

Bledsoe's Creek – Part 4

Bledsoe Under Seige

The scene in Bledsoe's fort that moonlit night of July 20, 1788 was one of chaos.

Isaac's tiny log cabin was filled with members of his and brother Anthony's large families. In a dimly lit corner reclined the wounded Anthony, supported on the blood-soaked knees of Isaac's wife, Caty.

Isaac was in shock. It was Caty, who had seen many die, who kept her head amongst the lamentation. It was she who, when fire was finally brought to light the dark cabin, examined Anthony's gaping stomach wound, told him he must surely die, and advised him to make a will which would protect his four young daughters, who would not otherwise share in the division of his 11,000 acres of land.

Now the scratch of a quill was the only sound punctuating the sobbing and whispered conversations. James Clendenning, called from his post, was writing the will of Anthony Bledsoe, father of Sumner County. *In the name of God, Amen,*

The other men peered from their portholes around the perimeter of the fort, scanning the moonlit stump fields for signs of movement, listening for owl calls from lurking Indians. The dogs growled but no longer barked - the Indians were gone for now. They were returning to their caves below Lookout Mountain where they boasted they had slain the great leader of the illegal settlers along the Cumberland. Their assassination plan had worked.



The Bledsoe Cabin is reconstructed here as the double cabin with dogtrot and stone chimney, left mid-ground. The outer stockade and blockhouses were added after Anthony's death to accommodate the North Carolina militia sent to protect the settlers.

Construction of Bledsoe's Fort – Bill Puryear, Artist, 2004

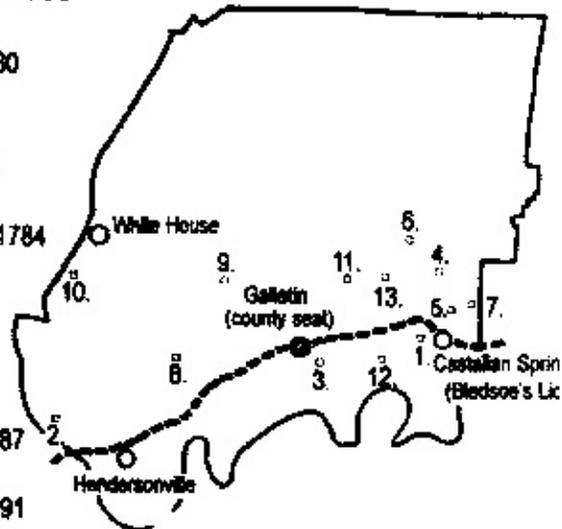
Indeed the settlements were close to extinction, and worse was to follow. At Nashborough James Robertson, Anthony's partner in founding the settlements, choked back his rage long enough to write the Cherokee Chief Hanging Maw, in an effort to restore peace.

It was not to be. In the years that followed the attacks mounted in intensity and frequency. Of the 263 men who signed the Cumberland Compact in 1780 there were but 67 left in 1784. Of the missing we have no accounting other than the listing of those killed. We know of many who returned to Virginia or North Carolina, while a number fled to the relative safety of Kentucky.

DOCUMENTED PIONEER FORTS AND STATIONS OF SUMNER COUNTY

-----AVERY TRACE 1788

1. Bledsoe's Fort
(Isaac Bledsoe) 1780
2. Mansker's Station
(2nd site) 1782
3. Asher's Station 1783
4. Greenfield Fort
(Anthony Bledsoe) 1784
5. Hall's Station 1785
6. Morgan's Fort 1786
7. Cpt. Wm. Martin's
Blockhouse 1787
8. Douglass Fort 1787
9. Hendrick's Station 1787
10. Hamilton's Fort 1788
11. White's Station 1790-91
12. Zeigler's Fort 1791
13. Saunders Fort 1791



Map from Guide to Bledsoe's Fort Historical Park
Bledsoe's Lick Historical Association, Inc. 1998-1999

But others came to replace them. In 1788 North Carolina, completed the construction of a road from the lower end of Clinch Mountain in East Tennessee to the remote Cumberland settlements. This Cumberland Road, which later came to be called Avery's Trace, after the contractor who built it, traversed nearly two hundred miles of wilderness that existed between Southwest Point near today's Kingston and the Cumberland settlements. There were more direct routes which existed between these two points; however, it was believed that by staying north of the Cumberland River from present day Jackson County one could avoid the heavily traveled Cherokee roads and warparties more likely on the southern side.¹ Bledsoe's Fort was the first place of refuge along the trace, and many settlers came no further than the beautiful valley of Bledsoe's Creek.



Avery Trace, Billie Wright Young, Artist

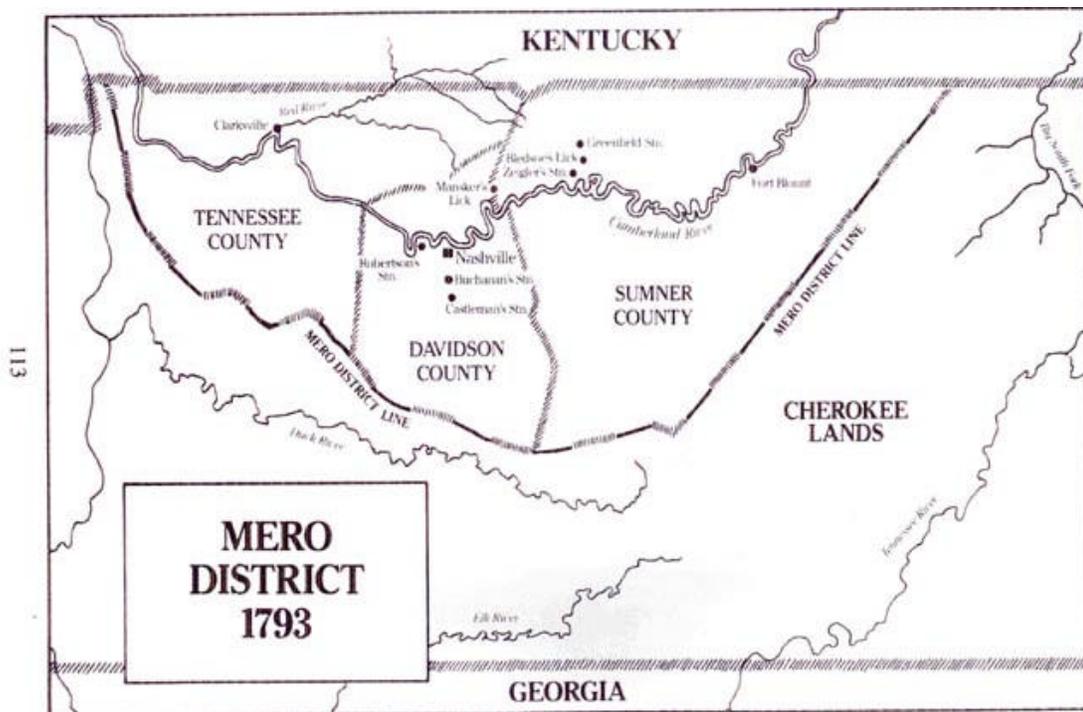
“During the year 1788 at least twenty-two families numbering approximately 140 persons came over the mountains to Sumner County. Escorted from Southwest Point by Colonel Mansker and Major Kirkpatrick at the head of 100 guardsmen recruited in Davidson and Sumner County, the new settlers carved out ten or twelve new stations and settled down to the serious business of clearing land and guarding against Indian attack....The original Cumberland Road was little more than a rough path, in most places it was just wide enough for a single wagon's passage. It was filled with all the dangers of travel during the era: not the least of which was threat of ambush by the warrior nations. 1792 was the year of greatest depredation along the trace. Well over one hundred settlers lost their lives during this period; many more simply vanished or were unaccounted for.”²

Despite their attacks along the trace, the Indians were unable to stem this burgeoning inflow, which ultimately doomed their dominance of the valley of the Cumberland. However many they killed, still more came, felled timber, fenced pastures, built fortified cabins, plowed and planted corn. Notwithstanding their superior numbers, the Indians proved inept at organizing themselves in any concerted fashion for battle and relied instead on stealth, ambush, terror, theft and, in the case of the Bledsoes, Major Hall and others, assassination of leaders.

As more settlers poured in the violence increased up and down Bledsoe's Creek after Anthony's murder in 1788. Bledsoe's Fort was the vortex of this violence. No family member – man, woman or

child - in their daily activities of making a living, travelling to the mill or to a neighbors, or even asleep in their beds was exempt from sudden and terrible violence.

- “In 1789 Henry Ramsey, a trusted scout of Colonel Robertson and Hugh Webb were shot by Indians on the trail between Morgan’s Station and Greenfield in 1789. Ramsey’s brother, William, was killed by Indians hidden along the lane leading from Bledsoe’s fort to the creek.. Jane Kindrick’s husband was killed near Winchester’s Mill...
- In 1790 Alexander Neely and his two sons, James and Charles, were killed about a mile north of Bledsoe’s Lick, where they were going to haul tanbark from their farm. A young woman named Morris was killed at Greenfield about the same time...
- The two sons of Robert Desha, Benjamin and Robert, Jr. were killed four miles north of Bledsoe’s Lick on Desha’s Creek...James Dickinson was killed with them.
- Benjamin Williams with his wife and children were killed by Indians in the night at their house about two and one-half miles north of Gallatin. One or two Negroes were also killed at the house, but one, a boy named Phillip, climbed up the chimney and hid until the Indians left. He was the only survivor.
- In 1791 George Wilson was killed May 23rd six miles west of the future site of Gallatin on the road to Nashville. A short while later Benjamin Kuykendall was killed in his own home which was located within two miles of Cragfont.³



On the night of June 26th of 1792 a large force of Indians succeeded in overrunning and destroying Zeigler’s Station, two miles west of Bledsoe’s fort across the creek towards Cairo. They set fire to the cabins, forcing the settlers into the open or trapping and burning them within. Jacob Zeigler, founder of the settlement, was burned to death in his cabin, five of the men were shot or clubbed to death, and eighteen women and children were led away into captivity in the Indian nation. Mrs. Zeigler made her escape with an infant child by stuffing a handkerchief into its mouth and hiding in a nearby thicket. Joseph Wilson was wounded in the fighting but escaped with his son and four others through the canebrake to Bledsoe’s fort.^{4,5,6}

The destruction of Zeigler's fort was complete, and the Indians hurried back to the east with their captives and plunder. It was the largest defeat suffered at the hands of the Indians by the settlers along the Cumberland and was the only one of their forts to fall to a siege.

Following the tragic fall of Zeigler's station, militia patrol and scout activities against possible Indian surprise attacks were increased throughout the settlements. Governor Blount ordered Major Sharpe of Sumner County, "who commands all the troops in service, for the protection of the frontiers. . ." to be on the alert for any Indian raids and to treat all Indians as enemies, except the Chickasaws and Choctaws who had only recently met him at Nashville and promised peace. Major Sharpe had 190 men, including both infantry and cavalry, spread out in nine separate stations on the Cumberland. This constituted the military posture of the Territory of the United States South of the Ohio River in defense of the Cumberland settlements, stretching some 85 miles east and west and approximately 25 miles north and south.^{7,8}

Earlier in the year, Governor Blount had viewed the taking of Indian prisoners near Fort Bledsoe as an indication that the settlers were developing the strength and ability to defend themselves. This appraisal was prematurely optimistic.

Shortly before August 11, 1792, Indians killed a boy and wounded a man near Bledsoe's Lick. On August 27, fifteen Creeks set fire to Captain Morgan's station near Bledsoe's Lick. The fire was put out and the Indians were driven off by Captain Lusk's company.¹⁹ Four days later John Birkley and his son were attacked by Indians in a peach orchard in the same neighborhood. The son was scalped and Birkley killed one of the Indians.⁹



*Leaving for the Fort –
The Evacuation of Hall's Station – August 2, 1787
Bill Puryear, Artist, 1976*

This was completed twenty-eight years ago in commemoration of the bicentennial of our independence in 1776. The American Revolution was fought on the Tennessee frontier against the Cherokee, Creek and Chickamauga Indians who were supplied with arms and ammunition by the British who encouraged them to destroy the settlements along the Cumberland and murder their inhabitants.

Receiving information that Indians were in the area, Major Hall attempted to move his family and possessions from their home to Bledsoe's fort a mile away. They were ambushed enroute by more than forty Indians and Major Hall, one of his sons and two of the guards were killed. His wife, Thankful Doak Hall was sister to Rev. Samuel Doak, Chaplain to the Tennesseans who won the Battle of Kings Mountain, South Carolina. She along with her daughter Prudence, the slaves and her son William escaped safely to the fort. William, who wrote the narrative of this event, was later Governor of and US Senator from Tennessee.

Despite the posting of sentries outside every station and with work parties, the terror continued throughout 1792 and into 1793. Those killed during this time in the vicinity of Bledsoe's fort during the months following the Zeigler massacre included

- John Bartlett, Jr., August 31st, near Greenfield
- Robert Bartly, near Walnut Fields Fort
- John Dixon, near General Winchesters, July 3, 1792
- Samuel Pharr and Henry Howdysshell, near Walnut Fields Fort, April 14, 1793
- William McMurray, near Winchester's Mill

On April 9, 1792 tragedy fell upon the Bledsoes once more. Colonel (later Governor) William Hall recalls the ambush of Isaac Bledsoe". . . whilst on the way to his field with his hands. The party was proceeding out to mend up the (burning) log heaps, and the Indians knowing that at such time some person might be expected to attend them, lay in wait nearby, and shot him down and scalped him. The Negroes, being a short distance behind, turned and reached the house in safety." ¹⁰

A few days later, Catherine Montgomery Bledsoe addressed her grief to General Smith, Secretary of the Territory. She wrote on April 17 from Bledsoe's Lick:

"Dear Friend,

"I have to communicate to you the doleful and unhappy news of the loss of my dear husband, who on the 9th instant about eight o'clock in the morning was fired on by a party of Indians in the field south of the lane leading to Major Winchester's and was then killed and scalped. Your knowledge of my situation will enable you better to judge of my deplorable condition than I am able to describe or express. And what greatly adds to my misfortune is my family being all inoculated with the smallpox which we were forced to do, on account of our daughter Sally taking it on the natural way. . . use your influence. . . to procure some troops for the protection of this place as it will be impossible for me to continue here unless some provision of that nature is made. An attempt has been made by calling out a few of the militia from the interior parts of country to guard the frontier stations but. . . without the posts that were formerly kept up are again resumed. . . this settlement cannot possibly stand. The keeping up of this place will (contribute to) preventing the whole of the upper end of the county from breaking for it is frequently spoke of by a number of the people of this neighborhood that if I break up and move away that they will not continue one day longer. . ." ¹¹

Governor Blount advised the Secretary of War of Isaac Bledsoe's death by letter from Knoxville on May 23, 1793. Blount had received news of the scalping from a friendly Cherokee village near Lookout Mountain. A party of twenty-eight Creeks had passed through boasting of having the scalp of the great warrior Colonel ¹²

The brothers Isaac and Anthony Bledsoe were giant figures on the frontier of Sumner County. They were its discoverers and its guardians during its infancy. They both signed its earliest constitution and facilitated its birth out of its mother state of North Carolina. They served as its first justices and officers of its court. They both served in turns as the Commanding Officers of its Militia, the sole and slender defense of the vulnerable outposts for years. They built and held the two forts most exposed to the Indian nations, in the southeast salient of the outpost settlements

Theirs was the first place of refuge and refreshment for the settlers making the long crossing of the Cumberland Mountains in search of independence in a new land– theirs the first friendly faces a child might glimpse after months of anxious travel. They held open the gate for new arrivals, yet their own families were left widowed and orphaned.

His Indian enemies respected Isaac Bledsoe, calling him *Tullatoska*, meaning waving blade of corn or perpetual motion. Old Jack Walker, a Cherokee Chief, who led some of the raids and attacks in the Bledsoe Lick country including the one that destroyed Zeigler's, later recalled that the bravest men and women he ever fought were the Bledsoes and the settlers in what is now Sumner County.¹³

Isaac's own words are his most fitting epitaph: "If we perish here, others will come to avenge our death and accomplish the work we have begun. They will find our graves, or our scattered bones, and tell to the ages that we deserved a better fate."¹⁴



Watching His Back Trail – Drawing by H. David Wright
From the display at Bledsoe Fort Historical Park

Next Chapter – Attack and Counterattack

Bibliography and References

¹ *Guide to Bledsoe's Fort Historical Park, 1998, 1999, Bledsoe's Lick Historical Association, Inc.,*

² *The Great Leap Westward, A History of Sumner County Tennessee From Its Beginnings to 1805, Walter T. Durham, p. 102*

³ *Ibid. pp102-105*

⁴ *Ibid. pp108-109,*

⁵ *Early History of Middle Tennessee, Edward Albright, 1908, p12*

⁶ *Historic Sumner County, Tennessee, Jay Guy Cisco, 1909, Chapter 2*

⁷ *Durham, ibid. p.110*

⁸ *Ramsey's Annals, p. 565.*

⁹ *Durham, ibid. p.110, Ramsey's Annals, p. 565.*

¹⁰ *William Hall, Early History of the Southwest, reprinted 1968, The Parthenon Press, Nashville, 1968, p. 20*

¹¹ *Draper Manuscripts, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin*

¹² *Durham, ibid. p.113-114, quoting Territorial Papers, Vol. IV, p. 259*

¹³ *Jo Conn Guild, Old Times In Tennessee, Tavel, Eastman & Howell, 1878*

¹⁴ *James Robert Gilmore, the Advance Guard of Western civilization, New York 1888, p. 50, as quoted in Durham, ibid. p.40.*

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No one has mined the rich vein of Sumner County History as exhaustively as Walter Durham.

Generations unborn will share in the debt we owe him for the unselfish dedication of his time and considerable talents to the marshalling and recounting of events which flowed through our area.

Since the publication of his first book by the Sumner County Public Library Board in 1969, he has published an entire shelf of well-thumbed books in my library, which include

- *The Great Leap Westward, A History of Sumner County Tennessee From Its Beginnings to 1805,*
- *Old Sumner, A History of Sumner County Tennessee From 1805 to 1861*
- *Rebellion Revisited, A History of Sumner County, Tennessee From 1861 To 1870*
- *Daniel Smith, Frontier Statesman*
- *James Winchester, Tennessee Pioneer*
- *Wynnewood*
- *Josephus Conn Guild and Rose Mont*

- *Volunteer Forty-Niners – Tennesseans And The California Goldrush*
- *A Pictorial History Of Sumner County 1786-1986(With James Thomas)*
- *A Celebration Of Homes (With James Thomas and John F. Creasy)*
- *The Southwest Territory 1790-1796*
- *Numerous articles in The Tennessee Historical Quarterly*

His latest book, on Bailie Peyton, was just released in September, and may be his best yet.

I appreciate the advice Walter has given me from time to time on Sumner County History, as well as his excellent references.

I also appreciate the advice on early times given me by my friend and fellow artist and historian, David Wright, of Gallatin. David is the best of artists depicting the history of the American frontier and Civil War, and has generously allowed me to use his art and photography to illustrate these articles. He is artistic director or consultant to several historical movies, including most currently the War Of 1812, which showed during September on The History Channel, as well as films used in the Cumberland Gap National Park, Martin's Station Virginia State Park and Mansker Station Park at Goodlettsville, TN.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Billy Young of Hendersonville for her research and art on Avery's Trace. Billy's sensitive watercolors capture the atmosphere and spirit of place of Middle Tennessee as well as any I know.