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# Revised History of Fort Watauga

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A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

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by
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May 2005

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Keywords: Fort Watauga, Fort Caswell, Elizabethton,
Sycamore Shoals, J. G. M. Ramsey, Lyman C. Draper

ABSTRACT

Revised History of Fort Watagua

by

Brian P. Compton

The history of the Revolutionary War Fort Watauga located in present day Elizabethton, TN has yet to be completed.

The critique of several Tennessee historians including J. G. M. Ramsey, Lyman C. Draper, Samuel Cole Williams, and others uncovered discrepancies and errors in Fort Watauga's written history. These problems forced a rethinking of the fort's actual location, which raised questions as to the reliability of the archaeological excavation in 1974 as well as to the historians who wrote about the fort during the last 200+ years.

Evidence found pointed to new accounts of the fort's history never before published as well as possible alternate locations of the original fort.

An updated version of Fort Watauga's history was included to serve as a new starting point for future historians and students interested in the Fort Watauga's history. An updated version of Fort Watauga's history was included to serve as a new starting point for future historians and students interested in Fort Watauga's history.

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# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

1776 was not only a pivotal year in American history but also for Tennessee history. Tennessee was at this time still part of North Carolina and would not become a separate state until 1796, but this may not have happened as it did were it not for the survival of the white settlements in the earliest days on the Tennessee frontier. When settlements arose in three main areas on the Tennessee frontier: The Watauga settlement, the Holston settlement, and the Carter's Valley settlement, conflict between the native Cherokee and the new intruders was unavoidable.

Even though many of the settlers made special deals through trading with the Cherokee nation in return for leases on the land, most deals were never considered official by the British government. It was an uneasy agreement between the Cherokee and the white settlers at best. When the Revolutionary War finally broke out, danger was a definite possibility. Most of the Tennessee settlers sided with the patriot cause, which put them in conflict with the British to the east. The Cherokee wanted the white settlers off of their land, so they allied with the British. Therefore, the settlers had the immediate threat of Cherokee attacks to also contend with. The British plan was for the Cherokee to eliminate the patriot population west of the Appalachian Mountains, and the British would likewise defeat the patriot forces in the east.

Attacks on the settlements were imminent, and the settlers knew that they were coming. Word spread back to them from the Cherokee towns that a three pronged attack was brewing in the Cherokee nation. Watauga, Holston, and Carter's Valley were to be hit by large Cherokee forces. When these settlements were defeated, the plan was to move on into North Carolina and

Virginia. But even before news of this attack reached the settlers, they were warned by the British government to remove themselves from land that still technically belonged to the Cherokee. Some heeded the warning, but those settlers who did not return east across the mountains for safety jammed into the surrounding forts for protection. Ultimately, the three regions survived the Cherokee attacks of July 1776, and the Tennessee frontier was able to continue its growth and prosperity. A closer look into the history of the Watauga settlement is the focal point of this present study. More specifically, the history of the fort located in the Watauga settlement deserves in-depth study.

The Watauga settlement, located near present day Elizabethton, Tennessee was attacked by the Cherokees on July 21, 1776. Fort Watauga, also known as Fort Caswell, was the fort built for the Watauga settlement shortly before the attacks to serve as protection for the surrounding settlements. One recent description of the attack is contained in Calloway's *America's First Western Frontier: East Tennessee*:

> The next day in the pre-dawn hours on July 21st, Old Abram's war party reached the vicinity of Fort Caswell. At daybreak, a few of the garrison's women were outside milking when in the gray light they saw the swiftly approaching naked and painted warriors. Their screams while running for the gates alerted the defenders who quickly manned the walls and began firing on the Indians, giving the women time to enter the fort. During the confusion the gates were closed and the way blocked by braves before one of the females could get inside. The young woman was Catherine (Bonnie Kate) Sherrill, a tall athletic girl, about whom it was said could outride, outshoot, and outrun almost any man in the settlement. Seeing that the warriors had blocked her way to the gates, still running, she turned toward the nearest side determined to scale the fort wall. The shower of arrows and lead balls were coming like hail; it was now leap or die. As she made ready to spring to the top, a man leaning down from the fire step, stretched forth his hand and shouted: "Jump for me Kate." She did. The strong hand which pulled Bonnie Kate Sherrill to safety belonged to a man who would four years later marry her and who would become the first governor of Tennessee, John Sevier.
>
> The Cherokees laid siege to Fort Caswell for about two weeks, occasionally harassing the defenders of the fort while small parties made raids in other directions; foraging the countryside, attacking the smaller forts, pillaging cabins, and killing some settlers while capturing others.

Another heroine during the siege was Ann Robertson, sister of James. During one attack on the fort, the Indians were making a desperate effort to burn the stockade at a section where rifle bullets could not reach them. It was wash-day in the fort; Ann, making a hasty decision, grabbed a bucket of boiling water, scaled the inner parapet amid a shower of bullets, and poured the scalding stream down on them. Though wounded, with the other women supplying more hot water, she continued to pour bucket after bucket until the burned Indians fled.

Among the captives taken back to the Overhill towns was a teenager named Tom Moore. He and a friend, James Cooper, had gone out from the fort one day to get boards to repair a roof. They were surprised by stray Indians at Gap Creek. Cooper jumped in the creek to escape the arrows and bullets, but was killed and scalped before he could swim away. Those in the fort could hear his dying screams and pleas of mercy. Moore was taken to the village of Tuskegee where he was cruelly tortured for days, and then burned at the stake.[1]

Calloway's description of the siege of Fort Watauga is the standard account given in almost every book about Tennessee history. However, even though this description appears to be a detailed and thorough account of the history of Fort Watauga and the settlement, it is still an incomplete history of the fort. It fails to mention what happened to the fort after the siege in 1776. To this day, no theories or explanations have been forwarded to answer the question of the fate of Fort Watauga. It was this question alone that opened a personal interest in discovering what fate befell the fort in its later years. Research was commenced to possibly uncover some answers. After all, a history of the fort can never be complete until all is known of its existence, and in this case, destruction.

There have been several accounts written by Tennessee historians in the past dealing with the Cherokee attack upon Fort Watauga, similar to the one above. An archaeological investigation of the fort's original location was also commenced in 1974 as part of the state's celebration of the bicentennial of the birth of the United States. The plan was to build a historic area near Elizabethton that would honor the history of the first settlers of the Tennessee frontier, especially those who fought for the patriot cause during the Revolutionary War. This historic site

was completed in 1976 and was named Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area, including a reconstruction of Fort Watauga. One of the goals of the project was to get an accurate portrayal of what the fort may have looked like two hundred years before. This was the reason for the archaeological excavation performed in 1974. However, as much information as possible concerning the fort's original location was needed before Carl Kuttruff's team of archaeologists could start digging. This information was provided by two women, Muriel Spoden and Pollyanna Creekmore, who researched the written history of the old frontier fort. Pollyanna Creekmore was in charge of tracking down primary documents of the early Watauga settlements. She was in search of anything that was contemporary to the known existence of the fort in 1776 or any kind of evidence to prove its existence, such as land titles or deeds. Among the documents Creekmore found were indeed two land titles mentioning the "fort property." One dated back to 1792 and the other to 1819.

Muriel Spoden was in charge of the secondary sources. These included the numerous accounts given by the several historians of Tennessee history. John Haywood, J. G. M. Ramsey, Lyman C. Draper, and S. C. Williams were only a few among the many whose works were researched. The research of these two women was combined to give a solid foundation for lead archaeologist Carl Kuttruff and his team of archeologists to begin the excavation. According to Spoden and Creekmore, Fort Watauga was located on the south side of the Watauga River, approximately one half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek, near present day Elizabethton, Tennessee. Their results were supported by the presence of a monument placed on the traditional

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[1] Brenda C. Calloway, *America's First Western Frontier: East Tennessee; A story of the early settlers and Indians of East Tennessee* (Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1989), 102.

site of the fort by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1909. The archaeologists led by Kuttruff now had a solid foundation from which to begin the excavation.

It was hoped this excavation could shed light on the question of the fort's demise. This was not to be the case. Even though the excavation found remains, it yielded no clear evidence of the fate that actually befell the fort. In fact, very little was learned about the fort from the excavation that was not previously known by historians. The reason for this was because the only physical evidence found relating to the fort were three trenches that Carl Kuttruff claimed were left from the walls of the structure. These trenches provided the general shape of the structure but nothing else. Also excavated were a few man made objects found in what was believed to be a trash pit, such as a belt buckle and the hilt of a knife. The unanswered question of Fort Watauga's fate grew into yet another inquiry. Why did the archaeologists believe that what they had uncovered was actually the remains of Fort Watauga? After all, they found very few remains from this site, none of which were substantial indicators that this was actually Fort Watauga.

The answer to this question was simple, at least for those people in charge of researching the history of the fort. When the archaeologists uncovered the trenches and remains of the trash pit, which were actually about one hundred yards west of the DAR monument, they had discovered clear evidence for the presence of a fort-like structure. Even though it was not on the traditional site of the DAR monument, it still fit nicely within the area pointed to by the written sources. This find had to be Fort Watauga. Why? Perhaps the best answer at the time of the excavation by those involved would have been because Fort Watauga was the only thing that seemed to explain the discovered physical evidence. The trenches were clearly signs of where the posts, which made up the fort's walls, were placed.

It is hard to doubt that the excavation yielded the remains of a structure that had walls, which clearly pointed to the presence of a building with a fort-like design. But, again the question was posed: What specific evidence supported these remains as being those of Fort Watauga? At first glance, it seems obvious that both the primary and secondary sources found by the researchers clearly stated that this was where Fort Watauga was once located 200 years ago. However, a closer, more in depth look at the same sources seems to shake the earlier confidence that this site was Fort Watauga's original location.

It is the aim of this study to reexamine the sources and explore the other possibilities that arise directly from the evidence. This close examination includes again focusing on both primary and secondary sources, the reports of the archaeological excavation, and the modern features of the surrounding land to paint a slightly different picture of Fort Watauga's history. It is not the intention of this study to completely refute the presently held belief that Fort Watauga was indeed located where the archaeological excavation occurred, one hundred yards west of the DAR monument, along West G Street in Elizabethton, Tennessee. However, this study will clearly show that by asking certain questions, answers different from those traditionally held emerge from underneath the blanket that was created through more than one hundred fifty years of writing on the history of the Watauga settlement, which never failed to mention the extraordinary importance of Fort Watauga in protecting the first settlers of Tennessee.

Chapter 2 will reexamine some of the written history of Fort Watauga. J. G. M. Ramsey's *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* contained a significant section dedicated to the Watauga settlement. With the exception of John Haywood, Ramsey was one of the first historians to attempt a history of the Watauga settlement and the present study will begin

with his research. More specifically, a text analysis of his writing will introduce discrepancies and conflicts that have confused Fort Watauga's history. Lyman C. Draper's research will also be investigated in a similar way. Draper's research contains scattered stories of the history of Fort Watauga, but no information from these notes was ever published by Draper himself. He only managed to publish one book in his lifetime, which was *King's Mountain and Its Heroes*.

Chapter 3 will introduce the historians who followed Ramsey and Draper, with special attention focused on Samuel Cole Williams, who wrote in the mid twentieth century. Others include, Frank Merritt, Pat Alderman, Robert Corlew, Max Dixon, and Brenda Calloway. By investigating these historians, I will argue that only Williams was able to add any new or useful information concerning Fort Watauga's history. The rest simply retold the stories in different ways, therefore neglecting to further research the fort.

Chapter 4 will introduce a new history of Fort Watauga. This new history will contain a much larger synopsis of Fort Watauga than has previously been written by any historian. Most historians omitted some versions of the fort's history and only included in their writing what they felt was more popular to readers. For example, if one reads Frank Merritt's history of the Watauga settlement and then reads Samuel Cole Williams' version of the same, it is obvious that Merritt's and Williams' histories do not contain the same stories. Because every historian except Williams merely retold what had already been written about Fort Watauga, nothing new or insightful was gained from their research. The new history introduced in this chapter will deal with every version of the fort's history and will also include some research that has not previously been published in history books. Unpublished research will include such things as the notes of Lyman C. Draper and the archaeological excavation reports. New interpretations about Fort

Watauga will also be included in this section. Hopefully, the new history and interpretations of the fort can serve as a better foundation for future historians wishing to further research on Fort Watauga.

Chapter 5 will be a brief synopsis of what has resulted from insufficient research into the sources of Fort Watauga's history, including how J. G. M. Ramsey's *Annals* has served as the unquestioned basis of determining Fort Watauga's location and history for over one hundred fifty years. Ramsey located the fort in his book and historians that followed simply took this information as being correct. Ramsey's accepted location was later solidified by first a monument at the site and then an archaeological excavation. There has never been an attempt by any historian to dispute evidence such as this. However, this chapter will try to explain how easy it was for the fort's location to go into the history books as accepted fact without question.

The last chapter will review the current historical situation and draw some conclusions about our current knowledge. Possible avenues for further evidence will also be mentioned to help establish a starting point for continuing research on Fort Watauga. By doing this, perhaps a more updated and concise history will eventually emerge and do service to a very interesting, yet puzzling and complicated, area of Tennessee history.

# CHAPTER 2

## J. G. M. RAMSEY AND LYMAN C. DRAPER

Ramsey set a standard for writing Tennessee history with the publication of *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* in 1852. Within *Annals* is contained a detailed history of the Watauga settlement and of the Cherokee attack upon Fort Watauga in 1776. Since its publication, *Annals* has served as one of the most cited sources for later historians writing on the Watauga settlement. Therefore, a thorough investigation of Ramsey's *Annals* is the first step toward a more comprehensive understanding of the history of Fort Watauga.

First, a short review of Ramsey's biographical information will quickly introduce his researching of the Watauga settlement. Second, an overview of the text contained in *Annals* concerning Fort Watauga is introduced. Also of importance in this section, Ramsey described several forts within the Watauga area in addition to that of Fort Watauga. This analysis of Ramsey's *Annals* casts doubt on the accepted location of Fort Watauga. Next, a comparison of three separate accounts of the fighting waged by the Cherokee at Fort Watauga will provide the basis for the proposal that Ramsey's history, although long and detailed, cannot be completely trusted or confirmed. These accounts contain several discrepancies and suggest that Ramsey neglected to compare and reconcile them. Rather, it appears that Ramsey threw together a conglomeration of events concerning the battle that happened to be similar to each other but not quite exact enough for a solid description of Fort Watauga's defense against the Cherokee attacks. Therefore, another critique of each account is necessary. The attack upon the fort during July of 1776 was more complicated than it appeared in Ramsey's history as well as the

subsequent histories of later Tennessee historians. Therefore, these later histories also become suspect in light of this present critique.

After the accounts in Ramsey's *Annals* are critiqued, the contents of the notes of Lyman C. Draper will follow. Draper was a contemporary of J. G. M. Ramsey, and the two shared a friendship, as well as their research. Draper's *King's Mountain and Its Heroes* is packed with the history of the famous 1780 King's Mountain Revolutionary War battle fought in South Carolina. Unfortunately, Draper's final published draft contained very little information concerning Fort Watauga or the Watauga settlement in general. However, Draper was a prolific note taker and collector of historical documentation. His extensive research papers, now more commonly referred to as the Draper Manuscripts, contain several references to Fort Watauga, the settlement, and the history of the surrounding area.

Like Ramsey, Draper managed to gather several accounts of the Cherokee attack upon Fort Watauga. As expected, Draper had many similar accounts of the battle that are easily recognized in Ramsey's research. Unexpectedly, there are some events not used, and possibly never even discovered by Ramsey or any of the later historians of Tennessee history. It is from the information contained in Draper's notes that a slightly different history of Fort Watauga emerges. Therefore, a critique of Draper's accounts of the battle at Fort Watauga is necessary in order to better understand the history. After Ramsey's and Draper's research is critiqued, the traditional history of Fort Watauga will appear slightly different from what has so far been written.

Ramsey started researching for *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* in 1840 and published it in 1852. Twelve years of gathering and collecting information

on anything related to Tennessee produced a very detailed and meticulous history of the Watauga settlement. But, from where did Ramsey gather the information concerning the Watauga settlement and Fort Watauga which he eventually incorporated into *Annals*? Obviously, he was a thorough researcher. He used written sources available to him at the time, he visited the supposed location of the fort, and he interviewed some of the locals.

Ramsey's written sources included John Haywood's *Civil and Political History of Tennessee*. John Haywood was a judge for most of his life, first in North Carolina and later moving to Tennessee around 1802 or 1803. Haywood personally knew many of the settlers involved with the Watauga settlement and its history, from who he gathered much of his information.[2] Another written source used by Ramsey was Lyman C. Draper. As stated above, their friendship allowed the two men to share research and ideas with each other, as well as serving as critics for each other's writing. "Their correspondence pinpointed names, places, and relationships, discussed battlefields and military exploits and commands."[3]

Ramsey also mentioned his travels to the various sites contained within his large history, where visual information served as a source of inspiration, especially in the case of Fort Watauga. While visiting Elizabethton, Tennessee, Ramsey viewed what he thought were the remains of Fort Watauga. "The spot is easily identified by a few graves and the large locust tree standing conspicuously on the right of the road leading to Elizabethton. Let it ever be a sacrilege to cut

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[2] John Haywood, *The Civil and Political History of the State of Tennessee From Its Earliest Settlement up to the Year 1796, Including the Boundaries of the State* (Nashville: Barbee & Smith, 1891; reprint, Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1999), 6-8 (page citations are to the reprint edition). A note appears in the title information of the book which states that this edition is an exact reprint of the edition of 1823, published by W. H. Haywood, Great-Grandson of the author.

[3] James Gettys McGready Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Charleston: J. Russell, 1853; reprint, Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1967), xviii (page citations are to the reprint edition).

down that old locust tree – growing, as it does, near the ruins of the Watauga fort which sheltered the pioneer and protected his family."[4]

It is also apparent that Ramsey interviewed some of the locals while in Elizabethton. He stated that Fort Watauga was once located on the land previously owned by Matthew Tolbot, but presently stood on Eva Gillespie's property during his visit. "The fort stood upon a knoll below the present site of Mrs. Gillespie's house, in a bottom, about half a mile north-east of the mouth of Gap Creek."[5] Ramsey continued the passage with another detail of the fort's locale. "Besides the fort proper, there were near, and within reach of its guns, a courthouse and jail. These were, necessarily, of the plainest structure, being made of round poles. In 1782 the former was converted into a stable."[6] From this passage it is reasonable to assume that Ramsey not only talked with Mrs. Gillespie but also with some of the other locals. How else would he have known about the presence of a courthouse and jail turned into a stable in 1782? However, the assumption that Ramsey interviewed some of the locals while in Elizabethton is simply a suggestion, because Ramsey did not give citation to any interviews.

Judging from the use of research available to him and his desire to visit the historical sites he wrote about, it appears that Ramsey was the authority on Fort Watauga and the Watauga settlement. At the time of publication, *Annals* contained more information on Watauga than even John Haywood's *Civil and Political History of Tennessee*. However, certain details in Ramsey's book were in conflict with one another. These were discrepancies that Ramsey himself should have detected.

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4 Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 141.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

Concerning the Watauga section of *Annals*, the conflicting details were apparent when Ramsey first gave the locale of Fort Watauga. He not only mentioned Fort Watauga's location but the location of at least four other forts in the surrounding area. "Higher up the river, and on the north side of it, near the closing in of a ridge, upon a low flat piece of land, stood another fort. The land was then owned by Valentine Sevier, Sen., now by Mr. Hart. On Doe River was a third fort, in the cove of that stream. The Parkinsons forted here. The farm is now owned by Mr. Hampton. Carter Womack had a fort near the head of Watauga; its exact location is not known. During an outbreak of the Indians, men were sent from this fort to protect settlements lower down the country. Another fort stood near the mouth of Sinking Creek, on land now owned by Bashere, then by Dunjain."[7]

It should be pointed out that the geographic detail in this account is much less specific than would first appear. Ramsey was probably referring to the Watauga River in his first sentence describing the fort on Valentine Sevier's property. However, the fact that Ramsey failed to give the name of the river on which the fort stood could have created problems for later researchers, especially for those without a map or general knowledge of the Watauga area. Furthermore, Ramsey even failed to mention that Fort Watauga stood close to the Watauga River. Perhaps he felt it was sufficient to mention its locale in the vicinity of Gap Creek, which we now know flows into the Watauga River. Also, Ramsey failed to mention the relative dates of construction for these forts. Are we to assume that these forts were present at the same time as Fort Watauga? Or was Fort Watauga the first to be built with the later construction of the other forts following the July 21, 1776 Cherokee attack.

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[7] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 141.

After first describing the location of Fort Watauga as being about a half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek, and also describing the presence of at least four other forts in the Watauga River vicinity, Ramsey shifted gears for several pages leaving the subject of the forts behind. He took time to concentrate on the Cherokee invasion and also to describe the appearance and construction details of a typical frontier fort. Later Ramsey took up again the discussion of the forts.

> The boundaries of Brown's settlement, on the west, extended down Nollichucky, below the mouth of Big Limestone Creek, and that neighbourhood being the weakest and first exposed, a fort was built at Gillespie's, near the river, and a garrison was stationed in it. Another one was built at Watauga- another at Heaton's, known as Heaton's Station. It stood in the fork between the north and south branches of Holston, and about six miles from their confluence. Evan Shelby erected one on Beaver Creek, two miles south of the Virginia line. There was one, also, at Womack's, and three or four miles east of it, on Holston, John Shelby, also built a station. In Carter's Valley there were several.[8]

This passage seems to refer to the building of several more forts, which Ramsey probably assumed the reader knew was sometime in 1776, considering he had just finished explaining the possibility of a Cherokee uprising. Is the reader to assume that some of the forts mentioned in the passage are new forts or possibly some of the same forts mentioned earlier? For example, Ramsey mentioned a fort built at Gillespie's on the Nolichucky River. However, he did not refer to Mrs. Eva Gillespie's property on the Watauga River. Again, Ramsey may have assumed that the reader could distinguish between two separate individuals with the same name, one living on the Watauga River, the other on the Nolichucky River. But, it is not certain that Ramsey himself did not accidentally confuse names.

Next, when Ramsey mentioned "…another one was built at Watauga…" the same confusion arises. Is Ramsey referring to Fort Watauga in this passage? This statement that

another fort was built on the Watauga River does not necessarily indicate that it was Fort Watauga, especially considering his earlier reference to the presence of four other forts in the area, two of which he located on the Watauga River. Heaton's, Evan and John Shelby's, Womack's, and the other forts in Carter's Valley need not be addressed in this study because of their distant location from the Watauga settlement.

Following this last confusing passage, Ramsey makes yet another mention of a fort at Watauga several pages later, but this time he actually names the fort. The passage follows a letter written by John Sevier on July 11, 1776. Sevier's letter reads:

> "Fort Lee, July 11, 1776.
> "Dear Gentlemen: Isaac Thomas, Wm. Falling, Jarot Williams and one more, have this moment come in by making their escape from the Indians, and say six hundred Indians and whites were to start for this fort, and intend to drive the country up to New River before they return. John Sevier."[9]

Ramsey then follows with "Fort Lee is believed to be the name of the fort at Watauga. Sevier was at the latter place at the attack upon it, July 21, and probably was there at the date of this laconic epistle. Thus forewarned, the Watauga Committee lost no time in preparing for the approaching invasion. The forts were strengthened, and every measure adopted that could add to the security of their people."[10] The fort on the Watauga River that Ramsey earlier named "the Watauga Fort" was renamed "Fort Lee" by him several pages later. This passage alone hints at the strong possibility that Ramsey was confused. It seems likely that Ramsey had available to him several accounts and descriptions of the many forts in the Watauga region, including Fort Watauga, but could not always distinguish them precisely because of their vague geographical details and inconsistent names.

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[8] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 146.
[9] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 150.

A reader with little background information concerning the history of Fort Watauga would not be able to understand what Ramsey wrote concerning the forts of the Watauga region. According to the standard accepted history concerning Fort Watauga, there was only one fort located on the Watauga River, close to Gap Creek, in which the settlers defended themselves against the Cherokee invasion under very cramped conditions. However, if one relies only on J. G. M. Ramsey's history, this does not seem to be the case. According to Ramsey, there was a fort built on the Watauga River named "Watauga Fort." There were also at least four other forts within the surrounding area, none of which have official names. Then there is another fort built on the Watauga River, which Ramsey again failed to name. Last, Ramsey actually names the "Watauga Fort" as "Fort Lee." At this point, Ramsey has identified the fort that was attacked on July 21, 1776, by the Cherokee as Fort Lee. With that information in place, Ramsey then focused attention on the actual attack upon the fort.

The July 21, 1776, attack upon Fort Watauga was again described in great detail by Ramsey. Like his previous research on the forts of the region, the account of this attack is also comprised of confusing and conflicting details, which are not easily reconciled when examined closely. Ramsey described the attack in what appears to be three separate accounts from different individuals, all of which were obviously included in *Annals* back to back without any attention to detail or editing by Ramsey. To better understand and pinpoint the discrepancies, the three separate accounts should first be read back to back, much as they appear in *Annals*. Then, a closer examination of each account will compare and contrast the details.

> Account 1: The garrison reached Watauga in safety. The next morning, at sunrise, the Indians invested that place and attacked the fort, now strengthened by the small

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[10] Ibid.

reinforcement from Gillespie's. Captain James Robertson commanded the forces at Watauga, amounting in all to but forty men. Lieut. John Sevier and Mr. Andrew Greer were also present. The assault upon the fort was vigorous and sudden. But, by the unerring bravery of men protecting their women and children from capture and massacre, the assailants were repulsed with considerable loss. No one in the fort was wounded. Mrs. Bean had been taken prisoner by the Indians on their march, the preceding day. The killed and wounded of the Cherokees were carried off in sight of the people in the fort. The number could not be ascertained, as the Indians remained skulking about in the adjacent woods for twenty days. During that time expresses had succeeded in escaping from the besieged fort at Watauga, and in communicating to the station at Heaton's the dangerous condition in which the siege involved them. Col. Russell was requested to send them succour: and five small companies were ordered to proceed to Watauga. These could not be well spared from Heaton's- and some delay occurring, Col. Shelby raised one hundred horsemen and crossed the country to the relief of his besieged countrymen. Before his arrival at Watauga the siege was raised, and the Indians had hastily withdrawn. The attack of the Cherokees under Old Abraham, was on the 21st of July, the next day after the Dragging-Canoe had made his unsuccessful march upon Heaton's Station near Long Island.[11]

Account 2: The fort at Watauga, when attacked, had one hundred and fifty settlers within its enclosure. The women from the fort had gone out at daybreak to milk the cows and were fired upon, but made a safe retreat to the fort. A brisk fire was then made upon the garrison, and kept up till eight o'clock, without effect. The assault was repelled with considerable loss to the assailants, as was inferred from the quantity of blood left upon the ground. In a short time after the Indians renewed the attack and continued before the fort six days. In the meantime, a soldier effected his escape from Watauga and went to Holston express for reinforcements. A detachment of one hundred rangers was instantly forwarded under the command of Col. Wm. Russell. On their way the rangers fell in with a party of forty Cherokees, who were busy skinning a beef at a deserted plantation, fifty miles east of Long Island. Of these Col. Russell's men killed five and took one prisoner, who was mortally wounded, and also made prize of twenty rifles belonging to the Indians.[12]

Account 3: During the time the Indians were around the fort, James Cooper and a boy named Samuel Moore, went out after boards to cover a hut. When near the mouth of Gap Creek, they were attacked by Indians; Cooper leaped into the river, and by diving hoped to escape their arrows and bullets, but the water became too shallow and he was killed by them and scalped. The firing by the Indians and the screams of Cooper were heard in the fort, and Lieutenant John Sevier attempted to go to his succour. Captain Robertson saw that the Indians were superior in force to that within the fort, and that it would require all the men he commanded to protect the women and children from massacre. The firing and screaming without, he believed to be a feint on the part of the enemy to draw his men from

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[11] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 156.

[12] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 158.

> the fortification, and he recalled Sevier and his party from the attempted rescue. Moore was carried prisoner to the Indian towns, and was tortured to death by burning. A few mornings after the battle a man named Clonse was found in the thicket below the fort, killed and scalped. He had probably chosen the darkness of the night to reach the fort from some of the settlements, and had been intercepted and slain. The intelligence of the defeat at the Island Flats had probably reached the division commanded by Old Abraham, and occasioned the precipitate retreat from Watauga.[13]

Before some of the discrepancies are addressed, it is necessary and fair to mention that the only compatible details of the 3 accounts concerned the initial attack. Accounts 1 and 2 described the fort being attacked at "sunrise" or "daybreak" and that it was a sudden attack. Although account 3 did not mention the initial attack, two agreeable details from two different accounts is a good sign that it may be somewhat accurate information. Also, accounts 1 and 2 both mention that some Cherokee were wounded or killed during the attack. The rest of the details contained in the accounts either conflict or stand alone.

The first discrepancy that is apparent concerns accounts 1 and 2. In account 1, Ramsey places 40 men in the fort under James Robertson. In account 2, there are 150 settlers within the fort. It is reasonable to assume that Ramsey was only referring to the total number of men as 40 in account 1, which would exclude women and children. If this is the case, it is possible that account 2 included the total number of men, women, and children as 150. However, given Ramsey's apparent confusion in his previous research concerning the forts of the region, it must be considered a possibility that Ramsey was confused by two differing accounts and had no way to determine which was correct. His solution was to include both versions in his book.

The second discrepancy is also found within accounts 1 and 2. It concerns the total amount of time that the Cherokee were around the fort. Account 1 claimed 20 days and account

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[13] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 158-159.

2 claimed 6 days. There is a huge difference between 6 days and 20 days when trying to survive a siege.

The third discrepancy was again found within the first two accounts. This time it concerned escaping the fort and traveling to the nearby settlements for help. Account 1 described that "expresses had succeeded in escaping from the besieged fort at Watauga…" and safely arrived at the fort at Heaton's. Ramsey earlier claimed that Heaton's Station was located on the Holston River. In account 2, "a soldier effected his escape from Watauga and went to Holston express for reinforcements." It is possible that in account 2 Holston referred to Heaton's Station on the Holston River. However, there was also a settlement in the present Bristol, TN region that was commonly referred to as the Holston settlement. It is not certain to which Ramsey was referring. The other obvious conflicting detail concerns the number of people who escaped the fort for help. Account 1 says "expresses" went out. But, account 2 only referred to "a soldier" who escaped from the fort. Again, this detail is small, but telling.

A fourth discrepancy concerned the casualties of the settlers within the fort during the siege. Account 3 differs drastically from the first two. Account 1 explains that "…no one in the fort was wounded…" although Mrs. Bean was taken prisoner. Account 2 described that "…the women from the fort had gone out at daybreak to milk the cows and were fired upon, but made a safe retreat to the fort." Although account 2 only refers to the initial morning attack, the failure to mention any deaths during the siege provides evidence that there may not have been any to report. However, the entire passage of account 3 refers to settlers being attacked and killed during the siege. James Cooper was killed while at Gap Creek and Samuel Moore was later killed at a Cherokee town. Also, a man named Clonse was found dead outside of the fort. It is not

known when he was killed, but probably sometime during the siege. Why would Ramsey include two accounts that claim no casualties and immediately follow those with an entire account dedicated exclusively to several casualties? The answer is not known.

After describing the initial attack upon Fort Watauga on July 21, 1776, and subsequent siege by the Cherokee, Ramsey concluded his published account of the fort and the settlement of the Watauga region. Ramsey's research concerning Fort Watauga was indeed detailed and thorough. However, it lacked organization and refinement. Given only the material from J. G. M. Ramsey's *Annals*, any reader would have difficulty understanding a history of the fort that was jumbled with differing accounts and misleading descriptions. At best Ramsey provided a good basis for later research. But later historians of Tennessee largely borrowed much of their information directly from Ramsey. One faulty source certainly leads to other faulty sources if not corrected. However, there was another historian researching and writing at the same time as Ramsey, his good friend and fellow Tennessee historian, Lyman C. Draper. If Draper's notes concerning the history of Fort Watauga had been used by later historians, discrepancies in the accounts would have been visible and dealt with sooner. The Draper Manuscripts contain never before published accounts of the attack upon the fort as well as other interesting comments concerning the fort's actual location. Unfortunately, Draper only managed to publish a history of the battle of King's Mountain and nothing from his extensive collection of notes and manuscripts concerning the Watauga fort made it into print. As far as Ramsey is concerned, it may never be known why he did not use some of Draper's material, considering the fact that they did correspond with one another on a regular basis. Nevertheless, Draper's notes can now be used to supplement and correct the standard accounts of Fort Watauga's history.

Lyman C. Draper made it an important task to collect all of the information possible concerning any topic he was researching. And this was the case with the Watauga settlement and the attack upon the fort. Draper never organized or refined his notes concerning Fort Watauga before he died. Therefore, they appear as a jumbled collection of accounts and descriptions, not unlike Ramsey's *Annals*. Because his notes were unpublished, Draper does deserve the benefit of doubt where organization is concerned. However, modern historians must still sift through the manuscripts to find information about Fort Watauga. And an intense search of this kind resulted in similar, yet differing accounts of the fort's history.

At this point, a description of the similarities and differences between Ramsey's and Draper's material is necessary. To start with, there are several details that agree with Ramsey's descriptions of the attack upon Fort Watauga. Both Ramsey and Draper agree that James Robertson and John Sevier had commands of the fort. There appears to be no reason not to trust this information. Draper also recorded in notes he entitled Gen. John Sevier – War of 1776 that "Mrs. Bean was taken prisoner, while riding on horseback, [not] suspecting danger, & was kept till delivered up to Christian when he invaded the nation" which corresponds with Ramsey's account 1 of the battle.[14] Draper also had a similar account of the initial morning attack upon the fort that follows more closely with Ramsey's account 2. "The Indians made their appearance (fired upon them [at long shot]) early in the morning while the women were out milking; the men in the fort opened the gates, & all got in safely."[15] Draper also recorded that "none were injured

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[14] Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, Series S (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Chicago: University of Chicago Photoduplication Department, 1980), microfilm, East Tennessee State University, p. 142, 32S.

[15] Ibid.

in fort" which corresponds with Ramsey's account 1.[16] Last, Draper agreed with Ramsey's research concerning the death of James Cooper when he left the fort to gather river boards. However, Ramsey places the death at Gap Creek and Draper only noted that it occurred at the river.[17]

There are details upon which Ramsey and Draper agreed. But, there are more details that Ramsey apparently neglected to use or did not have access to. Draper's notes do not portray a new history of Fort Watauga, but they do give a somewhat different appearance of what transpired during that July month of 1776. A review of Draper's location of the fort and surrounding area will come first. Then, the accounts of what transpired during the battle will be next, followed by other details, some of which may or may not have been used by Ramsey or any later historians.

Probably the most intriguing contradiction to Ramsey's history of Fort Watauga comes from one of Draper's descriptions of the fort's location. In his John Sevier notes, Draper recorded that "…Sevier was himself at Watauga Fort – Col. John Carter & family, James Robertson & family, Andrew Greer & family & his son Joseph Greer, Samuel Sherill & family & others, here lived in the stockade fort, on the South bank of Watauga, about a mile below the mouth of Doe River." There it was. That one small phrase was enough to seriously question the previous research of Ramsey, who was the first to place the location of Fort Watauga within the reaches of Gap Creek. By looking at a map of the Elizabethton area today, the Doe River and Gap Creek are at opposite ends of the city itself, at least three and a half miles apart. If what Draper recorded was correct, and considering that a mile was measured from Doe River back

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16 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 143.
17 Ibid.

towards Gap Creek to the southwest, that still leaves about two miles between the two proposed locations. This means that Ramsey's original placing of the fort about one half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek was not the true location of Fort Watauga. However, this does not mean that Ramsey was wrong in his placement and Draper was right, especially considering another description of the fort's location later by Draper.

Just when new evidence was discovered that actually placed Fort Watauga's location in a different spot from what has been held for over two hundred years, another description of the fort's location was found within the Draper manuscripts that directly contradicts the earlier passage. It was recorded in Note-Book K, p. 210: "In '76, Rich. Fletcher, James Moore, [ ] Goodwin [went] out from Watauga Fort to Capt. Sevier's plantation, 4 miles off for corn; were shot at by a party of Indians on the point of a small island in Doe river, a little below where Elizabethton now is."[18] Assuming that these men traveled four miles from the fort to Doe River to the northeast, it would again place the fort close to the vicinity of Ramsey's original location, near the mouth of Gap Creek. But, assume that Draper was still correct in his placement of the fort about a mile below the mouth of the Doe River. By traveling in a southerly route four miles would still possibly place a location of the attack on Doe River. However, this is unlikely, assuming that the attack actually took place on Capt. Sevier's plantation, which would have been much closer to the mouth of the Doe River and well within the bounds of Elizabethton.

So, it is hard to know for sure whether Draper was mistaken concerning the fort's location being only a mile below the mouth of the Doe River. Although there is not enough evidence to point to this as the original location of the fort, it cannot be discarded without serious attention.

Someone was wrong in placing the location of the fort, whether it was Ramsey, Draper, or an unnamed source. The location of the fort was not the only description conflicting with Ramsey's research. Draper's version of the attack upon Fort Watauga was also an interesting piece of information.

Draper recorded a more detailed description of the attack upon the fort by the Cherokee. Some of the details are similar to Ramsey's version, but new descriptions are introduced.

> "The Indians made their appearance (fired upon them [at long shot]) early in the morning while the women were out milking; the men in the fort opened the gates, & all got in safely. They used river water. Firing kept up two or three hours – around the fort was a kind of glade, & the Indians [could] approach nearest the fort on the north shore of the river which was skirted with trees. Behind there the chief portion of the [savages] hosted themselves. One got behind a tree which [forked] only a few feet from the ground, & watching an opportunity, when Sevier [peeped] through a port hole & the Indian [shot] the ball struck in the timber but an inch or so from the port hole. Sevier then shot – he [saw] no more of that Indian, & [always] thought he killed him. The Indian [loss] [was] never known"[19]

From this description of the battle, several details are new to what was published in Ramsey's *Annals* and later Tennessee history books. The account of John Sevier's encounter with a close call near a port hole in the fort has never been published. The description of the Cherokee staying at a distance from the fort during the attack, apparently from the opposite side of the river, also has never before been published. Following on the same line, Draper mentioned that the Indian loss was never known. According to Ramsey's account 2, the Indians suffered a considerable loss, due to the amount of blood on the ground. From the new information provided in this Draper passage and the presence of a few discrepancies of the battle when compared to

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[18] Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook K, Series S (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Chicago: University of Chicago Photoduplication Department, 1980), microfilm, East Tennessee State University, p. 210, 32S.

[19] Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 142-143.

Ramsey's account, one wonders why this information was not used by Ramsey or other historians.

Draper continued with more accounts of the attacks upon Fort Watauga, adding to the bulk of information already known about the battle. This description had more to do with introducing information concerning John Sevier and his wife Catherine Sherrill, than it did with the battle itself.

> He directed and aided in the construction of the first fort on the Watauga river, where his father, his brother, Valentine, himself and others settled. Whilst in defense of the Watauga fort, in conjunction with Captain James Robertson (so favorably distinguished in early middle Tennessee history) – he discovered a young lady of tall and erect stature, coming with the fleetness of the [ ] towards the fort, closely pursued by Indians & her approach to the gate cut off by the enemy, who doubtless were confident of a captive or of a victim to their guns and arrows. But turning suddenly she eluded her pursuers and leaped the palisades at another point, and fell into the arms of Captain John Sevier. This {rewardably} active and resolute woman was Miss Catherine Sherrill who in a few years after this sudden leap into the arms of the Captain, became the devoted wife of the colonel, and the bosom companion of the General, the Governor, the People's man and the Patriot, John Sevier; and the mother of ten children, who could 'rise up and call her blessed.'[20]

Draper's accounts of the deaths of some of the settlers who left the fort were similar to Ramsey's, as far as the man named Cooper was concerned. However, Draper has other names in his description.

> "Some little time after James Cooper & son, & one Tucker – went over the river to get some oak river boards, got them & on their return were killed by the Indians headed by Archy Coody, a half breed. Mgr. S does not recollect about young Moore being taken, as Haywood says; but does not say it was not so."[21]

There are some details here that should be recognized. First, James Cooper's son and Tucker were not mentioned by Ramsey. Second, these men traveled across the river, and were on their

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[20] Draper Manuscripts, King's Mountain Papers, Series DD (The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Chicago: University of Chicago Photoduplication Department, 1980), microfilm, East Tennessee State University, p. 175, 11DD.

way back when they were attacked. This differs from Ramsey's account that they were attacked at Gap Creek. Third, Draper obviously either had Ramsey's or John Haywood's work to compare with, considering he inquired upon the death of Moore, whom Haywood obviously introduced and was later used by Ramsey in his account. Fourth, the identity of Archy Coody was not mentioned by anyone other than Draper. Coody's identity as a half breed is an interesting topic in and of itself. Unfortunately, it shall not be considered in the present study.

In a later passage in Draper's notes, another version of the same attack at the river was found.

> "…James Cooper, his son Joseph, a young man nearly grown, & four others, went over the river after boards – they crossed near the fort; The Indians attacked them, & they ran for the fort; & while recrossing the river the Coopers & 2 others were killed in the water, & two escaped."[22]

This account follows the other accounts that James Cooper was definitely killed by Indians when he left the fort for boards. It is also the second time that Draper mentions the death of Cooper's son, who was named Joseph from this account. The mention of the men crossing the river and having to come back across the river while being attacked also matches in both Draper accounts. What does not match in the other accounts were the two men who escaped the attack. Unfortunately, their names were not given. It is possible that the "young man nearly grown" may have been the Moore boy mentioned by Ramsey and Haywood, but it is not for certain.

Following along with new and interesting information concerning the attack upon Fort Watauga, Draper actually records the number of the Cherokee force in another account.

> "The other [ ] of the Indian force, consisting of four hundred warriors attacked the fort at the Sycamore Shoals but were gallantly repulsed by Robertson and Sevier."[23]

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21 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 143.
22 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook K, 238.
23 Draper Manuscripts, King's Mountain Papers, 82.

One point of interest in this passage, other than the number of Cherokee who attacked Fort Watauga, is the vague location of the fort as being at the Sycamore Shoals. This detail will soon arise in later discussions of the topic at hand.

Whether or not we can rely on either Ramsey's or Draper's research is a hard problem to consider. Both men obviously had a knack at collecting information that they intended to use in some form. However, when their accounts of events surrounding Fort Watauga are compared and contrasted, what results is only more uncertainty about what actually happened in July of 1776. What was real and what was not? Which facts were embellished and which ones were true? In many instances, Ramsey's and Draper's accounts matched very well. These matching accounts are considered to be more trustworthy or accurate than those accounts that do not agree with each other. However, this does not mean that the matching accounts can completely be trusted. But, it does add credibility to an account when two separate but contemporary authors agree on details.

Several details contained in Ramsey's and Draper's accounts did match up very well. For example, James Robertson and John Sevier were obviously holed up together inside of Fort Watauga during the attack on July 21, 1776, and both men had some kind of commanding post at the fort, which contained a substantial number of people within its walls. The fort itself was located somewhere close to present day Elizabethton, TN around the south bank of the Watauga River. It is also reasonable to assume that the fort was attacked some time during the early morning hours or at exactly daybreak by the Cherokee, led by chief Old Abraham. Women were probably outside of the fort when the attack occurred, and they may or may not have been milking cows. No one inside of the fort was injured during the attack. Mrs. Bean was taken prisoner by

the Cherokee sometime either before or during the attack upon the fort as she tried to reach the safety of the enclosure. Some men were killed while attempting to collect boards outside of the fort, James Cooper and his son for sure. The Cherokee were probably around the fort for several days after the initial attack, but the exact amount of time is uncertain.

At this point, all other details and accounts cannot be confirmed concerning the history of Fort Watauga. The later historians of Tennessee history in the 20th century did not add much insight into Fort Watauga. Philip Hamer, Frank Merritt, Robert Corlew, Max Dixon, Pat Alderman, and Brenda Calloway are only some who fell prey to only using already published material. An exception can be made with the historian Samuel Cole Williams. Williams should be deservedly credited with checking sources and finding differing accounts of the battle. He introduced the diary of William Tatham to the mix. Tatham was an actual participant of the battle upon the fort, but what was written down of his recollections only offered minor changes to the fort's history. But, this was the kind of research needed in order to get a more complete and understandable version of Fort Watauga's short history. The next chapter will focus on what was written by these modern historians concerning Fort Watauga and explain why their failure to introduce new information has hurt the history of the fort, rather than helped it.

# CHAPTER 3

## SAMUEL COLE WILLIAMS AND LATER TENNESSEE HISTORIANS

Approaching the end of the nineteenth century, Fort Watuaga's history was descriptively given in Ramsey's *The Annals of Tennessee History to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. Unlike Ramsey's research, Lyman C. Draper's notes containing similar and new stories Fort Watauga's history were never published in a book. Therefore, access to his research was not as easy as Ramsey's, and the results of later histories were obvious to this situation. Either Draper's notes were ignored or not deemed important by the majority of historians.

This is not to say that later historians following J. G. M. Ramsey and Draper did not continue writing on the history of Fort Watauga and the surrounding region. The fort's history was included in several works such as *Goodspeed's History of Tennessee* published in 1887 and Philip Hamer's *Tennessee: A History 1673-1932*, which appeared in 1933. Goodspeed's history actually contained an interesting reference to Fort Watauga, but the failure to include a citation for the information made it difficult to follow up. The passage reads: "One of the first forts built in this section was the Watauga Fort, erected upon land owned by John S. Thomas, about half a mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek…Near this fort was built a rude courthouse and jail, erected by the Watuaga Association."[24] It seems likely that Goodspeed had access to Ramsey's *Annals*, because of the similar description of the location of the fort half a mile northeast of Gap Creek and the mention of the courthouse and jail nearby. However, this passage introduced John S. Thomas as owning the property where the fort stood, which differed from Ramsey's claim that

[24] Goodspeed's History of Tennessee, *History of Tennessee* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1887; reprint, Nashville: Charles and Randy Elder Booksellers, 1972), 907 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

Matthew Tolbot owned the property. Where did the name Thomas come from? Without citation, it is hard to ascertain.

The next chapter in Fort Watauga's history came with the writings of Samuel Cole Williams. Williams did what other historians had not. He looked at the written history available to him, interpreted it, and even questioned some of the details of the fort's history. Williams wrote three books concerning early Tennessee history. *Early Travels in the Tennessee Country 1540-1800* was published in 1928, *Dawn of Tennessee Valley and Tennessee History* in 1937 and *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War* in 1944. A smaller work entitled *William Tatham, Wataugan* appeared in 1947. The latter two works contain the information about the history of the Watauga settlement and of Fort Watauga. It is evident that Williams not only used Ramsey and Draper's writings, but he also critiqued the details of their accounts that seemed conflicting in nature.

Williams set an example of revisionist history by critiquing the written histories of Ramsey and Draper. The obvious path for later historians would be to learn and follow his revisionist style. However, what followed was a failure to continue the critiquing style set by Williams. The post-Williams historians only recycled the published accounts of the fort without ever questioning or suggesting other possibilities to the history. Some even felt the need to add their own special literary spice to the stories surrounding the fort's history. Frank Merritt, Robert E. Corlew, Max Dixon, Pat Alderman, and Brenda Calloway all included accounts of the events surrounding Fort Watauga in July of 1776. However, none attempted to do what Williams had started. Their failure to reinterpret the evidence and simply retell the stories helped to solidify the idea that Fort

Watauga's history was complete. Apparently, they felt that no additional research or questioning was needed for this important chapter in Tennessee history.

A look at Williams' history will introduce his critiques of Ramsey and Draper's research. Williams first introduced his version of Fort Watauga's history in *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War* and continued to improve its history in *William Tatham, Wataugan*. A short critique of Williams' works will follow. Next, the writings of the historians that followed Williams will be introduced and critiqued. Once these historians have been checked, the difficult process of separating fact from fiction concerning Fort Watauga's history can begin.

In *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, Williams immediately pointed out a discrepancy as he started his account of the Cherokee attack upon the fort. Williams' version follows:

> Fort Caswell was under the command of John Carter, colonel; James Robertson, captain; and John Sevier lieutenant. The defending force of males, augmented by the arrival of the garrison of Fort Lee and of men driven out of the valley of the Nolachucky, numbered seventy-five. The women-folk gave effective aid in many ways.[25]

This passage contained two notes by Williams that concerned corrections to the history. The first dealt with the question of who was in charge of Fort Watauga during the siege. Williams used his best source, William Tatham, who was an actual participant in the battle. Williams pointed out that Tatham himself mentioned John Carter as the commander of the fort, a fact not mentioned by either Haywood or Ramsey. Neither had even cited John Carter as a participant of the battle. The second note referred to the number of participants within the fort. Again, Williams mentioned that because Tatham was an actual participant, he was the best qualified to know the number within Fort Watauga during the siege. Williams made it clear in the note that both

Haywood and Ramsey had the number of occupants as forty and Hamer had the number at one hundred and fifty.

Williams continued in *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War* with an account of the rest of the battle, which did correspond with what was previously published in Haywood and Ramsey's books. However, Williams' research of the Draper Manuscripts did add another detail to the history that was not previously known. The passage follows:

> The besiegers kept up a desultory rifle-fire. A spent ball struck a man inside the fort without materially injuring him. Luke (Lew) Bowyer, Tennessee's first lawyer, standing by, caught the bullet in his hand.[26]

Although this was a small detail in the overall scheme of the battle itself, it did add flavor to the history of the fort. Another passage from Williams gave more:

> There was another and truer, though heretofore unheralded, heroine of the attack and siege, the young sister of James Robertson, Ann. A party of about twenty-five warriors during an attack on the fort reached the palisade and were making desperate efforts to set the fort on fire. The defenders could not reach them in firing their rifles. Ann was seized with an inspiration: it was wash-day in the fort; picking up a bucket of boiling water and bidding the women to supply more, she mounted the inner parapet amid a shower of bullets and poured a scalding stream on the attackers. Though wounded, she continued this until the enemy beat a retreat.[27]

Williams' note again cited the Draper Manuscripts as the source. This intensity of research by Williams showed a keen attention to detail, exactly what was needed for a history as complex as that of Fort Watauga. His next publication continued the search for more accurate answers.

Williams published *William Tatham, Wataugan* a few years after *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*. Here Williams reintroduced William Tatham's actual account of the battle, which had previously appeared in the April 6, 1793, *Knoxville Gazette*. In addition to giving

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[25] Samuel Cole Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War* (Nashville: The Tennessee Historical Commission, 1944), 45.

[26] Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 46.

easier access to an old newspaper account for later researchers, Williams used this opportunity to point out another mistake made by Ramsey in his *Annals*. Here is a portion of the account containing the discrepancy:

> …and those on the Watauga and Nolichucky posted [at the latter] about thirty volunteers under Captain James Robertson, just above the mouth of Big Limestone, where Mr. Gillespie now lives. Shortly after this party took post and before they had finished their fort, called Fort Lee, four of the traders made their escape from the Cherokee nation and apprised them of the immediate march of about six hundred Cherokees and a few Creeks, who were destined against the settlements…The few who were determined to oppose the enemy in the defense of that quarter were joined by as many in the rear of the scamper as had not time to get safely off: and were thus compelled to fortify near the Sycamore Shoals of Watauga, on much weaker ground than that which they had evacuated…[28]

Williams mentioned that this passage cleared up a couple of problems that historians had been previously faced with. One concerned the belief that John Carter had been the commander of the fort, already mentioned above. The other pointed to the mistake made by Ramsey that the fort on the Watauga was named Fort Caswell and not Fort Lee.[29]

Williams did accomplish the goal of researching in the 1940s when he found and printed the mistakes made by Ramsey and others. However, this presently brings up a difficult question to ask, but one that must be considered? If Williams was obviously finding mistakes contained in earlier histories, why did he not find more than what he did? After all, Williams was familiar with Ramsey's *Annals of Tennessee* as well as with Draper's notes. Why did he not notice the inconsistencies within Ramsey's accounts alone, and then when comparing them to Draper's? Why did he also not ask why Ramsey did not use some of Draper's material, such as the Luke Bowyer account during the attack? Perhaps the answer is simply that Williams did not have the

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[27] Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 47.

[28] Samuel Cole Williams, *William Tatham, Wataugan,* 2d ed. (Johnson City: The Watauga Press, 1947), 19-20.

[29] Williams, *William Tatham*, 18.

time to search through the majority of the Draper Manuscripts. Whatever the answer may be, Williams does deserve credit for going further with his research and not merely restating what had already been published.

Historians following the research of Samuel Cole Williams failed to investigate the inconsistencies and differing accounts of Fort Watauga's history. Rather, their publications contained several retellings of a history that presently has become an almost unbreakable truth. The writings of Frank Merritt (1950), Robert Corlew (1969), Max Dixon (1976), Pat Alderman (1986), and Brenda Calloway (1989) all failed to contribute new insights into Fort Watauga's history. Their histories either ignored already established facts about the fort or created new additions to the stories that had no basis in truth. To state it as politely as possible, these latter historians served to hurt Fort Watauga's history more than help it.

Frank Merritt published *Early History of Carter County* in 1950. His version of the attack upon Fort Watauga was completely covered in a single paragraph. It follows:

> The Indian attack on the Wataugans occurred on July 21, 1776, at their fortified location, sometimes referred to as Fort Caswell and sometimes as Fort Watauga, which was probably located near the Sycamore Shoals. The redmen under Chief Old Abram besieged the fort for several days, but finally dispersed when defeat of those within the fort seemed impossible. The fort was under the command of Colonel John Carter, assisted by Captain James Robertson, and Lieutenant John Sevier. The defending force, according to Tatham, a participant, numbered seventy-five. A force of rangers sent out by Captain Evan Shelby, Jr., from the North-of-Holston settlements came to the assistance of the Wataugans but arrived too late to be of much help;…[30]

Even though Merritt obviously used Tatham's account of the battle, he did not appear to give much thought about the location of the fort. His statement that it was probably located near the Sycamore Shoals completely ignored Ramsey's claim that it was close to Gap Creek. Perhaps

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[30] Frank Merritt, *Early History of Carter County* (Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1950), 14-15.

Merritt did not bother to look much further than the research of Samuel Cole Williams for his information. Regardless, Merritt's history neither questioned earlier histories nor introduced new research to the study.

Following Merritt's writing many years later was that of Robert Corlew with *Tennessee History* in 1969. His account follows:

> At this point the Wataugans, realizing that they must fight within the bounds of their own resources or surrender, prepared to defend their homes. First they increased their defenses by building Fort Watauga (later called Fort Caswell) near Sycamore Shoals and a second fort on the Nolichucky frontier on Big Limestone Creek… Old Abram moved against Fort Watauga. There he found some 200 people crowded into the small one-acre enclosure with troops commanded by Captain James Robertson and Lieutenant Sevier. Unable to take the fort by direct assault, Old Abram lingered in the area for several weeks to harass the people and to forage in the countryside. During this time one effort of the Indians to set fire to the fort was foiled when James Robertson's sister, Anne, poured scalding water down from the palisades upon the torchbearers. It was also during this time, according to tradition, that Sevier laid the groundwork for a second marriage. Several young women were outside the fort milking cows when a dozen or more Indians ambushed them. All reached the gate except a young woman named Catherine Sherrill, who was rescued dramatically by John Sevier. With one hand the Old Indian fighter pulled her over the palisades, and with the other he fired into an Indian who pursued her closely. Four years later, after the death of his first wife, Sarah Hawkins, Sevier married Catherine Sherrill. She assumed the care of his ten children and in due time bore him eight more.[31]

Like Merritt, Corlew failed to give an accurate location of the fort, just that it was near Sycamore Shoals. Further, he also created a larger fighting force within the fort during the siege. Corlew stated that the number of occupants was two hundred, when all previous accounts claimed forty, seventy-five, or one hundred fifty. Did Corlew decide to add some numbers together, possibly forty and one hundred fifty, to get a close approximation of one hundred ninety? If this was the case, then perhaps he failed to look at William Tatham's account that set the number at seventy-five. Again, no new information was added to Fort Watauga's history, but rather some confusion

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[31] Robert Corlew, *Tennessee History,* 2d ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 66-67.

may have started here for those not aware of the situation. Giving a numbered force of two hundred occupants during the siege without better confirmation other than arithmetic was not accurate history.

In 1976, Max Dixon gave his version of the history of Fort Watauga in *The Wataugans*.

> At this point the Wataugans proceeded to do two things. First, they speeded up preparations for defense. Fort Watauga was built near the Sycamore Shoals on a hillside clearing one-half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek. On the Nolichucky frontier, construction was begun on Fort Lee (named after the commanding general in the South), located down the river from Brown's store on Big Limestone Creek. On the Nolichucky a still incomplete but perhaps defensible Fort Lee was abandoned by Lieutenant John Sevier when he was unable to persuade fifteen of the thirty-man garrison to remain. The fifteen followed most of the other Nolichucky settlers in hastening away with their livestock and provisions. Some of the people fled eastward into the mountains, others northward toward the Watauga and Wolf Hills. At Sycamore Shoals some 150-200 persons, including many from Fort Lee, crowded into the acre-size Watauga Fort. The seventy-five "men, boys and negroes" were poorly armed and had only six pounds of lead between them. But under the command of Captain James Robertson and Lieutenant John Sevier, they made ready to defend the fort… On July 21, at daybreak, some women were milking just outside the fort when the Indians broke from the green skirting of the forest. All of the women made it inside the gate except a tall athletic young woman named Catherine Sherrill, who was rescued dramatically as she leaped high at the wall and was pulled up over the top amid a shower of arrows and lead balls. The strong hand which pulled Catherine Sherrill to safety was that of John Sevier, a man who would become her husband four years later. The assault by Old Abraham's three hundred warriors lasted three hours and was driven back with some loss to the Indians. Soon after this attack, the Indians learned of Dragging Canoe's loss at The Long Island. Stunned by the defeat, they lost their taste for war. They lingered in the area for another two or three weeks, only loosely besieging and occasionally harassing the defenders of the fort, while small parties turned to foraging in the countryside and to pillaging cabins in the neighborhood.[32]

Here Dixon includes a statement seen for only the second time in book format. He mentioned that Fort Watauga's location was indeed located near the Sycamore Shoals but, like Ramsey, included the approximate location of one-half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek. There is an explanation for this. By the time Dixon was writing his history in the mid 1970s, the

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[32] Max Dixon, *The Wataugans* (Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1976; reprint, Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1989), 41, 45-46 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

archaeological excavation conducted by Carl Kuttruff had already uncovered the remains of a fort-like structure at that location, as described in an earlier chapter. Dixon was probably very aware of this excavation and included it in his history as fact. Dixon also alluded to the information provided by the archaeological dig through his statement that the fort was only about one acre in size. This conclusion must have come directly from the excavation, considering no other account mentioned this detail anywhere. However, Dixon failed to mention his source of information as coming from the archaeological excavation. It is assumed that this was the only source he could have obtained it from.

The number of occupants seemed to also cause a problem for Dixon, similar to Merritt and Corlew. Dixon was unsure of the total to include in his history, so he approximated one hundred fifty to two hundred persons within the fort. Of this number, only seventy-five were "men, boys and negroes."[33] This is interesting because seventy-five was the number given in Tatham's account. However, if Dixon used Tatham's account, why did he not also use John Carter as being in charge of the fort, instead of James Robertson and John Sevier. This is an indication of not checking the sources more closely and missing the inaccuracies.

By the time Dixon was writing his account, the story of Catherine Sherrill's narrow escape from the Cherokee had already been mentioned several times by previous historians. And each time the story seemed to get more dramatic. Like others, Dixon played this part very well, perhaps too well. From his version, a little spice was added to make the escape more daring and dangerous. After all, Catherine Sherrill was "rescued dramatically as she leaped high at the wall

[33] Dixon, *The Wataugans*, 45.

and was pulled up over the top amid a shower of arrows and lead balls." It is hard to know whether Catherine Sherrill's escape was as dramatic as portrayed by historians.

Dixon's account of the battle continued with another recognizable story.

> Inside the walls of the little stockade there was considerable suffering and sickness. Some defenders became greatly discouraged and resolved to leave as soon as conditions permitted. There was some loss of life, due almost entirely to carelessness. Tom Moore, a youngster, went out to collect some boards with which to repair a roof, and James Cooper went with him to get some water. They were surprised by Indians at Gap Creek. Cooper was killed trying to swim away in the shallow water. Moore was taken to the Indian town of Tuskegee where he was burned at the stake. Two people were caught as they tried to make their way to the safety of the fort. A settler named Clouse lost his life when he was discovered by Indians in a thicket near the fort.[34]

Here Dixon chose to use only Tom Moore and James Cooper as victims to the Cherokee at Gap Creek. Again, this conforms to Ramsey's version best, but completely ignores Draper's account that there were at least seven settlers involved during this small skirmish. Draper's version included James Cooper and his son Joseph, a man named Tucker, and others not named. Why did Dixon fail to mention these men or did he even research Draper's notes? The answer is not known.

Pat Alderman's version appeared in *The Overmountain Men*, originally copyrighted in 1970 but reprinted in 1986. Therefore, the later edition will be reviewed here, due to the presence of additional information that the first edition did not contain. But did he add any new or useful information? In a way, he did. Alderman's description of the fort was a version not quite similar to previous descriptions.

> Watauga Fort, also named Fort Caswell, was located near the present town of Elizabethton. No description of the Fort is available other than it was a group of cabins

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[34] Dixon, *The Wataugans*, 46.

> arranged in rectangular shape, connected by stockade walls of sharp pointed poles set firmly in the ground, and within reach of its guns was a courthouse and jail.[35]

This passage contains very interesting information because it has a description of Fort Watauga's appearance not mentioned by previous historians. This information must have come from the archaeological excavation by Carl Kuttruff or Alderman simply viewed the reconstruction of the fort located at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area. However, the reconstruction was solely based on the excavation as far as the actual appearance was concerned. Remember, only three partial ditch lines were uncovered, which were assumed to be those that the palisades were erected in. The rest was speculation by the archaeologists, historians, and the company that built the reconstruction. We simply do not know for sure if the walls of the fort were "sharp pointed poles" that connected "a group of cabins arranged in rectangular shape." The fact that no evidence was found of connection points at the corners of the walls only led the archaeologists to assume that there may have been cabins or block houses located at these junctions. The archaeology could not ascertain this for sure. Also, it should here be mentioned that Alderman did include a visual next to this passage in his book, which explained that Fort Watauga was located one half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek.

Alderman's version of the actual attack upon the fort was again very familiar and similar to previous accounts. It did, however, raise some questions. The account follows:

> The Cherokees made a sudden and fierce assault in the early morning of July 20th, but it was repulsed by the defense with heavy loss. The Indians laid siege to the Fort for about two weeks, keeping up occasional gunfire from a safe distance. They removed those killed and wounded to their camp on the Nolichucky.
>
> The first attack was about daybreak. Some of the women had gone outside the Fort to milk when they saw the Indians. Their screams, while running for the gate, aroused the

[35] Pat Alderman, *The Overmountain Men* (Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1970; reprint, Johnson City: The Overmountain Press, 1986), 29.

> defenders in time to beat back the surprise attack and allow them to enter the Fort. In this party was Catherine Sherrill, a tall, athletic young woman. Seeing that the Indians had blocked her way to the Fort gate, she made a turn to reach the stockade on another side, resolved as she afterwards said, "to scale the Fort wall. The bullets and arrows came like hail; it was now leap or die, for I would not live a captive."
>
> The hand of a man reached down to aid her over the wall. That man was John Sevier, whom she married some four years later. It was said that Catherine (Bonnie Kate) Sherrill could out-run, out-shoot and out-ride any man in the settlement.
>
> Another heroine was Ann Robertson, sister of James. With the aid of other women she climbed the stockade wall and poured boiling water, from the wash pots, on a group of braves trying to set fire to the Fort wall. Amid the shower of bullets and arrows, Ann was wounded but stayed at her post until the scalded Indians gave up and scampered back to safety.[36]

First, July 20th does not match the July 21st date given by previous historians as the day for the attack upon the fort. Also, why did Alderman not even mention the attack upon the Coopers and others at Gap Creek or the escape of some couriers from the fort trying to reach the other settlements for help? Again, with the exception of his description of the fort above, Alderman's account was another retelling of a story already told.

Perhaps Brenda Calloway's *America's First Western Frontier: East Tennessee*, published in 1989, contained the most interesting yet unconfirmed version of the attack. While Calloway did again retell the story of the fort's history, she also added some new details to the storyline, but the lack of citations could not confirm which sources she used for information. Her version is as follows:

> One small fort already built-circa 1775- called "Old Watauga Fort" was located at Boone's Creek about three miles west of the William Bean cabin. Because this fort was inadequate in size, a larger structure with a stockade was constructed on the Watauga, near Sycamore Shoals; it was named "Fort Caswell" (later called Fort Watauga) in honor of the Governor-elect of North Carolina, Richard Caswell.[37]

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36 Alderman, *The Overmountain Men*, 33.

37 Calloway, *America's First Western Frontier*, 99.

Before continuing her version of the attack, it must be noted here that it is unknown what Calloway was referring to when she mentioned "Old Watauga Fort" built circa 1775. Her description reads as if the people that constructed "Old Watauga Fort" near Boone's Creek were the same people that eventually built Fort Watauga near Sycamore Shoals and that it was also built in 1775, not 1776 as commonly agreed upon by all other historians. But, it is hard to accurately critique this passage without the presence of citations to her sources. Calloway's version later continues:

> From their temporary camp on the Nolichucky, the division of warriors under Old Abram of Chilhowie continued its trek along the foot of Cherokee Mountain toward Fort Caswell. Periodically sending small squads out on scouting trips to pick up any whites as might be found, they discovered that most had already reached the security of the forts.
>
> The next day in the pre-dawn hours on July 21st, Old Abram's war party reached the vicinity of Fort Caswell. At daybreak, a few of the garrison's women were outside milking when in the gray light they saw the swiftly approaching naked and painted warriors. Their screams while running for the gates alerted the defenders who quickly manned the walls and began firing on the Indians, giving the women time to enter the fort. During the confusion the gates were closed and the way blocked by braves before one of the females could get inside. The young woman was Catherine (Bonnie Kate) Sherrill, a tall athletic girl, about whom it was said could outride, outshoot, and outrun almost any man in the settlement. Seeing that the warriors had blocked her way to the gates, still running, she turned toward the nearest side determined to scale the fort wall. The shower of arrows and lead balls were coming like hail; it was now leap or die. As she made ready to spring to the top, a man leaning down from the fire step, stretched forth his hand and shouted: "Jump for me Kate." She did. The strong hand which pulled Bonnie Kate Sherrill to safety belonged to a man who would four years later marry her and who would become the first governor of Tennessee, John Sevier.
>
> The Cherokees laid siege to Fort Caswell for about two weeks, occasionally harassing the defenders of the fort while small parties made raids in other directions; foraging the countryside, attacking the smaller forts, pillaging cabins, and killing some settlers while capturing others.
>
> Another heroine during the siege was Ann Robertson, sister of James. During one attack on the fort, the Indians were making a desperate effort to burn the stockade at a section where rifle bullets could not reach them. It was wash-day in the fort; Ann, making a hasty decision, grabbed a bucket of boiling water, scaled the inner parapet amid a shower of

> bullets, and poured the scalding stream down on them. Though wounded, with the other women supplying more hot water, she continued to pour bucket after bucket until the burned Indians fled.
>
> Among the captives taken back to the Overhill towns was a teenager named Tom Moore. He and a friend, James Cooper, had gone out from the fort one day to get boards to repair a roof. They were surprised by stray Indians at Gap Creek. Cooper jumped in the creek to escape the arrows and bullets, but was killed and scalped before he could swim away. Those in the fort could hear his dying screams and pleas of mercy. Moore was taken to the village of Tuskegee where he was cruelly tortured for days, and then burned at the stake.[38]

One thing that was blatantly obvious in Calloway's version was her description of the Cherokees who attacked the fort in the morning hours of July 21st. The idea that the warriors were "naked and painted" was good literary style but not anywhere documented as a possibility during this attack. It would be likely that something this obvious would have definitely been mentioned in other historians' accounts. Also, in Calloway's version, John Sevier actually spoke to Catherine Sherrill, "Jump for me Kate." Again, this was a nice addition to the story but based on unfound evidence.

Calloway's version of the attack at Gap Creek upon Moore and Cooper again followed the similar version of previous historians, which basically ignored Draper's version containing more individuals. But, her account does seem to conform nicely to the description of the naked and painted warriors having no mercy upon a pleading and dying settler in the creek or upon Moore who was cruelly tortured in the village of Tuskegee. Following the lead of her immediate predecessors, Calloway also failed to add any insight or new information to the history of Fort Watauga. Her slightly spiced up versions of the same stories cannot be trusted or confirmed due to her lack of citations.

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[38] Calloway, *America's First Western Frontier*, 101-102.

From this point, no later descriptions or versions of the Fort Watauga history have been written except for maybe a new edition to an older work. The failure of the many historians who followed Samuel Cole Williams to add new information, research further into the sources, or to double check and contradict those available sources have only confused Fort Watauga's history. Instead, their histories stand alone in relation to each other in the sense that they do not reflect every possible version of the stories concerning the fort's history. Rather, it seems that some of the historians chose to only include what they thought was most important or interesting to the reader. This is an understandable decision, but a simple statement making the reader aware of deletions of some of the stories was never given by any of them. Nor did any relate to the reader that some of the stories do not completely agree or conform to a perfect account. So, all of the information found in Samuel Cole Williams' account may not show up in a later historian's version. This alone hurts the history as a whole and only serves to confuse the reader or researcher even more.

The next chapter will introduce an updated version of the history of Fort Watauga. Unlike the works of those historians mentioned above, the updated history will contain every account of the fort's history that has been written, regardless of whether they conflict or not. Lyman C. Draper's accounts of the fort will also be included, some of which have never been published. Following the updated history will be new possible scenarios that have not yet been proposed by any historian. These scenarios are not meant to be the correct interpretation of the fort's history, only possible directions for future research.

# CHAPTER 4

## A NEW HISTORY OF FORT WATAUGA

History is constantly in need of revision. When small insignificant changes, groundbreaking discoveries, or new information concerning a topic is uncovered, it should always be given to the historical community for reference. This has not sufficiently been the case with the history of Fort Watauga. Samuel Cole Williams deserves credit for attempting to critique and revise history as he researched and wrote, but his contributions were few. Historians who followed Williams simply failed to add any new history or interpretations in their publications. Therefore, what we now have is a history that is basically considered complete and has been for some fifty plus years. Needed are more interpretations that can accompany the present critique of Fort Watauga's history.

Before new interpretations are considered, it is necessary to include a new account of Fort Watauga's history. Why is this new account necessary? It will serve as a more complete history of the fort. In the past, every historian writing on the fort simply included what he or she thought was most beneficial at the time. By doing this, many varying accounts were either left out or ignored, leaving an incomplete history. Furthermore, the new account should be different from those published before. Unlike previous histories, this new, up-to-date account should include all versions of Fort Watauga's history together, whether they contradict each other or not. Citations should also be given for the various accounts included. The new account will include all previously published history of Fort Watauga, including the unpublished research notes of Lyman C. Draper, found within the Draper Manuscripts. With Draper's unpublished research included, new stories and other versions of the known traditional stories will be available.

The new updated account of the history of Fort Watauga will hopefully serve as the starting point for future historians, instead of just another history of the fort that fails to introduce new material and insights. The new account will not contain any literary additions to spice up the story, as the Calloway history did so well. In the past, the histories seemed to be written more for the purpose of a glorified, gallant, and heroic event in Tennessee history, rather than a serious study into a complicated topic. Approximately fifteen years after the latest version of Fort Watauga's history, which appeared in Calloway's *America's First Western Frontier: East Tennessee*, it is now time to introduce the new revised history.

Following this updated account will be other possible interpretations of Fort Watauga's history recently learned from the close examination of the written and physical history of the fort in this present thesis study. These new interpretations will attempt to answer some of the basic questions that first prompted the interest in the topic and new questions that appeared during the present research. What happened to Fort Watauga after the Cherokee attack in July 1776? Why do the accounts of Ramsey and later historians' conflict? What can be ascertained from these conflicting accounts? The new interpretations that attempt to answer these questions are simply other possibilities to Fort Watauga's history. They are not to be considered the correct, updated version of the fort's history. But, perhaps they will introduce a new direction for the fort's history in later studies.

Fort Watauga (or Fort Caswell) was attacked by the Cherokee in July of 1776. In command of Fort Watauga was most probably John Carter, although many sources placed James Robertson in command with John Sevier under him.[39] One possibility is that James Robertson

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[39] Samuel Cole Williams introduced William Tatham's account in *William Tatham, Wataugan*, which appeared in 1947. Because Tatham was an actual participant of the battle, Williams stated that Tatham was the

was given command of the fort later when John Carter traveled east to gain recognition from the government for the Watauga settlement.[40] The location of Fort Watauga during the 1776 attack is now an issue of debate. J. G. M. Ramsey was the first historian to give an approximate location of the fort. He stated in *The Annals of Tennessee History to the End of the Eighteenth Century* that the fort "stood upon a knoll below the present site of Mrs. Gillespie's house, in a bottom, about half a mile north-east of the mouth of Gap Creek."[41] Lyman C. Draper placed the location of the fort about a mile below the mouth of the Doe River, which directly conflicts with Ramsey's location. Other historians writing in the 20th century simply placed the fort's location near the Sycamore Shoals. Regardless, it is safe to assume that the fort most likely stood somewhere on the south bank of the Watauga River.[42] The appearance of the fort was never described by any of the participants in the battle or by most historians. However, Pat Alderman offered a description of the fort in his work *The Overmountain Men*. "No description of the Fort is available other than it was a group of cabins arranged in rectangular shape, connected by stockade walls of sharp pointed poles set firmly in the ground."[43] There is a description available from Draper's notes that describes the area surrounding the fort. "around the fort was a kind of glade, & the Indians

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best source to answer this question that historians before had gotten wrong. Some historians writing after Williams would place Robertson and Sevier in charge of the fort, never mentioning John Carter as commander.

[40] Thomas Perkins Abernathy, *From Frontier to Plantation in Tennessee: A Study in Frontier Democracy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1932), 12.

[41] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, xviii. Ramsey traveled to many of the sites he wrote about. The locale of Fort Watauga was one such site.

[42] The archaeological excavation led by Carl Kuttruff in the 1970s uncovered remains of a fort-like structure, exactly where Ramsey had described the location. However, it is strange that no other historian, except for Max Dixon, placed the location near Gap Creek. Draper's comment that it was near the Doe River cannot be brushed aside. However, no other written accounts of the fort's location has yet been discovered.

[43] Alderman, *The Overmountain Men*, 29. It should be noted that Alderman had access to the physical reconstruction of Fort Watauga when his book was reprinted in 1986. The reconstruction now stands at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area. Again, the archaeological excavation could only give an outline of the fort's shape, which was incomplete. All other data about its appearance was speculated by historians and architects, who eventually agreed to what a frontier fort would have looked like in the late 18th century.

[could] approach nearest the fort on the north shore of the river which was skirted with trees."[44] Although the description is very vague, it gives the reader a sense that the fort was somewhat close to the river.

The impending Cherokee attacks upon the settlements forced many settlers to move from their homes and find shelter in the surrounding stockades and forts. Fort Watauga served as a haven for the Watauga and Nolichucky settlements. Before the attacks, John Sevier commanded a small detachment at Fort Lee, which was located on the Nolichucky River. However, this fort was not yet finished before the warnings of immediate attacks reached his location. On July 11, 1776, Sevier dispatched a letter from Fort Lee in response to the upcoming danger. "Dear Gentlemen: Isaac Thomas, Wm. Falling, Jarot Williams and one more, have this moment come in by making their escape from the Indians, and say six hundred Indians and whites were to start for this fort, and intend to drive the country up to New River before they return. John Sevier."[45] After many settlers fled this region, Sevier and fifteen others finally abandoned Fort Lee, and headed towards Fort Watauga.[46]

The number of people who eventually made it to the safety of Fort Watauga varies from historian to historian. Samuel Cole Williams introduced William Tatham's account, which he claimed could best be trusted because Tatham was an actual participant in the battle. Tatham stated that "At Watauga, men, boys and negroes fit to bear arms, but not well armed, under Captain James Robertson, 75."[47] J. G. M. Ramsey described the fort as being defended by forty men under James Robertson, but in a later passage stated that the total number of settlers was one

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44 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 142.
45 Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 150.
46 Williams, *William Tatham,* 19-20.
47 Williams, *William Tatham*, 20.

hundred fifty. Ramsey could have been referring to the number of men as forty. With the rest of the women and children added to that number, an approximation of one hundred fifty settlers could have been determined. However, it is not certain if this is what Ramsey intended.[48] Robert Corlew gave the number within the fort as two hundred people.[49]

The first attack occurred on July 21st, most likely at daybreak.[50] There are several accounts describing this initial attack. Apparently, there were some women outside of the fort milking cows when the attack came. These women were nearly ambushed by the Cherokee but managed to get inside the gates for safety.[51] Most historians assume that the attack on the women was the first attack upon the fort on July 21, but it cannot be for sure. It is also assumed that Catherine Sherrill's narrow escape occurred during this first morning attack. Somehow, Sherrill was the last to reach the fort and was consequently blocked from the gate by Indians. She then leaped the palisades and fell into John Sevier's arms as arrows and bullets barely missed her.[52] Some historians mention that Sevier shot an Indian who was close behind Sherrill as he pulled her over the wall.[53] An account from Draper's notes also mentioned the morning attack. However, in this account, the Cherokee only fired at the women at long range. "The Indians made their appearance (fired upon them [at long shot]) early in the morning while the women were out

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48 Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 156, 158. If Ramsey was referring to the number of men as forty without including the women and children, this does not match up with Tatham's seventy-five. It would be interesting to know where Ramsey got his numbers from.

49 Corlew, *Tennessee History*, 66-67. Perhaps Corlew calculated his number of two hundred people within the fort. He may have added together Ramsey's forty and one hundred and fifty settlers to reach a close number. Otherwise, it is not known how this number was ascertained.

50 Although Pat Alderman's account in *The Overmountain Men* says the attack occurred on July 20, most other historians, such as Ramsey, Williams and Draper, placed the date as July 21st. This is probably an accurate date.

51 Corlew, *Tennessee History*, 66-67.

52 Draper Manuscripts, King's Mountain Papers, 175.

53 Philip M. Hamer, ed., *Tennessee: A History 1673-1932* (New York: The American Historical Society, Inc., 1933), 83.

milking; the men in the fort opened the gates, & all got in safely."[54] It should be noted that Draper did not mention the escape of Catherine Sherrill during this attack. This passage also insinuates that the women were not chased to the fort by the Cherokee, as has been suspected by some historians. It is very possible that Catherine Sherrill's escape occurred at a different time or may not have been as dramatic as believed by historians.

After the initial morning attack, several close calls happened within the fort during the siege. A participant of one of the most well known close calls was Ann Robertson, the sister of one of the commanders, James Robertson. At one point during the siege, approximately twenty-five Cherokee attempted to set the fort ablaze. They maneuvered close enough to the fort that the settlers within could not get a clear shot. Apparently, it was wash day within the fort and Ann grabbed a bucket of hot water and "mounted the inner parapet amid a shower of bullets and poured a scalding stream on the attackers. Though wounded, she continued this until the enemy beat a retreat."[55]

Another close call, which is found in Draper's notes, happened to John Sevier. One Cherokee managed to position himself behind a tree on the north bank of the river. It was a good vantage point because it forked a few feet from the ground. Sevier peeped through one of the port holes in the fort's wall when a bullet struck inches from the hole. Sevier then shot back at the Cherokee and did not see the Indian again. He, therefore, believed that he had managed to kill that Indian.[56]

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[54] Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 142.

[55] Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 47. There are accounts where Miss Robertson's name is spelled Anne, as in Corlew's *Tennessee History*, 2d ed., 66.

[56] Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 142.

Another later prominent Tennessean was also witness to a close call within the fort. Luke Bowyer, who eventually became Tennessee's first lawyer, was standing next to a man hit by a slug. Fortunately, the slug did not manage to penetrate the man and it dropped right into Bowyer's hand.[57]

Although none were killed inside, there were some casualties outside of the fort. It is not known when the death occurred, but "a few mornings after the battle a man named Clonse was found in the thicket below the fort, killed and scalped. He had probably chosen the darkness of the night to reach the fort from some of the settlements, and had been intercepted and slain."[58] Other settlers were killed in another incident. Accounts vary as to who was actually involved, but it is safe to assume that James Cooper and Samuel Moore were definitely victims. Ramsey stated that James Cooper and a boy, Samuel Moore, went out to gather boards for the roof of one of the fort buildings. They were attacked close to the mouth of Gap Creek, where Cooper was killed and Moore was captured. Their pleas for mercy and screams of pain were heard by the settlers within the fort. John Sevier wanted to go to the aid of the settlers but was held back by James Robertson who realized that everyone was needed to protect the fort from the Cherokee. Moore was later executed at one of the Cherokee towns.[59] Draper described the event in more detail. "…James Cooper & son, & one Tucker – went over the river to get some oak river boards, got them & on their return were killed by the Indians headed by [Archy] Coody, a half breed. Mgr. S (Sevier) does not recollect about young Moore being taken, as Haywood says; but does not say it

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[57] Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 46.

[58] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 158-159. Some historians have changed this man's name to Clouse, but the reason never stated. Perhaps it was a typo when first taken from Ramsey's version.

[59] Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 158. Max Dixon states that Tom Moore was taken to Tuskegee where he was burned at the stake. It is not known if he was referring to Samuel Moore and mistook his name as Tom. Dixon, *The Wataugans*, 46.

was not so."[60] Draper also had another version of the same story but this time with more participants. "…James Cooper; his son Joseph, a young man nearly grown, & four others, went over the river after boards – they crossed near the fort. The Indians attacked them, & they ran for the fort; & while [recrossing] the river the Coopers & 2 others were killed in the water, & two escaped."[61] Due to the varying descriptions of the location, it is not known where the attacks actually occurred. At present, options are Gap Creek or the Watauga River and possibly even the Doe River, considering one of Draper's accounts refers to that river in the same passage as the attack.

A similar incident, but one without casualties, was again described by Draper. However, this account is vague and it is not known whether it occurred before, during, or after the siege by the Cherokee, only that the attack was in 1776. Draper described Rich. Fletcher, James Moore, and Goodwin, left the fort and went to Capt. Sevier's plantation to gather corn, about 4 miles off. When at the Doe River, they were fired upon by some Indians who were positioned on a small island in the river below where present day Elizabethton is now. Fletcher's arm was broken, Moore received a flesh wound on his arm, and Goodwin had some powder burns. Draper also included a description of a road that "crossed the river, & across the island." Apparently, the men somehow escaped via this road.[62]

Well into the siege, some accounts describe the escape of either one or several persons from the fort who went to the surrounding settlements for help. Ramsey included what seemed to be two different escapes during the siege. "During that time expresses had succeeded in escaping from the besieged fort at Watauga, and in communicating to the station at Heaton's the dangerous

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60 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook J, 143.
61 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook K, 238.

condition in which the siege involved them." And in a later passage, "In the meantime, a soldier effected his escape from Watauga and went to Holston express for reinforcements."[63] It is hard to interpret these accounts because Ramsey did not distinguish the details of the two mentioned escapes. Only questions are left from interpreting them. Was Col. Russell at Heaton's Station (near present-day Kingsport) or at the Holston settlement (near present-day Bristol)? Did only one soldier escape to the Holston settlement or did several make it to Heaton's Station? Perhaps both versions of the escapes are correct.

The total length of the siege is another questionable issue. Accounts vary from six days to six weeks. Ramsey first gave the length of the siege at approximately twenty days but then in a later passage changed it to six days. Some historians say the siege lasted for two weeks.[64] Another account extended the length to six weeks.[65] Although the length of time cannot be ascertained for certain, it would be a beneficial detail to learn, considering only a day can make all the difference during a siege. Regardless, the settlers somehow managed to fend off the Cherokee attacks of 1776. And here ends the majority of what we know about Fort Watauga and its fate in later years. The only mention of the fort after the Cherokee invasion of 1776 was in 1777 and shortly before the Battle of King's Mountain in October, 1780. "Prior to Christian's Campaign and the Treaty of Long Island, numerous bands of Indians, probably lead by Dragging Canoe continued to harass the settlement through the Spring of 1777. In response to the continuing threat a defensive posture continued on the frontier. Virginia sent two companies of militia to the settlements, and in the spring of 1777 North Carolina sent two companies of militia, with one

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62 Draper Manuscripts, Draper's Notes, Notebook K, 210.

63 Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 157-158.

64 This length of time can be found in both Pat Alderman's *The Overmountain Men*, p. 33 and in Brenda Calloway's *America's First Western Frontier: East Tennessee*, 102.

company under Captain Bengamin Cleveland stationed at Fort Caswell.[66] The reference to the fort in 1780 was only one in passing. Apparently, the soldiers gathered close to the Sycamore Shoals "probably within sight of Fort Caswell before heading off to their victory at King's Mountain."[67]

It is still not known what actually happened to Fort Watauga after the 1776 Cherokee attack. Even if the "overmountain men" did actually pass the fort on their way to the battle of King's Mountain, what condition was it in at that time? The archaeological excavation done in the 1970s could not answer this question. Actually, not much could be ascertained from the dig. "The archaeological remains of the fort consisted of only three palisade trenches which had been dug to erect the palisade logs in…It may have had five lines of palisades which surrounded the top of the knoll. The ends of the three walls that were located were separated by large gaps at the corners, and it is assumed that {that} some type of structure, either a house or a blockhouse was located in each of the corners. In all probability it was constructed by filling in areas between existing structures with vertical palisades, and constructing other buildings or blockhouses at other necessary corners."[68] Although the archaeology uncovered the remains of what was believed to be the fort, no conclusive evidence was found to interpret the fort's demise.

Why do Ramsey's accounts conflict with other historians? What can be ascertained from these conflicting accounts? Possible answers may be found through a different interpretation of the sources. Instead of retelling the history of the fort as above, some conclusions may be drawn that have never before been considered. There are several things that can be suggested when it

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65 Abernathy, *From Frontier to Plantation*, 12.
66 Carl Kuttruff, "Fort Watauga" (Nashville: Tennessee Division of Archaeology, 1979, photocopied), 15.
67 Ibid.
68 Kuttruff, *Fort Watauga*, 14.

comes to reinterpreting what has been written about Fort Watauga. One possibility that arises is the presence of not just one fort housing settlers during the siege but two or maybe even three. This possibility does take into account that a stockade would have been built for protection purposes, so it may not have been very large. This was probably the case with Fort Watauga. If this fort was constructed within a timeframe of about a month, then it probably was only an acre in size. The settlers of the Watauga Valley knew of the impending Cherokee attack, and they surely realized that more settlers would be pouring in from the surrounding region. It would have been very reasonable for them to construct several small stockades all along the Watauga Valley for protection, if some did not already exist by this time. When looking closer at the written accounts, there were several contradictions and possibilities that suggest the presence of more than one fort in the region during the attack.

One of the possibilities has to do with the men in charge of the fort. Most accounts, such as Ramsey's, placed James Robertson in charge, with John Sevier also commanding a post. However, William Tatham mentioned in his account that John Carter was in charge of the fort. Could it be possible that James Robertson was in charge of one fort while John Carter was in command of another nearby? Support for the multiple forts can also be seen in the number of occupants within the fort during the siege. As mentioned above, accounts differ concerning the actual number of people within the fort. Tatham said there were seventy-five, while later historians used anywhere from one hundred fifty to two hundred settlers. Again, perhaps there were seventy-five occupants in one fort and many others in surrounding forts. What about Ramsey's account that mentions only forty defenders within the fort? Perhaps Ramsey had access

to an account that only remembers forty people within a smaller stockade, especially if there was one separate from Fort Watauga.

When Ramsey's accounts differed, it seemed very likely that he was using accounts from several people to form one large story. Naturally, details emerged that did not conform to each other, such as the two separate accounts dealing with those who escaped the fort for help. Ramsey's first account had "expresses" who escaped the siege and traveled to Heaton's Station close to present day Kingsport. His second account mentioned that a soldier escaped and went to the Holston settlement for aid. Because both of these accounts were Ramsey's, it is strange that they conflicted without his notice. Or, perhaps he did have two separate accounts from individuals that were present in separate forts during the attack. It is possible that the settlers had communicated with each other before the attack began and decided to go to different settlements for help if needed. One fort would send help to Heaton's Station and the other fort would send to the Holston settlement.

Another clue to the presence of two forts can also be found in Ramsey's *Annals*. In account 1, Ramsey mentioned that the Cherokee were around the fort after the initial attack for about twenty days. In account 2, the Cherokee "continued before the fort six days." Again, maybe this contradiction could be possible with the presence of two forts. One fort may have been watched more closely for approximately two weeks, while the other fort was only harassed for only six days or about a week. And what are we to conclude from Abernathy's description of a six week siege?

When Lyman C. Draper's unpublished notes were added to the accounts of the siege, more clues arose. For instance, Draper's comment that the fort was located about one mile below

the mouth of the Doe River obviously contradicted Ramsey's belief that it was closer to Gap Creek. As stated earlier, there is approximately a three mile distance between Gap Creek and the Doe River. However, with the possibility of two forts in the area, it makes more sense. One fort could have been closer to Gap Creek, the other closer to the Doe River. Also, in another Draper account, the force of the Cherokee was four hundred warriors. Although possible, it seems unlikely that a force of this size could not easily defeat a small, one acre fort. However, this would be more understandable if the Cherokee force of four hundred warriors had to deal with two forts or possibly more. This would also conform nicely with a longer siege, perhaps one that lasted between two to six weeks. If there were multiple forts, it is possible that one fort sustained a smaller scale siege for six days, as Ramsey stated, or one for two weeks. The other forts, if there were any, could have experienced a much different attack. If a definite conclusion for the presence of several forts during the Cherokee attack is made, then a longer siege of six weeks is very likely.

Staying on the topic of the siege, what can be learned from the casualties outside of the fort's or forts' enclosures? It simply does not make sense that any casualties were sustained if the Watauga settlement was under a siege as dangerous as believed by historians. Why would settlers leave the protection of the fort during a siege, as happened to the Coopers and others at either Gap Creek or the Watauga River? Perhaps the siege was not as severe as believed or Cherokee attention was drawn to other targets at different times. If the multiple forts theory is followed, then perhaps the settlers believed that immediate danger had passed one fort and was concentrated on another close by. It would make sense that a quick trip to the river to gather boards was possible if there were no sightings of the Cherokee for a few days. However, without more proof, it is hard to determine exactly what happened to the Watauga settlement during the month of July 1776 and after. But, one thing is for certain, we cannot conclude that the history of

the fort has been completed. There are just too many inconsistencies within the sources to believe otherwise. The next chapter will conclude the present study and give options for a continuance of the history of Fort Watauga.

# CHAPTER 5

# GAP CREEK

There has been a considerable amount written concerning the history of Fort Watauga that created inconsistencies and more questions. Ramsey and Draper's material conflicted greatly and the failure of later historians to explain the discrepancies left many of these questions unanswered. Perhaps one of the most important conflicts between Ramsey and Draper concerned the location of the fort. Ramsey believed that it was located close to Gap Creek. A Draper account located it about a mile below the mouth of the Doe River, which placed the two possible locations about two miles apart. The initial discovery of this conflict first raised the question of how and when the location of Fort Watauga was first ascertained. To answer this question, research had to again focus on J. G. M. Ramsey's historical writings. Ramsey was the first historian or source to place Fort Watauga's location in the vicinity of Gap Creek. With the exception of Lyman C. Draper, those historians who followed Ramsey accepted his location as fact.

The only post-Ramsey historians who actually mentioned Gap Creek in their accounts include Samuel Cole Williams, Max Dixon, and Brenda Calloway. But, there are other sources that associate Fort Watauga's location with Gap Creek. One still visible today that places the location close to Gap Creek is the Daughters of the American Revolution monument, which was erected in 1909. The monument clearly states that this is where Fort Watauga was located. Two land titles were also found by Pollyanna Creekmore, one in 1792 and one in 1819, that mentioned a "fort property" located beside Matthew Talbot's land, which was sectioned alongside Gap Creek. Finally, the archaeological excavation led by Carl Kuttruff in 1974 also produced signs of a fort-like structure within the vicinity of Gap Creek.

When all of these sources were placed together, it created a very solid foundation that seemed to be unquestionable. But, if each source is looked at closely, one can construct a possible solution of how and why the original location of Fort Watauga was placed near Gap Creek. A complete look at each source that mentions Gap Creek as the location of Fort Watauga is necessary in order to understand how this location became trusted as accepted fact.

The several Tennessee historians mentioned above used Gap Creek as the original location of Fort Watauga. Again, the first prominent historian was Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, who produced a large work entitled *The Annals of Tennessee to the End of the Eighteenth Century* that was published in 1853. He was the first to identify the location near Gap Creek. Ramsey states that "the Watauga Fort was erected upon the land once owned and occupied by an old settler, Matthew Tolbot.[69] The land is now owned by Mrs. Eva Gillespie. The fort stood upon a knoll below the present site of Mrs. Gillespie's house, in a bottom, about half a mile north-east of the mouth of Gap Creek. The spot is easily identified by a few graves and the large locust tree standing conspicuously on the right of the road leading to Elizabethton."[70] Also in the late 19th century, a description also appeared in *Goodspeed's History of Tennessee*. "One of the first forts built in this section was the Watauga Fort, erected upon land owned by John S. Thomas, about half a mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creeck."[71]

Samuel Cole Williams was another historian who produced multiple books on the history of Tennessee. Williams relied heavily on Ramsey's work, which is evidenced through similar

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69 J. G. M. Ramsey misspelled Matthew Talbot's name in his account. The fact that he did this will later be looked at more closely as questionable evidence.

70 Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee,* 140-141.

71 Goodspeed's History of Tennessee, *History of Tennessee*, 907. It is not known where the name John S. Thomas came from. Ramsey certainly does not mention this name, although the rest of the description does resemble that of Ramsey when explaining the fort distance from the mouth of Gap Creek.

passages contained in both books, but with proper citations given. Williams' citation to Gap Creek is found in his 1944 work entitled *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*. Instead of giving an exact location like Ramsey, he merely included Gap Creek in a description of an attack made upon James Cooper, Samuel Moore, and a boy during the siege of the fort. "When near the mouth of Gap Creek, they were attacked by Indians; Cooper leaped into the river, and by diving hoped to escape their arrows and bullets, but the water became too shallow and he was killed by them and scalped… Moore was carried prisoner to the Indian towns, and was tortured to death by burning."[72] It should be noted that Williams took this quote directly from Ramsey's *Annals*.

In 1976, Max Dixon's *The Wataugans* gave another citation to Gap Creek, very similar to that of Ramsey's account. "Fort Watauga was built near the Sycamore Shoals on a hillside clearing one-half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek."[73] In 1989, Calloway published *America's First Western Frontier*, which again mentions Gap Creek. However, her mention was more similar to Williams' account, considering she also described the attack on Moore and Cooper at the creek. "Among the captives taken back to the Overhill towns was a teenager named Tom Moore. He and a friend, James Cooper, had gone out from the fort one day to get boards to repair a roof. They were surprised by stray Indians at Gap Creek. Cooper jumped in the creek to escape the arrows and bullets, but was killed and scalped before he could swim away."[74]

All of these passages mentioned Gap Creek as the prominent landmark identifying the proximity of where Fort Watauga was located. However, as already seen in these passages, they do not entirely agree on the details. This is seen in the accounts of Calloway and Williams that

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72 Williams, *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, 45.
73 Dixon, *The Wataugans*, 41.

used similar names but not exact ones. Both agree on James Cooper as one of the victims, but Williams' Samuel Moore differs from Calloway's Tom Moore. Also whereas Williams uses the description of an unnamed boy, Calloway mentions a teenager. Perhaps Calloway thought it too tragic for a boy to be slain by the Indians. Regardless, these accounts are merely a few examples of differences that have emerged from the supposed solid history of Fort Watauga's struggle in 1776.

The next piece of evidence identifying the location of Fort Watauga is the Daughters of the American Revolution monument that presently stands on the east side of West G Street approaching Elizabethton from the south. The monument is a small obelisk made from stone, supposedly taken from the Watauga River. One side of the monument reads "Here was negotiated the treaty of Sycamore Shoals under which Transylvania was acquired from the Cherokees, March 19, 1775." Another side includes the dedication information: "Erected Sept. 26 1909 By John Sevier, Bonny Kate, Sycamore Shoals Chapters, DAR." However, it is the third side of the monument that identifies this as the location of the original Fort Watauga. It simply reads: "Fort Watauga – First (settlers) fort built west of the Alleghanies, 1770." Even though the monument does not mention Gap Creek in its description, it does indeed stand approximately one half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek as J. G. M. Ramsey so assuredly dictated in *Annals*. So from 1909, the citizens of the surrounding area have had a physical identifier of the fort's location.

The next identifying marks of Fort Watauga's location were the two land records discovered by Pollyanna Creekmore. These land records were mentioned in a 1976 *Tennessee*

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[74] Calloway, *America's First Western Frontier*, 102.

*Historical Quarterly* article by Hal T. and Muriel Spoden entitled "Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area." "It was interesting, yet puzzling that the research had located only two land records, one dated 1792 and the other 1819, which mentioned the historic stockade. Both deeds were for part of the old Sycamore Shoals plat that adjoined property 'commonly' or 'usually known by the name of the Old Fort."[75] By then the evidence for an original location of Fort Watauga near Gap Creek was strong and perhaps the archaeological dig in 1974 was enough to set it in stone.

The archaeological dig produced information contained in two written reports which were never published. The first was the 1,046 page report written in 1974 entitled "Historical Research: Sycamore Shoals State Park and Colonel John Carter House." This report was written and compiled by Pollyanna Creekmore, Muriel C. Spoden, Hal T. Spoden, and Associates and is currently located at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area. Another report was written in 1979 by the lead archaeologist Carl Kuttruff entitled "Fort Watauga." Although the former report does not specifically mention Gap Creek as an indicator, it does mention the DAR monument. "The original site of Fort Watauga is a low knoll on the south side of G Street (Milligan Highway), approximately 100 yards west of the DAR Sycamore Shoals Monument on the west side of Elizabethton, TN."[76] Also included in this 1974 report is the information gathered through land titles above, which were used to plot a map. As stated earlier, these land titles mention a "fort property" on the east side of Gap Creek. The 1979 report by Kuttruff is more of a history of the settlement than an archaeological report. The report is only fifteen pages in length, which is

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[75] Hal T. Spoden and Muriel C., "Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 36, (1977): 17.

[76] Carl Kuttruff, "Watauga Fort (Fort Caswell)" (Elizabethton: Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area, Visitor's Center, 1974, Chapter VI of Historical Research), 358.

probably because very little was discovered in the excavation. However, the report clearly states what was assumed to be obvious after the actual excavation uncovered fort-like remains. "The fort was approximately 1000 feet from the western edge of the valley, defined by high ridge on the north bank of the Watauga, and slightly closer to the hills on the south. It was roughly 1200 feet east of Gap Creek and about 4000 feet or less than a mile below the Sycamore Shoals."[77]

When the archaeological excavation uncovered "Fort Watauga's remains" in 1974, the State of Tennessee had what it wanted; "the concern for authenticity in the development of the fort and site plans."[78] After the excavation of the fort, the actual historic area was built closer to the Watauga River containing the reconstruction of Fort Watauga. Since the 1970s, there have been no other inquiries into the physical history of the fort. Since then, the belief that Fort Watauga's location was indeed located close to Gap Creek as seen through the study of primary sources, secondary sources, one DAR monument, and an archaeological excavation was officially accepted as true history. Historians who wrote after the 1974 excavation have simply reiterated the same stories already told by earlier historians, which basically focused on the actual attack of the fort in July of 1776. After all, there was no need to explore any further into an already solid Fort Watauga history. But, the desire to learn more about the fate of Fort Watauga after the 1776 Cherokee attack reopened the investigation and shed light on new clues.

When a closer look was taken at every source that first placed Fort Watauga's location near Gap Creek, a simple question again was asked: Why Gap Creek? That is to say, what evidence did the historians have of the fort's location before physical evidence played a role? What was there that pointed to the Gap Creek location before the DAR monument of 1909 and

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77 Carl Kuttruff, "Fort Watauga," 13.

78 Spoden, "Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area," 4.

the archaeological excavation in 1974 physically placed it there? J. G. M. Ramsey was the only secondary source that mentioned anything about Gap Creek prior to the construction of the DAR monument in 1909. So, how did Ramsey know that this was the original location?

J. G. M. Ramsey was definitely an avid researcher, collecting both primary and secondary sources pertaining to Tennessee's history. However, his collection of notes and other sources were burned by the Union army during the Civil War. If one of Ramsey's sources specifically mentioned Gap Creek as a landmark, he did not make citation to this source in *Annals*. Our only clue comes from Ramsey himself when explaining the significance of historical sites.

> The topography of Watauga has become interesting, and the modern visitant to that early home of the pioneers of Tennessee and the West, lingers around and examines, with intense curiosity and almost with veneration, the places consecrated as their residence or their entombment. The annalist, partaking deeply in this feeling, has used every effort to identify these localities. He has made more than one pilgrimage to these time-honoured and historic places. In all time to come they will be pointed out and recognized as the abode and resting place of enterprise, virtue, hardihood, patriotism – the ancestral monument of real worth and genuine greatness.[79]

It is very probable that Ramsey visited the Watauga region during his exploration of the many Tennessee historic sites. If he did, then he probably asked the locals about the location of Fort Watauga. Because Ramsey did not give citation to any written sources describing the fort's location near Gap Creek, then it must be assumed that he most likely received some information from the locals. He does mention that the fort once stood below Mrs. Gillespie's current house, on what used to be Mathew [Tolbot's] land. There may even have been something left standing in the mid- 19th century that one could gaze at, even if nothing more than a few palisade poles, abandoned cabins or an overgrown mound of earth. Ramsey seemed to give some hint that there was something there. "Let it ever be a sacrilege to cut down that old locust tree-growing, as it

does, near the ruins of the Watauga fort which sheltered the pioneer and protected his family-where soldiery of Watauga fought under Captain Robertson and Lieutenant Sevier, and where the Courts of the Association were held, and even-handed justice was administered under the self-constituted legislature, judiciary and executive of the Watauga settlers." Still, it is not clear if Ramsey actually viewed any ruins. Either way, if anything did exist at this time, it was merely ruins. Regardless, the location that Ramsey believed was the site of Fort Watauga was certainly in sight of Gap Creek as well as the Watauga River. Ramsey was the first writer who placed Fort Watauga in the vicinity of Gap Creek.

By the time Samuel Cole Williams wrote on Tennessee history in the mid 20th century, the DAR monument had already been erected. Therefore, it is not hard to understand why Williams would have also placed Fort Watauga's location at this vicinity. He not only had Ramsey's *Annals* but also a physical monument. As far as the Daughters of the American Revolution are concerned, it is most likely that they also used Ramsey's account to identify the original location, at that time probably void of any traces of a historic fort. Evidence that the Daughters of the American Revolution did not know exactly where the fort once stood was proved during the archaeological excavation in 1974. As stated in the report, the original site was "…approximately 100 yards west of the DAR Sycamore Shoals Monument…"[80]

Following Williams were other historians, of which only Dixon and Calloway mention anything about Gap Creek. So, by the time Pollyanna Creekmore and Muriel Spoden started researching and Carl Kuttruff started the archaeological excavation, they already had a general idea of where to focus their search. Kuttruff even mentions Ramsey's *Annals*: "Although

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79 Ramsey, *Annals of Tennessee*, 140.

80 Kuttruff, "Watauga Fort (Fort Caswell)," 358.

Ramsey was correct in his location of the fort, he was mistaken in stating that it was on the land of Matthew Talbot, since the deed for Talbot's holding described them as being on the opposite side of Gap Creek from the fort."[81] With Creekmore's finding of the two land titles and finally Kuttruff's archaeological excavation, it only strengthened the evidence that Fort Watauga was located near Gap Creek.

Here is a possible scenario to the question of Why Gap Creek. It all started with Ramsey who may or may not have known for sure that what he discovered was the original location of Fort Watauga. By mentioning an almost exact location, marked by a locust tree, he fueled the belief that this was the fort's location. Next, it was the DAR's turn. They did not know for sure where the original location was but knew of Ramsey's *Annals*, which gave them the approximate location as a half mile northeast of the mouth of Gap Creek. So, it seems that they picked a nice hill or "knoll" that fit the description and placed their monument on top of it, unaware that they failed to hit the exact spot. Samuel Cole Williams, who obviously used Ramsey's *Annals*, proceeded with his *Tennessee During the Revolutionary War*, citing the attack at Gap Creek. Then in 1974, when the State of Tennessee decided to build a historic area in honor of the bicentennial of the country, they funded the archaeological dig with a grant through the Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission.[82] At the same time, Creekmore and Spoden, who were already aware of where the fort was supposed to be and, therefore, focusing on that location, started researching to compliment the excavation. The two land titles were discovered and along with the dig that uncovered trenches and some artifacts, the official site of Fort Watauga was set in stone not to be inquired upon again.

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81 Kuttruff, "Fort Watauga," 13-14.

82 Spoden, "Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area," 3.

With the evidence very strongly supporting the idea that the location of Fort Watauga is a known fact, where does the search go from here? Why even question the sources and archaeology? Just as these sources above give evidence that this was the location of Fort Watauga, they also posed problems. First of all, some of the written sources, specifically Ramsey's *Annals*, have many holes and unclear passages contained within that seem to be pointing to something a little different from what is traditionally believed. Furthermore, many of the written sources do not even mention Gap Creek in their descriptions. These include John Haywood's *Civil and Political History of Tennessee*,[83] Philip Hamer's *Tennessee: A History 1673-1932*, and Robert Corlew's *Tennessee: A Short History* to name only a few. Second, the DAR was wrong when it placed the monument to the east of West G Street instead of where the remains were found 100 yards to the west, so they cannot serve as completely trustworthy. Third, Creekmore's alleged Fort Watauga land titles only refer to "fort property," not specifically to "Fort Watauga property." This is important to note because of a passage from William Tatham, who was supposedly an occupant of Fort Watauga during the siege. "…for in less than two years after, the Tennessee and Kentucky countries contained no less than fifty-seven forts."[84] This leads to the fourth problem, the archaeological excavation. If what Tatham said is to be trusted, and there is no reason why it should not be, then the excavation may have uncovered something other than the actual Watauga Fort. What if the remains uncovered a fort of much lesser importance that was built later; one that may not even have had a name, just referred to as the "old fort" possibly placing it on what was known as the "old fort property" described in Creekmore's land titles.

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[83] It is interesting to note that Haywood wrote two decades before Ramsey, but did not mention anything about Fort Watauga as being near Gap Creek, which also supports the idea that Ramsey may not have used any sources in his search for the fort's location. It is known that he did use Haywood for much of his early history.

# CHAPTER 6

# CONCLUSION

Fort Watauga's history is still a topic in need of more research. This thesis attempted to further the history of the fort in several ways by reevaluating the majority of the research done in the past one hundred fifty plus years. The writings of the main historians such as J. G. M. Ramsey, Lyman C. Draper, and Samuel Cole Williams were examined and critiqued. Another look at the archaeological evidence for the original location of the fort uncovered in 1974 was also considered. The attempt to create an "updated history" of Fort Watauga will hopefully serve as the starting point for future historians, not as just another obstacle to surpass, which has been the case with many of the previous histories of the fort during the research of this thesis. And new interpretations were offered to answer some of the conflicting details and events of Fort Watauga, such as the "two forts" possibility. However, it is only fair to critique this thesis research and to explain that it has by no means attempted to prove any previous research wrong or to suggest that this interpretation should serve as the correct history of Fort Watauga.

There were many inconsistencies found within J. G. M. Ramsey's writing that concerned Fort Watauga and the history of the Watauga settlement. When reading his *The Annals of Tennessee History to the End of the Eighteenth Century* closely, it was very easy to see an unorganized pattern in his writing, which damaged the reliable credibility of his research. Ramsey obviously failed to check his own research before including it all in his book. This failure is most clear in his accounts of the siege on Fort Watauga, such as the inconsistencies with the number of settlers within the fort during the attacks or the differing versions of those settlers who managed

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[84] Williams, *William Tatham*, 20.

to escape for help to the surrounding region. Other small details also hurt Ramsey's credibility, such as the incorrect naming of the fort as Fort Lee, which historian Samuel Cole Williams managed to catch and bring to attention in his books. However, it is not the intention to completely disregard Ramsey's research as false but to simply state that some of it does not completely conform. With this being the case, what accounts can we trust as accurate and what can we not trust? It was with these inconsistencies in Ramsey's research that this thesis was able to proceed in the evaluation of Fort Watauga's history. Ramsey was obviously one of the first Tennessee historians to give a large detailed account of the fort's history and his research was used as the foundation by those writing afterwards. But, if some of his research was inaccurate, then those using it later must also be.

It was noted that Samuel Cole Williams attempted to critique Ramsey's research, while also adding new information found within Lyman C. Draper's manuscripts. For this he should certainly be commended. By finding inaccuracies with the history, such as the fort's commander actually being John Carter and not James Robertson, Williams started a process of revision of the fort's history. This is certainly the type of research that was needed for a topic that created more questions than answers. Ramsey had the chance to revise his history, if only he would have taken a closer look at the accounts and questioned them before publishing. However, much of what Ramsey published was not even cited and it is hard to know where he obtained much of his information. We know that he used John Haywood's *Civil and Political History of Tennessee* and his colleague Lyman C. Draper's notes, but the lack of citations did not always point to these sources. Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine what information concerning Fort Watauga would be available today if Draper would have eventually published his extensive notes. But, this did not

happen and so historians were left with the process of finding information not readily available in print. This was exactly what Samuel Cole Williams did and with him was the opportunity for later historians to follow his lead in new research and interpretations of the history of Fort Watauga. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

What followed were indeed several more historians taking on the history of the Watauga settlement and the fort, but they did not use the same revisionist process as Williams had before. Historians such as Frank Merritt, Robert Corlew, Pat Alderman, Max Dixon, and Brenda Calloway only used what had already been written and did not further the research of the fort. It seemed that most did not even use all of the material available to them concerning Fort Watauga. This was seen directly in their finished publications, where some accounts were included in one author's book but not in another author's that followed. For instance, what was found in Williams' books may or may not have been presented in Frank Merritt's book. This served to hurt the history of Fort Watauga rather than help it. Again, which accounts were to be trusted? Why did these later authors not go back to the sources of Draper, like Williams did, and discover what he had missed? The failure of these historians to present any new information concerning Fort Watauga's history prompted the need for an "updated history."

The "updated history" contained within this thesis used all of the material available in publication as well as Draper's unpublished notes. There were even some accounts contained within the Draper Manuscripts that had never been previously used by any historian. For example, the account concerning John Sevier's close call with being shot by a Cherokee, while looking out of a port hole in the fort's wall, has never been published in a history book or article to this day. It is not known why. So, the need to include missing accounts such as this one was

one goal for the "updated history" of Fort Watauga. It would also serve as an attempt to explain that some accounts of the fort's history do not entirely agree with others. Everything found that was written about the fort, including the unpublished archaeological reports, was presented in the "updated history" of Fort Watauga. The new interpretations that followed the "updated history" were meant to introduce other directions in research on Fort Watauga. To this point, no one has proposed the idea of the possibility of more than one fort in the Elizabethton region during the siege of 1776. And it is still hard to answer the question of how several hundred Cherokee warriors could not manage to completely wipe out the settlers huddled together in a one acre enclosure. It simply does not make sense.

The ideas presented in this thesis are not meant to serve as the corrected history of Fort Watauga. They are meant to suggest that by critiquing previous sources, it is possible that a revision of Fort Watauga's history, although only slight, may be needed. We cannot by any means call the history of Fort Watauga a complete and concluded section of the much larger history of Tennessee. There are still clues out there that will aid in finding a more accurate history of the fort. Recently, one such clue was discovered while visiting the historical markers of Elizabethton, a process that has already been undertaken several times before during this study.

Close to the covered bridge in Elizabethton, which crosses the Doe River, can be found the remains of a large tree, the very one apparently used by the first settlers to gather under and sign several treaties, such as the Transylvania Purchase in 1775. A marker in front of the tree reads: "In 1772, four years before the Declaration of Independence, settlers in the Watauga Valley adopted the "Articles of the Watauga Association," possibly the first written constitution in North America. John Carter served as the first chairman not only of the association but also of

the Watauga Court. This judicial body, probably the first English-speaking court west of the Alleghenies, met at this site."

John Carter Chapter, DAR July 4, 1991.

Another marker next to this one reads: "In 1772 the first court west of the Alleghenies was held under this tree."

Placed by John Carter Chapter D. A. R.

What can be interpreted by these markers? It is likely that the markers were referring to an outdoor court, held before the construction of an actual building to house this judicial body. However, it is just as likely that they refer to the presence of a courthouse that once stood in the vicinity of the markers. Here is where another question arises. If there was a courthouse located here at the Doe River, is it the same one that was referred to by J. G. M. Ramsey in his description of the location of Fort Watauga? Ramsey described that within reach of the fort's guns was located a court and jail house. But, if Fort Watauga was located close to Gap Creek, as Ramsey believed, then the courthouse also had to be in that area as well, not three miles away at the Doe River vicinity, where the D. A. R. markers now stand. Or were there two court houses built in the Elizabethton region? If so, then why? If there was an actual structure that stood close to the Doe River built sometime around 1772 that served as the courthouse of the settlement, why build another one three miles away at Gap Creek, near the supposed location of Fort Watauga? Again, perhaps Ramsey mistook the identity of a building close to Gap Creek as a courthouse, which stood in range of Fort Watauga. Here is a possible scenario. J. G. M. Ramsey travels to Elizabethton while researching the history of the Watauga settlement. In his search for the actual location of Fort Watauga, he views the remains of a structure that looks very similar to a fort.

Perhaps one of the locals told him that there was a fort or stockade that once stood there. Ramsey also has knowledge of the presence of a courthouse that was also located close to Fort Watauga. He views another structure near the ruins of what he thinks is Fort Watauga and assumes that it must have been the courthouse, which he later states in *Annals* as later being converted into a stable. But, what if Ramsey was wrong in locating Fort Watauga as being close to Gap Creek, instead of closer to the Doe River? We know of the possibility that several forts were built in the Elizabethton region, at least four others in addition to Fort Watauga, which Ramsey himself claimed in *Annals*. It is possible that he was mistaken in identifying a structure close to Gap Creek as Fort Watauga, which may have been something else, not realizing that the fort may have stood near the Doe River. But, this is only speculation and one possibility to be researched, which was initiated by simply viewing a historical marker. Then again, the D. A. R. misplaced the Fort Watauga monument by about one hundred yards from the presumed location of the fort in 1909. It is possible that they were mistaken instead. However, these kinds of clues must be looked at more closely before accepting anything as fact. And there are still several places to search that may uncover more of Fort Watauga's history.

Several land titles need to be researched for any indication or mention of Fort Watauga or Fort Caswell for that matter. As stated before, Creekmore only found two land titles that mentioned "old fort property" which may or may not have been referring to Fort Watauga, especially considering that there were more forts in the region. If other land titles are indeed found that indicate a location other than in the Gap Creek vicinity, perhaps this will some day provide enough incentive to do more archaeological excavations in Elizabethton. It is very likely

that many historical buildings from the Watauga settlement are there to be found, and perhaps more forts or Fort Watauga itself.

Much of the Draper Manuscripts still need to be sifted through, to possibly find a quick mention of the fort that gives another description or location. If only one other account could be found that described the fort's location as near the Doe River, then serious attention would certainly need to be given to the possibility that it was not located close to Gap Creek. Again, archaeology could aid tremendously in uncovering remains that may still be hidden in the ground. So far, the archaeology concerning Fort Watauga has been in a love/hate relationship. There simply is not enough evidence found in three trenches that could ascertain for certain that Fort Watauga was indeed found in 1974 near Gap Creek, where Ramsey had believed it to be. However, it cannot be ignored either. If those trenches were not from Fort Watauga, then of what were they the remains? It is interesting that the archaeological report by Kuttruff mentioned that there was an indication of some kind of historic structure that was there before the fort was built. But, it is unknown what this could have been. Perhaps a look into this evidence could turn up something very interesting and different from what is now believed to be correct.

Perhaps one day the presence of journals from some of the settlers of the Watauga settlement will be discovered that contains unquestionable evidence as to the fort's history. But, that has not yet happened and so the search must continue to find more evidence. This thesis is a request to continue the research of Fort Watauga and to revise that which has been accepted as fact for so long without question.

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