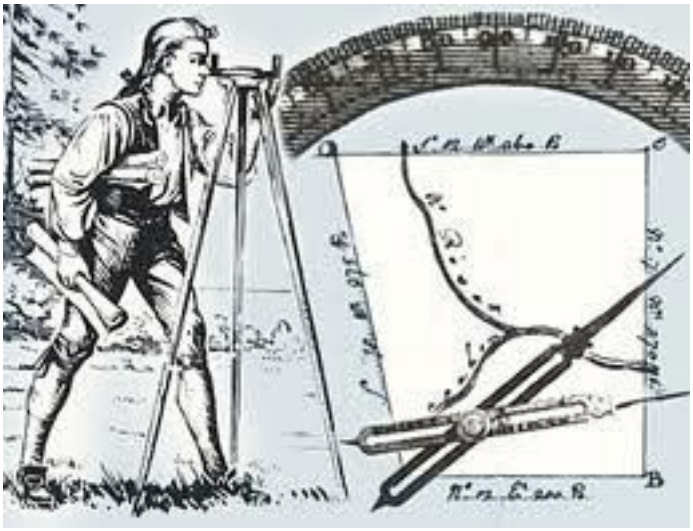
Early Land Speculation in Present-Day Watauga County

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The French, Spanish, and English were the three primary European powers that vied to dominate North America in varying degrees. Their objectives can be oversimplified as follows: the French came for furs, the Spanish came for gold, and the English came for land. Since the English won out it should come as no surprise that much of our history is rooted in land speculation.

Robert D. Mitchell in *Commercialism and Frontier* argues that land speculation was an important aspect of frontier settlement. In order to test his conclusion, early landholding patterns at the headwaters of the New River in present-day Watauga County will be examined.

The European domination of Carolina began not as a religious experiment or resource extraction, but rather as a speculation in land granted by King Charles II to eight Lords Proprietors in 1663. By the time white hunters were reaching the New River headwaters in present-day Watauga County in the mid-1700s, this portion of North Carolina (covering about a quarter of the colony) was owned by John Carteret, the Earl Granville, a descendent of one of the original proprietors. Earl Granville hired agents who operated a land office that sold land grants to settlers.[1] However, this land office closed in 1763 after Granville's death, making it impossible to obtain title to land in this section of North Carolina.[2]



John Carteret, Earl Granville

The closing of Granville's land office was not the only obstacle to gaining title to land along the New River headwaters. After the French and Indian War ended in 1763, King George III banned land grants and settlement west of the Blue Ridge.

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[1] Helen F. M. Leary and Maurice R. Stirewalt, eds., *North Carolina Research: Genealogy and Local History* (Raleigh: The North Carolina Genealogical Society, Inc. 1980), 301.

[2] William Doub Bennett, "Early Settlement on the New River System," *The North Carolina Genealogical Society Journal* 10 (February 1984): 6.

In order to determine if land speculation occurred during the settlement period in this part of Watauga County, it must be determined who first held title to the land after Earl



Granville. There is no evidence that Granville granted land in the county to large absentee landowners. The next obvious grantees would be the first settlers in the area. Details are sketchy as to the identity of the first settlers. The earliest account of settlers looking for land in Watauga County is that of Bishop Spangenburg and his Moravian followers. In 1752 they explored the area but found conditions too harsh for settlement.[3] Hunters and trappers were most likely the first temporary settlers. They often built cabins for shelter or made camps under rock outcroppings.[4] The land entry book (described below) makes many references to old cabins and camps.[5] Between 1759 and 1769, Ben Howard grazed cattle in the area presently known as Boone. Howard lived on the Yadkin River in Wilkes County and drove his cattle up the escarpment to reach pasture. Howard built a cabin in the area as a shelter when he was away from home.[6] There is no indication that these temporary settlers obtained title to the land they used. Although it is possible that permanent settlement occurred before settlement was banned and before Granville's land office closed, no evidence is found of any grants he made in this area.

The Proclamation of 1763 did little to stop the movement west that was already underway.[7] While people squatted on land west of the Blue Ridge, the Proclamation did, in fact, prevent them from obtaining title. Even if settlers were allowed to obtain title by law, they could not get it from Granville. Nevertheless, settlement continued. The headwaters of the New River were settled mostly by people from the upper Catawba River valley. A route was established by 1780 from Johns River in Burke County to what would become Boone. Another route used by settlers ran from the Yadkin River through Deep Gap.[8]

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[3] John Preston Arthur, *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina* (Richmond: Everett Waddy Co., 1915), 21-28.
[4] Bennett, 11.
[5] [Abstracted by Mrs. W.O. Absher], *Land Entry Book Wilkes County, North Carolina, 1776-1781* (North Wilkesboro: Genealogical Society of the "Original" Wilkes County, 1971).
[6] Arthur, 19.
[7] Bennett, 5.
[8] Ibid., 11.

Opening of a Land Entry Book

After the Revolutionary War began, the North Carolina legislature confiscated all Crown and proprietary lands. Granville's lands now belonged to the state. In 1777, the legislature established land offices in every county in order to grant land that formerly belonged to the Crown or Earl Granville. The process of obtaining title to this confiscated land began with the opening of a land entry book in each county. Squatters or absentee claimants would enter their claim. These entries were crude descriptions of holdings with boundaries established by streams and mountains. After the claim was recorded, it then had to be surveyed and a formal grant made to the owner. The whole process of obtaining a land title might have taken a year or more after the land entry was made. If a landholder sold land before he obtained title to it, his name was simply marked out in the entry book and the new landholder's name was written in.[9]

Wilkes County was formed at the same time the state was establishing this land entry system. The land entry book for the county was opened when the county was formed in 1778. The land under study in Watauga County was then part of Wilkes County.[10] Entries made at this time are the first evidence of permanent settlement in the area and the first evidence of legal landownership other than Earl Granville. (entries made in Watauga County are shown in the charts at the end of this narrative)

In order to identify the tracts of land in Watauga County, a United States Geological Survey map was used to match the names of geographic features with those mentioned in the land entry book. A map and list of land grants made a few years later was also used.[11] Forty-five tracts are identified as being within the boundaries of Watauga County on the headwaters of the New River. This area probably had more claims but these were the ones that could be identified with certainty from the descriptions provided in the land entry book.

Mitchell determines the presence of land speculation in the Shenandoah Valley by examining the number of acres that individual settlers owned. He concludes that land speculation was an important commercial characteristic of the frontier because settlers obtained acreage in amounts that far exceeded "basic agricultural requirements."[12] Defining "basic agricultural requirements" is difficult, given the many variables involved (e.g. topography, climate, soil). One source estimates that about 75 acres will support a family of five.[13]

If 75 acres of land is considered sufficient acreage to support a family, then most landowners in Watauga County had an abundant surplus of land. Original landowners claimed between 100 and 1,870 acres in the area, with an average of 451 acres. The fact that 44% of the landowners had more than one tract is further evidence that not all of this

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[9] Johnson J. Hayes, *The Land of Wilkes* (Wilkesboro: Wilkes County Historical Society, 1962), 420.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Bennett, 12-18.
[12] Robert D. Mitchell, *Commercialism and Frontier: Perspectives on the Early Shenandoah Valley* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 232.
[13] Ibid., 141.

land was for subsistence purposes. The tracts held by individual settlers were often scattered throughout the area. For example, the four tracts held by William Snoddy were located in four different areas of the county- Howard's Creek, Flannerys Fork, Blue Ridge, and Meat Camp. It would be difficult to argue that Snoddy farmed all four tracts, given the fact that they were so dispersed.

The column showing the number of acres owned by these men elsewhere in Wilkes County was calculated by looking at the land transactions in which they were involved. They might not have owned this much land at any given point in time, rather the figures show the amount of land in their possession at some time between 1778 and 1781. These numbers illustrate even more dramatically the large amounts of land owned by these men. The largest landowners held 12,740 acres. The average holding per landowner was 2,154 acres. Forty-four percent owned over 1,000 acres. When considering all of Wilkes County, 88% of the landowners in the Watauga County area held more than one tract. The average landowner held ten tracts in all of Wilkes County.

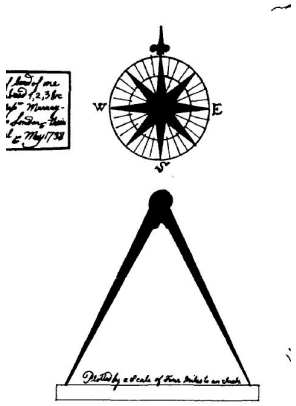
When examining the role of land speculation in a frontier area, an important consideration is the number of absentee landowners. The land entry book does not always reveal the place of residence of a landowner. Clues include reference to improvements and statements that plainly say "including plantation he now lives on." Of the entries that make reference to actual residence, 48% of the landowners lived in Wilkes County with 16% of those living in the area under study. These figures are almost certainly low because most entries make no reference at all to place of residence. Notable is the fact that the largest landowners, Lenoir and Herndon, did reside in Wilkes County.

Mitchell theorizes that settlers obtained excess amounts of land in order to speculate. Evidence presented above shows that settlers in the area did hold surplus land that potentially could be used for speculation. Is there evidence that settlers sold this land in a speculative manner? Thirteen landowners in Watauga County or 52% transferred at least one tract between 1778 and 1781. Of the 45 tracts in the area, 47% were transferred. As mentioned previously, the process for obtaining an actual title to land after claiming it in the entry book took about a year. Over half of the landowners sold at least a portion of their land within roughly a year of claiming it. Some tracts were transferred more than once in the four year period. For example, entry 541, originally owned by Abner Smally, was transferred three times.

Early landholding patterns in this area of North Carolina support Mitchell's claim that land speculation was an important feature of frontier settlement. The original landholders in Watauga County held acreage that exceeded their subsistence needs and their ability to develop agriculturally. Further evidence of surplus land is the number of tracts owned by individuals. These tracts were often scattered throughout the county, making their development by a single settler almost impossible. These patterns are magnified when an individual's holdings in all of Wilkes County is examined. Almost all Watauga County landowners held additional acreage in other parts of Wilkes County. As in Watauga, this land was broken into various tracts. This evidence again reveals the scattered nature of land claims in the area.

Evidence of land speculation is also seen in the sales of land. Over half of the landowners sold at least part of their land in Watauga County between 1778 and 1781. This is even more significant when the timing of these sales is considered. If a tract of land was sold between 1778 and 1781, the sale most likely took place within a year of the original owner's claim. Another important point is that tracts of land were sold whole, with the same number of acres that the original owner claimed. The nature in which land was sold reveals much about the intentions of the owner. The quick sale of land shows that landholders had no attachment to their land and did not find it necessary to hold on to it. The sale of whole tracts implies that none of the land was being used in a way that benefited the owner. This eagerness to sell land indicates that the original owners obtained the land to sell it and not to put the land into production for their own use.

Further evidence of land speculation can be seen when comparing the names in the original land entry with old Watauga County family names. Most of the original owners did not have descendants in Watauga County to carry on their names. Yet a look at the 1815 Ashe County tax list for the district that eventually became Watauga County reveals landowners with names such as Eggers, Brown, Church, Norris, Elrod, Miller, Green, Council, Hodges, Shearer, Sands, Cook, Rees, Hagerman (Hagaman), Hortley (Hartley), and Wilson.[14] These are all well-established Watauga families who have lived in the county for generations. The fact that the names of the original owners never became established implies that they obtained the land to sell, not for their own settlement; and the people they sold the land to bought it for the purpose of living there themselves.



Following is a copy of land entries in present-day Watauga County in the Wilkes County land entry book, 1778-1781.

[14] Raymond A. Winslow, Jr. *1815 Ashe County Tax List*, The North Carolina Genealogical Society Journal, February 1986, 14-16.

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
699	William Lenoir	yes	320	New River	Jesse Councill	10,870	51
786	William Lenoir	yes	150	Flat Mtn			
787	William Lenoir	yes	200	Howard's Creek			
791	William Lenoir	yes	400	Howard's Creek			
212	William Lenoir	yes	200	Big Bald Mtn			
700	William Lenoir	yes	400	Rockey Creek			
794	William Lenoir	yes	200	New River	Andrew Baird		
		Total	1,870		Total for entire county	12,740	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
227	William Snoddy		300	Howard's Creek	William Lenoir; Zebulon Beard	500	3
228	William Snoddy		150	Flannerys Fork	James Greenlee		
790	William Snoddy		300	Blue Ridge			
792	William Snoddy		200	Meat Camp Creek			
		Total	950		Total for entire county	1,450	

Entry #	**Original Owner**	**Resident**	**Acres**	**Location**	**Subsequent Owners**	**Acres Elsewhere**	**# of tracts**
1394	John Baker	yes	100	Turkey Knob	Edward Pennington	3,150	18
1397	John Baker	yes	150	Meadow Branch	Frederick Black		
1455	John Baker	yes	640	Chestnut Creek	William Davidson		
		Total	890		Total for entire county	4,040	

Entry #	**Original Owner**	**Resident**	**Acres**	**Location**	**Subsequent Owners**	**Acres Elsewhere**	**# of tracts**
517	George Reaves	yes; Watauga	600	New River		500	2
613	George Reaves	yes; Watauga	200	Rockey Creek			
		Total	800		Total for entire county	1,300	

Entry #	**Original Owner**	**Resident**	**Acres**	**Location**	**Subsequent Owner**	**Acres Elsewhere**	**# of tracts**
541	Abner Smally		200	Howard's Creek	Benjamin Herndon	580	3
					James Brown		
					Ebenezer Fairchild		
542	Abner Smally		200	Flat Mtn	William White		
					Benjamin Herndon		
553	Abner Smally		300	Howard's Creek	Benjamin Herndon		
		Total	700		Total for entire county	1,280	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1530	Memucan Hunt		250	Big Bald Mtn	Benjamin Herndon	3,650	13
1531	Memucan Hunt		250	Big Bald Mtn			
1532	Memucan Hunt		150	Howard's Creek			
		Total	650		Total for entire county	4,300	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
826	Joel Dier	yes	640	Flannerys Fork		875	8
		Total	640		Total for entire county	1,515	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
959	Reuben Easters	yes; Watauga	640	Three Forks	John Sellers		
					William Miller		
		Total	640		Total for entire county	640	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
175	John Brown	yes	640	Meat Camp Creek		4,730	27
		Total	640		Total for entire county	5,370	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1122	Thomas Elledge	yes	400	New River		1,125 (Elledge)	8
	John Brown (partnership)						
		Total	400		Total for entire county	1,525	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1042	Gibson Stepp	yes; Watauga	200	Howard's & Meat Camp Creeks	Aaron Mash	50	1
					James Brown		
1045	Gibson Stepp	yes; Watauga	200	Howard's Creek	Robert Ayers		
		Total	400		Total for entire county	450	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1027	Joseph Humphries		200	Meat Camp Creek	Spencer Humphries	250	2
					William Miller		
					Joseph Hagaman		
1093	Joseph Humphries		200	Meat Camp Creek	Spencer Humphries		
					William Miller		
		Total	400		Total for entire county	650	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
80	Robert Ayers		300	Flanneries Fork	John Ayers	300	2
		Total	300		Total for entire county	600	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
738	Benjamin Herndon	yes	300	Three Forks	Henry Chambers	11,050	39
		Total	300		Total for entire county	11,350	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1773	Samuel Simpson		300	Howard's Creek		565	6
		Total	300		Total for entire county	865	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
229	Joseph McCorkle		250	Blue Ridge	Daniel Eggers	300	2
		Total	250		Total for entire county	550	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1111	William Robinson		200	Meat Camp Creek			
		Total	200		Total for entire county	200	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
600	James Jackson		100	Meat Camp Creek		200	2
601	James Jackson		100	Meat Camp Creek			
		Total	200		Total for entire county	400	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
760	James Brown	yes; Watauga	50	Howard's Creek	Joseph Ayers	1,750	9
1606	James Brown	yes; Watauga	100	Hunting Creek			
		Total	150		Total for entire county	1,900	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
89	Jesse Walton		100	New River	Robert Ayers		
					John Green		
		Total	100		Total for entire county	100	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
847	James Martin		100	New River		100	1
		Total	100		Total for entire county	200	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1382	Daniel Yarnell		100	East Fork		400	2
		Total	100		Total for entire county	500	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
567	Thomas Laxton		100	Blue Ridge	John Brown	870	6
		Total	100		Total for entire county	970	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1086	Bennajah Pennington	yes	100	Martins Branch		250	2
		Total	100		Total for entire county	350	

Entry #	Original Owner	Resident	Acres	Location	Subsequent Owners	Acres Elsewhere	# of tracts
1053	Thomas Jones	yes	100	Chestnut Mtn		500	3
		Total	100		Total for entire county	600	