

Charles Robertson, Watauga Association Trustee and the First Court of Washington County

If you know Washington County history, you will recognize the name of our next *Early Landowner*. Charles Robertson was the first Trustee of the Watauga Association and the first court in the region was held in his home!

Robertson arrived in this area sometime prior to 1772, and established residence in the area in modern-day Pinecrest, Johnson City within five miles of Sycamore Shoals. His wife's name was Susannah and they were the parents of eight children, all born before 1770.

It is not known exactly when Robertson and his family moved to the northeast Tennessee area, but they were here by 1772. At that time, the settlers established the Watauga Association and elected thirteen Commissioners: Charles Robertson, John Carter, James Robertson, Zachariah Isbell, John Sevier, Jacob Brown, William Bean, James Smith, John Jones, George Russell, Jacob Womack, Robert Lucas and William Tatham. Five men were chosen to create a set of laws for their settlement. This system worked until the governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, wrote to Britain about the settlement in 1774. He described their refusal to leave their lands, their formation of a government and their agreements with the Cherokee, to be a "dangerous example." Britain was not pleased with the idea of a group of settlers, mountain-men, if you will, forming their own government. Was this a snub of Britain's authority? Most scholars believe that it was not. Some even suggest that the association acknowledged their allegiance to the crown. Since this important document has never been found, we can't be sure.

The Watauga Purchase, written on March 19, 1775, was the agreement between the Cherokee and the Watauga Association. The "deed" gave ownership of all the lands to Charles Robertson and he, in turn, sold the lands to the settlers—most of which had already set up their homes on the properties. The paperwork here, simply recorded the transactions and money exchanged hands.

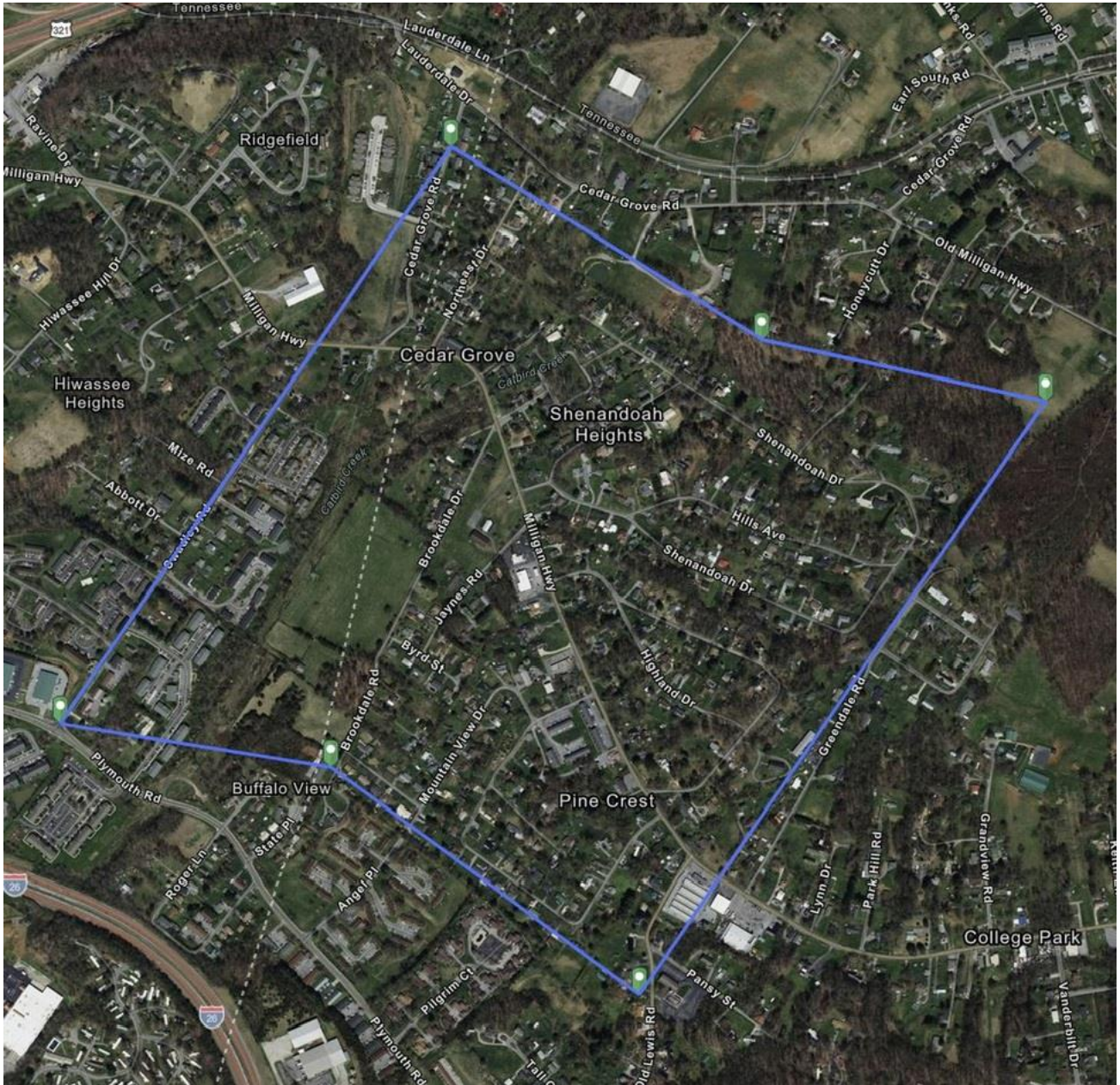
Lyman Draper wrote of Robertson: "He was distinguished for his great good sense and wisdom, not less than for his virtue." The association placed a great trust in Robertson, and he served the Watauga Association as Trustee, recording the land transactions in what later became known as Deed Book A. A petition was sent in 1776, containing the signatures of settlers from the Watauga area, including Robertson, asking the North Carolina legislature to provide local government. It was at this time that North Carolina created the Washington District, which in 1777 became Washington County.

The Watauga Association had appointed five men as magistrates—to settle disputes and uphold order. As stated earlier, Charles Robertson had a home near Sycamore Shoals, less than four miles away and the first court was held at his home.

On the corner of Cedar Grove Road and the Milligan Highway, once stood a Tennessee Historical Marker that read,

"On Feb. 23, 1778, 0.6 mile NE at the house of Col. Charles Robertson, Trustee, on the "east (Catbird) branch of Sinking Creek" was held the First Court of the newly formed County of Washington, North Carolina, with John Carter, Chairman; John Sevier, Clerk; John McMahan, Register; Valentine Sevier, Sheriff; and James Stuart, Surveyor."

The marker has disappeared, and our efforts to locate it have been unsuccessful. Another marker indicating the location of Robertson's home can be found on the Tweetsie Trail nearby. It is not known exactly where this marker was originally. This marker, placed by the Appalachian Studies Department of ETSU confirms the information from the Tennessee State Historical Marker.



Robertson was known to have a residence on this property. It was here that the First Court of Washington County was held. Deed Book 1, page 13, NC Land Grant # 190



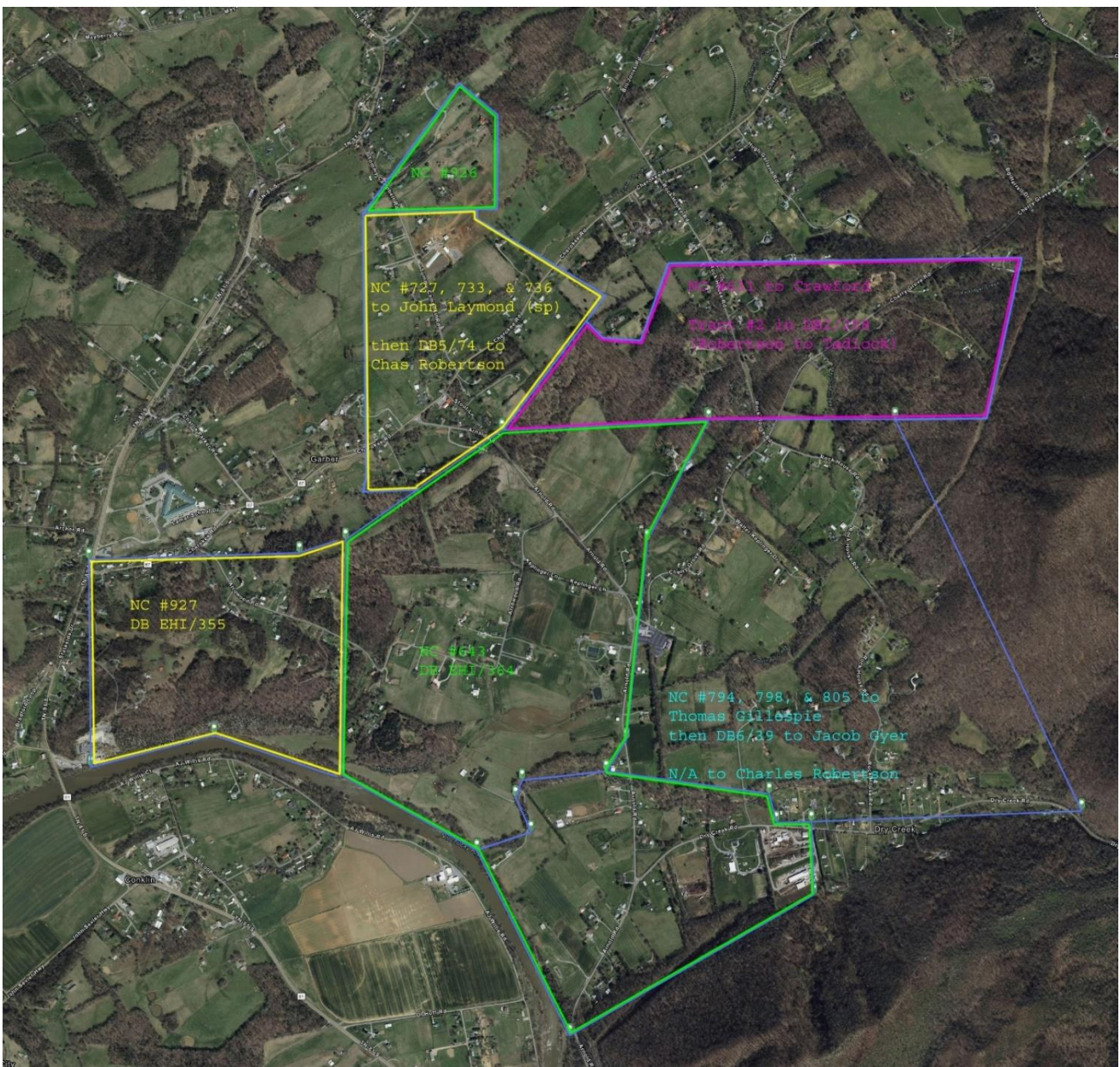
In trying to determine the actual location of Robertson's home, we noticed this small park on the map. Could this park, marked by the white square, be the location of the "First Court of Washington County?"

The property was on "Catbird Creek," and clearly, the creek flows through the edge of the property. The park, shown by the white square on the map, was marked on topographical maps from the 1930's. Typically, city parks for that time period were very unusual...it surely seems early to set aside such a small park in a residential area. Today there is no playground equipment, picnic tables or any other type of recreation equipment on the property. We will leave it up to you to draw your own conclusions.

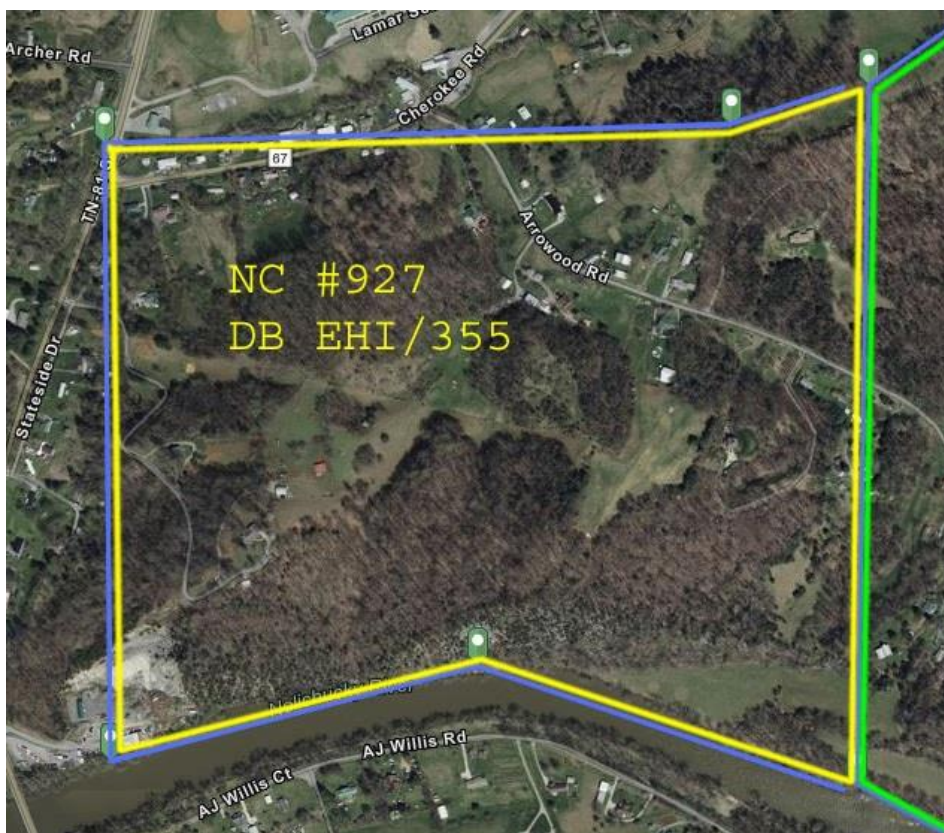
Robertson had military experience and was appointed the first Major of the district militia in 1776. In the following year, he marched troops to the Long Island (near modern-day Kingsport) to act as a guard while a treaty was negotiated there with the Cherokee.

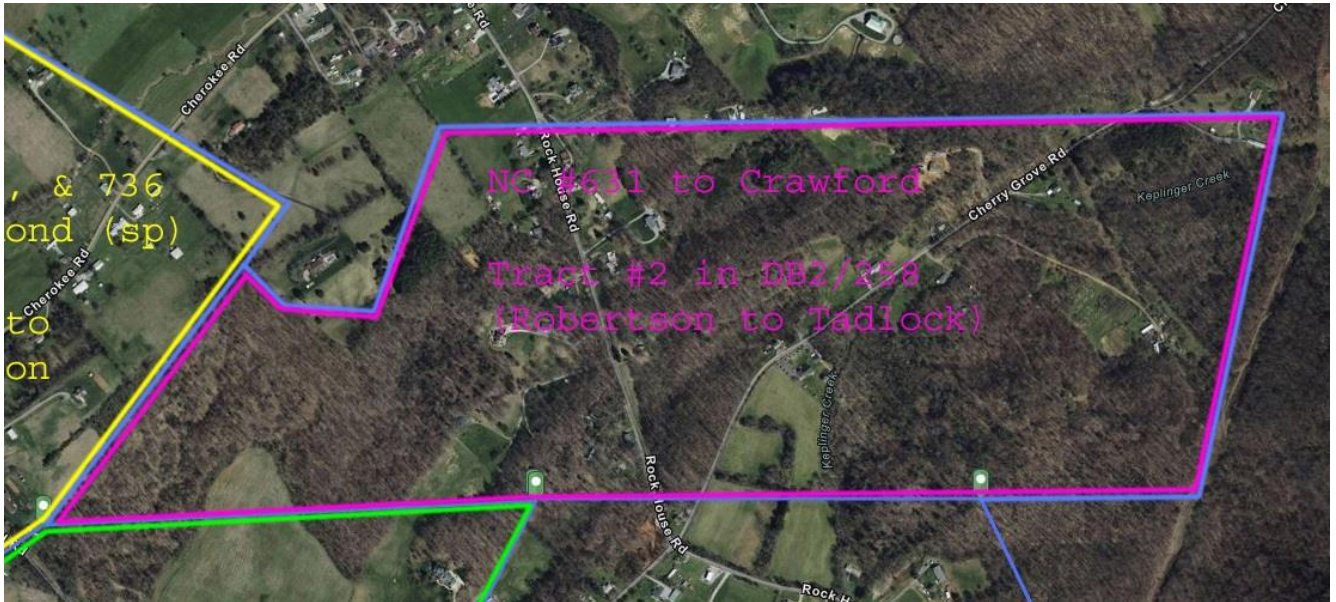
In 1784, delegates from Washington County (which included modern-day Carter County), Sullivan County, Greene County and modern-day Hawkins County convened in Jonesborough and declared their lands to be independent of North Carolina. The newly formed state was called "Franklin," in honor of Benjamin Franklin. The residents of this area, particularly those in Washington County, were strongly divided on whether we should remain a part of North Carolina, or become the "State of Franklin." In February 1788, tensions developed into a conflict at the home of Colonel John Tipton. A friend and supporter of John Sever, Robertson was present at the "Battle of Franklin." During the skirmish, several men were wounded and three were killed. In 1789, Governor Sevier and his fellow "Franklites" (including Robertson) signed oaths of allegiance to North Carolina and the State of Franklin was "no more."

Around 1789, Robertson moved to Greene County for a few years, then moved to the Lamar area, where he owned property with a mill. Perhaps Robertson was getting tired of government and hoped to find peace and quiet on the farm he received through several land grants (#521, #926, #736, #727, and #733). Shown below, through several images, is the Robertson land on Cherokee Creek.



All of the property of Charles Robertson after his move from Carter and Greene Counties. Due to the size of the property, it was difficult to get the plat drawn, and keep the road names visible. Below, we have cut this large map into smaller sections and the locations are easier to read.

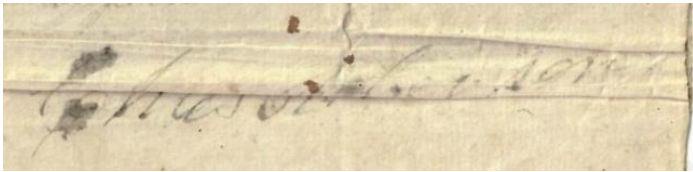




Robertson wrote his will on 31 Aug, 1798 and he died before early February 1799. It mentions his wife, Susanna and children, Charles [Jr.], William, Rosamond Beane (wife of Russell Bean), Keseah Sevier (widow of Robert Sevier) and Sarah Cox. Other children, Julius, George and Susan were not named as beneficiaries. Knowing burial customs of the time, it is very likely that Charles and his wife were buried somewhere on their farm in the Lamar area, but their graves have not been located.



This is a small section of the top of Robertson's will, which is on file within the Washington County Archives in Jonesborough, Tennessee. It is very faded and difficult to read.



Robertson's signature from his will, August 1798.

###