

The State That Almost Was: The Free Republic of Franklin

- The amazing but little-known tale of America's almost "14th state"
- Seven of original 13 states voted to admit "Franklin" into the union

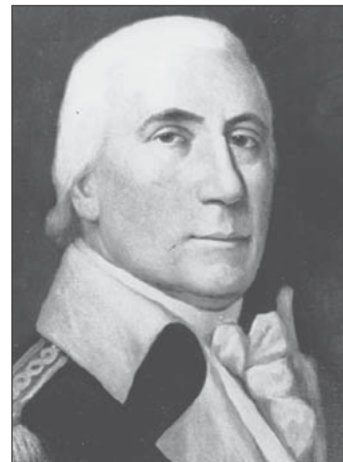
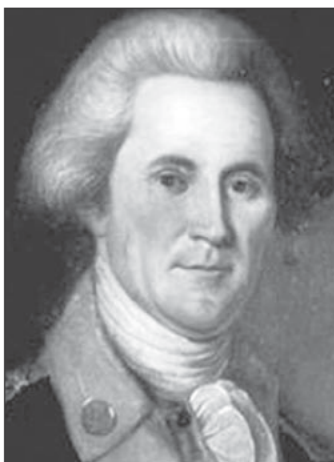
We have all heard of the 13 colonies that became the original 13 states of the United States of America. However, few history buffs are aware of what almost became our 14th state. Some of the other states would not allow that 14th state into the union, although they wanted to admit Canada, which wasn't even interested in joining the newly formed American confederation. . . .

By John Tiffany

State No. 14 existed from 1784 to 1788 and was the subject of great controversy and debate. As an independent republic, it seriously considered signing a treaty with Spain—an important regional power at the time. That would have been a disaster for the new nation calling itself the United States. This little-remembered state almost went to war with North Carolina.

The state, named the Free Republic of Franklin in honor of Benjamin Franklin, covered an area of 29 million acres, or 45,000 square miles, an area the size of Ohio.

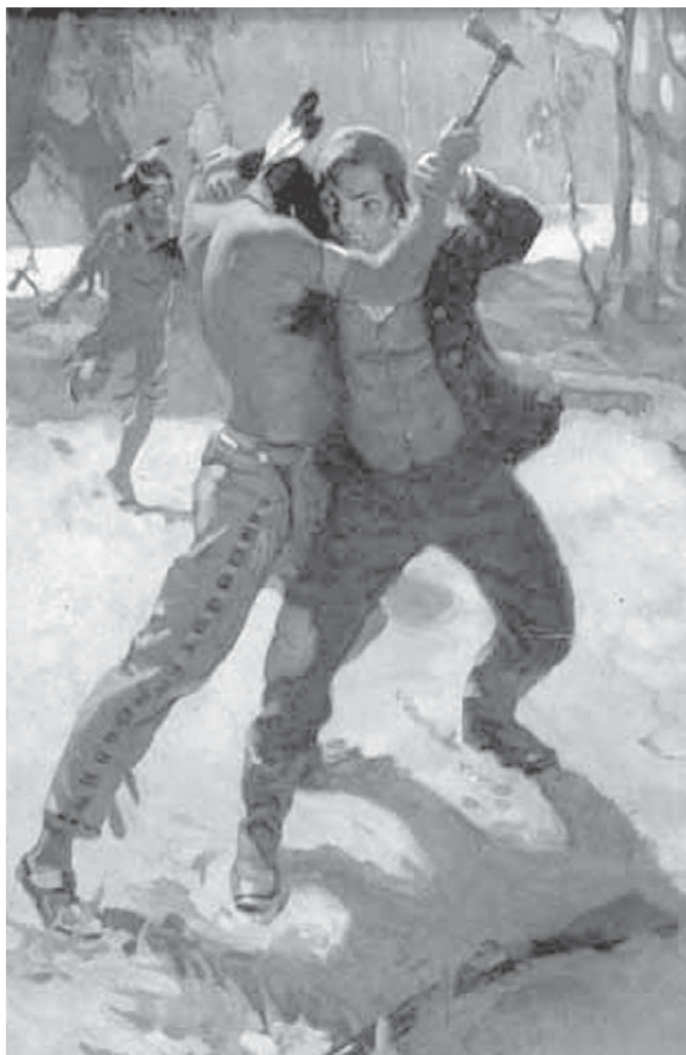
The whole thing started in the early 1780s. At that time, North Carolina's borders extended west to the mighty Mississippi River. Money was in short supply, es-



Left: John Sevier, first (and last) governor of the state of Franklin. **Right: Alexander Martin**, governor of North Carolina, Franklin's unwilling "mother state." Martin objected to the secession. However, he believed the westerners had a right to their own state—but only when granted by North Carolina, in the fullness of time. Ironically he was succeeded as governor by a Franklin—Jesse Franklin.

pecially in the Tarheel State. Eastern Tarheels by the hundreds crossed the Appalachians looking for a land of opportunity in the wilderness. But the situation was tough, and the frontiersmen asked their state government to give them some protection from wild Indians and roving criminal gangs that infested this western region.

Many eastern North Carolinians were not interested in the problems of their western brethren and did not



Left: John Sevier in hand-to-hand combat with a copper-colored marauder of the Cherokee nation. Sevier was an extraordinarily daring and brilliant leader of the racial conflict. **Above: Sevier rescues fellow settler Catherine Sherrill** by reaching over the palisade and pulling her to safety as the Cherokees attack. They were later married, in 1780.

want to spend their scarce dollars to defend them against their enemies. Gov. Alexander Martin came up with a rather clever idea: Why not give the problem to the newly formed Continental Congress, so his eastern constituents would not have to shoulder the responsibility?

At his urging, the North Carolina legislature ceded its western lands to the U.S.A., making the feds responsible for that wilderness region. (This may well have violated the U.S. Constitution, but no one seemed concerned about that.)

Soon after this act of cession, westerner John Sevier, known as “Nolichucky Jack,” got together with a number of other western patriots and held a “secession convention”—although technically unnecessary as the west had

already been dumped by the easterners. Not surprisingly, scorned and trashed by the easterners, they set up an independent republic, which they called the Free Republic of Franklin, with Sevier as its “governor.” Why he did not call himself its president is unknown.

Martin responded by suddenly having second thoughts and moving to have North Carolina reclaim the rejected territory. But the Franklinites were not having any of this. They were enjoying their enforced status as a free republic. Martin, insane as it sounds, declared the

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western territories in a state of rebellion and threatened to send his militia to force them back into North Carolina. Sevier, who was no pushover, swore he would raise a western army to defend the republic against the perfidious easterners. Two people were killed in the “civil skirmish,” in 1788.

But Franklanders did not really see themselves as potential Spaniards. Instead they considered themselves as good Americans, and on May 16, 1785, William Cooke,



John Sevier, known as “Nolichucky Jack,” was seen as a hero—specifically, the hero of the Battle of Kings Mountain—by his fellow mountaineers. But to the government of North Carolina, he was viewed as a traitor for leading his area to secede from the Tarheel State and setting up the independent republic of Franklin. In the fall of 1788, the Tarheels “kidnapped” him from his cabin and bore him away in iron chains to Morgantown. A thousand or so frontiersmen marched on the city, Deckard rifles in hand, and were prepared to fight a war, if necessary, to free him. At left, Franklinite James Cosby distracts the court with his speech in favor of Sevier; meanwhile, other friends and kinfolk of Sevier were able to “snake him out of the court.” Wisely, the trial was dropped, and civil war was averted. Sevier was immediately elected to the state Senate, and President George Washington appointed him to the command of the district around him, with the rank of major general. After that, he led a campaign against the hostile Cherokees, whom he summarily chastised.

representing Franklin, arrived in New York. He presented to the Continental Congress a petition for Franklin statehood. Seven states voted to admit Franklin to the union. Although this was a majority, it fell two votes short of the required two-thirds needed for approval.

Meanwhile, in Franklin, monetary reform set in. Having no dollars, the republic set Gov. Sevier’s salary at 1,000 deer hides a year.

Stubbornly, the Indian-givers of North Carolina would not relinquish their claim to the territory, or should we say, re-relinquish?

Ignoring Franklin’s independence, North Carolina sent its own officials into the republic, creating two sets of authorities and a lot of confusion. Rival clerks of court issued marriage licenses and recorded land transactions. Rival justices handed down conflicting decisions, and rival sheriffs got into fistfights.

In desperation, Gov. Sevier turned to Spain, requesting a loan to protect Franklin’s citizens from a military invasion by North Carolinians. But before a deal could be struck, a company of North Carolina law officers, led by John Tipton, invaded Franklin to arrest Sevier, clap him in irons and spirit him east across the mountains. He had barely settled in his jail cell when a contingent of frontiersmen from Franklin showed up to break him out of jail and escort him back home.

By now, Sevier had realized the futility of the struggle. In February 1788, he and other leaders of the Franklin venture went to North Carolina and surrendered to authorities.

They stood trial, but their only punishment was to take an oath of allegiance to the state of North Carolina.

Ironically, Sevier would become a state senator representing Greene County in the North Carolina Legislature. As soon as things settled down, North Carolina once more ceded the same territory back to the federal government. This time it was accepted by Congress, and the “Territory of the United States of America South of the Ohio River” was formed. On June 1, 1796, a new state was created from the territory that once had been the troublesome Republic of Franklin. They named it Tennessee. Its first governor was none other than “Nolichucky Jack.”

Whether “Nolichucky Jack” was related to scientist and explorer Earnest Sevier Cox but considering that Cox was a Tennessee native, it seems likely. Cox wrote the 1923 book *White America*, which describes his travels in Africa and argues that racial mixing would result in the collapse of white civilization. In 1924, Cox formed an alliance with black nationalist Marcus Garvey based on their shared belief that the only way to save both races was for African-Americans to relocate to Africa. ♦

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The Life of John Sevier

Born in Virginia in 1745 of French descent, pioneer John Sevier migrated, with his first wife (nee Sarah Hawkins) and nine children, around 1771, to the trans-Appalachian wilderness of what today would be Washington County, Tennessee, but was then a part of North Carolina (the Tarheel State claimed to extend from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River, as did Georgia, South Carolina, Virginia, Connecticut and Massachusetts). He settled by the Nolichucky River, and hence got the moniker of “Nolichucky Jack.” A 10th child was soon added. Just as George Washington is the father of our country, Jack is known as the father of Tennessee. He quickly developed a reputation against Redcoats and redskins alike, serving as captain of militia under George Washington in Lord Dunmore’s War against the Shawnee and Mingo nations in 1774. In 1777, he was promoted to colonel. His first wife died early in 1780. He led an army of settlers at the Battle of Kings Mountain, Oct. 7, 1780, where the mighty British loyalist militia (which had the patriots outnumbered) went down in ignominious defeat. After the war, he became involved in establishing a settlement at Muscle Shoals.

Sevier became in 1784 the governor of the “lost state of Franklin,” which is now northeastern Tennessee. For four years, the people of the area acted as if they had their own state of Franklin, hoping to join the union, or possibly Spain (which controlled the lower Mississippi country), but the Tarheel ruling class was reluctant to let them go and, because of this, Congress never recognized Franklin and it finally faded away. In 1789, the Tarheels ceded their western land claims to the U.S. central government, and the “Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio” was carved up into three districts, two of them corresponding to eastern Tennessee. Sevier was elected as a Federalist to the state Senate and was then elected to the first Congress, from 1789 to ’91. In 1795, a territorial census showed sufficient population for statehood, and in a referendum the people voted three-to-one in favor of joining the



Above, a 1931 statue by Belle Kinney Scholz depicts Tennessee governor and frontiersman John Sevier. The statue is found in National Statuary Hall in the U.S. Capitol.

union. In 1796, the state of Tennessee was formed, and Sevier was elected its first governor. He would serve in that position for 12 years (1796-1801 and 1803-09), and also four terms as congressman, until 1815, also serving as Indian commissioner. In addition to these duties and conducting his plantations, he engaged widely in land speculation and was trustee at four different colleges. He died in a tent on Sept. 24, 1815, while negotiating with the Creek nation in Alabama. ♦