

The mystery of the "Lost State of Franklin"

New state split away from North Carolina in 1784, but soon became history

By Hank Hayes, John Sevier photo provided by the Tennessee Historical Society.

A territorial dispute now regarded by history as a blessing in disguise began in 1782.

The American colonists had fought long and hard to gain their independence from Great Britain, but still had some emotional baggage left from the Revolutionary War. Americans distrusted authority and refused to take orders from fellow citizens who weren't residents of their known immediate region.

The tension between states and their residents was thick - especially in a region of North Carolina now known as Northeast Tennessee. Settlers there distrusted North Carolina so much they refused to pay taxes.

A move to separate from North Carolina gained ground in August 1784 when delegates from around the region gathered in Jonesborough. By the following December, separation was a done deal and a new state was born. Its name was Franklin - after Benjamin Franklin, one of America's founding fathers.

How the idea came about to name the new state was unknown, but the choice was popular. The delegates penned a letter inviting Benjamin Franklin to move to the new state, and requested permission to name it after him.

*"Dr. Franklin had a greater prestige than any other American," writes author Noel B. Gerson in his book, *Franklin: America's Lost State*. "He was a diplomat and statesman, inventor, noted philosopher, author and publisher."*

Franklin responded that he had too many business interests in Philadelphia, and couldn't move because of his advanced age. But he was proud to give his name to the new state.

Franklin's only governor was military hero John Sevier, who had fought 35 skirmishes against the Indians without a loss.

"Vain, obstinate and quick-tempered, [Sevier] was also a man of great courage, foresight and ability," Gerson writes.



Sevier immediately hit it off with settlers. He granted them a two-year grace period before paying taxes. Sevier would later become governor of another state called Tennessee.

The year 1786 was the golden era in Franklin's brief history.

Thousands of settlers arrived, mostly near the Tennessee, Nolichucky and Holston rivers. No one went hungry. The government was functioning and the state was at peace. Settlers were so happy they voted to remain independent of North Carolina.

The situation with the former British colonies, however, appeared to be disintegrating. Franklin's leaders weren't interested in joining the union. They

talked about becoming an independent nation and obtaining financial aid from Spain.

But an Indian war complicated matters. By the end of March in 1788, the Cherokee, Chickamauga and Chickasaw had gone on the warpath - killing, burning, looting and scalping.

No remote dwelling or home on the frontier was safe. Settlers were abandoning their homesteads. Taxes weren't collected.

Franklinites set aside their differences with North Carolina and fought side by side with the state's militia. Sevier, as expected, showed no mercy to the Indians.

The last 15 months of Franklin's history are a mystery. Only fragments of records exist. Franklin disappeared forever when it was ceded to a new federal government in the late 1780s and became known as the Southwest Territory.

"The story of Franklin is an exciting one - a self-made state carved out of the wilderness almost overnight by ambitious energetic frontiersmen who refused to be halted or even slowed by obstacles that would have forced the more cautious to wait and proceed slowly," Gerson writes. "Franklin... laid the foundation for the establishment of Tennessee."

The **State of Franklin movement** advanced farther than any other early attempt to create a new state as America was achieving its independence from Great Britain. Much of this history as well as the location of a battle between North Carolina and Franklin forces is archived and represented at the Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site in Johnson City - <http://tipton-haynes.org/> (website). The "Lost State" is also recognized in Johnson City Tennessee's most prominent transportation arterial - **the State of Franklin Road**.



Tipton-Haynes State Historic Site in Johnson City, Tennessee