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America's First SECESSION

THE LOST STATE OF FRANKLIN FELL JUST SHORT OF ADMISSION TO THE YOUNG UNION.

BY KEVIN T. BARNSDALE

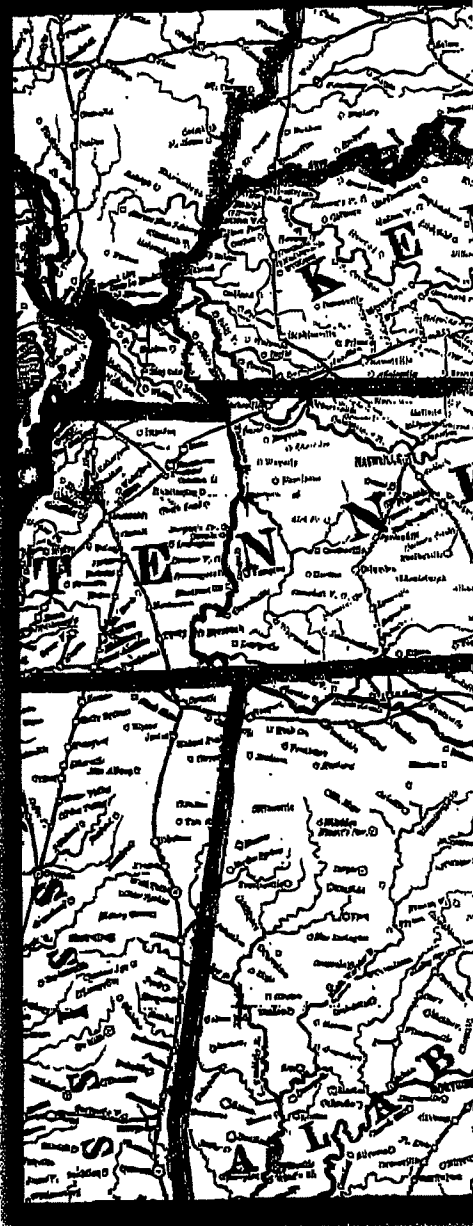
On Dec. 14, 1784, a small assemblage of Tennessee Valley leading men met at a rustic courthouse in Jonesboro, N.C. Under a darkening cloud of political uncertainty, 28 western political and economic leaders voted overwhelmingly to declare their communities' independence from their parent state of North Carolina and to form America's 14th state—Franklin. Despite being virtually ignored by scholars for more than two centuries, the story of the state of Franklin's short and tumultuous existence opens a window into the political, economic, and social dynamics of the early American republic and reveals the significance of the western frontier in the development of the United States.

Following the American Revolution, the United States faced a wide range of daunting political and economic challenges, including rebuilding the nation's economy, repaying an enormous national debt owed to both foreign and domestic creditors, and securing control of the nation's western borders. America's western Euro-American and Native American residents also presented major obstacles for the nation's political leaders. Western leaders agitated for increased federal spending on frontier infrastructure and Native American defenses and greater political influence within their states. Native leaders, particularly among the Cherokee and Creeks, continued a decades-long struggle to preserve their territorial and political sovereignty that precipitated near perpetual backcountry warfare.

By the summer of 1784, the residents of the Upper Tennessee Valley (modern-day east Tennessee) had grown increasingly frustrated by what they perceived as eastern North Carolina's political and economic marginalization of their region. Since the initial Euro-American settlement in the 1770s, the residents of the Upper Tennessee Valley had witnessed the rapid growth of their communities and their agrarian, land-dependent economy. Many of the region's political leaders argued eastern North Carolina's post-revolutionary fiscal and Indian policies actually thwarted the socioeconomic growth of their trans-Appalachian communities and that political separation from North Carolina offered a path to prosperity and increased political hegemony. In short, by separating from North Carolina, the Tennessee Valley communities could redirect their tax contributions toward regional internal improvements (i.e., courts, frontier defenses, and transportation), expand their regional economy, intensify their efforts to eliminate the region's native peoples, and, most importantly, control their own political destiny.

At the spring 1784 session of the North Carolina Assembly, the Tennessee Valley's political leadership got their chance to put their separatist plan into motion. During the April meeting, North Carolina delegates took under consideration legislation ceding their state's western land to the federal government in order to avoid tax liabilities and to relieve both state and national

debts. During the heated debate, western delegates from North Carolina's Upper Tennessee Valley counties (Washington, Sullivan, and Greene) joined many eastern congressmen to pass the Cession Act. After the passage of the legislation, these same western congressional leaders returned to their trans-Appalachian communities and openly advocated forming their communities into a separate state. Remarkably, despite publicly supporting the Cession Act of 1784, the delegates argued that North Carolina's passage of the legislation effectively meant that the state had "abandoned" them and left





them at the mercy of the "tomahawk of the [Indian] savages."

On Aug. 23 and 24, 1784, the leadership of the Tennessee Valley met for the first time at the Jonesboro log courthouse and agreed to petition North Carolina for "countenance" regarding forming an independent state. As word of the August meeting and statehood proposal spread across the Appalachian Mountains, delegates from the eastern side of the state were furious at the underhanded actions of western delegates related to the Cession Act and their effort to use the legislation to justify western statehood. In October 1784, the North Carolina

Assembly voted to repeal the Cession Act and to reclaim the western lands. This decision sent political shockwaves through the western communities and led to the convening of the Dec. 14, 1784, meeting in Jonesboro and the eventual declaration of independence and resolution to create an independent state. After declaring "the three western counties independent of North Carolina," the 43 delegates—now calling themselves the "Assembly at Frankland"—agreed to reconvene early in 1785 to organize the new state and draft a new state constitution.

The December meeting not only signaled the birth of the state of Franklin,

but also the beginning of a determined effort both within and outside of the Tennessee Valley to defeat the statehood movement. The first sign of the bitter internal factionalism that would eventually contribute to the collapse of the state of Franklin emerged during the December debate over issuing the declaration of western independence.

A vocal minority within the Tennessee Valley's political leadership expressed concern over the radical decision to separate from North Carolina. Eventually Washington County political leader John Tipton emerged as the leader of the anti-Franklin faction. Tipton and the

Anti-Franklinites (also known as Tiptonites) received considerable support from the state of North Carolina, most notably Gov. Alexander Martin. After convening in March 1785 to elect state officials (including the election of John Sevier as governor) and pass legislation primarily aimed at protecting property rights and land claims, the leadership of the state of Franklin received a threatening public manifesto from Martin challenging the Franklinites' rationale for statehood and demanding that the residents "return their allegiance" to North Carolina. The Franklinites issued a stinging response defending their right to secede from North Carolina and accusing the governor of attempting to "stir up insurrection."

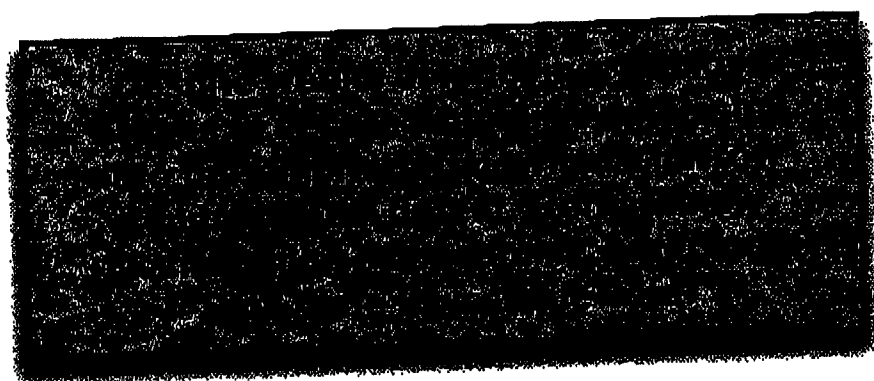
Tipton and his supporters responded quite differently to the Martin Manifesto by pledging their loyalty to North Carolina and committing to "discountenance the lawless proceedings" of their Franklinite neighbors. Tipton's pledge to work within the Tennessee Valley communities to undermine the Franklin statehood movement eventually paid huge dividends for North Carolina, but inadvertently plunged the entire region into political chaos.

By the spring of 1785, the rising tensions between North Carolina and the Franklinite leadership subsided somewhat with the election of Sevier's friend and business partner, Richard Caswell, to the governorship. In the summer of 1785, the state of Franklin concluded its first treaty with the region's Overhill Cherokee leadership at Dumplin Creek. Under the threat of violence, a carefully selected group of Cherokee leaders reluctantly ceded an enormous tract of land in the lower Tennessee Valley to the state of Franklin. While Franklin's Indian negotiators met with the Cherokee, the state's chief diplomat, William Cocke, initiated the first concerted lobbying effort to secure approval from the U.S. Congress for the admission of Franklin into the confederation of states. In May 1785 Cocke traveled to New York and presented his case to Congress. Despite weeks of lobbying, Cocke's efforts to secure Franklin's admission into the

Union went down in a narrow congressional defeat. Remarkably, Franklin missed becoming America's 14th state by a single vote.

Against the backdrop of the Dumplin Creek negotiations and the narrow defeat of statehood in New York, the Franklin Assembly reconvened at the Presbyterian Church in Greeneville and began the task of drafting and ratifying a state constitution. The Greeneville constitutional convention and the debates over the frame of government further polarized the region's political leadership. In the end, the Franklinites eventually approved a slightly modified version of North Carolina's constitution as their frame of government, but the debates

communities. As the region's voters prepared for the 1786 state and local elections, both Franklin and North Carolina erected polling stations, ran their own slate of candidates, and tallied their own votes. Additionally, both states created competing judicial systems by electing their own judges and attorneys and holding separate county courts. Predictably, the existence of two independent civil and judicial systems in the Tennessee Valley led to confusion among the region's inhabitants. Couples were forced to marry in both jurisdictions' courts and taxpayers were forced to decide in which state they would pay their taxes. Unfortunately, Caswell's efforts to peaceably defeat the Franklin statehood movement



surrounding suffrage and the election of state officials swelled the ranks of the Anti-Franklinite faction. As 1785 drew to a close, the residents of the Upper Tennessee Valley found themselves in an increasingly precarious position. Their statehood effort remained in political limbo and their communities were being torn apart by rising political factionalism.

As 1786 opened, North Carolina Gov. Richard Caswell implemented a new strategy to undermine the Franklin statehood movement without plunging the region into economic chaos and warfare. In a strategy best described as "divide and conquer" the Caswell administration sought to exploit preexisting communal divisions and erode internal support for Franklin by erecting a parallel state bureaucracy within the Tennessee Valley. In essence, the region's residents faced the confusing prospect of two state governments (North Carolina and Franklin) simultaneously functioning in their

also resulted in widespread partisan violence across the region. County courthouses and polling stations became the sites where Franklinite and Tiptonite supporters and elected officials, including the region's law enforcement officers, repeatedly clashed.

Over the next two years the Upper Tennessee Valley increasingly witnessed the escalation of partisan violence exacerbated by the state of Franklin's draconian Indian policies and resulting Native American backlash. Following the Treaty of Dumplin Creek, Overhill Cherokee leaders again met with Franklin negotiators and were forced to agree to another large land cession with the signing of the 1787 Treaty of Coyatee. The signing of the treaties at Dumplin Creek and Coyatee galvanized a breakaway faction of the Overhill Cherokee living on the Chickamauga River. Led by Dragging Canoe, the Chickamauga Cherokee rejected the land cessions and

demanding the end of white encroachment on their lands. As Franklin's political leaders and land speculators (often the same individuals) increased their efforts to secure and sell Cherokee lands, the Chickamauga resistance movement intensified their raids on the Tennessee Valley settlements. The cycle of violence precipitated by the Franklinites' Indian policies and Cherokee resistance efforts continued long after the state of Franklin's demise.

Despite two years of political lobbying, Franklin's political leadership failed to secure the state's admission into the Union. Combined with the internal chaos

leader submit to the laws of the state of Franklin. After tense negotiations, the Franklinites eventually opened fire on the Tipton home, wounding two women who were trying to flee. As the siege extended into a second day, Tipton managed to send word to his supporters who quickly mustered the region's North Carolina militia to come to his aid. As a thick blanket of snow covered the region, the Franklinites and Tiptonite forces clashed. When the smoke finally cleared from the battlefield, John Tipton and the North Carolina militia emerged victorious and John Sevier and the Franklinites were forced to retreat in defeat.

ten. Sevier's brief stint as governor was overshadowed by his election as the state of Tennessee's first governor, and outside of



a few historical markers and a commemorative road in Johnson City, Tenn., Franklin has been relegated to the history books. However, it is important to note that the state of Franklin and the politics surrounding the statehood movement resulted in a number of important constitutional and political developments.

During the height of the Franklin affair, the chaos and violence surrounding the Upper Tennessee Valley separatist movement convinced the delegates meeting in Philadelphia drafting a new U.S. Constitution to reconsider the protocol for the creation of new states. Article IV, Section 3 of the Constitution declared that no new state could be created out of an existing state "without the Consent of the Legislatures of the States concerned as well as of the Congress." The Franklin debacle directly led to the crafting of a national policy related to the creation of new states; the policy faced its toughest test during the Civil War with the creation of West Virginia. The state of Franklin continued to be celebrated in east Tennessee and the legacy of the failed state proved to be highly malleable for the region's political and economic leadership. In the 1830s regional abolitionists and civic boosters actively promoted east Tennessee's secession from the rest of the state as a means to end the use of slave labor and the political dominance of middle and western Tennessee. During the secession debates of 1860-61, Tennessee's pro-Union Sen. Andrew Johnson revived the history of Franklin in order to warn his fellow Southern political leaders against the "hell-born and hell-bound doctrine of secession." Despite being branded as America's "lost state," Franklin and its legacy remain an important event in the development of the early American republic.

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caused by the region's growing internal political factionalism and the devastating Cherokee conflict, Franklin's diplomatic failures portended a violent conclusion to the separatist movement. Throughout 1787, North Carolina's "divide and conquer" strategy continued to prove effective as key Franklinites returned their loyalty to North Carolina and the Tiptonite faction increased their influence within the region. Despite several efforts by North Carolina negotiators to bring the Franklin affair to a peaceful resolution, the Upper Tennessee Valley continued to be wracked by partisan violence.

The inevitable showdown between the Franklinites and Tiptonites occurred in February 1788 on John Tipton's Washington County farm. After ordering a North Carolina sheriff to confiscate John Sevier's slaves for the Franklin governor's failure to pay state taxes, Tipton and approximately 45 of his supporters took refuge in Tipton's home on Sinking Creek. Sevier and a force of roughly 150 Franklinites surrounded the farm and demanded that the Anti-Franklinites

The Battle of Franklin did not end the Franklin statehood movement. After his defeat at the Tipton farm and conducting a devastating raid on the Overhill Cherokee communities, Sevier returned to Washington County. Unbeknownst to him, Tipton had succeeded in securing a North Carolina arrest warrant for the Franklin governor and had organized a posse to apprehend him for treason. In October 1788 Tipton tracked down Sevier at the home of a Franklinites supporter, arrested him, and transported his prisoner across the Appalachian Mountains to Burke County's Morganton jail. Fortunately for Sevier, the Morganton jailer served with Sevier during the American Revolution and simply let the prisoner go free. Sevier simply rode out of Morganton, returned to the Tennessee Valley, and by 1789 had reclaimed his political influence by being elected to the North Carolina Senate. Without any fanfare, the state of Franklin was no more.

In the 200 years since the collapse of the state of Franklin, outside of east Tennessee the event has largely been forgot-