



Lost state of Franklin

Northeast section of Tennessee almost gained its own statehood. What happened?

Story by Bill Carey

This month marks the 225th anniversary of the beginning of the short-lived state of Franklin. I'm sorry to report that, as best I can tell, this historic anniversary is not being acknowledged in Tennessee. But I'd like to devote this month's column to the story of this unique chapter in our state's history.

In 1784, the people who lived in what is now upper East Tennessee originally tried to organize a state called Franklin. They elected a governor and a legislature, wrote a constitution and began going about the business of running their affairs (collecting taxes, holding courts, raising an army against the hostile Native American tribes of the day). Had the state of North Carolina not been bitterly opposed to the formation of the new state, Franklin almost certainly would have been accepted into the Union by the Continental Congress, and Tennessee would be known as Franklin today. But because of North Carolina's opposition, Congress never accepted this new state.

The story of the unrecognized state of Franklin starts during the American Revolution. It is important to remember that one of the main reasons for this war was King George III's order that the Colonists go no farther west than the Appalachian Mountains. Thousands of settlers ignored his demand and moved into what is now upper East Tennessee in the 1770s and 1780s. They also played a huge role in the outcome of the Revolution by defeating a British army at the Battle of Kings Mountain near the North Carolina-South Carolina line.

When the Revolutionary War ended, these settlers needed protection against Native American tribes, and the closest thing to an established government that these settlers had was that of North Carolina. But — for the same reasons King George III was reluctant to do so — North Carolina didn't want to incur the expense of sending its militia to defend a bunch of frontier families moving



In Greeneville, a historic marker describes the replica cabin believed to have served as the first capitol of the state of Franklin. The original building was dismantled and taken to Nashville as part of the Tennessee centennial celebration in 1897 but never returned to Greene County.

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farther and farther into lands claimed by Cherokee and Creek Indians. In the summer of 1784, the government of North Carolina voted to "give" this land to Congress. Then, after a new election, the North Carolina government rescinded that act and reclaimed this territory.

The settlers west of the mountains weren't sure what to make of this sequence of events. But the notion that they were completely dependent on the North Carolina government for their security didn't make them feel safe.

Concerned that the appearance of chaos would incite attacks, frontier leaders acted quickly to fill the void. On Aug. 23, 1784, about 50 frontier leaders met in Jonesborough and signed a document declaring themselves independent from North Carolina. Within months they had formed a loose government with a court system and a militia presided over by John Sevier, who had been one of the heroes of the Battle of Kings Mountain four years earlier.

In December, the elected representatives held a convention at a church in Jonesborough. There they wrote a constitution (borrowing heavily from the North Carolina con-

stitution), elected Sevier as their governor and officially named the state Franklin. William Cocke, one of the authors of the new constitution, was appointed the rather difficult task of going to Washington and convincing the Continental Congress to admit Franklin as a state.

Now the story takes a strange turn:

Having flirted with the idea of giving its western lands away only a few months earlier, the government of North Carolina was angry at the western settlers for declaring their independence. In fact, the North Carolina Legislature wanted to send troops to punish the rebellious people who lived in the state of Franklin, but North Carolina Gov. Alexander Martin, remembering how well these settlers had fought at Kings Mountain, advised caution in the matter. Instead the North Carolina government issued and published 5,000 copies of a “manifesto” that urged the frontiersmen to “return to the embrace of North Carolina.” Most of the residents of the state of Franklin ignored this document.

In the spring of 1785, Cocke made his presentation to Congress. On behalf of his fellow settlers, he asked Congress to admit Franklin as the 14th state. Needing nine affirmative votes, the state of Franklin got seven — those being Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Georgia. (States that voted “no” did so mainly because of North Carolina’s opposition.) Though Cocke was discouraged, he felt Congress would agree at some point in the future.

Undaunted, the government of the state of Franklin kept on — forming a permanent capital (Greeneville) and, apparently, authorizing the issuance of money (although no coins by the state of Franklin have ever been located). Originally consisting of three counties, by the end of 1786, Franklin had eight: Greene, Sullivan, Washington, Sevier, Blount, Spencer, Caswell and Wayne.



The home of John Tipton in Johnson City is now part of Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site. North Carolina troops camped at Tipton’s estate and fought Franklin loyalists in the “Battle of the Lost State of Franklin” in 1788.

These counties were formed because the population was growing so fast. In the latter part of 1785 and the first part of 1786, an estimated 10,000 families migrated from North Carolina and Virginia to the state of Franklin. The most extreme example of this growth was White’s Fort, a community started in early 1786 that, by the end of its first year of existence, had more than 2,000 people living there! (Today this community is known as Knoxville.)

Here are some more interesting things about the

state of Franklin:

- Franklin was originally known as “Frankland.” Apparently Sevier changed the name in an attempt to lure support from Ben Franklin — arguably the most popular American alive at that time. This happened so fast that many books about the state of Franklin make no mention of its original name.
- Paper and coin money never took hold in Franklin. According to one account, the Franklin Legislature spelled out a system of exchange using animal skins. The governor of the state of Franklin got a salary of 1,000 deer skins, the chief justice 500 deer skins, the governor’s secretary 500 raccoon skins and the treasurer 450 otter skins.
- Ministers of the gospel and lawyers were barred from public office under the Franklin constitution.

In the end, the state of Franklin was doomed by events within and outside its borders. To the west, battles with Native Americans were becoming fierce, mainly because so many of the immigrants were settling on land still claimed by Cherokee.

There were also people inside the state of Franklin who were loyal to North Carolina. The most important of these was John Tipton, who lived in present-day Johnson City. When the leaders of the state of Franklin began to flirt with the idea of an alliance with Spain (remember, Spain still dominated trade along the Mississippi River), North Carolina sent troops into Franklin, camping out on Tipton’s estate. From Feb. 27 to 29, 1788, troops loyal to Franklin confronted troops loyal to North Carolina; two people died in what is sometimes referred to as the “Battle of the Lost State of Franklin.” (You can learn about this incident on a visit to Tipton’s estate, today the Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site.)

The brief military engagement marked the end of the state of Franklin. John Sevier turned himself in to North Carolina’s authorities and was immediately restored to his rank of general in the North Carolina militia. Soon he and his fellow frontiers-

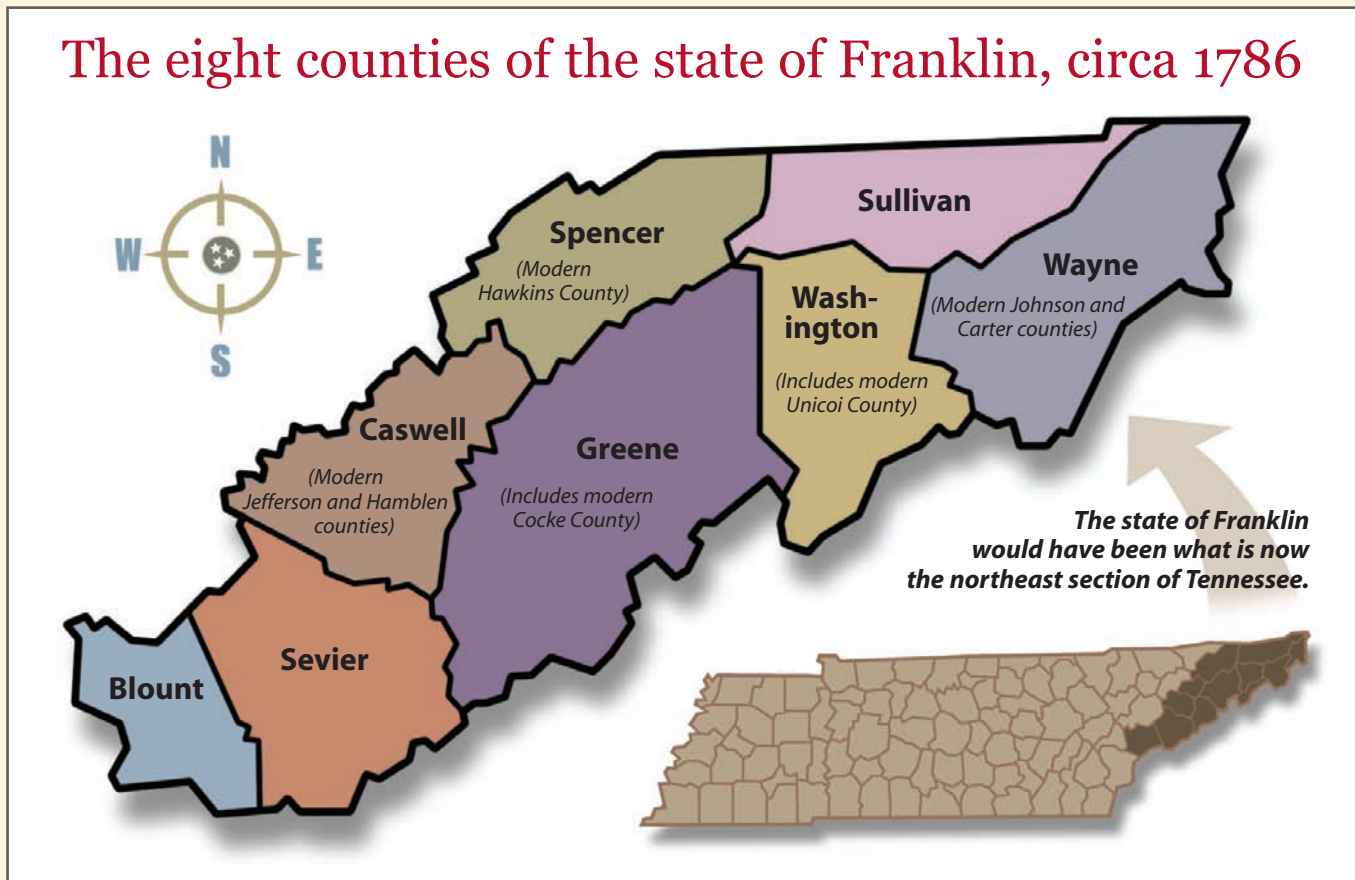


Tennessee History for Kids

Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of “Tennessee History for Kids,” an online Tennessee history textbook.

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The eight counties of the state of Franklin, circa 1786



men were overwhelmed with a series of Indian wars that took place at many points along the western frontier.

After the demise of the state of Franklin, North Carolina decided to honor all property transactions, court decisions and marriages authorized by Franklin — the closest thing to official recognition that the state ever had. Shortly thereafter, North Carolina deeded its western lands to the federal government.

So what's left of the state of Franklin? Not much, really. Almost none of the official government records of the state of Franklin have survived (which is why we don't even know the names of the people who met and declared the state independent in the first place). For years, the log cabin that functioned as Franklin's capitol building was left standing. In 1897, it was dismantled and reassembled in Nashville as a part of the Tennessee centennial celebration. But for some reason the logs never made their way back to Greeneville — which means that the capitol of the lost state of Franklin was, well, lost.

The failed attempt to form the state of Franklin did, however, have an important outcome: It was one of many incidents that proved that the government established by

the Articles of Confederation did not work. As representatives of the 13 states worked hard on a new form of government, they addressed the issues of new states in an attempt to make certain that nothing like Franklin could ever happen again. Under the new Constitution, the American government formed two territories out of the frontier — one south of the Ohio River (known as the Southwest Territory) and one north of the Ohio River (known as the Northwest Territory). In addition to the state militias, the U.S. Army would take responsibility for securing these borders until

they became states.



Johnson City's Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site is a place where visitors can learn more about the history of the settlement of Tennessee.

Note: There's a new book about this topic, written by Kevin Barksdale, called "The Lost State of Franklin: America's First Secession." ☺