

A Short History of Davidson's Fort (As We Know It So Far)

Davidson's Fort was built in 1776 by North Carolina Militia soldiers for the defense of settlers against the Cherokees.

Conflicts between Native Americans and European settlers were violent throughout the eighteenth century. The conflict was primarily about land, as settlers continually broke treaties by moving into land reserved to the Cherokees. In 1763, the British made a treaty with the Cherokee Nation agreeing that Europeans would not settle as far west as the Blue Ridge Mountains. It has often been said that the crest of the Blue Ridge formed the border between colonial and Cherokee land, and this has been a simple way to explain the intended effect of the treaty. The reality, however, is more complicated. According to the proclamation made by Governor Tryon when the treaty of 1763 was made, the boundary was a line beginning where the South Carolina boundary with the Cherokee ended at Reedy River. The line then ran about 60 miles north to Tryon Mountain (now called White Oak Mountain, near Columbus, NC), then continued in a straight line to Chiswell's mines in Virginia. (You can find Tryon's proclamation in [The Colonial and State Records of North Carolina](#), edited by William L. Saunders, vol. VII, pp. 502-503; you can access this source online at docsouth.unc.edu/csr/.) According to this line, the present town of Old Fort lies west of the boundary in Cherokee territory. Another reality is that the settlers were pretty much prepared completely to disregard any treaty made by the King and his agents, and so continued moving further west. Thus in the early to mid 1770's several settler families took up land in what is now McDowell County, including the brothers John, Samuel, William, George and perhaps Thomas Davidson.

The four Davidson brothers were the sons of another John Davidson who, with his brother George and/or his oldest son George, settled in what is now Iredell County in the 1740's. It would have been a favor to posterity if the Davidsons had not recycled the same first names in every generation. The multiplicity of Davidsons with the same first names – sons, uncles, cousins, brothers – causes considerable confusion in Davidson family records. It also makes it difficult to determine which Davidson owned which tracts of land and even confuses which individuals were actually involved in stories both handed down and written. We do know, however, that the elder John Davidson mentioned above had a brother named George Davidson, and that this George Davidson was the father of General William Lee Davidson who was killed at the Battle of Cowan's Ford in 1780. We also know that the elder John had five sons – George, Thomas, twins Samuel and William, and John who was called "One-Eyed" because of a rifle misfire in his childhood or youth. In addition, we know that Davidsons of every name owned considerable amounts of land in the present Old Fort area, as early as the 1770's. Davidson's Fort was built on land owned by Davidsons, though which Davidson owned the Fort site is unclear at present. For more on this subject, see "Digression on Land Ownership" below.

As the American Revolution continued, the Cherokees sided with the British against the Americans, and Americans accused the British of instigating Cherokee violence against settlers. The summer of 1776 saw an increase in Cherokee violence against settlers on the Catawba, particularly in present McDowell and Burke Counties. Davidson's Fort was built during this time, no doubt in response to the increase in Cherokee attacks. There are several slightly different stories regarding who built the fort, when and why:

- 1) According to a story handed down through the Davidson family, John "One-Eyed" Davidson, his wife Nancy Brevard Davidson and all but one of their children were massacred on their farm by Cherokee in the summer of 1776. In more modern times, a brick monument has been placed on the spot where the family is said to be buried, and some members of the Davidson family assert that Davidson's Fort was named in honor of John and his family. Forts were not usually named in honor of someone who was killed. They were normally named for either the owner of the land on which the fort was built (as is the case with Grider's/Krider's Fort in present Lenoir) or for the fort's captain. Certainly, however, the massacre of the John Davidson family could have been the immediate reason for building Davidson's Fort. There is another problem, however, and that is that I have

yet to find definitive documentation of this event. Did it really happen? To whom did it happen? For more on this subject, see “Digression on the John and Nancy Davidson massacre” below.

- 2) In his application for a military pension, Josiah Brandon says that he began service in the militia in the fall of 1776 or 1777, but does not remember precisely when. He states that he was under Captain Samuel Davidson and marched with him to the frontier to build a fort. He identifies that fort as being the place called Old Fort at the time he is giving his pension application (1832). Thus he says that Davidson’s Fort was built by a company of NC militia under Capt. Samuel Davidson in 1776 or 1777. Throughout his pension record, Brandon is unsure of dates, and other sources indicate that the Fort was built in 1776. (Pension application of Josiah Brandon, W 335. **Note: All pension applications are held by the U. S. National Archive in Washington, D.C. Many can also be found (in transcription) at www.southerncampaign.org . These pensions are one of the most important primary sources for the history of Davidson’s Fort, and those involved in the research make extensive use of the pensions available online from Southern Campaign.)
- 3) Richard Crabtree states in his pension application that he volunteered in the militia on June 1, 1776, and was sent to Davidson’s Fort. This seems to imply that Davidson’s Fort already existed in the summer of 1776. (Pension application of Richard Crabtree, W 8642.)
- 4) In another pension application, Belfield Wood implies that he was at Davidson’s Fort as early as May, 1776. He also says that he was still at Davidson’s Fort in July of 1776 when it was attacked by Indians. (Pension application of Belfield Wood, W 4492.) The same story is told in the pension application of Joseph McPeters (W 1303).
- 5) One pension application refers to Davidson’s Fort as Rutherford’s Fort and credits Gen. Griffith Rutherford’s men with building it. The pension application of Elias Lovelace says that Lovelace “remained some days at a time at Fort Rutherford on the head of Catawba River built by General Rutherford; . . .” (Pension application of Elias Lovelace, W 9143.) Lovelace is referring to the campaign led by General Griffith Rutherford against the Cherokee in the fall of 1776, commonly known as Rutherford’s Trace. The final rendezvous place for Rutherford’s militia forces before entering Cherokee territory was Davidson’s Fort. While on the campaign, Rutherford left some 300 men behind, distributed among several frontier forts. If the men left at Davidson’s Fort did not build the fort, they certainly continued building and/or improving it.

Although these stories differ, they all indicate that Davidson’s Fort was built by militia soldiers, most of whom were volunteers drawn from what are now McDowell, Burke, and Rowan Counties. It was built in 1776, corresponding with both the increase in Cherokee violence and with General Griffith Rutherford’s campaign against the Cherokee and it had a role in protecting the frontier settlements from the Cherokee and in supporting Rutherford’s campaign. It seems likely that the Fort was named for Samuel Davidson, its first commander.

Davidson’s Fort was not unique in western North Carolina. It was one of dozens of forts built along the frontiers of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Some of these forts were built by settlers themselves when Indian attacks threatened. Grider’s or Krider’s Fort, located in present Lenoir, was one of these; a great story about its construction is told in the pension application of Jacob Grider (W 3980). Others, like Davidson’s Fort, were built by companies of militia and served as militia outposts to whom soldiers were assigned to protect the western settlements from the Cherokee Indians. It appears that a militia company, amounting to about 20 men, was always stationed at the fort, the soldiers changing as men completed their normal 3-month tours of duty and returned to their homes. The fort also appears to have had a captain who remained at the fort while militia companies came and went. This picture of the role of Davidson’s Fort emerges from the reading of numerous pension applications, in addition to those mentioned previously. (A complete list is available upon request.) For a short explanation of the militia, see “About the militia” below.

Rutherford’s Trace.

Probably the most important event connected with Davidson's Fort was a military campaign led by General Griffith Rutherford against the Cherokees in 1776. The Indian violence along the Catawba River during the summer of 1776 inspired Rutherford to seek permission from the NC Council of Safety to launch an attack on the Cherokee villages of the Lower and Middle Towns. At the same time, the states of South Carolina and Virginia were launching similar campaigns, so the three states together represented a 3-pronged effort to destroy the Cherokee nation. Some 2700 militia soldiers mustered at Quaker Meadows, the home of Captain Charles McDowell, and then moved further up the Catawba River to Davidson's Fort. Several days later, on September 1, 1776, the force set out from Davidson's Fort.

Rutherford's forces engaged in only a few battles with the Cherokee, because the Indians abandoned their villages and moved further into the Upper Towns of Tennessee. The militia burned the Indian towns, along with their crops and stored corn, and killed or confiscated their livestock. In this way the Cherokee towns of Watauga (near present Franklin, NC), Nikwasi, Cowee, and Quanassee, among others, were destroyed. Rutherford's forces returned to Davidson's Fort on October 12, 1776, having destroyed some 36 Indian towns.

You can read more about Rutherford's campaign, often called Rutherford's Trace, online at:

www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4298

www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution.4353

www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution.4300

www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4291

www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/4301

www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-revolution/1916

Davidson's Fort continued to be used as a militia outpost at least through the 1780s. In fact, it continued to be the starting point for campaigns against the Cherokee throughout that decade. (Again, this information comes from the pension records of numerous militia soldiers.) We are not sure beyond that how long the fort was used or how long it may have been needed, because the most important primary sources available (the pension records) stop with 1783, the end of the revolutionary war. A more complete story can be told as research continues and more sources come to light.

Digression on Land Ownership

One of the problems of determining who actually owned the land on which Davidson's Fort was built is complicated by the fact that we do not have records of land ownership for the area before 1777. Burke County was formed from Rowan County in 1777, and in that year everyone rushed to get his land holdings listed and surveyed. (Those of us involved in the research for Davidson's Fort have not yet checked Rowan County land records to see if any exist for the Old Fort area before 1777.) In January of 1778, it was recorded that 640 acres on both sides of the Catawba River were surveyed for George Davidson. (See Burke County Land Entries, 1778-1795, p. 14, #42. I assume this is the George Davidson who was one of the 5 sons of John Davidson of Iredell County.) Another record from 1779 states that George Davidson owned the land "whereon the Fort stands." (Burke County Land Entries, 1778-1795, p. 620, #1865.) From these records, we know that George Davidson owned the land that included the Fort site by 1779; perhaps he owned it as early as 1776. Here is another interesting land record: In December 1778 a survey was requested by George Davidson for 100 acres "lying on his own Mill Creek joining his own survey that Sam'l Davidson lives on above ye mill." (Burke County Land Entries, 1778-1795, p. 14, #44.) It appears that Samuel Davidson may have lived on a piece of land owned by George. Obviously, more research is needed on the question of land ownership.

Digression on the John and Nancy Davidson massacre.

The story is told by F. A. Sondley in a speech given on Sept. 25, 1913, at the commemoration of a monument to Samuel Davidson at the place of his death near Asheville. (The full text of this speech is available at www.archive.org; the story

about this massacre is on p. 17.) The story is repeated by Jerry C. Cashion in his report "Old Fort and the North Carolina Frontier;" Cashion states that "One-Eyed" John Davidson and his family were the victims and cites Sondley's speech as his source. A genealogical database of the Davidson family, however, says that "One-Eyed" John died in Maury County, TN, in 1825 (www.tqsi.com/cgi-bin/igmsrch.cgi; The Davidson Family of Iredell County, NC, Geneological Database, by John Bulmer Lisle). It also states that this John Davidson was married first to Ruth Clement (1770) and later to Francis Bateman (1793). A search in this database for Nancy Brevard Davidson yielded no results. This conflict of sources probably results from the confusion caused by so many of the Davidsons having the same first names. Until definitive primary sources can be found, we are left with the questions (1) whether this massacre actually happened; (2) which John Davidson family it happened to; and (3) whether it happened to some other Davidson family.

*By the way, this is not the only "John Davidson massacre." A John Davidson was killed by Cherokee around 1780, along with his wife Anne and a 6-month-old daughter. This is documented by papers in the NC State Archive (General Assembly Session Records, April-May, 1782, Joint House Resolution of May 9-May 18.) I have photocopies of the original documents, written by C. H. McDowell. Funny thing – the first letter of Anne Davidson's name looks like an "A" superimposed on an "N," as if McDowell first wrote an "N" (for Nancy?), then corrected it by writing an "A" on top of it.

About the militia.

Every male between the ages of 16 and 60 was expected to serve an annual 3-month tour of duty in the local militia. There was no other protective force for most Colonial communities. In 1776 an army of the United States was being formed for the first time by George Washington and others to fight a war for independence. Before, during and after the Revolutionary War, most communities depended on the local militia for law and order and for protection. Present-day McDowell County was then a part of the Rowan District for militia purposes, with Brigadier General Griffith Rutherford as the top-ranking commander.

Frequently Asked Questions.

What did Davidson's Fort look like?

Unfortunately, no descriptions or sketches of the fort are known to exist today. Our reconstruction of the fort is based on what is known of similar forts in the Carolinas, Virginia and even Pennsylvania.

A fort consisted of some defensive fortification surrounding at least one building, whether earthworks, structures, or a combination of the two. Log palisades were not uncommon, nor were square buildings built into a corner of the palisade called a blockhouse. Inside the fort would be other buildings, such as a barracks, officers' quarters, a magazine for storing powder and weapons. Later documents indicate the presence of a trading post at Davidson's Fort. During times of relative peace, trade between Indians and whites was brisk. It is probable that the town of Old Fort grew out of the fort and its trading post.

Is Davidson's Fort Historic Park on the original site of Davidson's Fort?

No, the original Davidson's Fort was not located on the site where this reconstruction now stands, and we do not know exactly where the original fort stood. Here are a few theories:

- 1) One possible site is where the Mountain Gateway Museum now stands. Local oral history has said that the Fort was where the tannery boarding house stood in later years. Sanbourne maps (i.e., maps made and published by the Sanbourne Insurance Co.) of Old Fort in the early 20th century show that the tannery boarding house stood where the Mountain Gateway Museum is now. The boarding house burned, and in the 1930's a community center was built on that lot by the WPA. That community center building now houses the Mountain Gateway Museum. An archeological study has been done of the Mountain Gateway Museum site. That study had to be

limited (obviously, there's a building on the site), it turned up nothing of real significance, and it was thus called "inconclusive."

- 2) A 19th-century map in the possession of Mark Hall shows that Davidson's Fort was built between Mill Creek and Crooked Creek. That area might include several sites, including the site on which our reproduction of the Fort stands.
- 3) A land record from 1779 states that George Davidson owned the land "whereon the Fort stands." (Burke County Land Entries, 1778-1795, p. 620, #1865, mentioned above under "Digression on Land Ownership.") If further research can determine exactly what tract of land this record refers to, we may be able to determine where the original Davidson's Fort stood.

Who was Samuel Davidson?

Samuel Davidson was the son of John and Jane Davidson of Iredell County, the brother of George, Thomas, William (his twin) and John "One-Eyed" Davidson, and the cousin of General William Lee Davidson (of Battle of Cowan's Ford fame.) Along with some of his brothers (and perhaps a sister or two), he settled in the Old Fort area in the early 1770's. He was a captain in the local militia and, according to the pension application of Josiah Brandon, led the company of militia soldiers that built Davidson's Fort. He was thus the first commander of Davidson's Fort and remained there as captain for about two years. It has been said that Samuel Davidson owned the land on which Davidson's Fort was built, but this has yet to be proved. (See the "Digression on Land Ownership" above.)

In 1784, Samuel Davidson moved with his wife, young child, and servants across the crest of the Blue Ridge and settled near the present Azalea community outside Asheville. After only a few weeks Davidson was killed by Cherokees, lured away while searching for his horse by the sound of the horse's bell. His wife heard the gunshot that killed him and, guessing what had happened, fled with their child and a female servant to Davidson's Fort.

Who was Daniel Smith?

Daniel Smith followed Samuel Davidson as Captain of Davidson's Fort (with a short tenure by a Captain Cunningham in between). Smith served as Captain of the fort for at least two extended periods of time, thus he commanded Davidson's Fort longer than any other individual.

Daniel Smith was also a close friend of Samuel Davidson. According to some genealogical sources, Smith married Samuel Davidson's sisters, and Samuel Davidson married Smith's sister.

What role did Davidson's Fort play in the Battle of Kings Mountain (Oct. 7, 1780)?

Davidson's Fort played no direct role in the Battle of Kings Mountain. Neither the Loyalist nor the Patriot fighters camped at the fort, though members of both passed nearby. Men who had served militia duty at Davidson's Fort at one time or another were also present at the Battle of Kings Mountain, as they were in all of the Carolinas' battles of the revolution's southern campaign. The pension statement of James Jackson (S 38077) states that some of the men at Davidson's Fort "was taken to go to King's Mountain;" thus it is likely that several militia soldiers did go directly from Davidson's Fort to the Battle of Kings Mountain.

How is Davidson's Fort Historic Park supported today?

Davidson's Fort is owned and operated by a nonprofit organization, Davidson's Fort Historic Park, Inc. Its oversight lies with the Board of Directors, the members of which serve as volunteer staff and have been responsible for a great deal of the work done to build the site. Davidson's Fort is funded entirely by private funds from grants and donations; it receives no state or federal funding.