

GEOGRAPHY AS A HISTORICAL DETERMINANT:  
A BRIEF STUDY OF FORT LOUDOUN, MONROE COUNTY, TENNESSEE

*Introduction.* This brief overview of Fort Loudoun in Monroe County, Tennessee will highlight site and situation as determining factors in the fort's location, construction, occupation, and abandonment. A temporal cross-section approach will be used for the history of the fort from 1756 to 1760 that roughly coincides with the time of the French and Indian War in North America (i.e., 1754 to 1763).

*The importance of river passageways.* Rivers function as geographical passageways that crisscross a particular landmass. Generally they serve as outlets from elevated continental interiors to the sea. But they also function conversely as important inlets from the open sea to the heartland. Environmental activity concentrates in the river valleys and produces diverse flora and fauna. Human activity congregates around the flat land, abundant water, and productive soils of river valleys for agriculture, for transportation, and eventually for urbanization.<sup>1</sup> These geographical arteries markedly define the interaction of humans not only with the physical environment but more importantly with other humans.

*The geographic function of a river fort.* All river forts have special functions, but common roles for river forts can be defined historically. The primary military role of the river fort is obvious. The word "fort" means "a strong or fortified place occupied by troops and

---

<sup>1</sup>Tom L. McKnight, *Physical Geography: A Landscape Appreciation*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 482.

usually surrounded by walls, ditches, and other defensive works; a fortress; fortification.”<sup>2</sup> In North America, some river forts function primarily and solely as trading posts. But the fort, especially in North America’s colonial period, is foremost an outpost usually built at the behest of a government to give sanction to various types of claims by that government on the surrounding area. That area is considered hostile and a threat to the government unless proven otherwise. Because of this situation, a fort is erected. Ironically, the erecting of the fort often is considered hostile and a threat by the existing inhabitants of the area, or in the North American context, the native Indians.

The fort is designed to protect, guard, and defend. It protects occupants and their supplies against harm from both natural and human sources. It defends against theft and fire, and it shelters from flood and heavy rains, ice and snow, predatory animals, high winds and other such storms. It also guards the river passageway, so it usually occupies a site that is advantageous visually. Occupants of the fort can see a great distance upstream and downstream. The fort is defensible, and it is not so accessible as to be attacked easily and overtaken. For these reasons, the fort is situated frequently on some height like a bluff or embankment that overlooks the river below. And the fort defends the interests of the authority that built it, whatever those interests might be. As such, the river fort acts as a microcosmic projection of a foreign society into a penetrable wilderness.

---

<sup>2</sup>*Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York, NY: Gramercy Books, 1989), 558.

*Recovering the original geographical context of the site of Fort Loudoun.* An accurate description of the original locale of Fort Loudoun demands that all later geographical designators superimposed on the landscape be stripped away. But it is difficult to characterize this original geography of Fort Loudoun. Construction of Fort Loudoun began in 1756. At that time, the river system was very different. There was no Tennessee Valley Authority, no Fort Loudoun Dam, no Fort Loudoun Lake, no Tellico Dam, and no Tellico Lake. The “road” system was different. There was no Interstate Highway 75, no Federal Highway 411, and no State Route 360. And political boundaries were nonexistent. There was no United States, no State of Tennessee, and no Monroe County. To reconstruct any authentic resemblance to the original geography of Fort Loudoun, geographic designators from the mid-eighteenth century must be used. But these labels are perspective driven and sometimes difficult to determine.<sup>3</sup>

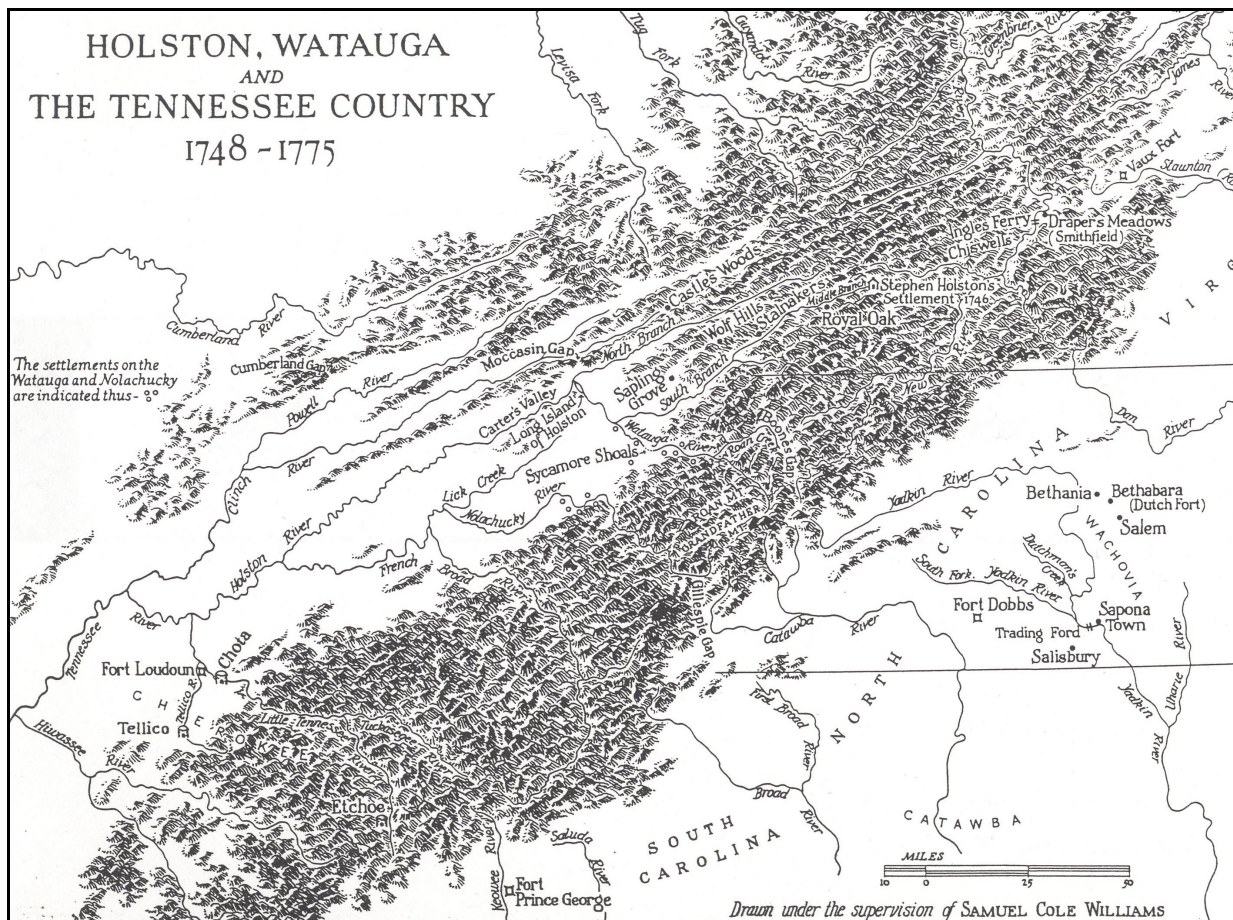
*The site and situation of Fort Loudoun.* Fort Loudoun was built on a narrow ridge in the fork of the Little Tennessee and Tellico Rivers, approximately thirty miles east of the Tennessee River. This strategic point, at 35 degrees North latitude, 84 degrees West longitude, and about 850 feet elevation, was located about five miles west of where the Little Tennessee River began its cut through the Appalachian Mountains.<sup>4</sup> Here the fort guarded access to the East through the mountains to and from the Carolinas, and it also protected Indian towns, such as Chota and

---

<sup>3</sup>See “A Sketch of the Cherokee Country” in Paul Kelley, *Historic Fort Loudoun* (Vonore, TN: Fort Loudoun Association, 1958), 6.

<sup>4</sup>Compare the site’s present-day location in the *Tennessee Atlas & Gazetteer*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (Freeport, ME: DeLorme Mapping Company, 2001), 42-43.

Tellico village, that were upstream on the Little Tennessee and Tellico Rivers, respectively (see Map 1).



Map 1. "Holston, Watauga and The Tennessee Country 1748-1775," by supervision of Samuel Cole Williams, in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Atlas of American History*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 54.

Perspective as a determinate of the distinction between site and situation is important.

Modern maps of Tennessee cannot portray exactly the role of Fort Loudoun as initial English *penetration* across the Appalachian Mountains to the interior, nor as *block* to the French and *control point* for the Indians. This English viewpoint is the perspective from the Atlantic Coast

that stretches from the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia to the Savannah River in Georgia. In its westward aspect, this panoramic view across the Piedmont and over the Appalachians knows nothing of an imaginary southwest to northeast line that goes through the middle of the mountains (e.g., the western boundary of English settlements; cf. the Royal Proclamation Line of 1763). From the coastal viewpoint, though, the barrier of the mountains is very real. It is geographically difficult, since there are high mountains. But it is penetrable, because there are river routes and mountain passes. The mountains as barrier also includes a human element, since there are Indians. They are different culturally, and some of them are hostile.

*Function of Fort Loudoun historically.* The area that surrounded Fort Loudoun originally was land that belonged to the Overhill Cherokee Indians. Gerald Schroedl explains why they were called “Overhill” Cherokee:

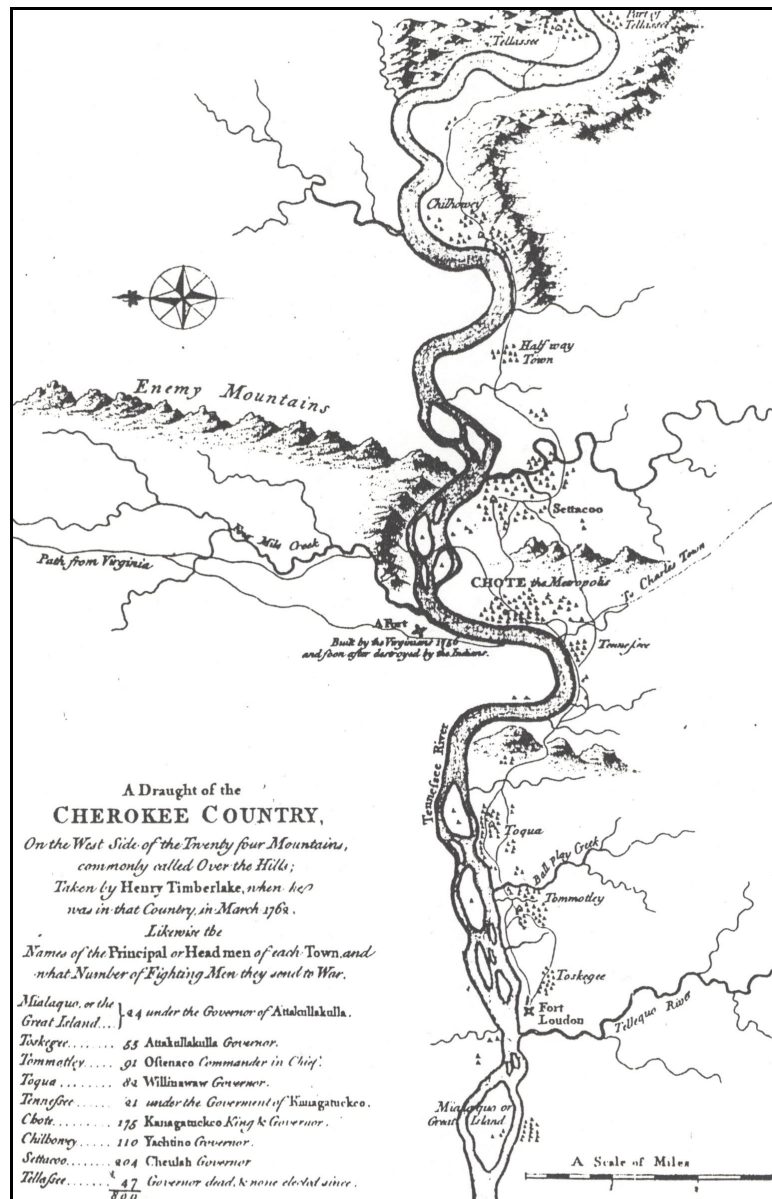
The name Overhill is generally derived from the geographic location of the Cherokees and the need to travel over the mountains from South Carolina to reach them. Early historic sources also often refer to these as the upper settlements in contrast to the lower and middle settlements found east of the Appalachians.<sup>5</sup>

It is likely that these Indians had occupied the Tennessee Valley since the sixteenth century, and they definitely had settled there by the late seventeenth century. They built towns along the Hiwassee, Little Tennessee, and Tellico Rivers—Chatuga, Chilhowee, Chestue, Chota, Citico, Great Tellico, Hiwassee Old Town, Mialoquo, Tallassee, Tanasi, Toque, Tomotley, and Tuskegee. Each village had a population of about 100 to 400 natives. These settlements together

---

<sup>5</sup>Gerald F. Schroedl, “Overhill Cherokees,” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 713.

formed a cultural, economic, political, and religious whole. They were, in a sense, a micro Cherokee Nation (see Map 2).



Map 2. "A Draught of the Cherokee Country," taken by Henry Timberlake, in James C. Kelly, *From Settlement to Statehood: A Pictorial History of Tennessee to 1796* (Nashville, TN: Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1977), 5.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, English trappers interacted regularly with the Indians. Official diplomatic overtures from the British followed, with an initial failure in 1715 reversed by Colonel George Chicken in 1725. His meeting with Cherokee headmen at the Tanasi townhouse began “a steady stream of diplomatic, economic, and military missions to the Overhills as the British came to depend on the Overhills to provide deer hides and as they recognized the importance of the Cherokees as a military buffer against the French and their Indian allies to the west.”<sup>6</sup> This interplay between British and Cherokees against the French resulted in the construction of Fort Loudoun near Tomotley and Tuskegee in 1756.

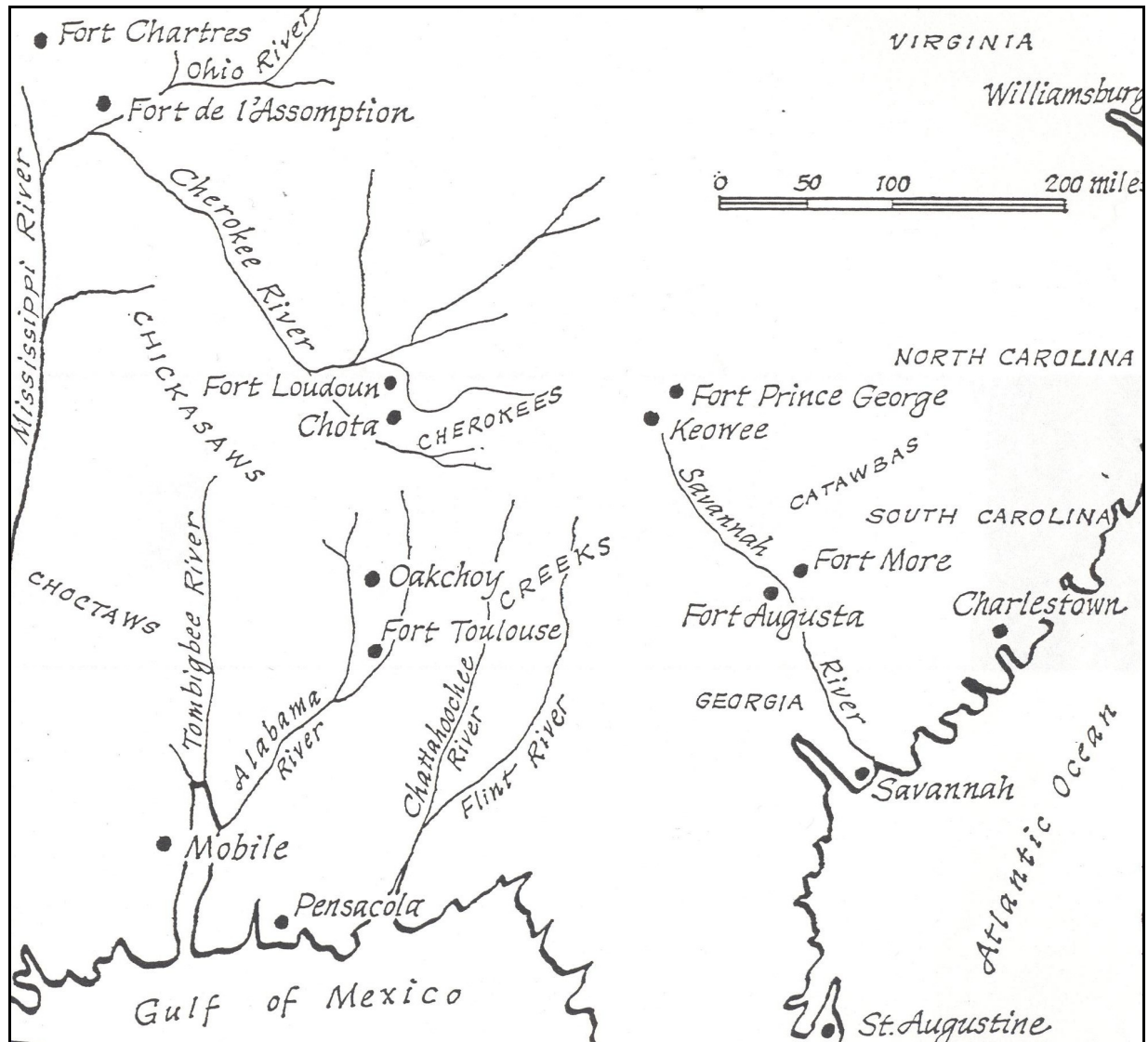
The Indians were by no means passive pawns in the chess game played out by European powers on the North American continent. According to John Finger, they successfully delayed the impact of a growing subordination to European masters by an intricate process of “realpolitik and cultural syncretism.”<sup>7</sup> The former tactic, through which the Cherokees emulated European methods of politics, was important for the circumstances that resulted in the construction of Fort Loudoun. The French had built forts at New Orleans, Mobile, Fort Massoc (or Fort Assumption) near the mouth of the Tennessee River, and Fort Toulouse on the Alabama River (see Map 3).

---

<sup>6</sup>Schroedl, “Overhill Cherokees,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, 714.

<sup>7</sup>John R. Finger, “Tennessee Indian History: Creativity and Power,” *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 13.





Map 3. "The southern Indian country, 1740-1762," from David H. Corkran, *The Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740-1762* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 57.



The French referred to Cherokee country as the “key to Carolina.”<sup>8</sup> And with political savvy, the Cherokees exploited the French encroachment to their own advantage, at least in their thinking. The newly-built Fort Prince George near the Lower Cherokee town of Keowee, about 250 miles away, provided a precedent. The Indians demanded that the English garrison another fort upland on the Little Tennessee River. Refusal by the British, they felt, would “interrupt the thriving Carolina trade and perhaps force a rapprochement with France.”<sup>9</sup> The Indian realpolitik gambit worked, and the British built a fort that later would be ransacked by the Indians themselves. But this strategy, although relatively unimportant for larger continental concerns, was typical of a conspicuous native presence that eventually forced British authorities to bar frontier settlement west of a line roughly corresponding to the Cherokees’ Appalachian boundaries (i.e., the Royal Proclamation Line of 1763).

*The circumstances of the building of the fort.* Stories about local “disturbances” among the Cherokees by the Jesuit utopian socialist Christian Gottlieb Priber and the French liaison agent Chevalier de Lantagnac, and their immediate influence upon the building of Fort Loudoun, are more romanticism than history.<sup>10</sup> In reality, British expansion had accelerated while French expansion had waned. But the British did not wish to lose any momentum in pushing the French

---

<sup>8</sup>See Robert E. Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981), 32.

<sup>9</sup>Finger, “Tennessee Indian History: Creativity and Power,” 13.

<sup>10</sup>Donald Davidson, *The Tennessee: Volume One, The Old River, Frontier to Secession*, Southern Classic Series, ed. M. E. Bradford (Nashville, TN: J. S. Sanders, 1946), 96-98.

off the continent. Larger continental events, precipitated by even bigger global events, made it advantageous for both British colonists and the Overhill Cherokees “to cement, in a physical, symbolic sense, diplomatic and trade relationships.”<sup>11</sup> By 1754, whites and reds across the South feared disruption to their “normal” life by a wave of deteriorating events in the northeast (i.e., the beginning of the French and Indian War).<sup>12</sup> As described by Paul Kelley:

The Indians wanted a place of safety for their old people and their women and children when the men were away at war. They hoped that the “great guns” of the British would deter neighboring tribes from attacking them. A fort would also, they believed, insure them a constant supply of trade goods. The English, on the other hand, wanted a fort to meet the threat of French encroachment in the Tennessee Valley and to cement their alliance with the Cherokee, who from early times had been regarded as allies of the English.<sup>13</sup>

An enclosed fort in the heart of Cherokee lands seemed the logical solution for both Indian and British aims.

*The particulars of Fort Loudoun.* John William G. De Brahm, a German engineer who had directed the fortification of Charleston, supervised the construction of the fort. Labor to build and then to garrison the fort was supplied by about 200 South Carolinians, two companies of provincial militia, and one company of British regulars commanded by Captain Raymond

---

<sup>11</sup>Carroll Van West, “Fort Loudoun,” *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998), 326.

<sup>12</sup>See Ted Morgan, *Wilderness At Dawn: The Settling of the North American Continent* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1993), 308ff.

<sup>13</sup>Paul Kelley, “Fort Loudoun: The After Years, 1760-1960,” *Landmarks of Tennessee History*, eds. William Alderson and Robert McBride (Nashville, TN: The Tennessee Historical Society, 1965), 219.

Demere.<sup>14</sup> Distractions, however, stalled the work. A new colonial governor with a different agenda, dilapidating defense works at Fort Prince George that needed repair and took priority, and concern about a rival stockade built by Virginians just across the Tennessee River from Chota proved discouraging.<sup>15</sup> But the Cherokees were persistent, and work on the fort began in October of 1756 after considerable disagreement between De Brahm and the advance party about where the fort should be located. The site chosen was a compromise that suited De Brahm and the Cherokees but not Demere.

In fact, the entire year of building displeased Demere, who constantly argued with De Brahm about construction and design. In his report to the governor, Demere ridiculed the fort. Unlike the Indians, he would not even consider the fort to be suitable for horses, cows, or hogs.<sup>16</sup> But, almost by accident, the fort did come close to the grand design wanted by Governor William H. Lyttelton and represented in the noble person for which it was named, John Campbell, the Earl of Loudoun, commander-in-chief of all British troops in North America. Lyttelton wanted bastions, traverses, and large ramparts with chevaux-de-frises on the outside of the fort and barracks on the inside of the fort. De Brahm tried to comply. He laid out the typical polygon that was shaped like a diamond with thick breastworks and jutting bastions. But the site simply

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>See Samuel Cole Williams, *Dawn of Tennessee Valley and Tennessee History* (Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1937), 171-183.

<sup>16</sup>Van West, "Fort Loudoun," *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, 326.

could not accommodate the fort's dimensions without crucial modifications. Donald Davidson explains:

The narrow, rocky ridge afforded room for only two bastions on its crest. The rest of the fort slanted curiously down the southern slope of the ridge and sprawled across the low ground by the river. . . . Within the main enclosure would be barracks, powder magazine, and storehouses. Instead of a conventional abattis, de Brahm ordered that the ditches protecting the ramparts be planted with thorny locust shoots which, when grown up, would prick the naked skins of attacking Indians.<sup>17</sup>

De Brahm, wearied by ceaseless interference from Demere, declared the fort finished and left just before Christmas 1756. Now his own boss, Demere rallied his men to complete a smaller fort that, with a dozen cannon, "was almost impregnable to Indian attack."<sup>18</sup>

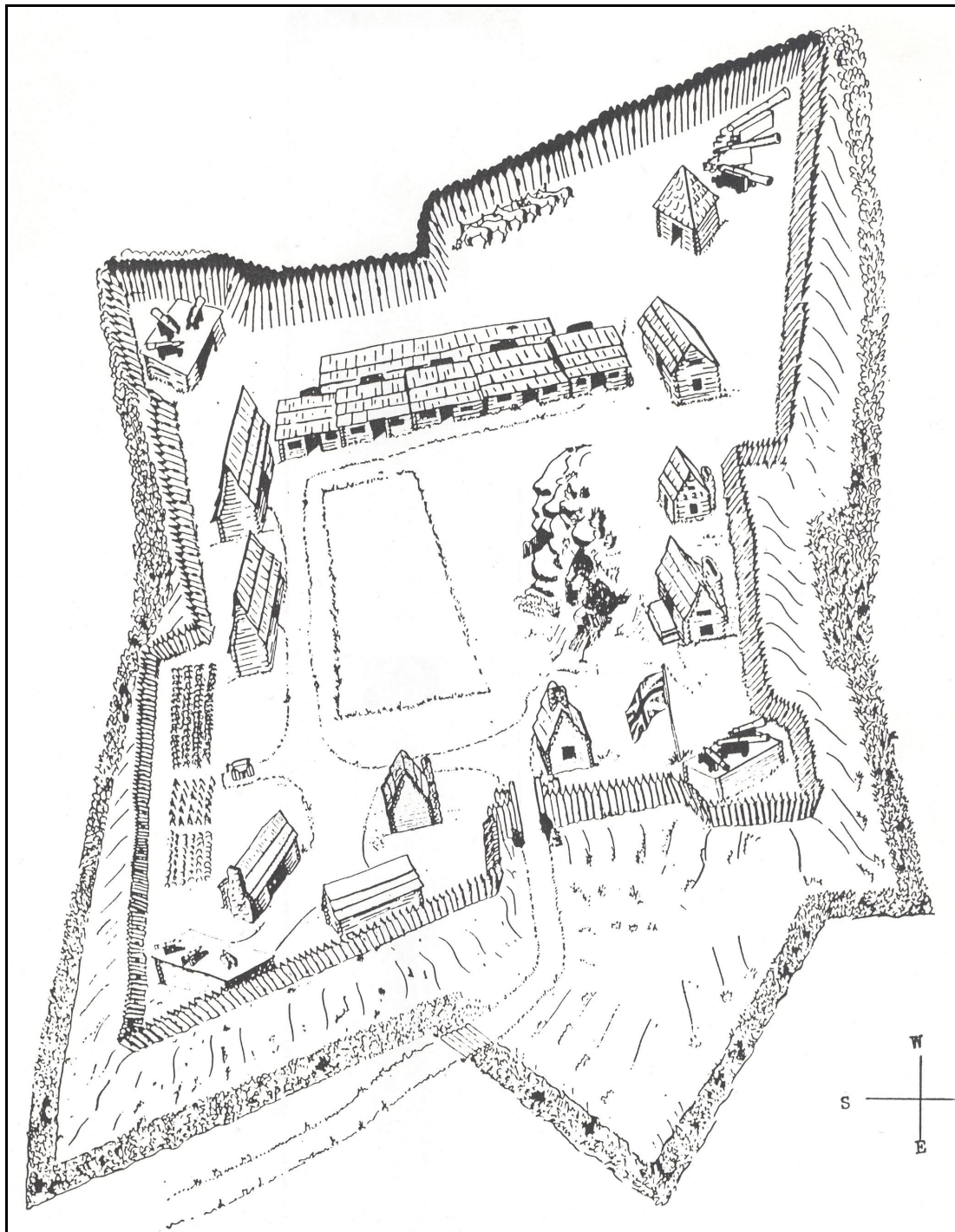
Fort Loudoun looked like European models; it was not at all like typical North American frontier forts. The fort was shaped like a diamond with bastions protruding from each corner. For perimeter defense, an earthwork, a dry moat, a hedge of honey locusts, and a log palisade barrier fifteen feet high encircled the fort. On the two acres of enclosed space were barracks for officers and regulars, two corn houses, other storehouses, a blacksmith shop, a powder magazine, and a guardhouse (see Map 4). The blacksmith shop also doubled as a meeting house, a chapel, and temporary guardhouse.<sup>19</sup> By the summer of 1757, Demere considered the fort completed, so in August he transferred command to his brother Paul Demere, and then he left.

---

<sup>17</sup>Davidson, *The Tennessee: Volume One, The Old River, Frontier to Secession*, 104.

<sup>18</sup>Kelley, "Fort Loudoun: The After Years, 1760-1960," 220.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*



Map 4. "Fort Loudoun on the Little Tennessee River," from Paul Kelley, *Historic Fort Loudoun* (Vonore, TN: Fort Loudoun Association, 1958), 22.

*Indian attachment to Fort Loudoun.* The Indians generously gave the fort an additional 700 acres of land to farm corn. A small English community blossomed with the arrival of soldiers' families. The population of the fort conceivably swelled to over 300 people. A meager Presbyterian mission to both fort and Indians led by Reverend John Martin was begun.<sup>20</sup> The Indians were delighted, because they learned much from their new white friends. This settlement of whites among them also advanced their objective of forestalling dependency on the Europeans by what might be called "cultural syncretism."<sup>21</sup> Although the Indians outnumbered European settlers immediately west of the Appalachian Mountains, the settlers still controlled the flow of goods to the area. A balance of power was sought by creating "middle ground" or "a place in-between." This was done by adapting trade to treaty obligations, blending gift giving with bribery, and overt sexual and cultural mingling.<sup>22</sup> This latter accommodation proved vexing even for Indian leaders. When the Cherokees later tried to starve out the fort's garrison, Cherokee women in defiance of their own war chief smuggled food to their white "husbands" at the fort.<sup>23</sup> So the balance achieved by cultural syncretism was delicate and very fragile. Just how fragile it was would be seen in subsequent events that led to the siege and fall of the fort.

---

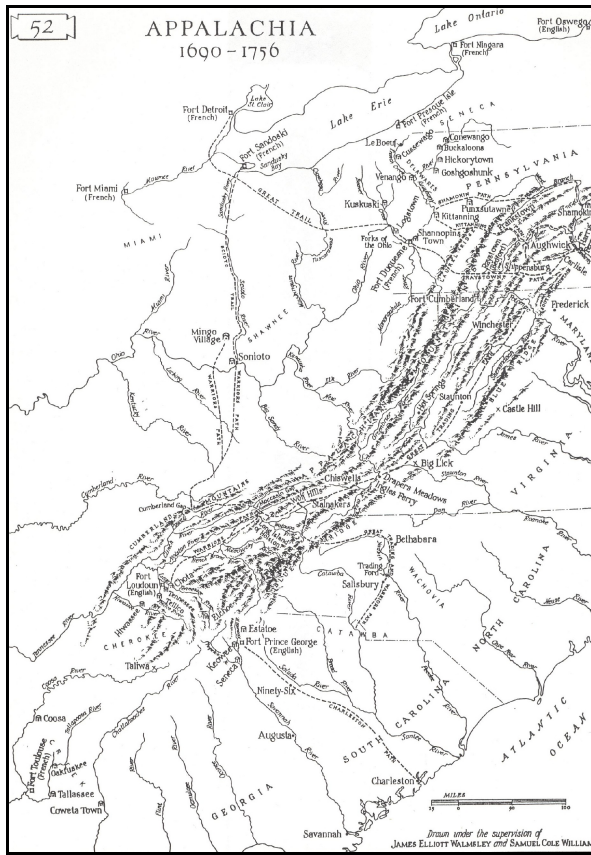
<sup>20</sup>See Williams, *Dawn of Tennessee Valley and Tennessee History*, 207-224.

<sup>21</sup>Finger, "Tennessee Indian History: Creativity and Power," 13.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>See Margaret Ripley Wolfe, "The Feminine Dimension in the Volunteer State," *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture*, ed. Carroll Van West (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 33.

*The relative position and unimportance of Fort Loudoun.* In the relative scheme of things in North America, Fort Loudoun was a distant outpost. Charlestown was almost 400 miles away, and the closest English fort was Fort Prince George on the leeward side of the Appalachian range



Map 5. "Appalachia 1690-1756," by supervision of James Elliott Walmsley and Samuel Cole Williams, in Kenneth T. Jackson, ed., *Atlas of American History*, rev. ed. (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 52.

(see Map 5). Events and battles affecting the outcome of the larger conflict, the French and Indian War, were even further away. The British had no time to squander resources or divert attention to a backwoods post with little overall strategic value. From the British perspective, Fort Loudoun was expendable. This was true irrespective of the failed expedition against the Cherokees led by Colonel Archibald Montgomery, beginning in 1760.<sup>24</sup> French interests in Fort Loudoun by way of grand consequence or close proximity were no stronger. The fort was isolated, and travel through the wilderness was slow and dangerous. Supplies often were delayed, as well as

<sup>24</sup>See David H. Corkran, *The Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740-1762* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 207ff.



necessary aid during times of trouble. And no high dignitary had visited the fort, nor did any need to visit. Fort Loudoun was not that important.

*The relative position and importance of Fort Loudoun.* To the Cherokees, though, things looked much different. This illustrates that perspective is a strong determinant of the difference



Map 6. "The French and Indian Wars, 1689-1763," from Carl Waldman, *Atlas of the North American Indian* (New York, NY: Facts on File, 1985), 100.

between site and situation. The Cherokees occupied a key area between Creeks, Chickasaws, Shawnees, and the East (see Map 6). Rather than an outpost, they held an active *point of intersection* between tribes and settlers, a *concourse* that they discreetly maintained and controlled. This much different viewpoint brought about harsh Cherokee reaction toward the English when things turned sour during the French and Indian War. Caught

between the pincers of hostile French and Indians to their west and the chameleon-like English to their east, the Cherokees responded in a predictable manner. They fought back.

*The significance of the Cherokee attack on Fort Loudoun.* After a couple of years of peaceful coexistence, the Cherokees laid siege to Fort Loudoun in the summer of 1760. Why did the Indians decide to repel the British after they asked them to come to their territory and build a fort there in the first place? In part, the answer lay in the clash between British and Cherokee conceptions about contractual agreements and beliefs about strict justice. Such issues were quite complex, but the immediate provocation seemed to be the English slaughter of about twenty Indian hostages at Fort Prince George. The British action was retaliation against Cherokee leader Oconostota, known as the Great Warrior, who had sanctioned the ambush killing of the fort's commander, Lieutenant Richard Coytmore.<sup>25</sup> This enraged the Cherokees who launched an assault on Fort Loudoun. It did not matter that the occupants of Fort Loudoun had nothing to do with the affair at Fort Prince George. To the Indians, they were guilty. Why? Apart from the political intrigue and the physical carnage generally associated with war, the answer possibly lies in the geographical function of the river fort as a *microcosmic protrusion* of a foreign society into a penetrable wilderness. Even though invited by the Cherokees earlier, the presence of the British in the heart of Cherokee Appalachia represented, at best, an *intrusion*, and due to intense bellicose events, they were an *unwelcome* lot of trespassers. To the Cherokees, the soldiers and their families at Fort Loudoun were guilty, because they were an *extension* of British rule. Cherokee legal tradition, therefore, sought life for life. After the brief summer siege, rations

---

<sup>25</sup>See Corlew, *Tennessee: A Short History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 33-34.

were exhausted and the fort surrendered on August 9, 1760. About 200 soldiers with 60 women and children began a fateful trek toward Carolina settlements. Van West succinctly tells the end of the story, that the next day during the retreat from Fort Loudoun:

Near Tellico Plains, approximately 700 Cherokees attacked the retreating soldiers and their families, killing three officers, 23 soldiers, and three women. The rest were captured and whisked away to Cherokee villages, where a few were murdered but most were ransomed to either Virginia or South Carolina.<sup>26</sup>

*Conclusion.* In a brief span of time, Fort Loudoun served as a common river fort and also functioned in a special way as diplomatic impasse or political stalemate. The English got what they wanted—a buffer against the French and a wedge by which to manipulate other Indian tribes toward ousting the French from the continent. The Cherokees got what they wanted as well—a respite from European encroachment onto their lands and temporary protection from hostile Indian neighbors. For both groups, Fort Loudoun performed a brief but necessary utilitarian role that was determined geographically according to site and situation.

---

<sup>26</sup>Van West, “Fort Loudoun,” *Tennessee Encyclopedia*, 327.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Corkran, David H. *The Cherokee Frontier: Conflict and Survival, 1740-1762*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962.

Corlew, Robert E. *Tennessee: A Short History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1981.

Davidson, Donald. *The Tennessee: Volume One, The Old River, Frontier to Secession*. Southern Classic Series. Edited by M. E. Bradford. Nashville, TN: J. S. Sanders, 1946.

Finger, John R. "Tennessee Indian History: Creativity and Power." *Tennessee History: The Land, the People, and the Culture*. Edited by Carroll Van West. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1998.

Jackson, Kenneth T., ed. *Atlas of American History*, revised edition. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978.

Kelley, Paul. "Fort Loudoun: The After Years, 1760-1960." *Landmarks of Tennessee History*. Edited by William Alderson and Robert McBride. Nashville, TN: The Tennessee Historical Society, 1965.

Kelley, Paul. *Historic Fort Loudoun*. Vonore, TN: Fort Loudoun Association, 1958.

Kelly, James C. *From Settlement to Statehood: A Pictorial History of Tennessee to 1796*. Nashville, TN: Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1977.

McKnight, Tom L. *Physical Geography: A Landscape Appreciation*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993.

Morgan, Ted. *Wilderness At Dawn: The Settling of the North American Continent*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1993.

*Tennessee Atlas & Gazetteer*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Freeport, ME: DeLorme Mapping Company, 2001.

Van West, Carroll, ed. *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*. Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1998.

Waldman, Carl. *Atlas of the North American Indian*. New York, NY: Facts on File, 1985.

David W Fletcher, 23<sup>rd</sup> Susman Graduate Student Conference, Rutgers University, April 2001  
*All Rights Reserved / Unauthorized Electronic Publishing Prohibited / [www.davidwfletcher.com](http://www.davidwfletcher.com)*

*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*. New York, NY:  
Gramercy Books, 1989.

Williams, Samuel Cole. *Dawn of Tennessee Valley and Tennessee History*. Johnson City, TN:  
Watauga Press, 1937.

Wolfe, Margaret Ripley. "The Feminine Dimension in the Volunteer State." *Tennessee History:  
The Land, the People, and the Culture*. Edited by Carroll Van West. Knoxville, TN:  
University of Tennessee Press, 1998.