

Summary: Tennessee Becomes a State

Seeking Statehood

After the American colonies gained their independence, the Tennessee frontier became part of North Carolina. However, North Carolina was far away and not able to help the settlers.

The settlers of East Tennessee had governed themselves under the Watauga Association. A group of settlers called a convention to write a constitution. The members wrote to Congress to say that Tennessee should become a state for several reasons: (1) North Carolina could no longer govern the region. (2) The settlers needed to be able to defend themselves from the Cherokee. (3) The federal government had encouraged the creation of new states.

Without waiting for approval, the settlers declared statehood in 1784. They named the new state Franklin and made John Sevier the first governor because he was a known leader and a pioneer. Unfortunately, North Carolina decided not to give up its western lands. The new government was no longer legal and Tennessee was not yet a state.

Statehood

Eight years later North Carolina became part of the newly created United States and turned the Tennessee frontier lands over to the United States government. President Washington named William Blount the governor of this new Southwest Territory.

At least 60,000 free people were needed for it to become a state. According to a 1795 census, 77,000 lived in the Southwest Territory. This included English, Scots-Irish, French, American-born settlers, free and enslaved African Americans, Cherokee, Creek, and Shawnee. Most voters wanted statehood, so Blount called for another convention. Another constitution was written, and this time the land, now called Tennessee, became a state. Knoxville was named the capital, and once again John Sevier became its governor.

The Tennessee Constitution of 1796 gave the right to vote to all free men who owned land, including African American men. However, many African American people in Tennessee were enslaved, and the constitution did not forbid slavery.



Before You Read

Find and underline each vocabulary word.

convention *noun*, a formal meeting held for a specific purpose

capital *noun*, the city where a government meets



After You Read

REVIEW Why did Franklin choose John Sevier to be its first governor? Draw a box around the sentence that answers the question.

REVIEW According to the 1795 census, who lived in Tennessee? Highlight the sentence that lists the people who lived in Tennessee at that time.