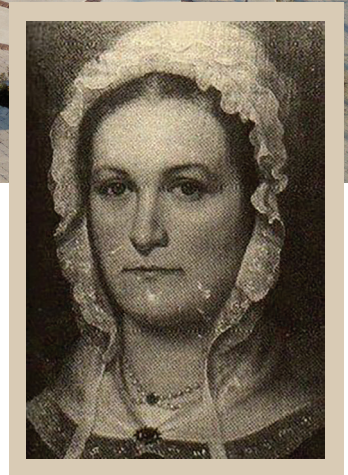


Fort Nashborough is part of Riverfront Park located in downtown Nashville, Tenn.



Charlotte Robertson, First Lady of the Frontier

— By Lena Anthony —

On December 22, 1779, about 30 families traveling on small flatboats departed Fort Patrick Henry (near present-day Kingsport, Tenn.) to begin a four-month river voyage that would take them some 1,000 miles along four rivers to reach their destination, French Lick Station (now known as Nashville). The trip was difficult, to say the least. Not only did navigating the backwaters of Tennessee prove challenging, but also a frozen river stranded the party for nearly two months, and a smallpox outbreak threatened their health while regular attacks from resident American Indians claimed several lives, including that of an infant born during the journey. The travelers also faced

starvation, exhaustion and extreme cold, according to the travel journal written by John Donelson, leader of the voyage and co-founder of the French Lick settlement, and his son, John Donelson Jr., who was also aboard.

An active participant in all of it was Charlotte Reeves Robertson, who made the trip with four young children in tow. She was meeting her husband, James Robertson, who had traveled overland with their oldest child to reach the settlement first. Robertson and Donelson were hired by Richard Henderson, a North Carolina judge, to settle the frontier.

In the Donelson's travel journal, Charlotte is listed as "James Robertson's Lady," but that moniker hardly matches the role she played in the tenuous early

years of the Middle Tennessee settlement. As America's western boundary grew, she was its formidable frontier woman. Though believed to be literate, Charlotte left behind no firsthand accounts of the hardships she faced. But piecing together the brief mentions gleaned from the writings of those who knew her paints a picture of a Patriot who regularly demonstrated strength and determination in the face of impossible odds.

Her Road to Hardship

Charlotte Reeves was born in eastern North Carolina in January 1751. She was 17 when she married Robertson, nine years her senior, near present-day Raleigh, N.C. According to Harriette Simpson Arnow

continued on page 48

continued from page 46

in *Seedtime on the Cumberland* (University of Kentucky Press, 1960), Charlotte taught her new husband how to read and write.

About 18 months after marriage, their first child, Jonathan, was born, and the family made their first move west, across the Appalachian Mountains to the Watauga Settlements, where safety was a shaky concept. The settlement was located on lands leased from the Cherokees, and peace between the two sides was fragile. Meanwhile, the British viewed the semi-autonomous settlement as an affront to the Colonial government.

Watauga gave Charlotte a first taste of the “grueling hardships of frontier life,” wrote Middle Tennessee historian Paul Clements in an article on Charlotte Robertson for the October 2016 issue of *The Nashville Retrospect*. “... The work was unending. From building a cabin to clearing and planting fields to harvesting their crops, they established the farm that would sustain their growing family.”

These challenges were compounded as the Robertson family grew—James Randolph was born in 1771, followed by Delilah in 1773, Peyton in 1775 and Charlotte in 1778—and James was frequently gone, whether hunting, exploring, surveying, trading or peacemaking. He was an early member of the frontier militia known as the Overmountain Men, and he also fought with the British in Lord Dunmore’s War, a 1774 attack on the Shawnee Indians of Kentucky. In 1777, he was hired by the governor of North Carolina as an Indian agent, a peace-making role intended to keep the Cherokees from becoming British allies during the American Revolution.

Once the Robertsons settled in French Lick Station, James continued to take long trips, often leaving his family for several weeks at a time. In late 1780, when the settlers needed salt, James left for seven weeks. While he was gone, his brother died, and a son, Felix, was born. Their daughter Charlotte, who had survived the treacherous river journey as an infant, had died only a few months earlier. As American Indian attacks on the settlement worsened between 1789 and 1794, the elder Charlotte lost two more children, and another was scalped, but managed to survive the attack.

But she had little choice but to soldier on. “The chances are she did not think too much on such; mostly those who settled the Cumberland were people with no time for looking back; the world for them was here and now; not theirs to remember or adjust to, but theirs to shape,” Arnow wrote.

Steadfast Strength

Quick thinking and resourcefulness are Charlotte’s most well-known qualities, thanks to a small detail in the retelling of the Battle of the Bluffs, an American Indian skirmish that took place at French Lick Station on April 2, 1781. While not considered an official battle of the American Revolution, the outcome of this clash between the British-leaning Cherokee and the American pioneers is credited with helping preserve the nascent settlement.

As legend has it, the men were in the woods when a group of American Indians, led by the Cherokee Chief Dragging Canoe, arrived to attack the fort.

“How many hundreds were there I do not know, but the sight struck terror to my heart, for we were cut off and my wife and children were in that feeble Fort,” wrote John Cotten, who participated in the Battle of the Bluffs and whose journal entry from that day was published by the Tennessee Historical Society in 1959.

But then, the “Fort gate was opened, and a ravaging horde of dogs ran out and flew at the throats of the Indians.” Later in the account, Cotten noted that “it was Mistress Robertson who turned them out.”

Modern historians like Dr. Carole Bucy speculate on whether that detail of the story is true, but the myth persisted. In the Tennessee State Capitol, the scene is memorialized on a mural outside the governor’s office.

“We can’t necessarily document these myths, but the fact that they exist says something,” said Dr. Bucy, who is a Davidson County historian and a professor of history at Volunteer State Community College in Gallatin, Tenn. “Charlotte Robertson was a leader among women because of the fact that she was married to James Robertson. She was looked up to as his wife. And in the lives of all of these women, she was the one they followed the example of. She understood that people were looking to see what Mrs. Robertson did. And everything she did was in the name of survival and protecting her family.”

As French Lick Station became Nashville and the settlement’s relations with American Indian neighbors calmed, Charlotte watched the world around her transform. After James died in 1814, Charlotte lived another 29 years in the community she helped forge and protect.

“It’s interesting to consider the changes she saw in her lifetime, from the wilderness to the modern, vibrant city that Nashville would become by the mid-19th century,” Bucy said.

Charlotte died at the age of 92 in 1843, the same year Nashville became the capital of Tennessee. 🌿



This mural, located in offices at the Tennessee State Capitol in Nashville, Tenn., depicts the Battle of the Bluff, which occurred on April 2, 1781. Legend holds that Charlotte Robertson let dogs out of Bluff Station (later known as Fort Nashborough) to drive off attacking Creek Indians.