Planting the Corn and Hunting the British:

The Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston of 1777 and the American Revolution

*By Kristin Brig**

Treaty borders are often porous lines. In British America, the Parliamentary-established Proclamation Line of 1763 supposedly served as an invisible border barring white settlers from making their homes across the Appalachian Mountains in an effort to stop frontier warfare between settlers and Native Americans. Unfortunately for British lawmakers in London, few settlers recognized the line as the barrier it was meant to be. By the time of the Revolutionary War, John Sevier and his fellow Wataugan squatters forged an illegal land treaty with the Cherokees. The Treaty of Sycamore Shoals in 1775 allowed them to settle along parts of the Holston River just over the present-day Blue Ridge Mountains. Doubly unfortunate for the Cherokees, the British settlers who disregarded the Proclamation Line of 1763 also paid little attention to the lines established by the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals, resulting in several bloody skirmishes between native and newcomer.

Though they lived across the mountains, the Wataugans were by no means cut off from the rest of British America; neither were the Cherokees, on whose lands they eventually settled. North Carolina owned the land as part of its territory, and so whatever problems the settlers and the Cherokees encountered, the North Carolinia government received news of developments. Conversely, as Patrick Ferguson's misguided 1780 letter to the Overmountain Men indicated, frontier settlers and the Cherokees had contact with the world beyond the mountains. Prior to 1780, both groups cared more about local skirmishes than global issues. In 1780, however, the British brought the Revolutionary War to the backcountry with the threat of alliances with the Cherokees. Through the Treaty of the Long Island of the

* The author is a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in history at the College of Charleston.

John Sevier, a statesman, solider, and pioneer of Tennessee, represented the Watauga Association during negotiations with the Cherokees. Lyman C. Draper, King's Mountain and Its Heroes *(New York, 1929), 174.*

Holston in July 1777, Virginia and North Carolina negotiated peace terms with the Cherokees in order to strengthen these alliances before the British forged an agreement with the Cherokees. Seen through the perspectives of white Indian commissioners and Cherokee leaders, this treaty assembled a group of colonial administrators and Cherokee headmen to create an armistice based on boundary lines and nonviolent negotiation. The treaty also introduced the Cherokees to the Revolutionary War through a new alliance with the Americans against the British as a means of securing protected land in the face of white settlers.

In August 1777, North Carolina Indian Commissioners William Sharpe and Waightstill Avery sent their journal of the proceedings at the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston to Governor Richard Caswell. Through this journal, they recorded letters, speeches, and other thoughts on the negotiations. They intended the journal to reflect accurately the words and actions taken by the treaty's negotiators, both Cherokees and white settlers. Almost 150 years later, North Carolina historian Archibald Henderson located the journal in the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh and published the original content in its entirety, accompanied by a contextual introduction on the basic narrative of the treaty. While Sharpe and Avery's report was surely biased and likely left out bits of information, it remains one of the few primary accounts of the negotiations and the treaty.[1]

Because Sharpe and Avery compiled the journal for North Carolina's government, few letters from Virginia's side made it into the report. However, documents in the *Official Letters of the Governors of the State of Virginia* (1928) support and overlap with the details of the treaty found in Sharpe and Avery's account. For this reason, Sharpe and Avery's account was treated as a relatively accurate reflection of the treaty's proceedings, at least from the white American perspective.[2]

[1] Archibald Henderson, "Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston, July, 1777," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 8 (January 1931): 55-116.

[2] *Official Letters of the Governors of the State of Virginia*, ed., H.R. McIlwaine (Richmond, 1926), vol. 1.

The historiography on the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston is sparse. In recent years, new studies have discussed eighteenth century Anglo-Cherokee relations, but few historians have closely examined the negotiations of the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston. Samuel Williams, a historian of early East Tennessee history and first executive director of the East Tennessee Historical Society, wrote several books with references to early British colonial-Cherokee relations, examining these dealings from a white perspective. He referred to the 1777 treaty, but only as it pertained to prevailing developments in the Tennessee Valley at the time. [3]

Since the 1960s, historians have looked more closely at Cherokee movements during the Revolutionary War, focusing predominantly on struggles with Anglo settlers. Thomas Connolly in his 1964 article on frontier interactions with the Cherokees argued for a renewed look at the Cherokees as fundamentally important to revolutionary movements in the late eighteenth century.[4] The 1990s brought an influx of research on the Cherokees, centering their research on Cherokee cultural and social history. Historians introduced the Cherokees as an active player in historical events, while others supported the traditional view of the Cherokees as marginal players in the American Revolution. In *Dividing Paths* (1995), Thomas Hatley examined the Cherokees in the French and Indian War. He showed how North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia erected barriers towards the Cherokees, terminating friendly relations and launching an era of illegal squatters in Cherokee territory and broken treaties.[5] Colin Calloway's *American Revolution in Indian Country* (1995) examined Anglo-native interactions throughout the colonies.[6] However, his short chapter on Chota included limited analysis of the nuanced relationship between states and Cherokee leaders, with only one small reference to treaty making between the two groups. More recently, Tyler Boulware, Paul Kelton, and Kristofer Ray looked at the Cherokees as an indigenous population with agency in an increasingly Anglicized world, showing how the Cherokees carefully navigated the colonial world for the survival and maintenance of their culture and identity.[7] Drawing on and contributing to recent scholarship,

[3] Samuel Cole Williams, *Early Travels in the Tennessee Country, 1540-1800* (Johnson City, 1928); Samuel Cole Williams, *Tennessee during the Revolutionary War* (Nashville, 1944).

[4] Thomas Connolly, "Indian Warfare on the Tennessee Frontier, 1776-1794: Strategy and Tactics," The East Tennessee Historical Society's *Publications* 36 (1964): 3.

[5] Thomas M. Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians through the Revolutionary Era* (Oxford, 1995).

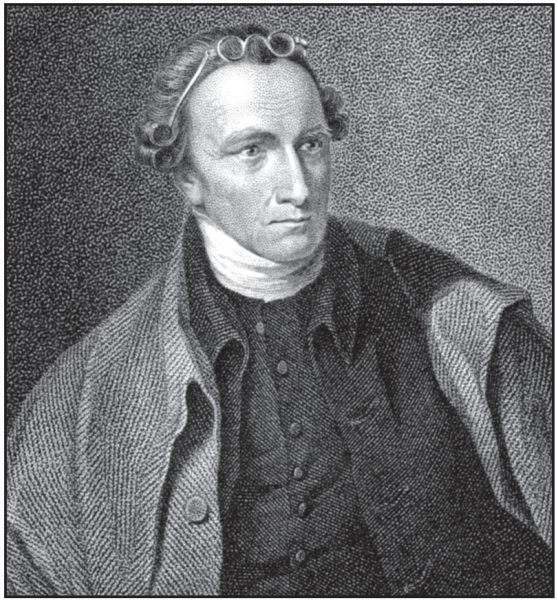
[6] Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York, 1995).

[7] Tyler Boulware, *Deconstructing the Cherokee Nation: Town, Region, and Nation among Eighteenth-Century Cherokees* (Gainesville, 2015); Paul Kelton, *Cherokee Medicine, Colonial Germs: An Indigenous Nation's Fight against Smallpox, 1518-1824* (Norman, OK, 2015); Krisopher Ray, "Cherokees and Franco-British Confrontation in the Tennessee Corridor, 1730-1760," *Native South* 7 (2014): 33-67.

this article analyzes the importance of Anglo-Cherokee relations during the 1777 Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston, and how that treaty affected the American Revolution and the role the Cherokees played in it.

Establishing Territorial Boundaries

Colonel William Christian with his Virginian militia first visited the Watauga and Cherokee territories in October 1776. Virginia Governor Patrick Henry instructed Christian to unite his militia with Colonel William Russell's North Carolina troops to march on the frontier against a newly-created militant Cherokee sect, the Chickamaugas. Henry ordered Christian to "severely chastise that cruel and perfidious nation" in order to reintroduce peace to the Appalachian region.[8] All thirteen of Britain's North American colonies declared their independence in July. By October, the Revolutionary War was already intensifying across the colonies. While the British attacked New York's Long Island and defeated Washington at White Plains, the southern states turned their attention to the frontier. William Christian never fought in any major battle of the American Revolution; rather, he participated in a prolonged conflict with the Overhill Cherokees, working towards an armistice between white settlers and Cherokees for at least as long as the Revolutionary War's length. The Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston came at the end of these years of bloody conflict between white settlers and the Cherokees.



Patrick Henry was one of the most vocal supporters of American Independence and famously declared "Give me liberty or give me death!" As the first governor of Virginia, Henry first used force and then began negotiations with the Cherokees to establish a boundary line for western settlement. *William Wirt*, Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry *(Philadelphia, 1818), frontispiece.*

Patrick Henry sent Christian to help white settlers fight Cherokee incursions, the majority of which resulted from the Second Cherokee War of 1776. One year earlier, Cherokee warrior Dragging Canoe with other

[8] "Instructions to Colonel William Christian, Commander in Chief of the Forces on the Expedition against the Cherokee," in *Official Letters of the Governors*, 1:21.

irate young Cherokees broke off from the rest of the Overhill Cherokees and formed the Chickamaugas. This group retaliated against the colonists who pushed further into British-designated Cherokee territory.[9] The year-long conflict resulted in an all-out war between Cherokees and settlers. In October 1776, when Christian attempted to stop the fighting, Dragging Canoe rejected the colonel's diplomatic overtures and instead continued to attack the white settlers in his people's territory. General Griffith Rutherford from North Carolina struck back after the Chickamaugas burned Cherokee towns and ripped their produce from the ground. In response, Dragging Canoe did much the same to white settlers.[10]

Yet Christian never fought a battle against the Cherokees, since the Cherokees largely left his troops alone when they marched into the Tennessee Valley in October 1776.[11] He moved into Chota the same month in order to conduct a peace treaty, but Dragging Canoe as the leader of the Chickamuagas refused to negotiate. He was still angry over how the settlers so lightly treated the Watuaga Association's 1772 land lease. Apart from Dragging Canoe's aggressive sect, the remainder of the Overhill Cherokees could not cope with the increased loss of their arable territory and hunting grounds. In March 1777, Patrick Henry noted in his letter to Governor Richard Caswell that the majority of Cherokee leaders opposed Dragging Canoe's movements against the white settlers and wished only for peace.[12] Oconostota, Chief of Chota, and Nan-ye-hi (Nancy Ward), Beloved Woman of Chota, vocally pushed for another territorial treaty as they saw white settlers encroaching on their territory.[13]

The Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston was not the first Anglo-Cherokee treaty in the region, but unlike earlier treaties made with American settlers and colonial governments, it was the first treaty to intrude on the nucleus of Overhill Cherokee territory. Prior to the 1777 treaty, British colonial officials had forged two principal treaties with the Cherokees: the Treaty of Hard Labor in 1768; and the Treaty of Lochaber in 1770. Through these treaties the Cherokees hoped to exchange land for a secure border, but these agreements had repercussions for other Native American communities. In the Treaty of Hard Labor, for instance, the Cherokees joined with the Iroquois to sign over lands to the south of the Ohio River; however, as James Drake pointed out, those lands belonged to other Native American peoples,

---

9 Albert Bender, "Dragging Canoe's War," *Military History* 28 (January 2012): 70-71.

10 Charles H. Faulkner, *Massacre at Cavett's Station: Frontier Tennessee during the Cherokee Wars* (Knoxville, 2013), 13.

11 Ibid., 12.

12 Patrick Henry to Richard Caswell, March 14, 1777, in *Official Letters of the Governors*, 1:124.

13 Michelene E. Pesantubbee, "Nancy Ward: American Patriot or Cherokee Nationalist?" *American Indian Quarterly* 38 (Spring 2014): 177-78.

including the Shawnee and the Delaware, who had little say in the treaty.[14] By bequeathing the territory of nearby native communities, the Cherokees assured more time to keep their own territory and deflected British warfare to the Shawnee, Delaware, and other Native Americans who had already seen defeat in fighting the Iroquois. Within a year, however, the officials pressed the Cherokees for more territory and a new Anglo-Cherokee border. The resulting Treaty of Lochaber in 1770, principally negotiated by British trader John Stuart, shifted the line of settlement into lands encroaching on Cherokee holdings. The border came perilously close to the Upper Cherokee homeland, reaching from the Ohio River as far south as the Holston River's south fork.[15]

In March 1775, Cherokee leaders signed the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals, giving the Watauga settlers permanent land holdings in the Cherokee heartland. Prior to Sycamore Shoals, the Wataugans had a ten-year lease with the Cherokees; Sycamore Shoals was the first permanent foray into Overhill Cherokee holdings, albeit an illegal one. By the time of the 1777 Treaty of the Long Island, the Cherokees had extensive understanding of Anglo negotiations and better understood how to deal with colonial officials.

Despite these treaties and growing familiarity between the Cherokees and the British, Cherokee leaders understood that war with the settlers was likely. Based on "authentic advices from the Cherokee country" Christian commented to the Virginia government that he believed war was likely to occur.[16] He explained that Virginia sought reconciliation between the area's warring groups, and how he and his Indian commissioners hoped to make a truce between the white settlers and the Cherokees.[17] As a twofold challenge, the settlers had no intention of abandoning their homesteads, and the Cherokees were hardly prepared to leave their territory. In order to assuage both populations, Henry and Christian understood the need for compromise which would allow Virginia and North Carolina to turn their attention to fighting the Revolutionary War.

In his work on Cherokee-American relations during the American Revolution, Colin Calloway argued that the Virginian and North Carolinian governments each viewed the Revolutionary War as advantageous, seeing it as an easy way to rid the states of an indigenous nuisance.[18] By 1777, Henry could not afford to remove troops from the Continental Army and Virginia

---

[14] James David Drake, *The Nation's Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America* (Charlottesville, 2011), 116.

[15] James Corbett David, *Dunmore's New World: The Extraordinary Life of a Royal Governor in Revolutionary America–with Jacobites, Counterfeiters, Land Schemes, Shipwrecks, Scalping, Indian Politics, Runaway Slaves, and Two Illegal Royal Weddings* (Charlottesville, 2013), 61-63.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Henry to Caswell, March 14, 1777, in *Official Letters of the Governors,* 1:124.

[18] Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country,* 196-97.

militias to the frontier. Henry's letters and journal entries discussed how he sent Virginia regiments to New York and Pennsylvania to strengthen the Continental Army. On March 15, 1777, Henry wrote to Colonel Charles Lewis with instructions to join Washington's troops without delay, because General Washington desperately needed soldiers. He wrote: "You will surmount any Obstacle & loose not a Moment lest America receive a wound that may prove mortal."[19] By contributing to Lewis's regiment, Henry hoped to supply Washington with men and help secure a victory for the colonies, if only a little bit at a time.

Henry undoubtedly saw the failings of the Continental Army and knew that Washington required more soldiers. By 1777, the Continental Army faced a decreasing number of soldiers, especially volunteers. In the first month of 1777 alone, only 1,000 soldiers from the previous year returned to the Continental Army. The number remained firm at 17,000 or below, but much less than British forces. Deserting became a frequent practice, as did "maintaining troop strength" with adequate resources.[20] With Washington's army in such a state of disarray, Henry recognized how essential Virginia's soldiers were to the revolutionary cause. Virginia, and more generally the thirteen states as a whole, could not afford to properly protect its citizens, albeit illegally settled ones, when the adversary sought peace.

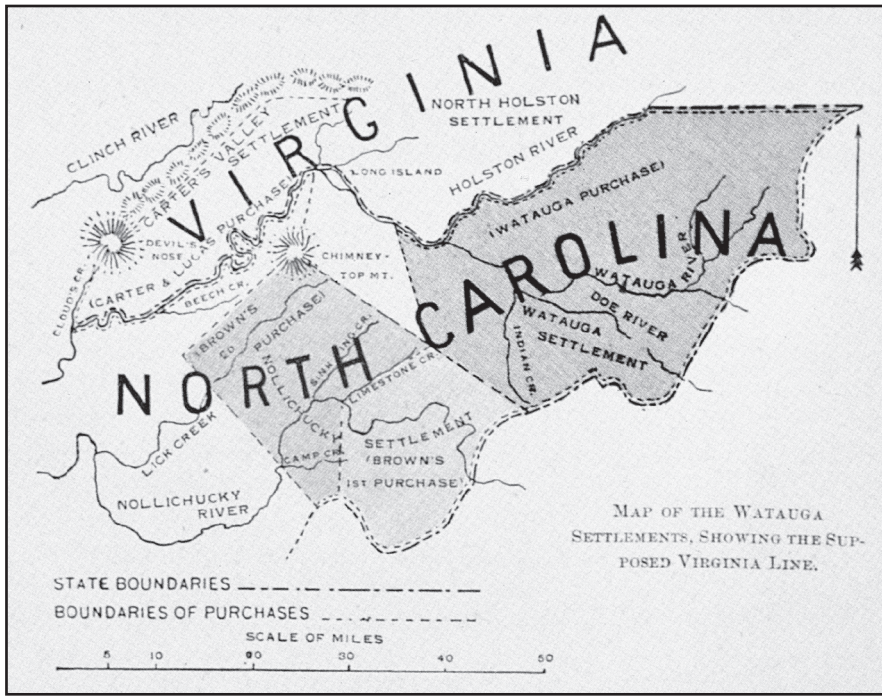
While Governor Henry faced an issue of manpower, Cherokee leaders confronted the challenge of a rapidly diminishing food supply. Chief of Tuqose, Old Tassel, in his speeches during the 1777 Treaty of the Long Island negotiations, explained this threat several times. In his July 11 speech, Old Tassel saw the Cherokees losing more territory, driving them to compromise with the Americans in order to protect their own land. He explained: "There are many of my people who are desirous to return home again, and I would be glad how soon the business might come on that they may go to work in their fields which are now suffering for want of Labor."[21] Old Tassel reintroduced the problem four days later in talks with Christian and Avery. Old Tassel stated: "Now I hope your Great men will take pity on us and do us justice, as our provisions is chiefly destroyed."[22] The Cherokees thus sought an end to warfare in order to save their territorial holdings. They hardly wanted to live with the settlers on their front doorstep, but at this point, they had little choice. Not only did Virginia and North Carolina refuse to remove the settlers diplomatically, but they also carried the threat of continued territorial

[19] Patrick Henry to Charles Lewis, March 15, 1777, in *Official Letters of the Governors*, 1:124-25.

[20] James K. Martin and Mark E. Lender, *"A Respectable Army": The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789*, 2nd ed. (Arlington Heights, IL, 1982), 90.

[21] Henderson, "Treaty of the Holston," 69.

[22] Ibid., 82.



The main purpose of the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston was to establish clear boundary lines between North Carolina, Virginia, and the Cherokees. "Map of the Watauga Settlements, Showing the Supposed Virginia Line," in Tennessee Blue Book, 2013-2014 *(Nashville, 2014), 493, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, also available at, http://www.tennessee.gov/sos/bluebook/.*

destruction if the Cherokees refused peaceful overtures.[23]

The Cherokees pushed for more than peace, they wanted Virginia and North Carolina to solidify and maintain a boundary line. The negotiations centered on setting concrete territorial boundaries, especially with the Cherokees. With set boundaries, white settlers theoretically could not settle in Cherokee lands and would thereby avoid territorial conflicts. Old Tassel in his July 15 speech linked destruction of valuable resources to this intrusion, saying: "Your people have encroached upon us verry [*sic*] close and scarcely given us room to turn around."[24] As the Wataugans and other white regional settlers continued to grab land for their families, Cherokee territory shrank.

The Raven, another Cherokee leader, called attention to settler encroachment on hunting lands. The settlers often crossed into Cherokee lands when hunting game, ignoring established lines and essentially pilfering Cherokee prey. For the Raven, such a break of territory boundaries stymied

[23] Cynthia Cumfer, "Nan-ye-hi (Nancy Ward), c. 1730s-1824: Diplomatic Mother," in *Tennessee Women: Their Lives and* Times, eds., Sarah Wilkerson Freeman and Beverley Greene Bond (Athens, GA, 2009): 1:6.

[24] Henderson, "Treaty of the Holston," 82.

Cherokee efforts to end a reliance on colonial aid. He explained: "We have been trespassed upon by bodies of people on our hunting grounds."[25] When Avery interrogated the Raven on the subject of territorial encroachment, he inquired as to the manner of previously established boundary lines between the Cherokees and the Wataugans. The Raven responded that the Cherokees allowed the Wataugans to claim territory along the Nolichucky River, but took issue when the settlers encroached on the Cherokee towns of Browns and Tuskega in the lower part of the Nolichucky River Valley.[26]

Avery then observed that the Cherokees had, in fact, allowed the Wataugans to settle in this designated area with Cherokee permission. The Raven rejoined with a jab at North Carolina's state government, saying:

> They did [settle there with our consent], but fear only made us agree to it and we expected redress again, but the white people instead of stoping [*sic*] where they were; encroached still farther and farther; fear only made us agree to a settlement at all, but we expected Government would again remedy us.[27]

The Raven used the term "fear" twice, indicating that Cherokee leaders believed that the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals gave more than land to the white settlers. He and the other leaders knew about the Proclamation Line of 1763; they understood that the British government had established it to protect white settlers and separate the Cherokees from them. When the Cherokees made the treaty, the Raven expected the North Carolina government to be knowledgeable about past agreements and protect the Cherokee territory from settler infringement. Throughout the negotiations, the Raven and Old Tassel argued that the Virginia and North Carolina governments should act as policing authorities, even if the states prioritized the safety and defense of the settlers.

Pieced together from these diplomatic brokering discussions, the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston orchestrated an armistice between the Cherokees and North Carolina, superficially focused on peace but more deeply on territorial control. The Cherokee delegation and the Indian commissioners who drafted the document wove concord into each article in the hope of consolidating their territorial goals. The majority of the treaty's articles were compromises. Article two, charged the Cherokees with the duty of returning colonial prisoners, both black and white, and stolen goods, particularly farm animals, when necessary. On the other hand, articles three and four required white settlers to ask for permission before crossing

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 83.

[27] Ibid.

the border into Cherokee territory.[28] Only when the settlers attained said permission did the Cherokees have to tolerate these procedures and allow incursions into their territory.[29]

The last two articles of the treaty established precise boundary lines. Article five outlined the boundary between North Carolina and the Cherokees. While Virginia had already established their boundary with the Cherokees in earlier talks, the treaty aimed to cease violence between the North Carolina settlers and the Cherokees. Although they were present at the talks, Virginia's representatives functioned as a third party rather than a participant. Because the problems primarily occurred in North Carolina's territory, the treaty targeted the state in a measure to install territorial boundaries. Article six established the Cherokee-North Carolina boundary, detailed down to specific river bends and mountains. Furthermore, the article addressed the issue of farming and hunting grounds, the most contested problems between settlers and Cherokees. In a decisive move, the article demanded that neither side could farm or hunt on the other's territory without permission; hunters could not even go over the territorial line in search of "stray prey" while carrying a gun.[30] Through these stipulations, North Carolina and Cherokee representatives outlined the area in which both communities could live side-by-side as agricultural partners. The document's meticulous language attested that they tried to address what they saw as the issues of geographic control in the region.

Yet in several ways, the treaty snubbed the Cherokees. In order to secure the treaty's promises, Avery took Cherokee hostages back with him to North Carolina. Taking hostages were a routine part of such negotiations, but generally in times of war.[31] Although negotiations were peaceful, the representatives from North Carolina took hostages while Cherokee leaders validated the treaty terms. By taking five Cherokees to the state capital, Avery and his group of state commissioners incentivized the Raven, Old Tassel, and the other Cherokee leaders to suppress the Chickamaugas' warlike spirit and maintain a peaceful co-existence with the settlers.[32]

Avery recorded no exchange of hostages, saying only that North Carolina took five Cherokee men into its keeping until the treaty was confirmed. This unequal exchange demonstrated the evident distrust of North Carolina towards its indigenous neighbors and an unbalanced

---

[28] Ibid., 107.

[29] The Treaty of Lochaber (1770) established that white settlers could apply for a patent in order to settle in the lands west of the Proclamation Line of 1763. David, *Dunmore's New World*, 62.

[30] Henderson, "Treaty of the Holston," 108.

[31] David Corkran, *The Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740-1762* (Norman, OK, 2016), 182-89.

[32] Henderson, "Treaty of the Holston," 116.

control over the negotiations. North Carolina leaders took hostages from the Cherokees but they did not acquiesce to a mutual exchange, exposing North Carolina's perceived superiority over the Cherokees. Superficially, the treaty equalized colonial and native powers. On a deeper level, however, North Carolina remained in control practically threatening the Cherokees into peaceful negotiations. In this sense, the Raven was correct in his analysis of the negotiations. The state indeed pressured the Cherokees into signing treaties to established geographic boundaries, but white settlers ignored those imaginary lines and encountered little if any repercussions for their actions.

Cherokee Support for the American Revolution

On June 28, 1777, Colonel Nathaniel Gist arrived at Fort Patrick Henry on the Holston River, where Christian's forces were camped.[33] Gist came from Chota, the principal Overhill Cherokee town, and brought with him the Cherokee leaders who agreed to conduct a treaty at Long Island, including the Raven and Old Tassel. He shared intelligence of British movements in Georgia. George Washington had personally sent Gist to conduct business with the Cherokees and to maintain a good relationship with them. While the Treaty of the Long Island never explicitly addressed the American Revolution, Gist's presence indicated that cooperation was needed to both stabilize the border and support the fight for independence from Britain.

Born in 1733, Nathaniel Gist came from a well-established Maryland family and spent most of his career as a Cherokee trader. In 1754, he and Richard Pearis began trading with the Cherokees. For the next two decades, Gist and Pearis immersed themselves in Cherokee culture and, as with most frontier traders of the era, involved themselves in Anglo-Cherokee political squabbles. Akin to other traders in the region, Gist became a fixture in Cherokee towns, participating in daily Cherokee activities and sharing colonial news.[34] Because of his trading relationship, Gist served as a diplomat for the Virginia government, often carrying letters between the Cherokees and Virginia officials.

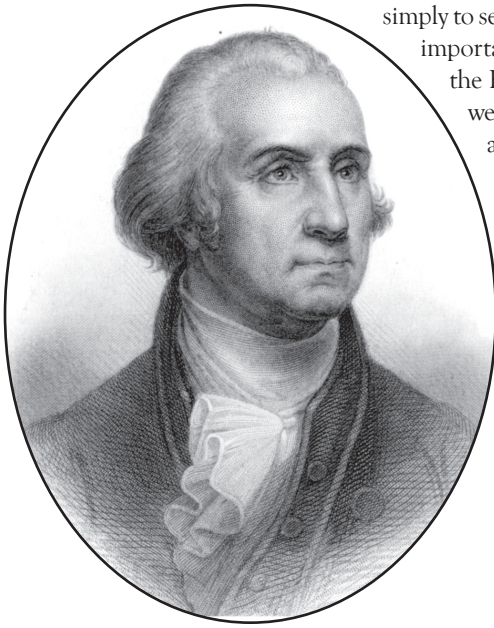
The ties between Gist and Dragging Canoe provide strong evidence of a joint trust. In April 1777, Gist delivered a speech from the Virginia Indian commissioners to Dragging Canoe, and then Gist returned to the commissioners with the response from the Cherokees. Dragging Canoe addressed the commissioners' concerns and he spoke directly to Gist, referring to him as a "Brother" and not just a trader. After he answered the commissioners, Dragging Canoe provided Gist with intelligence about a

[33] Ibid., 59.

[34] Hatley, *The Dividing Paths*, 40, 44.

potential attempt by a British trader on the latter's life. Old Tassel confirmed this friendship when he referenced Gist with other people. He called Gist a "friend and Brother," a part of Old Tassel's people. Gist was both a white settler from the outside as well as a participant in Cherokee culture, maneuvering between both worlds with little difficulty.[35]

Washington used Gist's connection with the Cherokees, and in the summer of 1777, he commissioned Gist to negotiate with Cherokee leaders. Gist arrived at Chota on June 28 and met with the Raven, Old Tassel, and the other well-known Cherokee leaders. His duty was not simply to secure peace on the frontier, but more importantly to secure Cherokee support for the Revolutionary War. In the following weeks, Gist bore messages and became a mediator for Washington acting as a representative of the United States. Washington pushed for Cherokee cooperation, with the intent that the Cherokees would monitor British influence near settler communities and along the Virginia and North Carolina frontier. While these negotiations occurred, Gist collected Cherokee intelligence of British troop numbers and movements on the frontier.



As commander of the Continental Army, George Washington understood the importance of having all available troops on the front lines to fight the British. He sent representatives such as Nathaniel Gist to negotiate treaties with the Cherokees. Washington Irving, Life of George Washington *(New York, 1856), 2:frontispiece.*

Gist served as Washington's principal commissioner throughout the negotiations of the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston. From the recorded minutes of July 14, 1777, the council meeting catalogued Gist as "on business from General Washington."[36] In his speech the next day, Christian identified Gist as Washington's chosen mediator. He explained how Gist's purpose at the treaty negotiations was to secure Cherokee support for the Americans, and how Gist had discussed the matter with the "Army and the Great Council of the thirteen United Colonies" the previous winter.[37] All present at the

[35] Henderson, "Treaty of the Holston," 64-65, 93.

[36] Ibid., 71.

[37] Ibid., 92.

negotiations recognized Gist's critical role as Washington's representative, confirming the treaty details as an outside presence with a stake in a Cherokee alliance beyond white settler safety and defense.

In many Cherokee-American narratives, historians viewed the Cherokees as a major source of British support during the Revolutionary War. In his 1918 article, Albert Goodpasture described how Dragging Canoe accepted the help of John Stuart and Alexander Cameron in the Second Cherokee War.[38] However, recent scholarship noted the nuances inherent in the Cherokees as historical agents in the American Revolution and frequent splits when it came to alliances with white governments. David Nichols, for example, related these treaties to geopolitical movements in North America.[39] The American Revolution affected the conception of Cherokee identity in how it split loyalties. As the most powerful depiction, the Chickamaugas sided with the British, whereas many older Cherokee leaders leaned toward neutrality. A third group of Cherokee leaders supported the Americans in their efforts to gain independence from Britain.[40]

Nan-ye-hi, a well respected female Cherokee leader from Chota, argued for continued territorial freedom but made peace overtures with the Americans.[41] Older chief Oconostota also supported this type of Cherokee nationalism. He had had little contact with British officials except through traders, who brought news of British movements to the Cherokees.[42] Washington and white settlers, however, represented more of a long-term threat than King George III's dictates from across the Atlantic.

Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy's work on the British side of the American Revolution examined British alliances and agreements with the Cherokees during this era. He explained that by 1776, the British had negotiated an alliance in which the Cherokees reached out to the "marginalized" who were threatened by native incursions to attack the Americans from the rear.[43] By sending Gist to forge an alliance with the Cherokees against the British, Washington demonstrated the assumption that the Cherokees and the British were allies. If the Cherokees showed Washington their firm support of the American side, they expected the new

[38] Albert V. Goodpasture, "Indian Wars and Warriors of the Old Southwest, 1730-1807," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 4 (March 1918): 25-28.

[39] David Andrew Nichols, *Red Gentlemen and White Savages: Indians, Federalists, and the Search for Order on the American Frontier* (Charlottesville, 2008), 10.

[40] Pesantubbee, "Nancy Ward," 178.

[41] While Cherokee women, such as Nan-ye-hi, participated in Cherokee leadership positions they did not participate in the 1777 treaty negotiations. The Overhill Cherokee Women's Council, to which Nan-ye-hi belonged, viewed the treaty as a peace negotiation "primarily for warriors." Cumfer, "Nan-ye-hi," 7.

[42] Pesantubbee, "Nancy Ward," 178-79; Cumfer, "Nan-ye-hi," 7; Goodpasture, "Indian Wars," 26.

[43] Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of Empire* (Hartford, 2013), 11, 261.

government to continue helping them with territorial and boundary quarrels with the white settlers. Cherokee leaders also hoped to maintain ties with the British during the war while passing intelligence along to Washington. Chota chief Oconostota was the most vocally amenable to this Cherokee-American alliance. He travelled to Williamsburg in May 1777 to make peace overtures to Governor Henry and corresponded with Washington during the treaty negotiations the following July.[44]

Oconostota was not the only chief in contact with Washington. In fact, several Cherokee leaders corresponded with Washington. When Avery pushed to extend treaty boundaries, Old Tassel requested correspondence with Washington, saying:

> I look upon it the line you ask is much too nigh to my Nation it takes in all your settlers on the Nolachucky River, which are themselves too nigh; but this shall not spoil our good talks. I want liberty to raise my children and have an open Country. . . . I want to talk about Col. Gist going to General Washington and I want the Commissioners to write a letter for Col. Gist to the great Warrior in behalf of my Nation.[45]

Oconostota and Old Tassel trusted the state commissioners to represent the Cherokees, yet they also wanted to deal directly with government officials. Oconostota personally met with Henry to discuss boundary lines and peacekeeping treaty articles, while Old Tassel desired direct correspondence with Washington. As Old Tassel denoted in his speech, he viewed Washington as America's "great Warrior," and a man of great dignity and military knowledge. He believed that Washington possessed an equivalent rank with Cherokee leaders and successful warriors.

Patrick Henry also took part in the negotiations. Even before Oconostota visited Williamsburg in May 1777, Henry attempted to broker a Cherokee-American alliance. During the "many conferences" with the Cherokees in early 1777, he introduced the "same ideas that [Christian] did" in regards to territorial and trade issues. At these same conferences he also discussed problems with England. Henry explained: "Moreover [I] endeavoured [*sic*] to lead them into the light of our situation with the King of Great Britain, and also that of our Commercial Connections."[46]

Though far removed from the main battlefields of the Revolutionary War, the Cherokees had a well-informed understanding of the conflict,

---

[44] Henderson, "Treaty of the Holston," 92.

[45] Ibid., 90.

[46] "Instructions to the Commissioners Appointed to Treat with the Cherokee Indians," June 3, 1777, in *Official Letters of the Governors*, 1:156-7.

especially the American side. Henry ordered Christian to replenish Cherokee resources, including guns, tobacco, and salt. Not only were these items gifts of good will, but they also exemplified the Americans ability to procure supplies for the Cherokees. If the Americans lost their war, however, they could no longer supply "Commercial Connections" to the Cherokees. British traders were often unreliable in their dealings with the Cherokees. As one example, British trader John Elliot inflated the value of his goods and overcharged the Cherokees for ammunition and other supplies that they could not make themselves. Elliot often failed to bring the goods that his customers requested, instilling even greater distrust in the Cherokees toward the British. Henry took advantage of this distrust, arguing that American commercial interests aligned with Cherokee interests and that without the Americans the Cherokees would have to rely on treacherous British traders.[47]

When he sent William Christian to Chota in October 1776, Patrick Henry effectively handed over all negotiation power to Christian. Henry expected Christian to ensure peace along Virginia's frontier and restore Virginia's soldiers to the state altogether. Christian desired to bring Cherokee powers into alliance with the United States by saying:

> In all such Cases you are empowered to act for the good of the United States in the best manner you can. Shou'd the Treaty terminate in the Manner the Board expects it will be unnecessary to continue many Troops in Washington County. You are therefore impowered [*sic*] and desired to discharge all Men on those Stations except such as you think Necessary to continue.[48]

Christian served as Indian commissioner for Virginia and earned the trust of Henry. Despite Virginia's seemingly third party role in the negotiations, Henry sent Virginian troops to the frontier for settler protection. Christian served as a key treaty negotiator, because he created a situation that allowed Virginia to send more troops to the front lines. The 1777 Treaty was thus crucial to the war effort because it allowed Virginia to remove troops from the frontier and provided the Continental Army new troops with special skills. Keeping the frontier peaceful and protecting settlers required almost constant skirmishing, thus these soldiers possessed discipline and fighting abilities that made them ripe for battling the British. To this end, Virginia left some soldiers on the frontier, but Henry sent the majority to bolster Washington's troops in the South or Mid-Atlantic.

Establishing territorial boundaries with the Cherokees immediately affected those near the borderland, and it also affected the outcome of the

---

[47] Daniel Ingram, *Indians and British Outposts in Eighteenth-Century America* (Gainesville, 2012), 53.

[48] "Instructions," June 3, 1777, in *Official Letters of the Governors*, 1:156-7.

The Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston was one of several treaties with the Cherokees during the American Revolution. The accords of the treaty helped make possible later agreements especially the Treaty of the Holston in 1791, which was the first treaty between the United States government and the Cherokees. James W. Wallace, "Treaty of Holston," 1901. McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture, Knoxville.

Revolutionary War. Native Americans in every state were key players in the American Revolution, giving their knowledge of the local geography, serving as soldiers, and providing intelligence on the British. The Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston of 1777 thus had a dual effect on the American Revolution. It first established an armistice with the Cherokees, permitting Washington, Henry, and other American leaders to put their efforts back into the American Revolution. Additionally, the treaty gave the Americans a new ally against the British, allowing them to use the Cherokees as a kind of frontier monitor.

At the end of August 1777, Nathaniel Gist was stationed in Maryland with a number of Cherokee warriors, all of them prepared to fight the British. Patrick Henry and Maryland governor Thomas Johnson sent a combined force to the Eastern Shore of Virginia, including Gist and Cherokee soldiers. On September 5, Gist and seventeen Cherokee warriors attacked a British fleet floating in a Maryland harbor. Following the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston, the Cherokees sent warriors north with Gist, reinforcing Washington's troops along the Mid-Atlantic coast. Even so, violence returned to the frontier. A few weeks after the treaty was ratified, Henry and Caswell became uneasy about the armistice. In a letter to Washington, Henry detailed how groups of Cherokees and the white settlers continued to fight one another. This tense environment required more troops from Virginia and North Carolina to maintain the peace. In writing to Washington about

such backcountry squabbles, Henry feared that more troops to the region would withdraw a sizable force from the Continental Army.[49]

While the resulting truce of the Treaty of the Long Island was short lived it established important territorial boundaries. Through the treaty negotiations, the Cherokees sought to retain land rights and American leaders requested terms that strengthened the American front against the British in the Revolutionary War. Decreased frontier violence meant more troops for the war, and Cherokee support provided the Americans with a greater intelligence and additional troop strength. The Cherokees may have been a population living on the margins of the frontier, far from the front lines of battle, yet they contributed to the Revolutionary War in both candid and subtle ways. In the end, the territorial boundaries determined by the Treaty of the Long Island of the Holston of 1777 did not last, but the terms of the agreement provided important short-term advantages for both parties. Perhaps most important, the treaty represented the first alliance between the Cherokees and the new American nation, marking a departure from the colonial era in more than just American independence from Britain.

[49] Patrick Henry to George Washington, September 5, 1777, in *Official Letters of the Governors*, 1:184.