IMPORTANCE OF THE UPPER CUMBERLAND DURING THE WAR OF 1812

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Although the ongoing Civil War Sesquicentennial has gotten more attention, Tennesseans have also recently commemorated another important event, the War of 1812, which touched the Upper Cumberland region deeply. This conflict wrapped up with General Andrew Jackson's victory over the British at the Battle of New Orleans 200 years ago, in January 1815. The War of 1812 greatly affected numerous settlers in the Cumberland region, as men joined military companies, drilled, and sometimes marched off to fight, a few in the Canada campaign, but most with General Jackson in Alabama (against the Red Stick Creek Indians) or at New Orleans. The personal privation of the men was compounded by the separation of families, with accompanying disruptions of domestic and economic life, as women and children were left to run households and farms.

One lesser known effect of the War of 1812 came from an economic impact which particularly affected the local (and national) economy. England had long been the main source of gunpowder for the young United States, in the form of cheap imports from India. But by 1806, that supply was greatly reduced as the United States tried to apply economic pressure on Great Britain with a series of non-important and embargo laws. The outbreak of war in June 1812 meant that the supply from England was totally cut off, while the British Navy prevented Americans from purchasing the critical commodity from the French or the Dutch. The already high price of gunpowder soared to a dollar a pound, retail. Saltpeter became both scarce and expensive. But that scarcity and price provided an economic opportunity too good for many to ignore.

For it turned out that the caves of Upper Cumberland region, of which there are many hundreds, contained within them sediments rich in nitrates, and potassium nitrate, known as saltpeter, was the main ingredient (75%) in gunpowder. Thus in the earl 1800s a substantial industry appeared almost overnight, saltpeter mining and processing, and an associated gunpowder milling industry was also developed. Related activities included cutting timber for iron boiling kettles, and making potash, both necessary for processing the cave saltpeter. Once in the form of crystals, the saltpeter was taken to a local powder mill. Suppliers also made charcoal locally, the second ingredient of gunpowder, and brought it to the mill. The third ingredient, sulfur, was normally brought in from out of state. All three were finely ground and mixed carefully at the powder mill.

Making gunpowder was a tricky and dangerous business, as explosions, injuries, and deaths occurred at early powder mills. An explosion in the powder mill at Grassy Cove killed Dickey Matthew's son; an explosion in Isaac Smith's Powder Mill in Warren County killed William Barnes in 1819; while an explosion in the Waterloo powder mill badly burned a workman, John Roberts, in the 1850s. There were numerous other

powder mills in the region, especially on the Cumberland River, the Caney Fork, and their major tributaries, though their history is not well-known.

So, several inhabitants of the Upper Cumberland went into the saltpeter business. It could be sold locally or to the government; either way it would be profitable. Perhaps the most poignant story related to the dangers of the saltpeter business comes from newspaperman, preacher, and teacher, Stephen Calvin Gregory, who researched and wrote about the history of Smith and Macon counties throughout the mid-1900s. Calvin Gregory grew up in Pleasant Shade, Tennessee, on Peyton Creek, where generations of the Gregory family lived since the 1790s. He wrote more than once about an unfortunate fatal accident linked to cave saltpeter processing, with the most complete version appearing in 1949. The story focuses on Cave Point, named for a prominent cave in a hill or point above Peyton's Creek. Calvin Gregory wrote:

Near the entrance to the cave occurred another tragedy, in 1814. The cave had then and perhaps still does have a supply of saltpeter. The Second War with Great Britain was then in progress and gun powder was extremely scarce in the western settlements. Some of the men of the community decided to mine quantities of the saltpeter and to make thir own gun powder. Among those helping in this undertaking was Ansil, a 16 year old son of our great-great-grandfather, Bry Gregory. In cutting down a large tree near the entrance to this cave, to get wood for boiling down the saltpeter, the youth was crushed to death by the falling tree. His father, who lived not a great way off, took his mule and sled…and went to bring the body home. As he lifted his own, dead son, a youth only 16 tender years, onto the sled, the old man said: "Now d-n you, I guess you won't run away any more."

Subsequent research has confirmed some of the details of this recorded family lore. There is an obvious cave, with three entrances, on a prominent hill or point above Peyton Creek. This is Cave Point. Although I was unable to find either Ansil or Bry Gregory's gravesites, there are three Gregory Cemeteries in the valley; I presume that they are in early, unmarked graves in the vicinity. Bry Gregory is well represented in the historical record, appearing in the 1820 Smith County census.

He remained a prickly and unsympathetic character; Calvin Gregory later wrote that "(t)his was the same man who 33 years later (in 1847), was killed by lightening when he cursed the Almighty and called on Him to 'try old Cuff a pop.'" One of Bry Gregory's surviving sons later lived on the road upstream from the cave. Later the road was called Gregory Road past Cave Point. Today the valley of Peyton Creek is green and peaceful, but it is best not to forget that 200 years ago the Second War with England affected the people in our region deeply.

(Cumberland Tales, created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region's history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tntech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu.)

*Read more ‘Cumberland Tales’ atL http://www.ajlambert.com