wears a smile! Similarities in palette and style suggest that the same artist painted both the upstairs and downstairs panels. Unfortunately, the identity and dates of this artist are unknown. If the paintings were completed during the late 18th century, then they probably depict Virginia because houses with grand columned porches did not exist in the Watauga settlement during John and Landon Carter's lifetimes.¹⁵³ Ironically, the downstairs office mural is in much better condition than its upstairs counterpart, in part because it had been covered over and forgotten. The new paint protected the older mural from sun and smoke damage, and the downstairs painting is very well preserved.

Second Floor Landing

The second floor of the Carter Mansion lacks the elaborate paneling of the first level but exhibits some intriguing features of its own. The walls upstairs are smooth pine boards—many

¹⁵³ Dickinson, 324 refers to the date 1820 being written on the wall next to the upstairs painting.

of them very wide, presumably cut from the virgin timber that grew in the nearby forests. Chair rails and cornices adorn the upstairs walls, although these types of embellishments were rare on the upper floors of Southern homes during this time.¹⁵⁴

Additionally, faux finishes cover the walls of the Mansion's second floor. Below the chair rail, the walls are painted to simulate wood paneling. This technique was common to the very late 18th or early 19th centuries. The National Heritage Corporation cites the style of the upstairs rooms as evidence for the "two architect" theory, since this type of painted veneer is an example of a younger, "vernacular" architecture.¹⁵⁵

Small Upstairs Bedchamber

During John Carter's lifetime, one or more of his sons presumably slept in this room. Upon the senior John's death, one of his sons (most likely Landon) would have taken the larger bedroom. After Landon and Elizabeth's marriage, the small room probably became a bedroom for at least some of the couple's seven children.

The room never had a fireplace. It had been painted and repainted more than any other room in the house, and only traces of the original painted faux wood veneers remain.¹⁵⁶

Master Bedroom

This room bears the clearest and best example of the 2nd floor's painted faux finishes. The occupants of the house added a special flair to the walls in this room: the Carters not only painted faux paneling below the chair rail but also painted the upper portions of the walls to simulate marble. This room is one of the largest in the house, and it is possible that when the Carters entertained, they cleared out the furniture and used this spacious room for dancing.

¹⁵⁴ NHC, 25.

¹⁵⁵ NHC, 10-11.

¹⁵⁶ NHC, 25.

A carved chimney breast decorates the far wall, which the National Heritage Corporation study calls “a charming but naïve attempt at high design,”¹⁵⁷ possibly created by the same architect responsible for the chimney piece in the main hall. A painting crowns the space above the fireplace, apparently the work of the same artist who created the office mural. The painting depicts a country estate with fenced gardens and (possibly) a church steeple in the background. A large table set with flowers is placed in the center of the composition, and to the right are deer and at least one dog. Constant exposure to smoke over the years has made the painting very dark and cloudy; however, both Kennedy and Warterfield comment on the similarities between this painting and a Virginia mural that was once at a Tidewater mansion called Morattico.¹⁵⁸

There is writing on the wall in the master bedroom. Kennedy claims that an “upstairs panel” bears the date 1816, while Calvin W. Dickinson claims that the date “1820” is written “on the wall beside the painted panel.”¹⁵⁹ Since I have never seen either date on the wall, I do not know how to reconcile these differences. Dickinson associates his date with the painted panel, while Kennedy believes “1816” refers to the faux finish on the walls.

The front-facing (South) wall bears additional writing. In the space between the two windows, a list of names has been written:

James T. Carter
Mary Carter
Bettie Carter
Alice Carter
Serafina Carter
Addie Carter
James T. Carter

¹⁵⁷ NHC 26.

¹⁵⁸ Warterfield, 8-9; Kennedy 297. Incidentally, Kennedy believes that the both of the panels might represent “King” Carter’s lost estate of Corotoman. The Morattico panel depicts a building surrounded by gardens and domed pavilions. The Carter Mansion panel also depicts domed pavilions, a coincidence Kennedy finds “eerie.”

¹⁵⁹ Kennedy 305, fn.; Dickinson, 324.

The names belong to a later generation of Carters—probably the last to bear the name “Carter” to live in the Mansion. There are many theories, but the circumstances of these writings are unknown. Legend has it that during the Civil War these Carters were forced to leave their property. Before departing, one of the children wrote the names on the wall in order to lay claim to the house when they returned. The story makes a kind of sense: the names are almost invisible unless one knows where to look. Samuel D. Smith, the archaeologist who headed the 1977 archaeological dig, conducted research on the house before his team excavations. Smith found that General James T. Carter died in 1859, and by 1860, his widow Mary and children were living with another family. It is unknown if they ever returned to live in the Carter House, but in 1883 a William S. Thomas had “recently purchased” the land from Mary Carter.¹⁶⁰

Garrett (Attic)

This room is large, running the length of the house, and has a low ceiling. It is accessed by a well-embellished stair with lamb’s-tongue molding, suggesting that the room was intended to function as part of the family’s living space.¹⁶¹ It provided ample room for children, other family members, slaves, and guests.

The garrett has four small closet doors, two of which open to the same closet which runs lengthwise alongside the room. The other two closets are separated by the narrow stairway. The room was never well-ventilated. It has only two small windows which flank the east chimney.

Epilogue

Descendants of John Carter lived in the house until the late 1800s when William S. Thomas purchased the property. The Thomas family once owned land directly across the

¹⁶⁰ Smith, “Summary,” 7.

¹⁶¹ NHC, 24.

Watauga River from the Carter House. The Thomases retained the property until the State of Tennessee purchased the house during the early 1970s. A more thorough treatment of the subject is found in the research of Pollyanna Creekmore and Muriel Spoden, a copy of which is kept at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area.

CHAPTER 5

ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE CARTER MANSION

Native American Features and Artifacts

The Carter Mansion grounds have undergone three separate professional archaeological excavations. The first was conducted by the Smithsonian Institute in 1926 or 1927, while the second and third were studies by the State of Tennessee in 1973 and 1977. These excavations have added greatly to the body of knowledge on the Carter Mansion site, particularly to our understanding of the region's prehistory.¹⁶²

During the 1920s the Thomas family who lived at the Carter house unearthed at least one Indian burial on the grounds while digging a flower pit in the yard. The discoveries eventually attracted the attention of the Smithsonian Institute. The Smithsonian sent an archaeologist, Mr. H. Woodman, to excavate the burials.¹⁶³ Woodman's report is dated June 1, 1927, and states that "Three days of actual work were expended on the project. On account of the impossibility of working during the week days, the trip was made from Bristol to the site each of three week-ends."¹⁶⁴

Though Woodman's stay was brief, his visits were productive. He opened a total of eighteen grave-pits with remains ranging from adult skeletons to that of a five-year-old child. He did not indicate whether or not the graves seemed to belong to the Cherokee people. The

¹⁶² It is important to note "professional" since it was once a popular local pursuit to dig up arrowheads and other "Indian relics."

¹⁶³ A diary page found in the Carter Mansion attic read "Mr. Woodman an archaeologist from Bristol working for the Smithsonian." Smith, "Summary," 44

¹⁶⁴ H. Woodman, "Report covering the Excavation of Burial Cists, Elizabethton, Tennessee" (Unpublished report for Bureau of American Ethnology and the Smithsonian Institution, 1927, Sycamore Shoals State Park), 1.

following is a short summary of his findings, with special attention to the artifacts associated with each of the burials:

Burial pits 1, 2, and 3 all contained adult skeletons in advanced stages of decay. Woodman noted that burial 3 had an otherwise almost intact skull but very poor teeth, “being greatly worn and most of them decayed.” The skeleton appeared to be male, while the sexes of the other two were indeterminate. Burial 4 was that of a child less than five years of age. The skeleton was also in poor condition but retained its “baby teeth” or milk teeth, though badly decomposed. This grave contained artifacts: four conch shell pins of 2 to 3^{1/2} inches long.¹⁶⁵

The remains in pits 5 and 6 were adult, with number 5 probably male and number 6 female. The right side of skull 5 was crushed and most of the teeth were missing. The man buried in pit 5 might have sustained some of this damage and survived, for Woodman mentions that “all molar teeth except the first on the right side of the lower jaw had been lost and the bone completely healed.” A cairn of river stones surrounded the body in burial 6. These tightly-packed stones had crushed the face. Burials 7-9 contained the remains of relatively young children and adolescents. These burials included small earthen vessels, shell beads, a string of wampum, a shell pendant, and worked stones of various shapes.¹⁶⁶

The remaining burials contained similar, stone-age artifacts and skeletal remains in advanced stages of decay, with two very notable exceptions:

Woodman describes the skeleton found in burial pit 13 as “negroid... identified by the shape of the skull.” This skeleton was buried only 16 inches deep—the shallowest of all the graves Woodman recorded. Woodman believed this to be a later burial because the skeleton was “in a much better state of preservation” than the others. The only possible artifact found in this

¹⁶⁵ Woodman, 1-2.

¹⁶⁶ Woodman, 2-4.

burial cist was a polished dark green stone with straight edges. Woodman conjectured that the stone might have been a razor.¹⁶⁷ If Woodman's analysis was correct and the skeleton was African-American, it raises intriguing questions about the man's identity.

The most artifact-rich site was burial 15. Woodman reported a skeleton of "six feet, three and a quarter inches from the os calcis to the top of the cranium, the tallest found." The body had been buried with numerous possessions, including a string of Indian shell beads hung about the neck and body, stone arrowheads, and a polished stone in the shape of an axe. This burial also bore evidence of European contact: a copper disk 5" in diameter with a not-quite-centered hole cut through the middle; three conical copper arrowheads; two crescent-shaped pendants and one triangular pendant, all of copper; one badly rusted iron tomahawk; and about two dozen light blue glass beads. Woodman believed that the copper artifacts and the shape of the stone axe- implement might indicate that the remains were Iroquoian rather than Cherokee, though he does not give further explanation.¹⁶⁸

Woodman sent many materials that he had unearthed to the Smithsonian museum. These were on display at one time; the Thomases remembered visiting the museum and seeing some of the familiar Carter House relics taken by Woodman, whom they called "Woodby." Excavations continued after Mr. Woodman left the site. Though these were mostly amateur attempts on the part of the Thomas family, the Thomases did attempt to document their findings using a map, diary, and photographs. These were in the possession of Ethel Thomas Hardin in 1977.¹⁶⁹

Compared to the practices of later archaeologists, Woodman's methods seem sloppy and wasteful. Workers who anxiously sift for every detail would never think of excavating eighteen

¹⁶⁷ Woodman, 4-5.

¹⁶⁸ Woodman, 5-6.

¹⁶⁹ Smith, "Summary," 44. The current location of these items is unknown to the author, but if they could be found it would certainly benefit further study of the Carter site's prehistoric past.

graves in three days. Woodman's record-keeping is also less-than-perfect: he fails to record the depth of some of the burials and gives little indication of their locations. The excavations, however, reveal what the early white settlers had long come to suspect: that a native people lived on the Watauga long before the Carters arrived. These early excavations also left many tantalizing questions for researchers: Who were the people buried at the Carter House site? To what culture did they belong? When did they live? Why did they leave? Was there truly a man of African descent buried among them and, if so, how did he get there? Who was the tall man buried with many copper artifacts: was he a warrior and leader who traded far and wide, or an ambassador to the new groups of Europeans who entered the forests? Without further research, these questions might forever remain unanswered.

The purpose of the 1973 excavation was to examine the historical aspects of the site; therefore, the archaeologists did not attempt to penetrate the dark-stained "aboriginal midden" which contained evidence of aboriginal occupation. In 1977, however, the state archaeologists were able to conduct a more thorough investigation of the underlying native levels. This investigation yielded surprisingly rich results. The following discoveries were made below the levels of historic occupation; that is, below the levels of eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century artifacts that are most likely associated with European peoples rather than native Indians.

The 1977 archaeological team dug one pit to the front left side of the house, running along the wall of the foundation, and several others of varying sizes to the rear of the house. These tests reveal that at least one fairly concentrated native settlement existed on the Carter House site. In front of the house, archaeologists found a "homogenous dark-stained midden" that suggests a very heavy level of "intensive" occupation. Below this was an earlier dark-

stained level indicative of native settlement. It is unknown whether this lower level represents an earlier phase of the same culture or an altogether different group of people.¹⁷⁰

The test pits dug to the rear of the house revealed a similar configuration of levels. The layers of occupation in front of and behind the house seemed to roughly correspond, though further testing is needed to determine their exact relationship. There appear to be additional layers of occupation to the rear of the house. Both in front of and behind the house, researchers discovered the remains of post holes and what appeared to be refuse pits, strengthening the hypothesis that this area was once a densely populated native settlement.¹⁷¹ Because the test squares were limited in number and covered only a small area, the post holes did not display any discernable pattern; but again, the tests conducted were quite limited.¹⁷² Aside from the postholes and refuse pits, many other small Indian artifacts were found, especially ceramic sherds and flint pieces.

Beneath these dark-stained aboriginal levels, cultural material decreased significantly. This indicates only passing human activity, with a few notable exceptions. Out of the eight test squares dug in 1977, three contained Indian burials.

Two of the burials lay mostly outside of the test squares and were not fully excavated due to the limited scope of the project. One skeleton, however (Burial 1), lay well within the test pit and yielded a rich supply of artifacts. The skeleton appears to be the remains of an adult male. The artifacts buried alongside the body indicate that he was of high social status: bowls; bone pins; a polished black stone; ear pins; a piece of sheet copper, pierced; shell beads; seashells; a

¹⁷⁰ Smith, "Summary," 22.

¹⁷¹ Smith, "Summary," 24.

¹⁷² Smith, "Summary," 31.

mat of woven bark; and chert flakes.¹⁷³ The most significant find among the remains, however, was a small Lamar Incised bottle.¹⁷⁴ The presence of this artifact indicates that the most recent Indian occupation of the Carter site lasted until early historic times, ca. A.D. 1500. This fits well with Woodman's discoveries in the 1920s and also with a Thomas family tradition that an Indian skeleton was found on the property with a string of musket balls around its neck.

The archaeological remains suggest two separate periods of native occupation: one from the late prehistoric or early historic period (ca. 1500 A.D.) corresponding to the "Appalachian Summit 'Pisgah Phase'" (1000-1450 A.D.), and an earlier settlement that corresponds to the Connestee Phase (A.D. 200-1000) or the contemporary Candy Creek culture of the Tennessee Valley region. The Connestee culture falls into the larger Woodland period of native prehistory (1000 B.C. to 1000 A.D.).¹⁷⁵

Historical Features and Artifacts

Historical Features

Two subsequent excavations followed many years after the Smithsonian-sponsored digs. In 1973, a team under Dr. Karl Kuttruff, Tennessee Division of Archaeology, conducted small-scale archaeological surveys of the John and Landon Carter property. This limited project was an initial stage of a larger plan to purchase and restore the house on behalf of the State of Tennessee. Tests were necessary to ascertain the site's historic value and components. These tests revealed, in the words of a later report, "a complex archaeological situation" that warranted

¹⁷³ Smith, "Summary," 51. I assumed that a piece of copper would indicate the presence of Europeans, but the report gives no indication that this is the case.

¹⁷⁴ Smith, "Summary," 24.

¹⁷⁵ Smith, "Summary," 9, 46.

further study: the area contained native prehistoric elements as well as artifacts from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.¹⁷⁶

During the summer of 1977, the state of Tennessee Division of Archaeology conducted a second wave of excavations on the site. One objective of these excavations was to take advantage of recent renovations to the Carter house: the North Wing was removed in 1976, exposing ground that had been covered since the mid-nineteenth century. The Division of Archaeology hoped to dig in an area that—having been covered for over one hundred years—remained untainted by modern debris. Samuel D. Smith, the archaeologist who directed this new excavation, detailed the results of both the 1973 and 1977 excavations in “Summary of Archaeological Explorations at the Carter House (40CR5), Carter County, Tennessee,” a report prepared for the benefit of the Planning and Development Division and Historical Commission, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation.

The total study of the Carter House consisted of two main phases: preliminary studies and the excavations themselves. In preparation for the digs, Smith consulted a wide range of primary and secondary sources in order to form an understanding of the house, the grounds, and the site’s history. He also conducted interviews with some remaining descendants of the Thomas family who had once lived in the house and were familiar with the grounds.

By 1977, only the Carter House itself and one lone outbuilding remained on the site; however, testimonies of the Thomas descendants, rare old photographs,¹⁷⁷ and a wealth of study on eighteenth-century homes all asserted that many diverse outbuildings once flanked, surrounded, and supported the Carter Mansion proper. Based on this evidence, the research team

¹⁷⁶ Smith, “Summary,” 1.

¹⁷⁷ Only two old photographs of the Carter House have been found by the State of Tennessee. One is an early twentieth century snow scene photograph found in one of the rooms in the Carter house; the second is a 1949 aerial photograph taken by Tennessee Valley Authority. Smith, “Summary,” 11.

prepared a map that showed the conjectured locations for a myriad of buildings from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. For the sake of this research, oriented primarily to the eighteenth century, I have listed only the features that might have existed during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.

The Carter Mansion. The house itself is discussed elsewhere.

Old Smoke House. This building was apparently “[b]uilt in the same style as the earlier portion of the main house and other outbuildings, pegged-frame walls with non-overlapping weather boarded exterior.” This building was gone by 1977 but was still standing in a 1949 photograph.¹⁷⁸

Early Kitchen. The Thomases had a family tradition of “an old kitchen that was torn down and used to build the smokehouse;”¹⁷⁹ however, the map actually shows the kitchen in the wrong location. Later excavations revealed that the early kitchen was located where the North Wing was later built. It was a common feature of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth- century houses to have a detached kitchen to the rear left of the house.¹⁸⁰

Servants’ or Tenants’ House. This was the sole remaining outbuilding at the time of the 1977 excavation. Its origins and uses are unclear. Tradition suggests that the building served as a temporary dwelling for John and Landon Carter while the Mansion was built, and the small house later became quarters for servants or slaves. During the early twentieth century, the building served as a house for a tenant farmer and his wife.

Granary. This building exhibited a similar type of construction to the other, oldest buildings. Smith reports that while the Thomases used it as a granary, its earliest function was

¹⁷⁸ Smith, “Summary,” 11.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, “Summary,” 11.

¹⁸⁰ Smith, “Summary,” 31.

unknown. A high concentration of buttons found near the building (27 out of 72 total) suggests that the so-called granary had an earlier, more domestic function.¹⁸¹

Blacksmith Shop. Smith writes that this was “a purely conjectural structure suggested by surface debris observed in the past” by William S. Thomas.

Well. Now covered by a concrete slab (for safety), this stone-lined well is approximately 60 feet deep. According to the Thomases, it is as old as the Carter house.¹⁸²

Country Road and Landing. There is still a telltale depression across the Carter site that marks the location of the old country road. The road veers close to the river, and the Thomases used the spot as a landing. It is possible that the Carters did so as well.

Old Barn. The site of the old barn is now at least partially obstructed by a modern, paved road (the Broad Street Extension). The Thomases indicated that this barn had been built in the “old-style,” peg-framed manner which suggests a building date in the late 18th or early 19th centuries.¹⁸³

Family Cemeteries. This cemetery lot actually contains the graves of at least three families: the Carters, the Taylors, and the Thomases. The oldest portion is located to the rear of the plot, and contains a number of Carter graves, including that of Elizabeth Maclin Carter. The Creekmore and Spoden research supplies a more complete list of graves in the cemetery; however, it is possible that even the Creekmore list (1974) is incomplete. The Daughters of the American Revolution have erected a newer monument over the supposed resting place of John and Landon Carter, so neither of their original headstones remain.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Smith, “Summary,” 43.

¹⁸² Smith, “Summary,” 14.

¹⁸³ Smith, “Summary,” 15.

¹⁸⁴ There is also the possibility that John Carter is not buried in the Carter Family Cemetery at all—another cemetery in Carter County claims to hold the gravestones of John and Landon Carter. If the claim is true, it might indicate that John Carter died away from home, fleeing from the Loyalists who sought his life.

As mentioned earlier, both the 1973 and 1977 excavations indicated that the Carter site contains a “complex archaeological situation.”¹⁸⁵ The grounds have been continually occupied since the late 1700s and contain eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century materials. A humorous, but very real complication to archaeological study has been the presence of woodchucks on the site.¹⁸⁶ The site is riddled with woodchuck burrows, so that one can scarcely walk the grounds without stepping on a tunnel. This continual digging throughout the years has churned up artifact-laden soil and disturbed the pristine archaeological environment. Nevertheless, the excavations of historical artifacts have supplied an important, material supplement to the records and histories of the Carter family. Since no diaries or personal correspondence of the earliest Carters have yet been found, their archaeological remains might be the only window into daily life at the Mansion that scholars will ever have.

Historical Artifacts

Kitchen Foundation. The team made its most striking discoveries under the north wing, that mid-nineteenth century addition to the house that was removed as part of the restoration process. The removal of the wing provided archaeologists an excellent opportunity to dig in soil that had been sealed away, untainted by the last one hundred years of occupation.

Behind the house, “on alignment with the northwest corner,” archaeologists discovered the foundation of a small building. The resident family had apparently torn down this small detached structure when they built the north wing but incorporated its foundation into that of the new addition. This small building was undoubtedly a kitchen. Detached kitchens were common in late eighteenth-century plantation houses in order to stop the spread of fire: in the event of a

¹⁸⁵ Smith, “Summary,” 1.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, “Summary,” 34.

kitchen fire, the kitchen itself could burn to the ground and leave the larger, main house unscathed. Furthermore, according to the Smith report, kitchens were most commonly located to the rear left of the house, precisely where the detached foundation was discovered.¹⁸⁷

Ceramics. Of the numerous historical artifacts found at the Carter site, many seemed to date from the eighteenth century, but ceramics are the most informative. A study of ceramics also yielded a surprise. The sequence of pottery development in this region is as follows: the earliest pottery fragments found at the Carter site were creamware types. Creamwares were imported from England and are distinguished by a cream-colored body and yellow glaze. Creamware first appeared during the early 1760s but gave way to pearlware, or “china ware,” from the 1780s through the 1820s. Pearlware also came from England but displayed a white or pale blue cast.¹⁸⁸ Various whitewares replaced pearlware during the 1820s.¹⁸⁹

Researchers expected to find a higher percentage of the earliest ceramics in the area that had been sealed under the north wing. Instead, while early ceramics were certainly *present* beneath the wing, the highest concentration of early types (i.e., creamware and pearlware) was instead centered in an Area III, a zone to the northeast of the house with no known structures. The presence of concentrated creamware fragments suggests that early domestic activity at the Carter Mansion site was centered around Area III, perhaps before the house was even built. In fact, the earliest of all the pottery fragments found at the Carter Mansion, Westerwald stoneware (ca. 1700-1775) was not found near the house at all, but only in areas to the north and east.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁷ Smith, “Summary,” 31-34.

¹⁸⁸ Samuel D. Smith, ed. *Fort Southwest Point Archaeological Site, Kingston, Tennessee: A Multidisciplinary Interpretation* (Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Division of Archaeology, Research Series No. 9. Tennessee Division of Archaeology, 1993), 189.

¹⁸⁹ Smith, “Summary,” 36-39.

¹⁹⁰ Smith, “Summary,” 36-39., map p. 17.

This discovery might suggest a later date for the house than expected but also implies that the remains of additional structures to the northeast that have not yet been detected.

Nails. Nails, like pottery, can be roughly grouped by time periods. Most nails were wrought by hand until the 1780s, when industrialization made early forms of machine-cutting popular. The heads of early machine cut nails, however, still had to be formed by hand. Fully machine-made nails did not appear until 1815-1830; therefore, all of the Carter Mansion nails would presumably be partially hand-wrought.¹⁹¹

Interestingly, the distribution of nails on the Carter site seems to follow the distribution pattern of ceramics. Of 363 hand-wrought nails found, 221 of these were found in Area III, an area to the northeast of the Carter house. Smith writes: “A nail is a type of artifact especially likely to be found in close association with a building or building site. It seems probable that some very early building may have stood in close proximity to area III. What this means in terms of the probable antiquity of the Carter House is not entirely clear, but it does indicate that a more thorough archaeological exploration should be undertaken.”¹⁹² I could not agree more.

Window Glass. Window glass fragments, uniformly distributed around the house, probably represent the periodic breakage and replacement of windows. Fragments of glass containers were also found on site, but the ratio of glass to ceramic fragments was about 0.4 to 1, as opposed to 1 to 1 in most other Tennessee historic sites. Ceramics were much more prevalent than glass in the eighteenth century, and the ratio is probably a reflection of the site’s age.

Games and Amusements. Other items indicate the presence of children (or playful adults) on the site: marbles, fragments of “jews harps,” slate pencils, and slate writing tablets.

¹⁹¹ Smith, “Summary” ,40.

¹⁹² Smith, “Summary,” 40. John Carter was a merchant and he is known to have operated a store in Carter’s Valley. Perhaps he had another store here on his property, which might account for the high concentration of artifacts to the northeast of the Mansion proper.

Fish hooks and fishing weights were also found. The antiquity of these items was either unknown or unreported.

Tobacco pipes provide additional insight: of the twenty-four fragments found, seven were of a long-stem white ball clay (“kolin”) type, common to eighteenth-century sites but not later ones. These were the only type of pipe fragments recovered from the enigmatic Area III.¹⁹³

Firearms. Gunflints and other firearms-related materials were also found, some of which might pertain to the eighteenth century. Smith writes, “Six gun-flints of the dark gray English prismatic type, two percussion caps, and a partial brass side-plate relate to the earlier periods of firearms use.” All of the flints were found to the rear of the Carter house.

Clothing. The Carter House excavations also unearthed many items related to clothing: buttons, thimbles, pins, clothing fasteners, buckles, grommets, a copper shoe-toe plate, a watch fob, and even some scraps of clothing; however, none of these items were positively identified as eighteenth-century. One nineteenth-century item of note, however, is a blue glass bead. Such beads have been linked to the presence of slaves at other archaeological sites.¹⁹⁴

Clearly, the Carter Mansion site is rich in prehistoric and historic artifacts and requires further investigation. The answers to some nagging historical (and prehistorical) questions about the identity of the people who lived in the Watauga River valley might lie, yet unearthed, in the rich soil of the Carter site. The latest study on the site’s archaeological riches is nearly thirty years old. It is time for new research.

¹⁹³ Smith, “Summary,” 40-43.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, “Summary,” 43.

CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The following layouts represent over a year's worth of research and design work. The text, carefully and painstakingly condensed, is designed to convey important and memorable information to park visitors of all ages. The balances between accuracy and readability, visually stimulating and garbled, are, in the end, personal to the viewer. I have endeavored to create text that is reliable and to provide interesting visuals that help to tell the site's impressive story.

WELCOME to the
HISTORIC JOHN AND LANDON CARTER MANSION

The Mansion

Local tradition holds that **Colonel John Carter**, a Virginia merchant with a mysterious past, built the mansion around the year 1780. John served as Chairman of the **Watauga Association** and led the defense of **Fort Watauga** in 1776. Among the Carter family's friends and associates were John Sevier, Tennessee's first governor; James Robertson, the "Father of Tennessee"; Isaac Shelby, the first governor of Kentucky; and French botanist André Michaux. Many prominent frontiersmen—those who fought for America's independence and forged Tennessee into a state—passed through the doors of this rustic but elegant house.

The Setting

This land was part of the **Watauga Settlement**, a pioneer community west of the Appalachian Mountains. King George's **Proclamation of 1763** made it illegal for subjects of the Crown to settle west of the mountains. But as land grew scarce in the east and tensions mounted between Britain and its colonies, settlers poured across the Appalachians and into Indian territory. These settlers were called the **Overmountain people**.

Relations were uneasy between these new settlers and native Indians. Some settlers bought or leased their lands, as many Wataugans did from the Cherokees at the **Watauga Purchase** and **Transylvania Purchase** of 1775. Others "squatted" on lands illegally, while still others mistakenly believed that they were in Virginia.

When fighting broke out in New England, the American Revolution soon spread to the frontiers. Most Wataugans supported the Patriot cause and fortified their homes against the British-allied Cherokees. When Cherokee warriors attacked in July of 1776, the Wataugans stood their ground and later launched campaigns of their own. In 1780 the Overmountain Men went on the offensive against British forces. The frontiersmen won an unexpected victory over a British Loyalist Militia at **King's Mountain**, South Carolina, weakening the British for their final defeat at Yorktown.

A Big Risk

Before the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781, the outcome of the Revolutionary War was uncertain, as was the future of the Overmountain settlers. If the British won the war, the settlers might be forced to move away and give up their lands. If John Carter did build the Mansion before the war's end, he took a very big risk!

Fit For A Ball

The first documented reference to "The Mansion" dates from the year 1800 when Tennessee's first governor, John Sevier, wrote in his diary that he attended "a ball at Carter's."




Figure 1. Welcome Panel

THE CARTERS OF WATAUGA

Col. John Carter (1737? – 1781)



Colonel John Carter—merchant, Indian trader, and backwater politician—was the first white occupant of this property. Almost nothing is known of his birth and childhood. As an adult he worked for a merchants' firm in Virginia, married Elizabeth Taylor (dates unknown) and ventured over the mountains around the year 1770 with at least two sons: **Landon** and John, Jr. He settled permanently in Watauga around 1772 and became a leader of the frontier people. John Carter served as chairman of the **Watauga Association**, an independent and democratic government created four years before the Declaration of Independence was written.

The **American Revolution** spread even to the isolated frontiers, and communities broke apart as neighbors chose sides. When John Carter assured British agents that the Wataugans were "determined to support His Majesty's Crown and Dignity," he was stalling to buy time. Most Wataugans sided with the Americans who would uphold their **land claims**. Carter confiscated the property of Wataugan **Loyalists** and took command of the frontier militia. When a hostile branch of the Cherokees attacked the settlement in the summer of 1776, Carter defended **Fort Watauga**. John Carter died of smallpox in 1781, one of the richest men west of the mountains.

Elizabeth Maclin Carter (1766-1842)



Elizabeth Maclin belonged to another prominent frontier family. She married Landon Carter in 1784 and bore him seven children, six of whom survived into adulthood. Their descendants continued to be influential in state and local politics for generations.

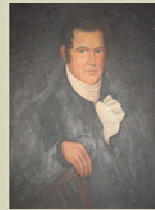
Elizabeth continued to live in the Mansion after Landon's death. She was also illiterate; she signed

her Will with an "X." Elizabeth is buried in the Carter Family Cemetery.

Carter County was named after Landon Carter and Elizabethton was named for Elizabeth Maclin Carter.

General Landon Carter (1760-1800)

Landon Carter, son of Colonel John Carter, was born in Virginia in 1760. He was sixteen years old at the **siege of Fort Watauga**. At twenty he joined the **Overmountain Men** in their victory at **King's Mountain**, and later that year he campaigned with John Sevier against the neighboring Cherokee and Chickamauga Indians. He also served under General **Francis Marion**, the "Swamp Fox," and thwarted the British in South Carolina. Colonel John Carter passed away in 1781 and Landon inherited his estate.



Landon quickly became a major player in local affairs and held positions of power throughout his life. He was Secretary of State and Speaker of the Senate in the "lost" **State of Franklin**, and he later held a seat in the state senate of **Tennessee**. Landon also became one of the region's wealthiest men. He owned an iron forge and many other businesses, and by the time of his death in 1800, Landon had increased the family's landholdings to over 10,000 acres.

Slavery

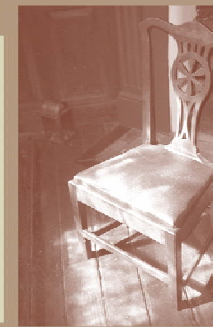
Slavery was not as widespread on the frontier as in the east because of terrain, climate, and poverty. John Carter owned three slaves in 1781: Will, Austin, and Charles. Landon Carter was one of the area's largest slaveholders. He owned seven slaves in 1799.

The Will of Elizabeth Carter, dated 1841, shows that she owned at least fourteen slaves. One slave, Eady, was to be emancipated upon Elizabeth's death.



Carter's Mysterious Past

Some scholars connect John Carter to one of the most powerful colonial families of Virginia: the Robert "King" Carter clan. This chair, belonging to John Carter, bears a wheel symbol similar to Robert "King" Carter's family crest.




Possessions


By eighteenth-century frontier standards, John Carter was a prosperous man. According to a 1779 property list, Carter owned 640 acres of land, seven horses, 42 cattle, and 400 pounds ready monecy.

Figure 2. The Carters of Watauga Panel


Through the Carter Mansion




The **hall** was the main room and hub of the house. Its fireplace provided warmth and comfort, and its panelling was meant to impress visitors with the wealth and status of the Carter family. Some features of the house, such as the carving over the fireplace, seem to date from an even earlier time.




The **parlor** was a cheerful room for entertaining guests. Ladies sat in the parlor to drink tea and discuss the latest news. The once-bright paint on the walls has faded and worn away. The panel over the fireplace is similar to designs found in Virginia Tidewater mansions.



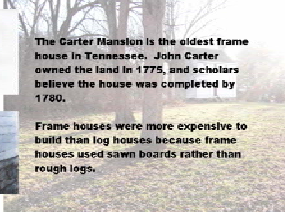
This third downstairs room probably served as an **office**, the center of the family's financial and political activities. Workers uncovered a hidden painting beneath layers of paint and paper in the office when the Carter House was restored.



Log house




Frame house




The **Carter Mansion** is the oldest frame house in Tennessee. John Carter owned the land in 1775, and scholars believe the house was completed by 1780.


Frame houses were more expensive to build than log houses because frame houses used sawn boards rather than rough logs.




Hallway panels



Office



Parlor




Upstairs hall



The large upstairs chamber served as a **master bedroom**, but could also become a ballroom when the Carters had guests. It has a painting over the fireplace, but the painting is darkened from exposure to smoke and light.



This small upstairs room might have been a **bedchamber** for Landon and Elizabeth's seven children. The room has no fireplace, so the children would huddle together to stay warm during the winter.



This dark upstairs attic was also called a **garret**. It has small closets for storage, but it also provided more living space for children, guests, or slaves.



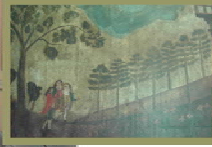
The Carters decorated the upstairs walls with faux finishes that were common around the turn of the nineteenth century. In each upstairs room the lower part of the wall is painted to look like paneling. In the master bedroom, the top part of the wall is also stained to look like marble.



Military Preparation at the Carter House

The Carter family stored food in the **basement**, but its thick stone walls also provided protection in times of war. The North Carolina General Assembly ordered that it would be "expedient to place 500 lbs of Gunpowder & 1,000 lbs of lead" at the Carter House "as a public magazine."

The outer walls of the house are filled with thick mud-bricks called **noggings**, which suggest that the house might have also served as a fort.



Office Painting, detail



The Carter House Through Time

The house has changed over the years. Later occupants have cut doors, moved stairs, added shelves, painted and re-painted walls. The family even added a wing with a two-story porch during the mid-1800s. This **North Wing** was removed when the State of Tennessee restored the property to its original form during the 1970s. Despite these changes, however, the eighteenth-century elements of the house are well preserved. Ninety percent of the house interior is original.

Figure 3. Through the Carter Mansion Panel

Layers of History

Archaeology at the Carter Mansion



Archaeologists found the remains of at least two Indian villages on the Carter House property, one dating from the Woodland Period (ca. 1000 B.C.E.-1000 A.C.E.) and another from around 1500 A.C.E. The earliest burial sites yielded

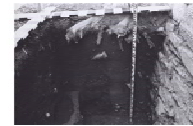
The fertile flat lands along the Watauga River were called the **Old Fields** because the land had been cleared for farming long before European settlers arrived.

stone and clay artifacts from **prehistoric** times, while more recent levels yielded copper arrowheads, glass beads, and an iron tomahawk—evidence of trade with Europeans. It is unknown whether these artifacts were Cherokee or of another native culture.

Archaeologists uncovered **historical** artifacts from three centuries, including clay pipes, glass beads, slate writing tablets, marbles, and silverware.

Grand houses of the eighteenth century did not stand alone. Several **outbuildings** functioned in the day-to-day operations of the homestead. Barns, granaries, smokehouses, and slave quarters commonly served the demands of southern colonial mansions.

Archaeologists uncovered the remains of a kitchen to the rear of the mansion. Open-hearth cooking could cause house fires, but a **detached kitchen** prevented the spread of fire to the main dwelling.



Several layers of historic and prehistoric occupation



Archaeologists working after removal of the North Wing



The house had been occupied by the Carter, Taylor, and Thomas families for almost two hundred years when the State of Tennessee bought and restored the mansion. The house never had indoor plumbing.



Servants'/Tenants' house, no longer standing



Test pits dug to the rear of the house

The Carter Mansion is a property of **Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area**
 1651 West Elk Avenue
 Elizabethton, TN 37643
 (423)543-5808

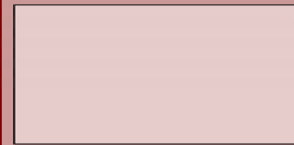


Figure 4. Archaeology Panel

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