John Sevier Biography

John Sevier

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Biography

John Sevier (1745-1815), American frontiersman, soldier, and politician, was a leading figure during the frontier period in the Old Southwest and became the first governor of Tennessee.

John Sevier was born on Sept. 23, 1745, in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The eldest of seven children, he worked for his father, who had a farm, kept a tavern, traded for furs, and speculated in real estate. At the age of sixteen John married Sarah Hawkins and began a similar career.

By his late twenties Sevier had decided to go west, and in 1771 he purchased land on the Holston River in eastern Tennessee. Two years later he moved his wife and seven children there. Sevier gained his new neighbors' respect, and soon they elected him to positions of leadership which included membership on the local Committee of Public Safety and one term in the North Carolina Provincial Congress. Although a lieutenant colonel in the militia, he took little part in the War for Independence until 1780, when he led several hundred frontiersmen east to help defeat the British at Kings Mountain. Shortly after this, he led a punitive expedition against the Cherokee in Tennessee, the first of many such campaigns.

In 1784 North Carolina ceded its western lands to the Confederation Congress to reduce the state war debt and tax burden. This cession stimulated a movement for statehood among the frontiersmen living beyond the Appalachians. In August 1784 they held a convention and decided to petition Congress for statehood, but before they acted, North Carolina rescinded its land cession. The settlers met again in spite of this, adopted the North Carolina statutes temporarily, and elected John Sevier as governor of the state of Franklin. Opposition from the United States, North Carolina, the Native Americans, and some settlers defeated the statehood movement by 1788.

The next year Sevier began a single term in the U.S. House of Representatives, and in 1791 he became a brigadier general in the territorial militia. Three years later he was elected as the first governor of the new state of Tennessee, an office he held for the constitutional limit of three consecutive terms. Then, after he had been out of office for 2 years, the voters chose him for still another three terms. Following that, Sevier served in the Tennessee Senate and in 1811 was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served until his death in 1815.