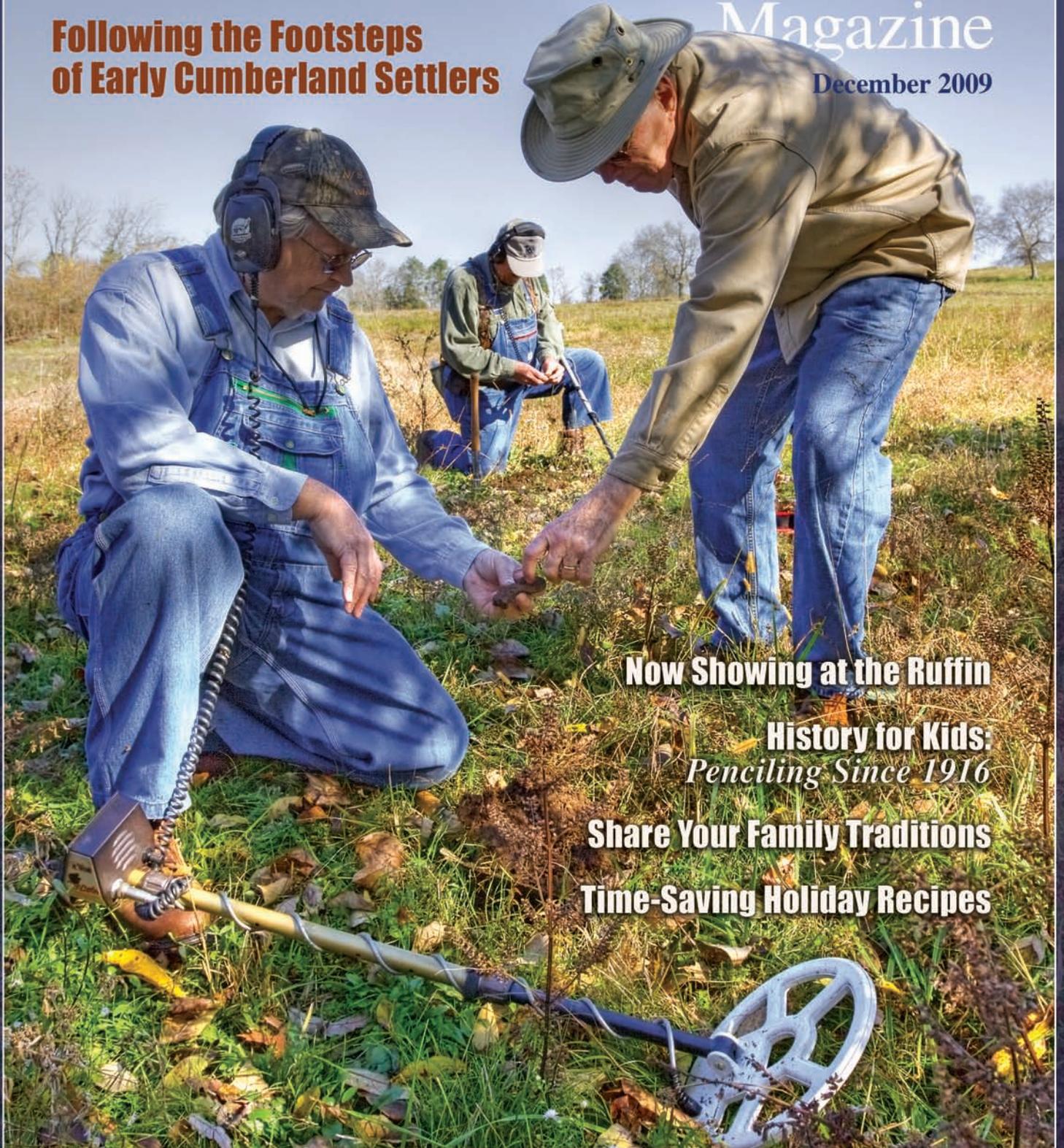


Statewide Edition

# The Tennessee Magazine

**Following the Footsteps  
of Early Cumberland Settlers**

December 2009



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# Tennessee's PIONEER PATHS

## Trio of historians trace the steps of Cumberland settlers

*Story by Trish Milburn • Photographs by Robin Conover and contributed by the authors*

It's always fascinating when you meet people who are passionate about what they do — educators, actors, artists, community volunteers. There's a light in their eyes and an excitement when they talk about their subject of choice. They're willing to put in long hours to their cause, spread the word about it and become its champion. That's the feeling you get when you meet the three Sumner County men who are the authors of a groundbreaking new historical book titled "Founding of the Cumberland Settlements: The First Atlas 1779-1804."

The book, by Doug Drake, Jack Masters and Bill Puryear, is already a big hit with historians and genealogists. It pulls together a tremendous amount of information about the settlement of an 11-county region in what would become Middle Tennessee. Some of the information had been available before, though scattered. Other parts of the work had never before been compiled. The result is a 240-page, glossy, 11-inch-by-14-inch book filled with maps of land grants; original survey maps; information about the 244 signers of the Cumberland Compact, an early governing document for the area's settlers; charts and graphs of population, immigration and demographics; and maps detailing locations of pioneer roads, salt licks, buffalo traces, Indian warpaths and pioneer forts and stations. Also included is a CD with transcriptions and the original survey maps of all 1,500 deeds included in the book.

"For many years, I dreamed of putting together the early roads and land grants of northern Middle Tennessee," says Yolanda Reid, Robertson County historian, in advance of the book's release. "Doug, Jack and Bill had no idea when they began this project that they would be making a dream come true for this county historian. The value of this work may never be fully calculated."

Added to the impressive collection of information in the book are more than 30 stunning paintings

by H. David Wright, widely known for his well-researched and visually stunning depictions of pioneer and Native American subjects, and a number of Puryear's more impressionistic paintings depicting aspects of history such as the building of Bledsoe's Fort.

So how did a book of this magnitude come about, especially from three self-professed "amateurs?"

Puryear, of Gallatin, says he, Masters and Drake got to talking about historic stations while attending a history fair at Bledsoe's Fort. The topic of Morgan's Fort, built by Puryear's great-great-grandfather, John Morgan, came up. He told his friends he thought he could take them to it. After finding the site, they used metal detectors and other tools to uncover thimbles, brass uniform buckles and other pieces of the past. When they dug out a log that had been at the base of the fort, it was a thrilling moment for Puryear, touching something that his ancestors had touched.

He says that once they'd found the land grant information on the site, they became interested in all the adjoining land grants. These were typically plots of 640 acres that were bestowed by the state of North Carolina, of which this area was still a part, to veterans of the Revolutionary War for their service. Once they found those land grants, there were always more adjoining them. The domino effect took over. Thus began more than three years of hiking across fields, picking their way through forests, excavating relics and examining public records and historical documents.

"Finding is one thing, documenting is another," Puryear says.

Masters adds that the men would often be up in the wee hours of the morning, e-mailing each other about the project.



**When three friends decided to investigate the routes pioneers traveled to get to Middle Tennessee, they had no idea how many miles they would hike or the treasures they would discover. Below, from left, Bill Puryear, Jack Masters and Doug Drake explore a Sumner County property.**

"They are passionate about this," says Stephen Giddens, executive director of The Book Foundry in Brentwood, which helped Warioto Press, composed of Drake, Masters and Puryear, take the book from tons of information to finished volume. "This book had to be written."

For Masters, some of the most exciting finds were old sunken roads, which often follow treelines, fencerows or parallel modern roads.

"Chills literally go up and down your back," says the Gallatin resident and Cumberland Electric Membership Corporation member.

That's understandable when you think about how many people must have used those roads in the years before Tennessee was even a state, people who had to be brave to settle in what was still a hostile wilderness.

"The story of survival comes through in this book," Giddens says. "These people were at war with everyone — Indians, the Spanish, the British."

In fact, the settlers were outnumbered by at least 10 to 1 by the five Indian nations that made incursions into the area — the Creek, Shawnee, Cherokee, Chickasaws and Chickamauga.

The realities of the daily life-and-death struggle those early settlers faced are illustrated in a number of ways in the book. There's a chart showing how many settlers were killed by Indians from 1780 to 1795, by year. This is followed by





**Above, a roadbed, once known as the Road to Kentucky, is bordered by a dry-stacked rock wall near the ruins of Sanders Station. At right, White Sulphur Springs at Upper Drakes Lick appears to be much the same as when pioneers first described it. Below, iron artifacts such as this horse-shoe helped the historians date sites. They donate their finds to local historical societies and museums.**



eight pages of casualty listings with the names of the pioneers, the year they were killed and where. Even the paintings tell the story of just how precarious life was in those early years. Wright's "The Captives" depicts a white man and woman held captive in a canoe, flanked by two Indians. But Indian attacks weren't the only threats to the settlers' survival. Disease, accidents, childbirth and a whole host of other challenges brought the end to many a pioneer.

The authors used every means at their disposal to create as comprehensive a book as possible. They walked a lot of miles, eyeballing a lot of old roads, creek fords, springs and other landmarks. Aerial photos, mapping software, microfilm machines and even local lore directed them to more pieces of the giant puzzle covering 11 counties: Davidson, Sumner, Robertson, Williamson, Montgomery, Smith, Cheatham,

*Continued on page 35*

# The Wright Stuff: Painting the Pioneers

If you stand a few feet away, you'll almost swear David Wright's paintings are, in fact, photographs. The realism is striking, a window into this country's pioneer past. These glimpses of early settlers, American Indians and the realities of pioneer life serve as the perfect visual component alongside the text and charts in "Founding of the Cumberland Settlements: The First Atlas 1779-1804."

Wright, a native of Kentucky but a Tennessean since the 1950s, went to the now-closed Harris Art School in Nashville. Afterward, he worked as a commercial artist while creating his own art pieces on the side. But since 1978, he's been devoting his time to creating his fine art paintings and sketches of rural landscapes, the Civil War, Indians, hunters, settlers and soldiers on the American frontier.



**Artist David Wright donated the use of more than 30 of his paintings depicting pioneers, landscapes and Native Americans to the project.**

ning — The James Robertson Party Arriving at the Bluffs, 1779," graces the cover of the book.

"I'm flattered to have so many images included," he says. "It's a great project to be a part of."

The fact that he is a student of history shows in the precise and accurate historical detail in his works. He's a big believer that historical painters should be as accurate as possible.

His talent and accuracy are what make his paintings such sought-after works. Accolades include being listed in "Who's



**"Uninvited Visitors" by David Wright**

Who in American Art," the prestigious Purchase Award at the Eiteljorg Museum Quest for the West show and even a nomination for a Prime Time Emmy for art direction on the History Channel's "First Invasion — The War of 1812." Visitors to the Cumberland Gap National Historical Park visitor center will no doubt notice the large mural reproduction of Wright's "Gateway to the West — Daniel Boone Leading the Settlers Through the Cumberland Gap, 1775."

The History Channel production wasn't the only affiliation Wright has had with show business. He's been art director or historical consultant on other documentaries, and after serving as an extra in the feature film "Last of the Mohicans," Wes Studi, who played Huron warrior Magua in the movie, posed for Wright. The result was wonderful paintings such as "The Warrior" and "The Huron."

*For more information about Wright and his artwork, visit his Web site at [www.davidwrightart.com](http://www.davidwrightart.com).*



**"The Captives" by David Wright**



**Below, from left, Doug Drake, Bill Puryear and Jack Masters spent years researching the pioneers of Tennessee's Cumberland Settlements. With permission from current landowners, they explored thousands of acres, searching for the remnants of who these pioneers were and how they arrived in Middle Tennessee.**

Trousdale, Wilson, Macon and Jackson. The 100 pages of 1,500 land grants alone are like a Christmas gift to those interested in locating their ancestors' land on a modern map.

Drake, Masters and Puryear found landowners and descendants very willing to help them out by pointing them in the right direction and telling them the family tales that had been passed down through the generations. The authors decided to include some short biographies, often of people who weren't the big names that make it into the history books but people "who left some tracks," according to Puryear. The use of first-person accounts adds an authenticity because you're reading about history in the words of the people who actually lived it. For instance, a section on the Mayfield family in Williamson County details raids by the Creeks, the staggering death toll and even the horrific nature of some of the deaths. One such victim was Isaac Mayfield, who was killed in 1794 while standing sentinel for his son-in-law while he hoed his corn. Mayfield's end came via eight shots to his body, a scalping, a bayonet through the face and two tomahawks. Bloody? Yes. A reality of those pioneer years? Also yes.

Throughout their years of research and since the publication of the book, the authors have depended on the kindness of local historians. Members of historical societies aided them at various points and have hosted some of their presentations since the book's release. Drake, Masters and Puryear gave back by donating the relics they found to local history museums such as the Sumner County Museum in Gallatin.

You might think that after three years of long hours working on this book the men might take a break. Not so. They are already working on a second volume that, according to Masters, will expand the area covered and get into more of the cultural history of the years between 1779 and 1804. That book, "Thoroughfare for Freedom," has a targeted publication date sometime in 2010 or 2011.



*For more information, including how to order your own copy of "Founding of the Cumberland Settlements, The First Atlas 1779-1804," go to [www.cumberlandpioneers.com](http://www.cumberlandpioneers.com) or contact The Book Foundry by e-mailing [info@thebookfoundry.com](mailto:info@thebookfoundry.com) or calling 615-330-9013.*