



Adventure on the Cumberland

The Donelson Party's river journey had more than its share of setbacks

In my opinion, the greatest story in Tennessee history is what happened to the fleet of boats carrying men, women and children downriver to settle what was then known as the French Lick. The Donelson Party comprised one of two groups that migrated that year. Another group of men, led by James Robertson, went by land, through the Cumberland Gap, through Kentucky and into Nashville. Robertson's journey was relatively uneventful, while the Donelson Party ran into one misadventure after another.





On Dec. 22, 1779, about 200 people left Fort Patrick Henry (site of present-day Kingsport) on the Holston River. They were loaded on about 30 flatboats — long, wooden crafts of various sizes. Most of the boats had roofs over parts of their hulls, with bunks inside for sleeping and a small area for cooking. But the people riding in them were mostly exposed to the cold. And it was very cold that winter.

The biggest boat was led by John Donelson. It held about 30 people and had been christened *The Adventure*.

It would be hard for us to imagine the excitement these settlers felt as they set off that day, leaving behind friends they knew they would never see again. It would be even harder for us to imagine the sense of frustration they must have had three days later, when their boats ran aground and they found themselves stuck in the ice. Unable to return to the fort, the entire party spent the winter there, waiting for it to thaw.

Finally, on Feb. 27, the boats set out again. At first there was more trouble; several of the boats ran aground, and it took a long time to get everyone back together. But soon they were drifting along, and for the next few days things seemed to go well. On March 2, they passed the present-day site of Knoxville, but there was nothing there at the time but trees and a hill. Two days later came the journey's first death: an African-American man died of an infection caused by frostbite.

This wasn't the only horrifying development. Smallpox broke out among some of the settlers. In an attempt to keep the disease from spreading, Donelson ordered everyone

At left stands a memorial to Jacques Timothe Boucher De Montbrun, or Timothy Demonbreun, who lived from 1747-1826. He was a French-Canadian fur trader and explorer, officer during the American Revolution and lieutenant governor of the Illinois Territory who is also honored as Nashville's first citizen. To the south of Demonbreun's memorial stands Fort Nashborough, above, log structures now dwarfed by downtown Nashville.



with the disease to board the same boat and told them to stay behind the other vessels.

A few days later the settlers stopped to rest at the mouth of South Chickamauga Creek, site of a Cherokee town burned to the ground by white invaders a year earlier. It was there that Mrs. Ephraim Peyton gave birth to a child.

The next day the settlers began seeing members of the warlike Cherokee faction known as the Chickamaugans on the shoreline. At first the natives seemed friendly. But when Donelson saw canoes filled with armed Indians, painted red and black, paddling in their direction, he ordered everyone to keep going.

A few miles later the settlers ran into an ambush. As the fleet of flatboats passed Moccasin Bend, Chickamaugans fired guns and tried to attack the boats from

canoe. They were unable to catch up with most of the boats — all except the one that was carrying all the people with smallpox. “The Indians fell upon this straggler and soon killed or captured all the party,” Donald Davidson wrote in “The Tennessee: The Old River.” “The yells of the Indians, the crack of guns, the screams of the women were borne along the gorge to the ears of the voyagers. But the current,

now increasingly rapid, prevented any turning back. They could not reach (the) boat in time to do any good. An attempt at rescue might endanger the whole expedition. Their only solace was the grim certainty that the smallpox would wreak revenge for them.”

Twenty-eight people were on the doomed boat. None of them were heard from again.

There was no time to grieve. As the remaining boats floated downstream, warriors lined the left side of the river, firing guns and arrows and ready to board any craft that fell behind the others. Meanwhile the boats were entering the dangerous part of the river known as “The Suck,” where the current was rapid and unpredictable and where a boat could be crashed into a boulder at any moment. (This part of the

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The original site of Fort Nashborough covered about two acres on the west bank of the Cumberland River. Today, smaller replicas of five original structures are open daily for self-guided tours.



river, now placid because of TVA, is near the present-day site of Chattanooga.)

Everyone pitched in. On one boat, the man steering was shot, and a woman named Nancy Gower took his place. She steered the boat for a while and then noticed that she, too, had been shot.

In the confusion of the moment, one of the boats — headed by a man named Jonathan Jennings — was missing. The remaining boats kept on, certain that Jennings' boat — which contained Mrs. Ephraim Peyton and her child — had capsized.

The next couple of days went more smoothly as the boats entered the present-day boundary of Alabama. Then, early one morning, Jennings' boat caught up. As it turned out, his boat hadn't wrecked but had run aground while it was being fired upon by the Cherokees. In the frantic attempt to get the boat off the reef two men drowned, Jennings' son had been captured, and Mrs.



A memorial to the handshake between James Robertson and John Donelson stands near Fort Nashborough. From 1779-1780, the two pioneers led settlers to the present-day Nashville, Robertson by land and Donelson by river.

Peyton's infant child died – in all likelihood, thrown overboard by accident.

As mentioned before, James Robertson and other men had come to the French Lick via the land route. Under the original plan, Robertson was to have sent some men down from French Lick to the area just above Muscle Shoals (now in Alabama) to greet the settlers and tell them whether they had found a good way to proceed via land from there.

When the boats arrived at Muscle Shoals, several men got off and started looking for Robertson's men, or at least some sign that they had been there. But there was no sign of them.

Can you imagine how much the settlers despaired? No doubt, many of them wondered if Robertson's men had even made it to French Lick. Was it possible that they were heading for a settlement that didn't even exist?

Next came the terrifying journey through the Muscle Shoals, the steepest and most treacherous part of the Tennessee River. To everyone's relief they made it with no accidents. But, two days after leaving the shoals they were attacked by Creeks. Five more men were wounded. They pressed on.

Somehow, the next few weeks went smoothly. Now out of Cherokee and Creek territory, the boats drifted along quietly through pleasant weather. In a week the boats had floated 250 miles downstream to the junction of the Tennessee and the Ohio. It was here that the journey became physically more difficult, because the boats now had to turn upstream on the Ohio and subsequently on the Cumberland. Every able-bodied person had to paddle.

Finally, the boats arrived at Ft. Nashborough (the new name for French Lick) on April 24, 1780, having come a thousand miles. At least 33 of them had died or been captured on the way. The community that they started is today known as Nashville.

I recommend "Perilous Journey" by Peyton Cockrill Lewis, a recent work of historical fiction that retells the story of the Donelson Party. ➡



Tennessee History for Kids



Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of "Tennessee History for Kids," an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to www.tnhistoryforkids.org.