

Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements

New Book Compiles Rare Accounts of the Life and Times of Middle Tennessee Pioneers

TEN-YEAR PROJECT BY PAUL CLEMENTS
INSPIRED BY WORK OF LYMAN C. DRAPER

Central Focus Is on the 'Long Years of Killing and Deprivation' from 1779 to 1796

BY JOHN EGERTON

Lyman C. Draper was a little man with a big idea. When he died in Madison, Wis., in 1891 at the age of 76, he left behind 486 bound volumes of handwritten letters, transcriptions and notes that he had collected in six decades of questing for first- and second-hand accounts of life on the American frontier. It had been his determination, from the age of 17, to gather up and celebrate the stories of the pioneer men and women—and the native resistance—whose collective exploits constituted the history of “the Southwest territory,” by which was meant the land beyond the long Appalachian chain of mountains bordering the colonies of Virginia and the Carolinas.

A series of unforeseen circumstances had steered Draper from his native New England to upstate New York and on to Wisconsin, with intermittent periods of lengthy visitation in Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee (including Nashville) and Alabama. He was an unimposing man physically, barely more than five feet tall and a hundred pounds, but he loved history with single-minded passion, and he was driven to “rescue from oblivion” countless stories of frontier life that were literally dying untold when Draper became recording secretary of the Wisconsin State Historical Society at its founding in 1854. By that time, he had already accumulated more than 10,000 pages of manuscript materials on the westward movement, and for almost four decades subsequently, the diminutive scholar built up what was to become the most extensive collection of historical material ever amassed by an individual or a state. Among his prize acquisitions were the papers of Daniel Boone, George Rogers Clark and the Shawnee chief Tecumseh.

Draper's ambition to write many volumes of history based on his stash of original papers never came to pass; he was too busy collecting material to stop the research and knuckle down to the more exacting discipline of writing. But many—it's tempting to say countless—are the books written by others that could never have made it into print without the relentless field work of Lyman Draper.

Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements is the latest in that long line of volumes; it is even dedicated to Draper, “whose intense curiosity led him to record a staggering amount of information about those who lived through [the] long years of killing and deprivation” that marked the settlement of what we now recognize as Middle Tennessee—particularly in the years from 1779, when James Robertson led the first party of settlers here, to 1796, when Tennessee became the 16th state of the new United States of America.

Paul Clements, a lanky, affable, middle-aged, native Nashvillian, bears no physical resemblance to the sober-sided Lyman Draper. But reading his two published works—these *Chronicles* and *A Past Remembered*, his massive two-volume history of antebellum homes in Nashville and Davidson County, published in 1987—and his monthly contributions to *The Nashville Retrospect*, make it abundantly clear why Clements identifies so closely with

Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements, 1779-1796

By Paul Clements,
with maps by George Clements

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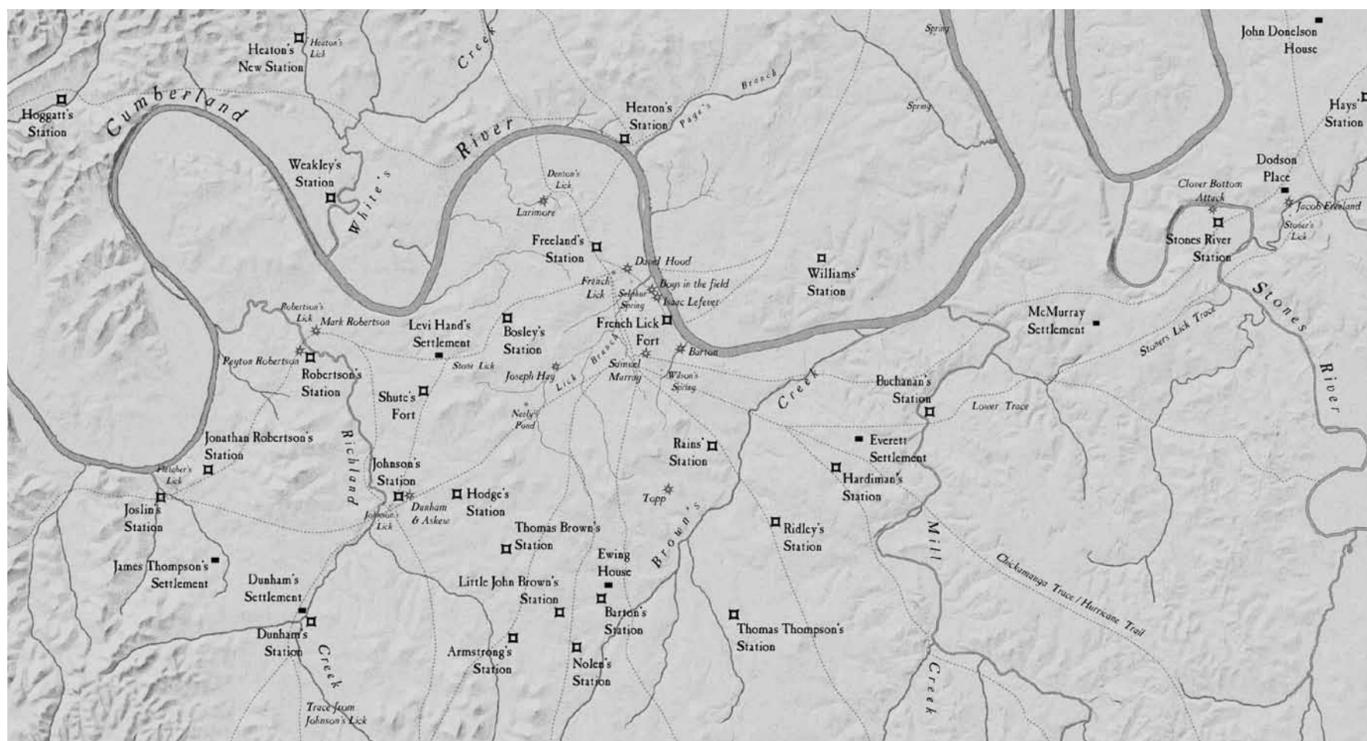
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www.chroniclesofthecumberland.com

the preeminent 19th-century scribe of frontier life. In their essence, Clements and Draper are two peas in a pod: life-long, self-made, hopelessly addicted micro-historians whose basic instinct and ambition has been to learn all that is knowable about the subject at hand. To his credit, Clements at least knew he had to raise a fence around his chosen territory, and stay inside the boundary. Draper could never stop expanding his vision. No wonder he remained a gatherer of facts and artifacts, not a writer of frontier history.

Happily for modern readers who love historical detail, Paul Clements has paused twice in his 30-plus years of digging to put his findings on display. *A Past Remembered* is a beautiful, full-color, oversized set that tells us, in fascinating detail, virtually everything there is to know about 72 Davidson County homes built before the Civil War that were still standing in 1987. By comparison, *Chronicles* is not as imposing, physically—you could think of it as 400 sheets of standard-size paper, printed on both sides in one color and hard-bound into a single volume—but it is a far more complex and expansive undertaking than the slipcased set. This new book is the fruit of a 10-year commitment by Clements to document, annotate and index all extant material of, by or about the explorers, pioneers and settlers who migrated from the East in a determined and ultimately successful attempt to wrest the wilderness land of the lower Cumberland River valley from its native claimants.

In scope and density and sheer volume, Draper's work dwarfs that of Clements (who, incidentally, lives in Williamson County and spends most of his working hours at the Metro Archives in Nashville). Even so, both the idea and the execution of the *Chronicles* make this 785-page guide to the early historical record of Middle Tennessee seem almost like an extension of the Draper canon. If Draper himself could peruse this book, I can easily imagine that he would have mixed feelings of pride and envy—pride at seeing what his own solitary labors had inspired, and envy on holding in his hands a fully-realized work of compilation and writing, the likes of which he had aspired to but never achieved in his four decades of professional service in Wisconsin. Further to Draper's amazement would surely be the more than 300 computer-generated maps in the *Chronicles*, created by George Clements (a cousin of Paul's) to pinpoint on the Middle Tennessee map precisely where pertinent structures were located, and where certain events and incidents took place.

The organization of *Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements* falls smoothly into three sections. First comes a historical prelude of about 140 pages, beginning in the archaeological shad-



This map from the *Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements* shows the central section of settlements that extended considerably further both upriver and downriver from Nashville, as well as several miles more to both the north and the south. The map, created by George Clements, is one of over 300 maps featured in the book. Dotted lines show trails and star symbols indicated the locations of notable deaths during the Indian Wars.

ows of prehistory and concluding with the explorations of frontiersmen from the Carolinas whose rising ambitions pointed inevitably to the seductive prospect of land claims. Next is the book's central focus on the 17 years of conflict and settlement (1779-1796) that culminated in the formal admission of Tennessee to membership in the new nation. Approximately 350 pages are devoted to this main section. The third part is the “guts” of the scholarly undertaking (think of it as what's under the hood of a complex automobile or in the hard drive of a computer): first, a long epilogue that reads like the testimony of witnesses to a transformational era; next, several appendices, including the names of close to a thousand migrants from the East who died during the course of settlement efforts before Tennessee was granted statehood; and finally, a thick unit of documentary endnotes, a bibliography, and a lengthy index cross-referencing the most minute details in the main body of the book. Altogether, this back section takes up slightly over 300 pages.

Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements could hardly be classified as light reading. In a sense, it's a reference book, and an excellent one, a model of organizational clarity and accessibility—but not something you would be likely to read through, start to finish, as you would a novel or a biography. Yet, unlike most reference books, this one teems with first-person drama, lifted directly from the diaries and letters of people who lived through those perilous times, or from the writings of second or third parties—like Lyman Draper—who went to extraordinary lengths to rescue eyewitness stories from oblivion. These tales unfold in a relentlessly chronological flow from prehistory to statehood—and tucked away in the interstices is the understated but commanding prose of Paul Clements, the master builder of this imposing house of history. *Chronicles* was conceived, compiled, written, edited and designed by him—more or less in that order. The book is a sterling example of what can result from the 10-year obsession of an intellectual-exercise fanatic whose mind is seized upon and captured by an idea, a vision, a goal, a destination. Nothing will suffice for this tormented person except a

certain resigned arrival, punctuated by lingering doubts that the end has truly been reached, because there is always more to be researched and discovered.

“A cultural collision between native people and Europeans began on the North American continent in the 1500s and has lasted nearly five centuries,” Clements writes in the first paragraph of his opus. “In the late 1700s, crucial parts of that monumental conflict unfolded in the Cumberland River basin, in what would become Middle Tennessee.” Having thus established in two succinct sentences both the time and place and the contending forces in this epic pageant, Clements then rolls back time to about 14,000 years ago and begins his determined march to the fall of 1779, when James Robertson and his advance party of about two hundred, having journeyed overland from the North Carolina-cum-Tennessee mountains, arrived at a bluff above the Cumberland with the intent of creating a settlement there. The historic Courthouse of Metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County, Tenn., commands the view from atop that bluff today.

In the early spring of 1780, there was a rejoining at the bluff of two groups of migrants: those, mostly men and boys, who had accompanied James Robertson overland with their livestock, and those, including women and children, who, with John Donelson in the lead, had followed a more circuitous river route in a flotilla of boats and rafts. For all their relief and joy at being reunited, the 500 or so people who made up that settler party were traumatized by the number of lives lost en route (to accidents, the elements and the Indians), and by the fear of further attacks. There were no signs of permanent Indian habitation in the area, but several tribes hunted there, and their resentment at the arrival of settlers from afar was clearly and frequently expressed. With more than 100 descriptive entries and nearly 20 maps for the year 1780 alone, Clements vividly conveys not only how perilous and challenging the newcomers' journeys had been, but how endangered their lives were after their arrival.

Throughout the decade of the 1780s, even as the founding of Nashville and Davidson County formalized the permanent presence of settlers spilling out of North Carolina into the Tennessee terri-

tory, the resistance of numerous indigenous tribal groups continued. Early on, the tenuous settlements seemed at times to be unsustainable; in fact, several outposts and stations had to be abandoned. In 1783, after the American coastal colonies had finally won their war for independence from the British, the pace of European movement across the continent quickened. Land speculators drove the surge, as much as did the various state and national governments in the mix (the United States, Britain, Spain, France). The unallied and often competitive Indian tribes were gradually compelled to make alliances with the newcomers or fall further back into the western wilderness.

Both in his short previews of each year of the decade and in his selections describing people and events, Clements unites a cacophony of voices into a semblance of coherent narrative. Whether read at random as singular episodes—war stories—or as a chronological account of the flowering of the lower Cumberland River valley, the *Chronicles* seldom stray far from the path laid out at the start by their Draperesque compiler.

At the end of a long epilogue filled with pioneer voices receding toward the future from his 1796 chapter, Paul Clements offers a brief concluding essay that gathers some of his thoughts about what this massive mother lode of local history has taught him, and what it offers to all of us. He cites and celebrates some of his heroes, foremost among them being James Robertson, the undisputed leader and savior of the

men and women who risked their lives—and sometimes lost them—to establish stable, permanent communities in this sprawling river-valley wilderness. Clements draws some provocative parallels, both positive and negative, from the machinations of powerful men in every age, from the 1780s and '90s to the present.

Perhaps most vividly, Clements can stand at a site in Middle Tennessee—in a field, on a river bluff, at the confluence of two streams, anywhere that some dramatic event took place 200 or more years ago—and feel history awakening there, coming alive in his mind, echoing in his ears, rumbling beneath his feet. His long years of immersion to such a depth have given the true stories he delivers here the urgency and immediacy of a newly-uncovered cache of letters and diaries from the front, telegrams from the battlefield, emails from yesterday.

Not since *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History & Culture* was published 12 years ago has a state history volume of this magnitude and importance come along. Every library in Tennessee should have this volume in easy reach. So should the wider circle of individuals, avid readers of state and local history, who may think they have heard all the great stories before. Perhaps—but not, I submit, until they've drunk deeply from the *Chronicles of the Cumberland Settlements*.

John Egerton was the editor of two local histories: Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries (1979) and Nashville: An American Self-Portrait (2001).