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Historians are back with the second atlas of the Cumberland Settlements

THE ROAD WEST

Story by Trish Milburn • Photographs by Robin Conover



At left, Bill Puryear, left, and Jack Masters explore an area where the Holston Road once crossed Smith County. The historians, at right, have painstakingly studied thousands of historic documents and maps to rediscover several sections of the original roadbed pioneers used to travel through Tennessee more than 200 years ago.



Many people's dreams of retirement involve cruises, road trips in RVs, endless fishing or winters in Florida. But for two Middle Tennessee men, retirement was just the beginning of a second career as historians.

It's been two years since *The Tennessee Magazine* first profiled Jack Masters and Bill Puryear, who have turned their love of history into a passionate dedication to chronicling the settlement of the state's Cumberland Settlements. Now they're back with "Thoroughfare for Freedom: The Second Atlas of the Cumberland Settlements 1779-1804," Volume II of their planned three-volume history, after the success of Volume I, "Founding of the Cumberland Settlements."

Again, 78-year-old Puryear, a retired certified public accountant, has handled the first half of the book, the narrative that details the history of several Middle Tennessee counties and the people who traveled the Holston Road to settle there. The text covers the Paleo-Indians, the American Revolution (including a listing of Tennesseans who served as patriots in the war), treaties with the historic Native American tribes, migration into the area via routes cut through the wilderness and the contributions of slaves to the development of the midstate. And like in the first volume, the second half of this book is filled with maps of the land grants, painstakingly produced by Jack Masters, a 71-year-old retired engineer. All you have to do is look at the number of research files in Puryear's study or listen to Masters talk about the 16,000 land grant records



At left, Masters and Puryear examine support abutments across which a wooden bridge was built to allow wagons to navigate the Holston Road. Through their extensive research, Puryear and Masters also discovered where the road crossed the Caney Fork River, right.

he's scoured to know these two aren't part of the kick-back-and-take-it-easy retirement set. While many of us are still sleeping, these two are starting their days of research and writing, sometimes as early as 4 a.m.

For two guys who sort of fell into being authors and historians, they are making significant contributions to the state's historical and genealogical record.

For instance, their research for Volume II — which covers the land grants south of the Cumberland River where Volume I covered those north of the river — led them to the discovery that as much as 20 percent of the land grants in those early days were fraudulent. In fact, some of the big names in Tennessee history were implicated — John Sevier and William Blount among them.

"William Blount was kicked out of Congress for corruption in land-dealing," Puryear says.

Andrew Jackson was the one to blow the whistle on a lot of the fraudulent land grants in Middle Tennessee. In fact, he and Sevier, the state's first governor,

fought two duels over the issue. It was the beginning of the political rift between East and Middle Tennessee.

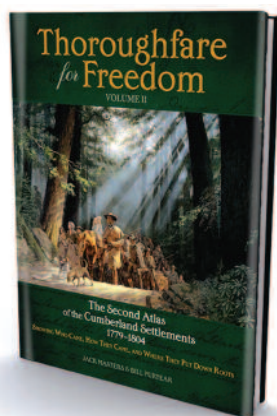
For Masters, who does much of the field work, one of the highlights of working on this second volume was finding important points along the First Holston Road, which ran from Nashville through Lebanon, Alexandria and Lancaster, crossing the Caney Fork River into Putnam County. This was the earliest road for Middle Tennessee. Using old maps and the stories told by older residents of the areas through which the road passed, Masters was able to find the road's Caney Fork River crossing point. This was largely because of a conversation with an older man who passed away only a month after talking to Masters.

Speaking with residents who have oral histories to tell is part of what makes the experience of researching these early settlements so rewarding, both in experience and information gleaned, say the historian-authors.

"We go to local historical societies and tell them what we're doing," Masters says. "We ask them to contribute information to be used in our books."

Some of what Puryear and Masters are providing in their histories has never been documented before. One such revelation is the present-day location of the Chickasaw Trace that runs from Nashville to West Tennessee.

Also of great value in this second volume is a look at the history of slaves in the midstate. For African-Americans with roots in Middle Tennessee, the appendix listing the sales of slaves from 1789 to 1804 is illuminating in more ways than one: While it can help those doing genealogical research, it is also a grim reminder of the



Explore it for yourself

For more information, including how to order your own copy of "Thoroughfare for Freedom," call 615-330-9013, visit www.cumberlandpioneers.com or contact The Book Foundry by emailing info@thebookfoundry.com.

wrongs of the past. For example, you see a line item listing the sale of two slave children, ages 9 and 5, for \$350.

"Next to land, slaves were the biggest assets," Puryear says. "One slave was equal in value to 200 acres of land at retail."

Though Puryear and Masters spend large chunks of each day working on their three-volume history, they agree the time and effort are worth it.

"It's very rewarding, and we've learned so much about our area," Puryear says. "We're contradicting sloppy myths with the facts."

Their efforts have not gone unnoticed. "Founding of the Cumberland Settlements" was named the Tennessee Library Association and the Tennessee Historical Commission's Tennessee History Book of the Year.

Volume III, titled "The First Southwest: The Third Atlas of the Cumberland and Duck River Settlements," should be released sometime in 2012, though Masters admits that's a bit of a moving target. That volume will include information about the Nickajack area and the Chickamauga Indians as well as the Blount land frauds from Wartrace to the Manchester area along the Duck River. ■

