Settlements on the Cumberland

Richard Henderson was far from discouraged by his failure in Transylvania. With characteristic energy and aggressiveness he determined to repeat on North Carolina soil the revolutionary experiment which Virginia had denied him. He firmly believed that he and his associates had purchased millions of acres from the Cherokee within the limits of North Carolina, for the grant extended from the "Cumberland River, including all its waters to the Ohio River." His first consideration, therefore, was to determine whether the aforementioned territory lay in North Carolina, which, unlike Virginia, had made no move to nullify his claims. This could be done by extending the dividing line between North Carolina and Virginia, which had been surveyed only as far west as Steep Hill Creek.

Henderson planned to locate the settlement of his new project at French Lick on the Cumberland—the present site of Nashville. At this place in 1776 George Rogers Clark purchased 3,000 acres from Virginia. But Henderson doubtless intended to pay Clark the purchase money for "cain rights" should the planned survey show that his property lay within the chartered bounds of that colony.

Henderson chose James Robertson and John Donelson as the leaders of the new enterprise. In this he showed the same prudence and foresight with which he had chosen Boone for the Boonesboro project. Robertson needs no introduction. Colonel John Donelson was admired for his marked resourcefulness and proved stability. Born in Maryland, he had moved to Virginia
where he served as vestryman for two parishes, as surveyor, and three times as a member of the House of Burgesses. A lieutenant colonel of militia he had traveled widely on the frontier, serving successfully as a peacemaker among the Cherokee.

Henderson undoubtedly offered Robertson and Donelson large inducements for their services. Otherwise, Robertson would hardly have relinquished leadership of the Watauga settlements and Donelson would have refused to abandon the ambition to speculate in extensive western lands.

With untiring energy and efficiency Robertson recruited a party for the preliminary exploration of the country. In a letter to the governor of North Carolina he predicted that, by the beginning of March 1779, as many as two hundred men with their families would be ready to leave Long Island on the Holston for the Cumberland region. In order to provide the prospective settlers with bread on their arrival in the fall of that year, Robertson with eight white men and a Negro left for French Lick to plant corn.

The party followed buffalo paths through dense forests and canebrakes, wandering and exploring and hunting, until they arrived at their destination. There they were soon joined by another small group whose leader, Casper Mansker, claimed the land by right of settlement. They cleared the land, built rude fences and planted and cultivated corn. Then all of them, except Robertson and three other men, returned to Watauga. Robertson, believing that the settlement lay within the jurisdiction of Virginia and that, therefore, the property belonged to George Rogers Clark, went to see that officer in Vincennes. Clark agreed to accept "cain rights" should the land prove to lie in Virginia. Robertson returned to Watauga to command the migration.

Meanwhile Virginia and North Carolina had taken steps to complete the surveying of their mutual boundaries to the Mississippi River. As commissioners for this task Virginia appointed Dr. Thomas Walker and Major Daniel Smith, and North Carolina chose Richard Henderson, John Williams and William Bailey Smith. Thus Henderson, in his efforts to place the jurisdiction of the French Lick settlement in North Carolina, had, by some means known only to himself, succeeded in having members of
the Transylvania Company appointed as two of the North Carolina commissioners. Furthermore, the third commissioner from North Carolina had been closely associated with Henderson from the very beginning.

The five commissioners from the two colonies met at Steep Hill Creek on September 1, 1779, and began surveying toward the west. They soon disagreed, however, in regard to the observations on which the running of the line should depend. On Cumberland Mountain the North Carolina commissioners abandoned their work, but Henderson, accompanied by his brothers, Pleasant, Nathaniel, and Samuel, advanced with the Virginia commissioners to the Tennessee River. From there they repaired to Boonesboro which they reached on Christmas Day.

Henderson had two reasons for going to the settlement. He had patched up his difference with Nathaniel Hart and wished to induce him to settle on French Lick. He also hoped to per-
suade Hart to sell him 300 bushels of corn. Henderson succeeded in both undertakings, though extremely cold weather delayed the corn until the middle of March 1780 when it was loaded in pirogues and taken down the Kentucky under the direction of William Bailey Smith. From the falls of the river it was floated down the Ohio to the mouth of the Cumberland and thence to French Lick.

The expedition to the Cumberland country was to be made by two parties, one by land and the other by water. Robertson was to lead the land party of skilled hunters and Indian fighters through Cumberland Gap, while Donelson took their families and some older men and slaves in boats down the Tennessee and up the Ohio and the Cumberland—a veritable modern Odyssey of 985 miles which in its heroic details has few equals in the entire history of the American frontier.

Robertson conferred with Donelson and agreed to explore the country between French Lick and Muscle Shoals if circumstances permitted. Should Robertson discover a practicable overland route from Muscle Shoals to the north, he was to inform Donelson by leaving some message or sign at the head of the Shoals. Donelson was then to disembark, thereby saving himself and his charges the hardships of the rest of the long and tedious journey by water.

Robertson started first. He and his men went through Cumberland Gap, followed the Warriors' Path for some distance and then blazed a trail of their own. As they progressed slowly in deep snow and bitter cold they fell in with some families who had intended going to Kentucky but who quickly joined them. At length the party reached the Cumberland, a curving avenue of solid ice which they crossed on foot with their cattle. On its banks they started a settlement, naming it Nashboro in honor of General Francis Nash of North Carolina revolutionary fame.

On December 22, 1779, Donelson launched his expedition from Fort Patrick Henry on the Holston. It inchèd like a file of black insects in the heavy snowfall which early in the previous month had precipitated one of the coldest winters on record. Donelson's flagship, appropriately named the Adventure, carried his wife
and eleven children, several slaves and the household silver engraved “JDe.” About thirty smaller boats joined him as he journeyed down the river.

The *Adventure* was a large flatboat, probably one of those constructed of heavy, squared logs known as “broadhorns.” Most of its hull was roofed and its sides bulwarked. Rough bunks provided sleeping quarters for the voyagers, and a stone hearth warmed their bodies as well as their spirits in the desolate surroundings. In calm weather the boat was steered by sweeps; in rough, it was propelled by poles. It floated rapidly downstream but struggled upstream. The boats that accompanied it were of a similar type.

Donelson kept a journal of the expedition. Though written in the stilted and diffuse style of the period, clearly not the work of a practiced literary man, it is one of the most vivid and forceful documents in the pioneer literature of America. Donelson’s diary provides stark evidence of the suffering a man is capable of enduring for the sake of realizing an ideal. On the first day of his voyage Donelson floated only three miles, to the mouth of Reedy Creek, where he encamped in the snow.

There the entire party remained, enduring cold and privation until in February 1780 the thawing ice enabled them to sail for Cloud’s Creek. Joined by the smaller boats of the expedition, they took their departure and struck Poor Valley Shoal where they lay grounded that afternoon and succeeding night “in much distress.” In the morning rising water came to their rescue. They lightened their boats enough to set them free, but in attempting to land on an island they lost some of their baggage.

Icy February melted before a rainy and windy March. Yet the travelers saw no signs of spring. Only the dark cones of cedars on the lower slopes and the pine groves among the hardwood forest relieved the drab gray that spread all around them. Impenetrable clouds hung eternally on the ranges. Patches of sage grass intruded on young trees and on clusters of brier and bramble. Skeletons of sycamore and oak waved in driving sheets of rain.

On March 2 in the continuing downpour Donelson led his fleet past the mouth of the French Broad River where the strong current damaged one of the boats, sending much of its cargo to the
bottom and endangering the lives of its crew. To the rescue of the distressed went the whole fleet. The men snatched floating articles, helped dry the shivering passengers and bailed the boat in order to reload her cargo.

That afternoon Reuben Harrison went hunting and failed to return by nightfall. Early in the morning Donelson ordered a four-pounder to be fired and sent out a few men to search the woods for the missing man. Failing to find him, Donelson left Harrison's father in charge of a few boats to continue the search and proceeded downstream. There Donelson found Reuben. That afternoon they passed the Tennessee, and ten miles farther encamped on the southern shore of the river.

Since they were now in Indian country, the sailors took the precaution of posting sentinels. Blinding sheets of rain followed by dense fog had slowed some of the boats to the extent that Donelson was forced to wait until the fleet reassembled. That night one of the Negroes died in camp from frozen feet and legs.

Now the fog vanished before a stinging wind. The Adventure advanced steadily on the furious waves, but the smaller boats tossed like chips of wood on a ruffled lake. The wife of Ephraim Peyton was delivered of a child. Ephraim himself did not witness the blessed event for he had “gone through” by land with Robertson, leaving his wife in the care of the Jennings family.

Soon the voyagers saw Indians crowding the southern bank. With cries of “Brothers! Brothers!” the red men invited them by signs to land. At this Donelson's son and John Caffrey boarded a canoe which the colonel had in tow and began crossing the river. In midstream they were met by a canoe full of Indians under the leadership of a half-breed named Archy Coody, who advised them to return to the boat. When the young men turned their canoe Coody and his companions followed them.

Reaching the boat immediately after Caffrey and young Donelson, the half-breed and his companions sprang on board. The Indians appeared friendly. Donelson gave them presents which they accepted with much pleasure. Suddenly the voyagers saw on the shore a group of Indians, armed and painted red and black, embarking in canoes. Coody signaled his companions to return to their canoes while he and a friend remained on board and urged Donelson to move off quickly. The colonel obeyed,
and not too soon, for he saw a number of armed and painted Indians running down the riverbank in an attempt to intercept the voyagers. A few miles downstream Coody and his friend left with the assurance that the white men had passed danger.

At another town near an island on the southern bank the voyagers saw Indians shouting for them to disembark. The red men, seeing the boats standing off the opposite bank, assured the travelers in a friendly manner that the south side was better for navigation. This inducement the voyagers ignored and sailed on, but before long a man named Payne was killed from ambush as his boat hugged the northern shore which Donelson presumed to be safer. The boats, however, went by so quickly that the Indians were unable to organize a real attack.

Nevertheless, the savages succeeded in picking off the last boat in the fleet. This belonged to Captain Stuart, and had on board twenty-eight persons, including Stuart, his family and friends. Some days earlier one of his children had contracted smallpox which soon spread. Donelson requested Stuart to keep behind the other boats, assuring him that he would inform him of the place of encampment each night by sounding his horn. The Indians, observing the straggling boat, fell on it and massacred all its passengers. To those ahead the yells of the Indians, the screams of the women and the crack of the guns bespoke the futility of attempting to rescue their unfortunate friends. Perhaps they found lean solace in the grim hope that the smallpox would avenge the tragedy.

The Indians pursued the voyagers along the rocky paths that paralleled the river until Cumberland Mountain removed them from sight. Now the river itself demanded their vigilance. They had arrived at the Whirl where Cumberland Mountain, jutting out on both sides, compresses the river to about half its usual width. The eddies and cross currents of the narrows, intensified by heavy rains, dashed and tossed the fleet while crews, standing on the bows and sides with poles, fended the boats off from rocks and the drifting trees that raced with them in the flood.

Before entering the narrows John Cotton had safeguarded his family by transferring it to a larger boat. To its stern was tied a large, goods-laden canoe which, dashing wildly to and fro, pres-
Settlements on the Cumberland

tently overturned. Cotton's friends immediately decided to recover the cargo. Landing at a level spot on the northern shore, Donelson and his men started to walk toward the scene of the wreck when they heard the crack of guns and the whistle of bullets. Standing immediately over them on the overhanging cliffs of the shore were Indians who were firing down on them. Hastily the would-be rescuers retreated to the boats, leaving Cotton and his crew to solve the problem as best they could.

The Indians continued to fire on the boats as they moved off, wounding four men. Young Nancy Gower seized the rudder and steered the boat until the menfolk were reorganized. When the flurry was over, Mrs. Gower noticed that Nancy's skirt was soaked with blood. The girl had suffered a shot through the thigh without uttering a sound.

By now they had passed the narrows. The river widened with a placid and gentle current. All the boats were safe save the one commanded by Jonathan Jennings, which had run into a large, partly hidden rock jutting from the northern shore. Early next morning Donelson was awakened in camp by shouts of distress far in the rear, and he soon saw Jennings and several passengers of his boat emerge from the forest.

The stragglers were cold, hungry, bedraggled. Jennings told an exciting tale. As soon as the Indians discovered his predicament they had turned a galling fire upon the boat. He ordered his wife, his nearly grown son, a friend of his son, and his Negro man and woman to throw the baggage into the river to lighten the boat so that it might be moved off the reef. While the others were thus engaged, Jennings covered them by rifle fire which, since he was an excellent marksman, always found its target. Instead of carrying out Jennings' orders, the younger men and the Negro, seized with panic, jumped from the boat. The Negro was drowned and young Jennings and his friend were wounded and captured by the Indians. Jennings' wife, aided by the Ngress, succeeded in unloading the boat and shoving it off the rock; indeed, it started so suddenly that Mrs. Jennings lost her balance and almost drowned. In the confusion, Mrs. Peyton's child was killed, but the mother, though only eighteen hours from childbed, retained her health despite cold, water and exertion.
Two days later the voyagers sighted Muscle Shoals. Here, on the northern shore, they halted to look for the pre-arranged signal from Robertson. They found neither Robertson nor any signs of him. Concluding that they should continue by water, they trimmed their boats in the best manner possible and before nightfall approached the shoals. These presented a fearful spectacle. The high water, swift and broken, surged in waves and roared among piles of driftwood around the points of the islands where the currents ran in all directions. Frequently the boats touched bottom. They tossed as much as in a rough sea, and the passengers lived every moment in deadly fear of being dashed to pieces. But a kind fate protected them and within three hours the dreadful ordeal passed without accident. Humbly grateful to God, they camped for the night on the northern shore. And God rewarded their fortitude by granting them a day's respite from their troubles.

In the morning, however, the Indians fired on two boats near the shore, slightly wounding five of the crewmen. That night the voyagers encamped near the mouth of a creek. Hardly had they built their fires and lain down to rest than the frenzied barking of dogs brought them to their feet. Thinking that they were about to be attacked, they hastily broke camp, took to their boats and fell down the river about a mile where they encamped again. In the morning Donelson persuaded his son John and Caffrey to return to the earlier camp in a canoe and recover the utensils abandoned in their retreat. They found a Negro whom they had left behind still asleep by the ashes of a campfire.

The wayfarers moved peacefully on the now gentle stream to the junction of the Tennessee and the Ohio rivers. The sight gladdened their hearts for they knew that much of their voyage lay behind them. They rejoiced, too, at the passing of cold weather. Spring at last was definitely in the air. Here and there in the sheltered places beyond the canebrakes and gaunt white sycamores on the shores, delicate green began to appear on dogwood and maple and crab apple. But the pioneers rejoiced too soon. Sailing up the Ohio toward the Cumberland they found the river very high. Like chips of wood in water from a broken dam, the lumbering boats were dashed back and forth by the
Settlements on the Cumberland

rapid currents. Moreover, the crews were famished and fatigued. Some of them, refusing to ascend the river, floated down the Mississippi to Natchez, and others—among them Donelson's daughter and husband—made for the Illinois country.

Donelson grimly pursued his course, taking more than four days to pole, shove, tow and otherwise work the boats up the Ohio to the Cumberland. His efforts were rewarded. His passengers found the Cumberland gentle, and its banks generously provided them with poke salad, buffalo and wild swan which proved "very delicious."

In better spirits they ascended the river until on the last day of March they met Henderson and rejoiced. Henderson regaled the settlers with an account of his own travels and cheered them by telling them of the corn he had bought from Hart. Worn by the long voyage and the privations they had endured, they yet went on in exultant mood. On April 23 they reached the first settlement on the north side of the river, a mile and a half below the lick called Eaton's Station. Next day they arrived at French Lick and climbed to the cluster of cabins Robertson and his company had built. The long, hard voyage was ended at last. Out of the 167 who had begun the expedition 23 had lost their lives either in the river or at the hands of Indians. Nine bore the marks of bullet wounds. All thought themselves fortunate for having completed the expedition.

In the ensuing days the vast Cumberland Valley clamored with human activity. All around in the deep forest rose cabins, stockades and stockhouses with gardens and yards surrounded by stout palings. Gradually eight separate settlements or "stations" appeared, each named, in typical pioneer fashion, after the original settler or some natural object: a river, a ford or a hill.

On a limestone bluff covered with cedars, which became the center of the community, rose the little stockaded village of Nashboro. The other stations, scattered along both sides of the river, were hidden from one another by stretches of cane that covered the intervening ground.

At Clover Bottom on Stone's River, about seven miles from the village on the bluff, John Donelson encamped with his large
family, cleared several acres and planted corn and cotton. Two months later rising water forced the Donelsons to take refuge in Casper Mansker's blockhouse ten miles away where they remained until at the end of the summer the receding river permitted them to return to their clearing. One day Indians attacked Donelson and some of his slaves while they were gathering in the corn and cotton that had survived the flood. Two of the slaves were killed. Perceiving the difficulty of obtaining a clear title to his grant, Donelson soon left the Cumberland region and joined his son in Kentucky. His neighbor, Richard Henderson, remained to sell lands under the deed he and his associates had secured from the Cherokee in the Treaty of Watauga five years before.

More than any other man in the community Henderson realized the numerous problems which confronted the settlers. They must be protected from attack by Indians and by whites as well. They must move under just laws. They must mold their habits to Christian precepts for their own benefit. Henderson had no desire to repeat the mistake he had made in Transylvania by attempting to establish another independent colony. Indeed, he enlisted Robertson's advice in forming a government for the new settlements. Both men sought a government of the settlers, by the settlers and for the settlers, somewhat akin to the one Robertson had formed in the Watauga region.

Henderson requested the settlers of the eight stations to elect delegates to an assembly. On May 1, 1780, this body met at Nashboro and entered into an agreement of government known as the Cumberland Compact. Robertson's influence in the document is seen from the very beginning:

That the well-being of this country entirely depends, under Divine Providence, on unanimity of sentiment and concurrences in measures, and as clashing interests and opinions, without being under some restraint, will most certainly produce confusion, discord, and almost certain ruin, so we think it our duty to associate, and hereby form ourselves into one society for the benefit of present and future settlers, and until the full and proper exercise of the laws of our country can be in use, and the powers of government exerted among us: we do most solemnly and sacredly declare and promise each other, that we will faithfully and punctually adhere to, perform, and abide by this our Association, and
Settlements on the Cumberland

at all times, if need be, compel, by our united force, a due obedience to these our rules and regulations.

Thirteen days later the male settlers, 256 in number, ratified the work of the delegates and signed the Compact. By so doing, they guaranteed one another their rights to the land, their personal security against wrongdoers and their faith in the integrity of the community.

The Compact provided that the affairs of the community be administered by a committee of twelve judges or triers to be elected by voters over twenty-one years of age. Three of the judges were to come from Nashboro, two from Mansker's, two from Bledsoe's and one from each of the other five stations. If the people should grow dissatisfied with their judges they may call a new election in any of the said stations, and elect others in their stead, having due respect to the number now agreed to be elected at each station, which persons so to be chosen shall have the same power with those in whose room or place they shall be chosen to act.

The judges were to serve without salaries, but the Clerk of the Court was permitted to accept small fees, "just enough to pay for the pens, ink, and paper, all of them scarce commodities."

The Compact established a land office over which the court had complete jurisdiction in all cases of conflict over land titles. A good part of the Compact was devoted to the rules of the land office. In the case of a land dispute, a majority of the twelve judges could give a binding decision which was to be recorded in the land office by the entry taker, an official appointed by Henderson. All future marked or improved claims and all improvements not registered with the entry taker within twenty days after the Compact had been formed were declared null and void. Any entry taker found guilty of fraud in office was to be removed.

In the absence of any constituted authority of government, the judges were to consider themselves a "proper court" for the recovery of debt or damage. In cases of a controversy involving less than $300, three judges sufficed; but in those involving more
than that sum, appeal could be had in a court consisting of as many as nine judges whose decision would be final.

The court, of which Robertson was elected chairman, enjoyed large powers. It levied taxes and performed marriages, passed sentences and awarded contracts, granted letters of administration on estates of deceased persons and punished disturbers of the peace and those who committed capital crimes—provided it refrained from sentencing death or bodily harm. Perpetrators of crimes considered dangerous to the state were to stand trial in the regular courts of North Carolina. Thus the Compact acknowledged the legal jurisdiction of North Carolina over the region and promised obedience to her constitution and laws.

Because of the Indian depredations, the Compact established a militia composed of officers and men from the various settlements. Robertson was chosen colonel. The officers had the power to call out the militia in time of need, to punish shirkers and deserters and to impress horses for warfare. The settlers of the stations were to pay proportionate damages—as determined by the court—for those horses which were injured.

Two weeks later the Compact was amended. The change provided that all males over sixteen years old and able to perform military service could enter lands, a policy which naturally increased sales. The amendment also provided that the entry taker would receive twelve dollars for each entry, and that the entry book would be open to the judges at all times.

Mindful of his disappointment in Virginia, Henderson took pains to incorporate into the Compact provision for a petition addressed to Congress “giving the fullest assurance of fidelity and attachment to the interest of the Country, and obedience to the laws and Constitution thereof.” He assured Congress that “we do not desire to be exempt from the rateable share of the public expense of the present War or other contingent charges of government.”

The Compact declared that it was designed as a “temporary method of restraining the licentious” and that the Cumberland settlers regarded themselves as citizens of North Carolina. It asked the mother state to extend them immediate protection by making them a separate county. The document admirably met the needs of the backwoodsmen who were too shrewd and too
practical to attempt to live by an untried government. Familiar with the county system, they modified it to fit their needs.

Henderson stayed in the settlements only a short time. Learning that the North Carolina assembly disputed his land claim, he went to defend it before that body. Early in 1782 the assembly declared that his claim to the Cherokee cession was illegal. As compensation for his expense, trouble and risks, however, it granted him 200,000 acres in Powell’s Valley. This tract proved to be “mountainous barren land, altogether unfit for cultivation,” and Henderson never surveyed it. Later he settled on a small grant which Virginia gave him in Kentucky where he established the present city that bears his name.

Leadership of the Cumberland settlements passed to Robertson, who in the next seven years defended them against Indian attacks, preserved law and order and persuaded the settlers to remain until success should crown their perseverance.

The attacks began with alarming suddenness in April 1780, when a group of Chickasaw massacred Jonathan Jennings and one of Robertson’s sons, killed pigs and cows and drove off the horses. Thereafter the Chickasaw murdered on farms, by stockades, at licks and in the forests, wherever they could lure their victims by gobbling like turkeys or growling like bears. And the settlers responded pitifully. Gradually they deserted stockade and cabin until by midsummer all the eight settlements save Nashboro and Freeland’s stood lifeless.

The exodus shook, but never enfeebled, Robertson’s tenacity. The death of his son, the spasmodic Indian attacks and the panic of the settlers only strengthened his resolve to remain in Nashboro and see that settlement pull through its crisis and enjoy the glory it deserved. He was everywhere—encouraging, consoling, sympathizing. And before long the remaining settlers rose to receive the comfort of his heartening words. Abandoning the futility of trying to live by their stock and crops, they took to the woods where their expert marksmanship quickly rewarded them with an abundance of game.

During the winter one party of hunters killed over a hundred bears, seventy-five buffaloes and eighty-seven deer. Such prodigalities soon exhausted their ammunition. To overcome this
emergency Robertson announced that he would fetch the needed ammunition from Kentucky. Passing fearlessly across an endless desert of snow and through desolate, Indian-infested country, he purchased the powder and began to retrace his journey. On the evening of January 15, 1781, he reached Freeland's. The settlers received him joyfully, listened around a late supper table to the details of his journey and then went to bed without taking the precaution of posting sentinels.

They all slept soundly except Robertson, who tossed suspiciously. A late moon threw a silvery gloss over stockhouses and stockade. Suddenly Robertson heard the heavy chain of a gate clang, heard figures slipping across the yard, heard them stealing around the heavy timber pickets of the palisades. "Indians!" he shouted, springing from his bed and firing his gun into the darkness. Thus aroused from sleep, his companions flashed their rifles through the merlons, scaring off the enemy. Robertson killed one of the Indians. The Indians killed two settlers and wounded two others.

The next day a formidable number of Indians attacked the fort in Nashboro. For several days they hovered like vultures over the settlement, burning cabins and fences, driving off cattle and picking off those men, women and children who for one reason or another ventured outside the walls. Finally they set fire to the fort and fell back into the forest. While one group of settlers put out the fire, another galloped after the red men, overtook them at a creek and engaged them in a duel of musketry.

Meanwhile a larger group of Indians, concealed in underbrush and behind cedars, prepared for an assault on the fort in the rear of the combatants. The settlers, becoming aware of this maneuver, saw their only chance lay in forcing their way back to the fort through their numerically superior enemies. This was a desperate venture, for the settlers had discharged their guns and had no time to reload them. But fate came to their rescue in the form of a freakish incident. Their bewildered horses, running back to the fort, passed a group of the Indians who pursued them to make them their own.

Meanwhile the settlers in the fort, sensing what was happening, made preparations of defense while the women leveled guns through the merlons or lifted axes at the gate. Even the dogs of
the fort had their day. These stout, powerfully built animals—some hounds, some watchdogs and all accustomed to fighting bear and buffalo—saw the line of Indians drawn up between the fort and their masters and instantly sensed their duty. Furiously they attacked the Indians, scattering them in all directions.

Availing themselves of the opportunity this circumstance provided, the settlers ran through the lines and gained the fort. Five of the white men were killed and two were wounded. Another man fell with a broken thigh near the gate; he rose, reloaded his gun and fired as he attempted to run, thereby saving his scalp.

Under the walls an Indian overtook a settler and began to whack him on the shoulder with his gun while he pulled the trigger. The Indian's bullet missed—but the settler's did not. The Indians, seeing that the gates were closed and the settlers ready, abandoned their effort to capture the fort. They had taken five scalps and a number of horses, and the whites had taken two scalps and wounded a number of their enemies.

Thereafter the Indians made only small raids against the fort. These, however, sufficed to prevent planting corn. The settlers' days were spent in endless vigilance. When one drank from a spring, another stood by with rifle ready to protect him against a lurking Indian. When four or five assembled at a place where business required their presence, they held their guns in their hands with their backs turned to one another—one or more facing each direction—ready for the enemy.

Depression seized some of them; they began to talk of deserting the settlements; they dreamed of safer homes in Kentucky or on the Holston. Robertson pertinaciously resisted the settlers' mutinous longing. He pointed out to them the impossibility of reaching Kentucky: how were they to elude the Indians who, in large numbers, held all the roads and passages leading to that region? How were they to reach the Holston? They might, he said, go down on the river to Illinois, but even this route presented insurmountable obstacles. How were they to come by the wood with which to build their boats? Every day Indians lay concealed in shrubs and behind cedars, ready to pick them off the moment they appeared in the forest. Why should they risk danger and death when they were so near to possessing, if they but persisted a little longer, this fine country which God had
sent them to settle? Soon veterans would join them from the older settlements; surely they could defend and support themselves until help could arrive.

Robertson's encouraging words prevailed. The settlers' anxieties diminished. They thought less and less of abandoning the settlements. They resolved to remain on the ground which their recollection of past dangers, of enduring toil and of conquered difficulties, had made precious.

A kinder day rewarded their forbearance. At the end of 1781 they learned of Cornwallis' surrender. As Robertson had anticipated, this put an end to the Indian attacks for the present and at the same time brought an inflow of veterans, both officers and men, seeking the bounty lands which the North Carolina assembly reserved for them when in 1782 it converted the Cumberland country into a military district.

In the fall of the following year the assembly provided them with a local government by creating Davidson County, named in honor of the North Carolinian hero General William Lee Davidson, who lost his life at Cowan's Ford while resisting the advance of British troops.

Each veteran claimant was given his preference of the land not already pre-empted by the original settlers of the country. A private received 640 acres; a noncommissioned officer, 1,000; a subaltern, 2,160; a captain, 3,840; a colonel, 7,200; a brigadier, 12,000; a chaplain, 7,200; a surgeon, 4,800; and a surgeon's mate, 2,560.

The three commissioners sent out to apportion the district, Absalom Tatum, Anthony Bledsoe and Isaac Shelby, were accompanied by 100 guardsmen whose presence encouraged the settlers and strengthened the defense of the country. The veterans gradually restored the old stations and established new, and built corn mills and "homing pounders" on the banks of some of the streams.

Eager for justice between man and man, Robertson meanwhile had reorganized the committee of judges which had not met for two years. At his request the settlements elected ten men, with Robertson as chairman and colonel of the militia. For the next seven months the ten judges, meeting in Nashboro, ruled the settlements with sovereign power. The records of the court have
been preserved and provide an illuminating picture of some of the vicissitudes of life in the wilderness.

At its first session, which began on January 7, 1783, the court issued an attachment against the estate of one John Sadler, who had absconded after giving a bad note in “payment of two good cows and heifer with calf.” Humphrey Hogan sued one of his neighbors for stealing a kettle. The court awarded the kettle to Humphrey and ordered the defendant and his mother-in-law, who was involved in the theft, to pay the cost of the suit. In another case a settler sought to secure judgment for cattle that he had won “in gaming at cards,” but the court judged “the debt illegal” and dismissed the suit.

One of the court’s regulations followed an economic principle of doubtful value. Some enterprising settlers, taking advantage of the fact that the community had drunk nothing but water for months, brought in casks of whisky and sold them at an enormous profit. Whereupon the court passed a decree forbidding further profiteering by persons bringing in liquors from “foreign ports” and carrying away the money to the consequent “impoverishment of this infant settlement.” The decree required such persons to give bond to charge not more than one silver dollar “for one quart of good, sound, merchantable liquor.” Several months later the court set the price at one silver dollar per gallon.

In 1784 the North Carolina assembly gave Nashboro the status of a town and changed its name to Nashville. The assembly also appointed a board of commissioners to act as governors of the town, to survey it and to dispose of the lots on which it stood. Under the commissioners’ watchful eyes a public square gradually took shape on the crest of the limestone bluff that faced the river. And on the square rose a courthouse of hewn logs, furnished with “benches, bar, and table for the use of the Court” and a jail “of square hewn logs, a foot square, both with floor and loft, except the same shall be built on a rock.”

The old committee of judges was abolished, and the judges of Davidson County, including Robertson, took their oaths of office. The new seat of justice grew rapidly. Before long the stockade of the old fort had to be torn down. But when some stray Cherokee knifed their way into the town, depriving it of
several of its solid citizens and members of their families, the residents threw up a stronger and higher stockade around their dwellings. While the town caught its breath it played host to a small group of well-to-do Easterners. They liked Nashville and decided to stay. Soon frame houses sprang up proudly here and there among the thirty original log cabins, presaging the passing of Nashville from a crude frontier town to the elegant city of a later age.

No less auspicious than its physical origin were Nashville's intellectual beginnings. Robertson, perhaps because he had learned his letters and how to spell in mature years, had a profound respect for knowledge. He persuaded the Reverend Thomas B. Craighead, a graduate of Princeton, to settle in the Cumberland country and promote education. Craighead put up at Haysboro, six miles northeast of Nashville, where he built Spring Hill, a rough stone building which served as a church as well as a school.

The North Carolina assembly was so impressed by Craighead's pedagogical zeal that it passed an act in 1786 establishing Davidson Academy for boys in his meeting house, appointing him its president and naming nine other men, including Robertson, as trustees. The academy was exempt from taxation for 99 years and was supported by a grant of 240 acres and the tolls of the local ferry. Tuition was "four pounds per annum, hard money or its equivalent." Because of the scarcity of ready cash the fees were usually paid in corn.

The curriculum of Davidson Academy was designed to furnish the students with the practical knowledge needed to earn a good living without denying them the cultural background required to lead a good life. Grammar, spelling, arithmetic and geography strove with such literary masters as Terence, Sallust, Lucian, Erasmus, Virgil, Xenophon and Aesop. After 1787 the teachers tried to instill in their charges a feeling for the responsibilities of being Americans by requiring them to learn the new Constitution of the United States.

Elected as one of the two representatives from Davidson County, Robertson in 1785 prevailed on the assembly to provide some kind of protection against the almost incessant Indian at-
Settlements on the Cumberland

tacks on the Cumberland settlements. Accordingly, 300 soldiers were assembled at the lower end of Clinch Mountain with instructions to build from that point to Nashville a road wide enough for the passage of wagons and carts. From time to time the soldiers were to be marched to the Cumberland country and stationed at those places in numbers which would induce the Indians to stop their attacks. For this endeavor the commanding officer was invested with the authority to use the soldiers in whatever capacity he saw fit.

By the end of the year the road was completed. It provided a much shorter route to the Cumberland country than the original one through the wilderness of Kentucky. So many “movers” settled in the unclaimed sections that in the fall of 1786 the North Carolina assembly was obliged to provide them with a local government by creating from a portion of Davidson a new county, Sumner, named in honor of another North Carolinian hero, General Jethro Sumner.

The 300 soldiers had been so busy guarding the settlements that they failed to cut a road adequate to serve the vast migration. The assembly, therefore, began a wider and more level road. This, completed in September 1788 and called the Nashville Road, ran from Campbell’s Station, a few miles west of Knoxville, to present Kingston, then to Crab Orchard and the upper Cumberland and finally down to Bledsoe’s Lick and Nashville.

In the first company to move west on the new road were a young lawyer named Andrew Jackson and his friend, John McNairy, who had recently been appointed judge of the Supreme Court in the Cumberland country. One night an incident occurred which disclosed Jackson’s eminent fitness for pioneer life. While he and his party were sleeping by a fire a group of Indians, hooting like owls, surrounded them. Jackson awoke. Having the sensitive ears of an experienced frontier scout, he discerned that this was not the hooting of owls but its imitation. He aroused his companions and advised them to move on quickly and quietly. They did so—just in time to escape the scalping knives that brought down four hunters on the spot. A few days later Jackson, after shooting a panther and tomahawking its cub to prevent their killing a colt, reached Nashville and plunged
into the flamboyant career of lawyer, judge, statesman and soldier that eventually took him to the White House.

Nashville now and then talked about a victory that Robertson had won over the Indians in the previous summer. In the past three years the Cherokee and some Creeks had conducted many small raids in the courses of which scores of Cumberland settlers had been killed. Then, in May 1787, a handful of Cherokee tomahawked Robertson's brother, Mark, in broad daylight as he was walking home. Full of grief and anger, James Robertson resolved to avenge his brother's death and, at the same time, attempt to stop the Indian depredations.

Robertson's suspicions fell on some Creek and Cherokee braves living in a town on Coldwater Creek, a tributary of the Tennessee near Muscle Shoals and at the present site of Tuscumbia, Alabama. To this place came French traders from the Illinois or Wabash country, encouraging the Indians in their warfare against the Cumberland settlers and at times even providing them with guns and ammunition. Early in June Robertson gathered 120 men and, guided through the forest by two Chickasaw, one of whom was a chief named Toka, marched toward the town. Another force, under the direction of Captain David Hay, started at the same time by water but fell into an ambush and returned.

Pushing briskly across dense cane country, Robertson and his men soon heard the Tennessee as it roared over the falls. For a day they concealed themselves under the cane, awaiting a favorable time for crossing. In the night Edmond Jennings, the fearless son of the unfortunate Jonathan Jennings, and Joshua Thomas, his inseparable companion, swam across the river and returned with a big canoe that had been tied to a stick driven into the bank. In the morning forty of Robertson's men piled into the canoe and after stopping its leaks with shirts and linn bark crossed the Tennessee, while the remaining troops swam over with the horses.

After drying their clothes and equipment the men marched five or six miles and swooped down into the town which lay in a ravine surrounded by cornfields. The surprised Indians and their French guests fled to their canoes, closely pursued by shooting
and yelling white men. Three braves, three French traders and a white woman fell dead on the bank of the river. The principal traders and five or six other Frenchmen, all wounded, surrendered. By now many of the Indians were paddling furiously away from the bank, only to jump into the river to seek safety from the bullets that whizzed all around them. Twenty-six died from wounds or drowning.

Robertson’s men quickly occupied the town and in the stores seized taffia, sugar, coffee, cloth, blankets, Indian wares of all sorts, salt, shot, Indian paints, knives, powder, tomahawks, tobacco and other articles suitable to Indian commerce. Then they buried the white men and woman they had killed, destroyed the domestic animals and burned the town to the ground. The two Chickasaw, presented with their portion of the booty, returned home. The remaining goods and the prisoners were put into three or four canoes and taken under guard down the Tennessee, and Robertson with the remainder of his men rode along its bank. At Colbert’s Ferry the two parties joined and proceeded to Nashville where the prisoners were released. The booty was sold at Eaton’s Station and the proceeds divided among the troops.

The expedition involved Robertson in a difficulty with the nation which had been our stanch ally in the Revolution. He therefore wrote to a French functionary living in the Illinois country, explaining the causes and motives which had led him to undertake the campaign. If innocent people, whether Frenchmen or Indians, had suffered in the attack, he said, they had nobody to blame but themselves. They were judged by the company they kept. His men unfortunately were unable to distinguish between the good and the bad. Robertson concluded his letter by warning the French that their traders would “render themselves very insecure” if they continued to furnish the Cherokee with weapons. At the same time he warned the Cherokee that a war would “compell ous to retaliate, which will be a grate pridegedes [prejudice] to your nation.” “He did not spell well,” says Roosevelt, “but his meaning was plain, and his hand was known to be heavy.”

The Indians paid Robertson’s warning no heed. In the fall of 1787 Cherokee and Creeks joined in a piratical attack on some
boats from Louisville and the Illinois settlements, killing their crews. Robertson wrote that, in the course of the year, the Creeks also killed forty-one settlers and that their depredations had actually stopped business as well as immigration.

But adversity only strengthened Robertson's resolve to get relief for his people. He realized now that they could hope for effective help from neither their neighbors in Kentucky—whom, in desperation, they had hoped to join politically—nor North Carolina. Congress was their only refuge, but even Congress could do nothing for them in this year of change from confederation to Federal union.

Robertson saw clearly that, ironically, immediate relief could come only from the settlers' enemies—from the Creeks themselves or from Spain, the instigator of the attacks. This realization impelled Robertson to employ, with the consent of leading Cumberland settlers, an artifice, a subterfuge expressive of his realism and political acumen. The stratagem, says Arthur Preston Whitaker, aimed "to serve simultaneously as a threat and as a promise. As a threat to reluctant North Carolina, it would secure a cession of that state's western territory to Congress. As a promise to Spain, it would obtain from the Spanish governor of Louisiana commercial concessions and, above all, relief from Indian attacks."

In pursuance of his scheme Robertson, with the assistance of two other influential Cumberland settlers, Anthony Bledsoe and Brigadier General Daniel Smith, began to correspond with Governor Samuel Johnston of North Carolina, with Governor Esteban Miró of Louisiana and with the unscrupulous and shrewd half-breed chief of the Creeks, Alexander McGillivray, who in 1784 had put his people under the protection of Spain. This correspondence has aroused a great deal of suspicion among some superficial and unimaginative scholars and writers who, more the bane than the boon of history, have seen in it evidence of a design on the part of Robertson and the Cumberland settlers to place the region under the domination of Spain.

A careful study of the so-called Spanish conspiracy and an understanding of the situation and the character of the settlers involved, however, shows that neither Robertson nor any of
the Cumberland settlers had any intention of turning traitors. Robertson was a practical man who sought only such practical ends as the protection of life and property. By sending veiled threats to North Carolina he hoped to get that state to cede her western lands to Congress, while by making promises to Spain he simply hoped to find out what she was willing to do for the Cumberland settlers in regard to such vital issues as trade, land and the Indian attacks.

The typically American frontier folk would scarcely have given serious consideration to repudiating their Protestant faiths and their even more sacred individualism in return for the questionable protection of a Catholic and completely foreign nation. And Spain, for her part, wanted only submissive subjects. She looked with intense suspicion on all Americans whom, with their heretical notions of equality and freedom, she regarded as good only to weaken and perhaps to defeat her traditional concepts of government.

Robertson, with the assistance of Bledsoe, initiated his scheme in January 1788 with a letter to Governor Johnston. Obliquely charging Spain with encouraging the Indian attacks, the correspondents urged Johnston to appeal to Congress and especially to make representations to Don Diego de Gardoqui, Spanish diplomatic representative in New York, to exert his influence with McGillivray to stop the Indian depredations.

Johnston, being a loyal son of North Carolina, felt little sympathy for the frontiersmen, but he transmitted the letter along with other correspondence to Dr. James White, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Department, with the conciliatory comment: "It is not my opinion that the Court of Madrid or any other officers have the least share in abetting the grievances they (the Gentlemen beyond the Mountains) complain of." Dr. White referred the matter to Gardoqui, who on April 18 replied to Robertson as follows:

The news has caused me great sorrow, but I am extremely surprised to know that there is a suspicion that the good government of Spain is encouraging these acts of barbarity. Very different are the orders of His Majesty, to our way of thinking,
and it may be asserted that, just as the King is a friend of the United States in general, so also he takes pleasure in giving every evidence of good will and generosity to the region of the West in particular, whenever occasion is offered.

On receiving this denial that Spain had instigated the Indian attacks, Robertson hastened to appeal to McGillivray himself. In April he sent two trusty messengers to the chief with a letter urging him to establish peace between the Creeks and the Cumberland settlers. McGillivray replied:

"Agreeably to your request, I will be Explicit and Candid in my answer to yours, and will not deny that my Nation had waged war against your Country for several years past, but that we had no motives of revenge, nor did it proceed from any sense of Injures Sustained from your people, but being warmly attached to the British, and being under their Influence, our operations were directed by them against you in common with other Americans."

Despite this serene effrontery, McGillivray generously granted the Cumberland settlers an armistice pending the meeting of the Creek assembly.

At this stage of the intrigue Andrew Jackson in a letter to Brigadier General Daniel Smith provided evidence that the Cumberland people were neither resentful toward the United States nor devoted to Spain but simply anxious to try anything that might bring them relief from Indian attacks. Early in 1789 Jackson met André Fagot, a militia captain in the Spanish service, stationed in the Illinois country, who wanted to trade with the Cumberland region.

Jackson saw in this trade the possibility of securing a lasting peace with the Indians. Writing to Smith, he introduced Fagot and asked him to write to Miró requesting a commercial treaty. Fagot was to deliver the letter and request a permit to trade with the Cumberland people. Fagot, by misrepresenting himself as a close kinsman of Miró, made Jackson feel confident that the
permit would be granted without difficulty. "Then," continued Jackson, "he will show the propriety of having peace with the Indians for . . . the benefit . . . of the trade . . . and also show the governor the respect this country honors him with."

Here Jackson was alluding to the fact that in the previous August Robertson had requested and received permission from the North Carolina assembly, of which he was again a member, to change the name of the Cumberland country from Western District to District of Miró. The Cumberland leaders, knowing no Spanish, spelled the name as it sounded to them, "Mero," and it thus appeared in their letters and official documents. The motive for bestowing the honor on Miró is easily surmised. Robertson hoped that the flattered governor would reciprocate by persuading McGillivray to call off the new attacks which the Creek assembly had recently sanctioned. In this he was to be disappointed.

Jackson’s proposals were adopted. In writing his letter to Miró, Smith introduced Fagot as a man in whom the Cumberland people “have very great confidence . . . and beg leave to refer your excellency to him for a particular intelligence. We have honored our district with your Excellency’s name . . . and I should look upon myself as much honored by a Correspondence from you.” The “particular intelligence” to which Smith referred was given verbally: in September the Cumberland settlers were to hold a convention to secure a separation from North Carolina. This done, they were to send delegates to New Orleans to arrange a union with Spain.

To this important information Miró replied as follows: "His Excellency Dan. Smith Brig. gral & Commander of Miro Dist­trict &ca, &ca, &ca. I have had the greatest satisfaction in the honour I received in being acquainted that the Inhabitants of your District have distinguish[ed] my name . . . for the denom­i­nation of that country.” This, he continued, impelled him to give any number of good wishes for their prosperity. And, of course, he “anxiously expected the consequences of the operation you are to transact in September.”

When, on the first day of the month, the delegates convened, their purpose was simply and clearly expressed in resolutions to
urge North Carolina by every possible means to cede her western lands to Congress. No motion whatever was made to choose delegates to negotiate a union with Spain, for no such union was ever contemplated. On September 2 Robertson wrote to Miró, informing him that the convention had been held and that the Cumberland people had agreed to seek a separation from the mother state. He also stated that his people, though "unprotected" and though they desired "a more interesting Connection," would remain "obedient to the new Congress of the United States. . . . The United States afford us no protection. The district of Mero is daily plundered and the inhabitants murdered by the Creeks, and Cherokee, unprovoked."

In one of his letters to Robertson, Miró had extended him an invitation to settle in Spanish territory. To this invitation Robertson now replied: "For my own part, I conceive highly of the advantages of your Government. But my estate, here, is such that I could not flatter myself to equal it by removing [sic] to any part; our lands satisfying my utmost wishes, and being infinitely before anything I have seen elsewhere."

The purport of this letter, if it is read objectively, is unmistakably clear. The Cumberland people, while expressing dissatisfaction with the United States for failing to provide them with effective protection against Indian attacks, still had no intention of repudiating her for Spain. That Spanish and frontier principles were irreconcilable is indicated by Robertson's rejection of Miró's invitation. Neither side had any intention to meet the needs of the other. Robertson and Smith were not surprised, therefore, at Miró's noncommittal replies to their letters. He promised them neither to use his influence to stop the Indian attacks nor to grant Fagot the trade permit that Jackson had sought for him in the hope of securing a lasting peace with the Indians.

As for the Cumberland settlers, they knew the Spanish government too well to hope that Miró would extend them the privileges of local government and religious freedom—privileges which they as Americans would have expected had they entertained any notion of joining a foreign power. They remained constant in their objective: to urge North Carolina to cede her
western lands to Congress which, after all, remained their ultimate refuge.

The truth of this supposition is borne out in a letter which Robertson addressed to Governor Johnston on the same day that he wrote to Miró. The Indian depredations, he said, were driving many of the people to seek safety under a friendly foreign power.

I wish your Excellency to be informed that there is a Colonel [Robert] Stark who openly confessed a desire to take the inhabitants into the Spanish dominions as subjects to that power, and many people are upon the point of going down, were it not for the representations of people just from there, particularly Dr. White, who had been of general service in dissuading people from that country and government. . . . [I wish] to be informed if there are no legal means to prevent Colonel Stark and others from debauching our citizens to emigrate in so public a manner.

The purpose of this letter is obvious. Robertson is saying that the people of the Cumberland, “being without hope of securing protection from North Carolina, are in a dangerous mood, but a cession of this region to Congress will probably quiet their minds.”

The settlers had not long to wait. In December 1789 the North Carolina assembly at last ceded her western country to Congress, which accepted it and converted it into the Southwest Territory.