I

FRONTIER

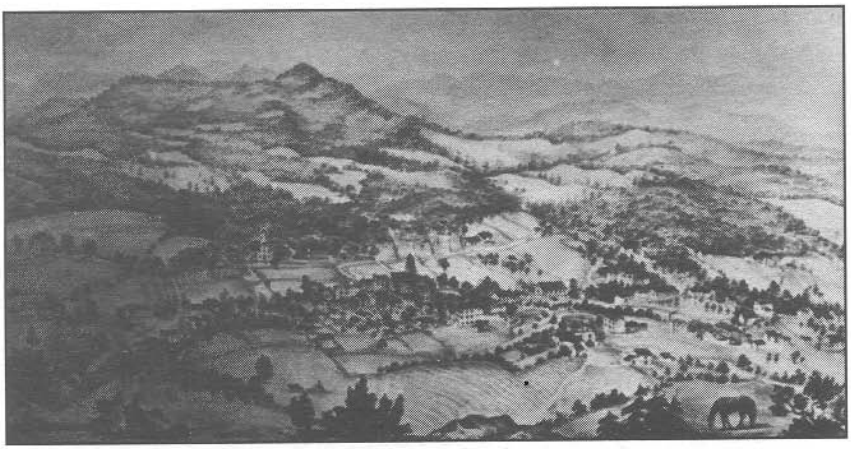
No white man had penetrated the wilderness as twenty-four-year-old Samuel Davidson was doing that day in the spring of 1784. When he crossed the barrier between civilization and the wild frontier he was all alone. In the vastness of the steep forest around him, there were no houses, no barns or cleared fields, nothing. . . but Indians? John Parris described the land as "an unexplored wilderness of white water and tall trees and wild game and brooding silence."

Davidson was a careful man who came prepared for trouble. Riding a stout horse, cradling a long rifle in the crook of his left arm, he allowed nothing around him to go unnoticed. His life depended on alertness, attention to detail, and readiness. His rifle was loaded, his powder horn filled, the powder was dry, and the skinning knife at his side was honed to such a razor's edge that he could shave with it of a morning. He was as much a backwoodsman as Daniel Boone. Some of the frontiersmen back at the fort had fought Indians with Dan'l, knew him well, in fact.

A half-mile from his starting point at the eastern foot of the mountains, from a blockhouse called Davidson's Fort,[1] he had entered the wilderness, and from that point he rode with care. There were no Cherokee settlements between the fort and his destination across the mountains; but these were Indian hunting grounds, and he risked the chance of encountering a hunting party.

At times he rode a buffalo path, and now and then when the going was rougher elsewhere, he took to an Indian trail up the forbidding mountain, but when the forest opened enough for passage, he left the

[1] Known today as Old Fort.



View of Asheville and the mountains in 1851.

trace and moved through the woods, riding when the going was easy, walking and leading his horse when the grade was steep.

The horse was burdened enough without his weight. Behind the saddle, it carried an axe and froe, a frying pan, and a couple of blankets. One saddle bag contained a tin cup, a coffee pot, a bag of coffee beans, part of a side of hogmeat, jerked beef, salt, and other staples, an extra buckskin shirt, a new pair of moccasins, a hunk of lead, a sack of gunpowder, and a bullet mold. He did not think he had forgotten anything. The other saddle bag was filled with grain for the horse.

He was prepared to stay over the mountain until he could clear a piece of land and build a rough cabin of logs. When he returned to the fort and brought his wife and infant child to their new home, he would build a bigger, better cabin.

Around him the woods were silent, except for the chirp of birds and the occasional chatter of a squirrel. Sunlight glistened off newborn foliage, forming slanted shafts of light through giant, virgin trees of oak, hickory, beech, poplar, chestnut, and evergreens. When possible, he clung to a route that carried him away from laurel hells[2] dotting the mountainside, for these were prime hiding places for savages up to no good and provided excellent cover for an ambush. With the forest in early leaf, he could see far enough through the trees so no one would come up on him unnoticed.

He made his way up the mountains, holding to hollows, creekbeds, and mountainsides, never skylining himself on a ridgetop. He rode

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with care and kept himself constantly alert. There was no dozing in his saddle on that ride.

His wariness paid off. When he camped for the night beside a trickle of pure water and staked his horse nearby, he had seen no other human being that day, and caught only glimpses of a few deer.

He strapped a feedbag on his horse's muzzle, rubbed it down, and patted its neck. "Well, Brownie, we've made it this far. Day after tomorrow we ought to be on t'other side of the mountains, and then we'll look for a place to live."

Savoring the meager supper as if he were devouring the finest steak, he ate quickly and put out the tiny fire over which he had brewed coffee and fried salt pork and corn balls, working the latter by mixing cornmeal and grease and frying it to a crisp. Darkness closed in quickly in the woods, and he rolled into his blankets and went to sleep, knowing his horse would alert him to any danger.

This was the life he loved. Hours spent in the forests where God's handiwork was so evident were his most satisfying times.

He had learned from occasional woodsmen that across the mountains were broad valleys of rich land and more mountains thickly covered with forest. There were wide rivers filled with jumping fish and whitewater creeks rushing down the hills and along the valley floor, creeks that carried cold water from bold springs high in the hills, and the forests held plenty of game for the table. Life would not be easy, not with the backbreaking work of carving out a homestead, clearing fields, and planting crops, but he did not mind that. The promise of a new and better life overshadowed the thought of strenuous labor, and the solitude appealed to him, regardless of the amount of toil.

History records that Davidson was the first white man to plant a homestead over the mountains, but he was not the first to explore west of the Blue Ridge. It is probable that DeSoto came through the Valley of the Tuckaseigee as early as 1540, and others intent upon scouting the country or wreaking havoc among the Cherokees had crossed through Swannanoa Gap since. The German explorer John Lederer came into the western mountains in 1669 or 1670 and probed the country. Englishmen James Needham and Gabriel Arthur poked about west of the Blue Ridge in 1673. Both of these parties came through Swannanoa Gap or Hickory Nut Gap.

A more recent expedition had been led by General Griffith Rutherford, who in 1776 brought 2,400 fighting men across

Swannanoa Gap and down along the river, passing through or near the site that would later become the town of Asheville, and moved on to the west to destroy Cherokee towns.

Two days later Samuel Davidson crossed the divide and descended into a broad, lush valley[3] divided by a small river.[4] Pausing to let his eyes roam the valley, he noticed pine- and hemlock-covered ridgelines, the thickness of the forest, and the location of ample water. A more beautiful sight had never passed before his eyes. The country fairly burst with natural resources, and the resources of a nation were for the benefit of all. He felt very good about entering this land, even if he was taking a grave chance, coming here all alone. All day he rode through the forest, encountering streams of varying width, and coming to a creek[5] that flowed from deep in the hills toward the river, he pulled his mount to a halt and surveyed the glade through which the creek rushed. He rode around it to a knoll from which he could see into the glade, and slowly a smile of satisfaction spread over his face.

"This is the place," he said to his horse. "This is where we'll build our home."

Enough said. He had seen aplenty, and Samuel Davidson never had trouble making up his mind. This was the place. He would go no farther.

Weeks later, under a warm sun, he removed his hat, wiped sweat off his brow, and surveyed the work he had done. He had cleared a small area of timber, pulled the stumps, and in the center of the clearing had grooved together a cabin. With froe and maul he had rived boards for the roof, and with rocks from the creek and good clay from its banks he had built a fireplace and chimney that drew well and would provide warmth on the coldest days.

On one side he had built a lean-to opening into the cabin, large enough for a small bed and table for the Negro servant girl his wife would bring with her. With no window, the lean-to would be warm

[3] The Swannanoa Valley.

[4] The Swannanoa River. There are various traditions concerning how the Swannanoa River got its name. Some said it was the Cherokee word for beautiful; others said it was intended as the Indian imitation of the sound made by the wings of the raven when flying rapidly, and was applied to this river because of the great number of these birds that congregated upon its banks. But to the historian Forster A. Sondley, Esq., it seemed more probable that this was just another way of spelling the name Shawano, a name for a tribe of Indians, some of whom lived in Ohio territory and others in northwestern South Carolina where their lands on the Savannah River adjoined the Cherokee territory. The word Savannah even appears to be a corruption of the name Shawano.

[5] Later Christian Creek.

in winter and cool in summer, and he figured the negress would fare well in there. He and his wife and daughter could easily make do in the main room. The cabin would have to be enlarged, perhaps this winter when there was no field work pressing him. He would clear land for crops and by next spring the homestead would still be raw but comfortable enough.

The horse lounged in a pole lot beside the place on which he would build a barn as soon as he could split the planks, and beside the horse lot was a garden plot with vegetable growth tall and healthy.

By carefully cutting the pieces and pegging together a rough bed, table, three chairs, and cupboard, and a bed and table for the servant's room he had furnished the cabin. On a rainy day he fashioned a cradle for their infant daughter.

Surveying the homestead and marveling at the work he had done, he turned his attention to the next task, that of returning to Davidson's Fort and bringing his family over the mountain.

At the fort a few days later, he made a sled of sturdy oak with runners cut from the crook of a sourwood tree, bought another horse, and headed again for the hills.

They made a caravan this time: two horses, one ridden by Samuel Davidson with his baby daughter strapped behind him, and another pulling the sled in which the Davidsons were moving their earthly possessions, including plow blades, hoe blades, other tools, a grinding stone, cooking pots, and seed corn for the fields. Davidson's wife drove the sled and the servant girl carried articles for the cabin.

They wove a careful though uneventful way up the mountain and a day or so later down into the valley to their new home. After supper that night, the Davidsons gave thanks to God for their bounty and good fortune, looking to the future with unbridled anticipation, and thus settled into the cabin to become the first white settlers west of the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Early fall arrived and Samuel Davidson made plans to clear more land for planting. He could clear as much farmland as he needed–and he had the jump on other settlers who would come over the hills later.

All day he studied the woods about him, pausing in his work to slowly run his eyes around the clearing in which he labored, taking in every detail. Had a rock been moved he would have known.

It was not a slackening of alertness that brought Davidson's end, but a small bell. At times he allowed one of his horses to graze freely and tied a small bell around its neck in case it wandered.

One morning in early autumn a small band of Cherokee hunters, seeking meat for the winter, moved into the valley and immediately saw wisps of white smoke drifting up from the woods. Investigating, they found the Davidson cabin. Moving nearer, they were attracted by the tinkling of the horse bell. Removing the bell, they led the horse to hiding in the woods, and returned to climb the forested hill beside the cabin, shaking the bell as they went along.

Samuel Davidson heard the bell and taking his rifle went to bring the horse back. He followed the sound up the hill and was gaining on the bell when a rifle ball knocked him from his feet and he saw a puff of smoke and heard the blast of a flintlock rifle from the trees. Other rifles boomed and Samuel Davidson felt the shock of lead balls striking his body, then heard no more as life slipped away.

In the cabin, Davidson's wife heard the crack of rifles and knew instinctively what had happened. Gathering her baby and the servant girl, she snatched wraps off pegs in a wall, and a handful of food, and pushing the girl ahead of her, fled into the forest. There they hid until dark. As soon as twilight settled, they made their way down the hill, around the cabin, and hurried toward the mountain they would have to cross to reach Davidson's Fort.

At the fort, a party of men including several members of the Davidson family saddled up within an hour after the arrival of Mrs. Davidson and headed for the mountains to avenge the death of Samuel Davidson. On the hill above Christian Creek they found the pioneer's scalped body and buried it on the spot. Trackers picked up the trail of the marauding Indians and brought the avengers in close to the Indian camp at the mouth of Rock House Creek, not far from the place of Davidson's death. Opening fire, they killed two Indians and the others fled into the blindness of the forest to the west.

In the valley, Colonel William Davidson, Samuel's twin brother, scooped up a handful of soil and let it sift through his fingers.

"That's good soil," he said, and a kinsman, standing beside him, caught the flowing dirt and felt it.

"Good, all right," he said, and his eyes glowed with interest.

The richness of the land and promise of the forest did not fail to register with members of the group, and soon a trickle of white men

came over the mountain from Davidson's Fort, entering through Swannanoa Gap, and under the protection afforded by numbers began building homesteads in the valley land along the Swannanoa River, settling in a place they called Grey Eagle,[6] and others who came settled along the length of the river to its confluence with a greater river.[7]

First to come were the Davidsons, Alexanders, and Edmunsons. Then came more Davidsons, the Smiths, and finally almost too many to count. Samuel Davidson was killed before he could clear his fields; thus, the first land cleared by a white man west of the Blue Ridge was Edmunson land near the mouth of Bee Tree Creek and was known for decades as the Edmunson Field.

Man has always been intrigued with the conquest of uncharted lands, and suddenly the Valley of the Swannanoa was no longer a part of the Cherokee hunting grounds but was commanded by a growing number of fearless, well-armed whites who found the land to be unbelievably lush and fertile. They loved the flat bottomland which required little clearing and took easily to the plow, and they recognized the presence of plentiful game in the forests and netted fish in quantity from the streams. Wherever the river afforded a good place to set a fish trap, someone quickly settled.

The stream of settlers grew into thousands, and soon all across the land were scattered settlements of white homesteaders.

These frontiersmen had no idea they were hacking homesteads out of an area to be called Buncombe County. When they settled they were in Burke and Rutherford counties.

The Swannanoa River was the dividing line between Burke and Rutherford, with Burke on the north side of the stream and Rutherford on the south. Buncombe was carved out of them eight years after Samuel Davidson was killed and scalped on Christian Creek.

In 1791, David Vance, who lived on upper Reems Creek, was a member of the Legislature from Burke County, and Col. William Davidson, who had settled on the south side of the Swannanoa at

[6] Black Mountain.

[7] The French Broad River. The usual account of the origin of the name French Broad is that, as the settlements from the east advanced toward the mountains, the Broad River was found and named. It rose on the east side of the Eastern Continental Divide and flowed southeastward to dump its waters eventually in the Atlantic Ocean. When the larger river was discovered on the western side of the same mountains, it was found that it flowed in a huge arc which led to the Tennessee and then the Mississippi and at New Orleans, then claimed by the French, emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. Thus, it was called the French Broad. It is an unusual river, flowing south to north, and is one of the oldest rivers in the world, proven by the fact that it flows northward through the Great Smoky Mountains which geologists say are the oldest mountains in the world. Thus, the French Broad was in place before the mountains were created.

Gum Spring, was the Rutherford representative in the State Senate. The two had raised petitions in December 1791, asking for the new county, and now they introduced legislation for the organization of a new county. It would be formed of the western portion of Burke and Rutherford counties with its western border fixed by the line of the territory North Carolina had ceded to the United States two or three years before, which afterward became the State of Tennessee. The legislature ratified the act creating the county on January 14, 1792. The bill was passed the same day it was received.

The county was named for Col. Edward Buncombe, a North Carolina soldier who commanded the 5th North Carolina Regiment, Contintental Troops, in the Revolution.

This, the legislature considered, was apt honor to give one who gave his life for the freedom of the new country. Buncombe was a patriot who led North Carolina forces under General George Washington's command in the northern phase of the war. Buncombe was severely wounded and captured at the Battle of Germantown in October 1777, and died in Philadelphia in May 1778, while a paroled prisoner in the hands of the British.

It is interesting that Col. Buncombe's final fame came not as the man for whom the mountain county was named, but for a phrase that coined a new word in the American language.

It was many years after formation of the county that the word "Buncombe" was given a new meaning by the Congress of the United States. The 16th Congress, which convened in 1819, debated the Missouri question; and after hours of rhetoric, the House, tired of speeches, wanted to come to a vote.

Felix Walker, representing Buncombe County in the lower house, was opposed to the bill. He secured the floor and apparently stalling for time, launched a long, windy, and rather meaningless address. Impatient members whispered to him to sit down and let the vote be taken, but he refused, saying, "I must make a speech for Buncombe," meaning for his constituents. Several members rose and left the hall in disgust at the threat of filibuster, and when Walker saw them go, he interrupted his ramblings to say to the remaining members, "You might go too, if you wish, for I am only speaking for Buncombe."

The phrase was caught up at once and the English vocabulary was enriched by a new term: "Buncombe," sometimes shortened to "bunk," which meant "empty talk" or "pointless ramblings." The word first appeared in Webster's dictionary in 1900 with the definitions of "insincere or foolish talk" and "nonsense."