

Battle of Boyd's Creek was Pivotal to Early Settlers

By Carroll McMahan

On December 16, 1780, two months after the Battle of Kings Mountain, the Battle of Boyd's Creek took place. The battle was fought, not against the British, but their sometime-ally, the Cherokee. A number of East Tennessee and Southwest Virginia's leaders had been calling for an expedition against the Cherokee for some time. British agents, led by John McDonald had allegedly been encouraging the Indians to attack white settlements.

Regardless of the outcome, the British would benefit since either way, the number of white frontiersmen able to fight the British would be reduced. Major Joseph Martin, Virginia Cherokee Indian Agent and husband of Betsy Ward, daughter of Nancy Ward, beloved woman of the Cherokee, had been successful maintaining relations with the older Indian chiefs. But the younger chiefs were unable to convince Dragging Canoe to join them.

Somehow, Nancy Ward was able to get word by way of Isaac Thomas, Ellis Hardin, and William Springstone, white traders who were able to alert the settlements, with Thomas and Hardin reporting at Nolichucky and Springhouse to Col. Arthur Campbell at Washington County, Virginia.

Col. John Sevier returned from the victory against the British at Kings Mountain to his home in Jonesboro to find Isaac Thomas and Ellis Hardin waiting. Nancy Ward had sent them to find Sevier to warn that both Creek and Cherokee nations were staging attacks against the settlers.

After listening to the report of Thomas and Hardin, Sevier announced the necessity of setting out at once to meet the Indians. Thomas and Hardin went with him to serve as guides and scouts. Sevier led the small advance force, consisting of Russell's Company, joined by Captain Thomas Gist as he marched southwestward. Other volunteers were being equipped and soon followed. The meeting place was to be at Swan Pond on Lick Creek in Greene County.

After a treacherous march that involved the exchange of gunfire, the troops crossed the French Broad River at the big island that would later be named Buckingham Island and encamped at Boyd's Creek. The next day, the advance guard under the command of Capt. Stinson, continued the march and soon found the encampment of the enemy and their camp fires still burning. Reinforcement was immediately ordered to the front, and the guard was directed if it came upon the Indians to fire upon them and retreat, and thus draw them on.

Less than a mile from their camp, the enemy fired upon the advance from an ambush. They returned the fire and retreated, and, as had been anticipated, were hastily perused by the enemy until it joined the main body. Formed with three divisions, the center of which was commanded by Col. Sevier, the right wing by Maj. Jesse Walton, and the left wing by Major Jonathan Tipton; they met the Indians near the confluence of Cedar Springs and Boyd's Creek.

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Col. Sevier and his men fired upon the Indians killing a great number of enemy warriors. In the charge, Col. Sevier was in close pursuit of a warrior who, finding that he would be overtaken turned and fired at him. The bullet cut the hair of his temple without doing further injury. Col. Sevier then spurred his horse forward and attempted to kill his assailant with his sword, having emptied his pistols in the first moments of the charge.

The warrior paired the licks from the sword with his empty gun. The conflict was becoming doubtful between the two combatants when one of the soldiers came up and shot the warrior, deciding the conflict in favor of his commander.

The Indians retreated running into a swamp therefore escaping the destruction for which they would otherwise been doomed. The victory was decisive. The loss of enemy amounted to 28 killed and very many lay on the ground wounded. On the side of Sevier's troops not a man was wounded.

The victorious then returned to the big island and waited there the arrival of reinforcements that promised to follow. The prompt collection of troops and rapid expedition of Col. Sevier saved the frontier settlements from a bloody invasion. Had he not arrived when he did, the Indians would have reached the settlements, scattered themselves along the extended border, then driven them into stations, or perhaps massacred them in their cabins and fields.

The Battle of Boyd's Creek did not signal the end of Cherokee Expedition. Col. Sevier remained only a few days at his encampment on the French Broad Island that would later be called Sevier Island before being renamed Buckingham. He was joined by Col. Arthur Campbell with his regiment from Virginia, and Major Martin with his troops from Sullivan County. The army consisted of seven hundred men. The soldiers went on to burn out town after town and by the end of the expedition were claiming victory every step of the way.

According to *Ramsey's Annals of Tennessee*, the Battle of Boyd's Creek was considered to be one of the best fought battles in the border war of Tennessee history. On July 4, 1927, the John Sevier Chapter of Tennessee Society Sons of the American Revolution erected a monument to mark the site of the Battle of Boyd's Creek.

While it is not recorded, perhaps Sevier County was named in honor of John Sevier in appreciation of his involvement at the Battle of Boyd's Creek.