

The Tragedy of Fort Loudoun

By Arthur McDade

British Captain Paul Demere awoke on the morning of August 9, 1760, as a broken, beaten man. On that day near the Little Tennessee River in present-day Tennessee, after a long siege, Demere faced the ignominious task of surrendering Ft. Loudoun to the forces of Cherokee War Chief Oconostota.

Feeling utterly “abandoned by God and man,” Demere gave the order to lower the British colors and then marched his forlorn soldiers and civilians out of the fort on the start of a long trek to South Carolina. As he marched out, Captain Demere did not know that this would be his last night alive. He and some 20 other soldiers were killed the next morning in a Cherokee surprise attack. The surrender of Ft. Loudoun and the killing of Paul Demere and his men ushered in further violence, as British authorities in South Carolina unleashed retaliatory attacks on a host of Cherokee towns, further compounding the tragedy of war on the frontier during the French and Indian War.



Today, Fort Loudoun near Vonore is a state historic area under the stewardship of Tennessee State Parks. The peaceful setting today belies the tragic events of 250 years ago. “Two hundred and fifty years ago during the French and Indian War this area of present-day Tennessee was part of British colonial rule,” says Park Manager Jeff Wells. “During that war, in which Great Britain and France vied for control of the North American continent, British colonial forces built Fort Loudoun in the very heart of the Overhill Cherokee country. It was built with the support of the Cherokees initially, but over time relations deteriorated, leading to violence on both sides and the ultimate surrender of the fort to the Cherokees. The events which occurred here and elsewhere along the frontier were at times tragic, as distrust and resentment led to violence and retaliation,” Wells says.

For British colonial authorities in South Carolina, having a fort in the Overhill country protected lucrative commercial and military alliances, while providing a position against the French, who had Ft. Toulouse in Alabama. For the Overhill Cherokees, the British fort provided protection against Indian enemies who’d allied with the French. The idea for a fort made good sense at the start.

So, in 1756 British Capt. Raymond Demere (the brother of the aforementioned Capt. Paul Demere) left Fort Prince George in South Carolina with approximately 200 soldiers on an official expedition to construct the fort in the Overhill country. In his “Independent Company of South Carolina” was an excitable German engineer named William Gerard DeBrahm, who’d been commissioned to design the fort. Right off the bat, bad blood developed between Demere and DeBrahm.

Captain Demere’s contingent reached the Overhill country on the Little Tennessee River in September 1756. Demere stayed for a time in the Indian town of Tomotley as a guest of Cherokee Peace Chief Attakullakulla, known as “The Little Carpenter” for his ability to work out solutions between Cherokees and whites.

Captain Demere consulted with his Cherokee hosts on the location for the fort. They wanted it near their main towns along the Little Tennessee, but DeBrahm scoffed at that idea, arguing for a location farther downstream at Great Island, called “Mialoquo” on a 1762 map drawn by explorer Henry Timberlake.

DeBrahm believed his location would be more defensible, but Raymond Demere sided with the Cherokees, agreeing to build the fort on a knoll upstream from the mouth of Tellico River.

As the engineer, DeBrahm planned a European-style fort, diamond shaped with corner bastions. His design included earthworks, with a dry moat or ditch outside, protected by a thorny hedge of Honeylocust. Barracks, powder magazine, blacksmith shop, storehouses, and a guardhouse were planned inside.

During construction, DeBrahm regularly argued with Raymond Demere and vowed to quit the project several times. Once, in an emotional outburst, he reportedly pulled a sidearm and asked Demere to kill him. Tensions grew, with DeBrahm finally making good on his threat to leave by departing around Christmas 1756. One commentator stated that the Cherokees thereafter referred to DeBrahm as “the man who slips out in the night.”

After DeBrahm's departure, Captain Demere directed the completion of the fort, adding a palisade wall. In July 1757, he officially reported to South Carolina Governor Lyttelton that the fort was "fit for service." It was named for John Campbell, the Fourth Earl of Loudoun, commander of British forces in North America from 1756-1758.

The strain of working with DeBrahm and building the fort in the wilderness took a toll on Raymond Demere's health, however. He requested a change of command, and ironically his brother, Captain Paul Demere, was sent as his replacement on August 6, 1757. After the brothers made the fateful change in command, they never saw each other again.

Over time, Fort Loudoun became a hub of trade and commerce with the Overhills. Traders and Cherokees came and went from the adjacent town of Tuskegee and elsewhere. Several of the garrison soldiers even married Cherokee women. A co-existence developed on the edge of the British frontier in the foothills of the southern Appalachian Mountains.

But deteriorating relations elsewhere cast a pall on the isolated Ft. Loudoun outpost. French agents continued to drive wedges between the Cherokees and British during the French and Indian War. Insults and attacks occurred between Cherokees and settlers. Tensions finally reached the boiling point with the killing of the British commander outside Fort Prince George in the fall of 1759, leading to the summary execution of approximately 23 Cherokee prisoners. The alliance was broken.

With hostility now the rule, the Overhill Cherokees surrounded Fort Loudoun in early 1760, imprisoning the garrison. All talk of peace failed. Months of siege ensued, as the garrison force waited for what they assumed would be assistance from South Carolina forces.

But help didn't come. South Carolina forces got bogged down among the Lower Cherokee towns, and the Ft. Loudoun soldiers watched their food dwindle to emergency rations over the months of siege. By early August, Paul Demere faced the wrenching decision of surrendering the fort. In a letter smuggled out of the fort, he penned the statement that he'd been "abandoned by God and man." He agreed to terms of surrender, which allowed his soldiers to depart with small arms only, leaving behind the artillery pieces and ammunition stores. On August 9, 1760, British colors were officially lowered and the fort was handed over to the Cherokees.

Demere and his haggard party marched southeast toward South Carolina, camping the first night where Cane Creek joins Tellico River. The next morning, they discovered their Cherokee escorts had slipped away during the night. Fearing the worst, they braced for an attack. Cherokee warriors soon fell upon them, killing Demere and all but one of his officers, along with approximately 20 other soldiers. The attack has been described as retaliation for the Cherokees killed earlier at Ft. Prince George. Another explanation is that the soldiers violated the terms of surrender by burying gunpowder in the fort. In any event, surviving soldiers and civilians were captured, spending months of captivity in Cherokee towns.

The Cherokee victory at Ft. Loudoun brought retaliation upon the lower Cherokee towns by colonial forces, continuing the tragedy of misunderstanding and periodic violence that persisted on into the formation of the American nation. By the time of the "Trail of Tears" in the late 1830s, Fort Loudoun was all but forgotten, a relic of the colonial past.

Public recognition came in 1917 when the Colonial Dames of America commemorated the site with a historical marker. In 1933, the Tennessee State Legislature chartered the Fort Loudoun Association to oversee the site. In the ensuing years the fort was reconstructed and incorporated into the Tennessee State Parks system. When Tellico Dam was completed, the fort was raised 17 feet to elevate it above the summer level of Tellico Lake.

Today, Fort Loudoun is a place of history, open year-round with free admission. The visitor center contains a comprehensive museum, along with an excellent film. On August 6-8, 2010, there will be 250th anniversary events to commemorate the events of 1760. "Our very special 250th anniversary event this August will interpret the events at this historic site, and put 'flesh on the bones' of that long ago time," says Wells.

Ft. Loudoun State Historic Area also hosts monthly "Garrison Weekends" in the spring, summer and fall, along with an "18th Century Trade Faire" in September and a Christmas event.

Wells also sponsors a "Winter Lecture Series" each January and February. Additionally, he and his staff preserve the nearby Tellico Blockhouse, another important site in Tennessee history.

“Fort Loudoun preserves a priceless remnant of colonial American history right here in Tennessee,” Wells says. “It represents the far-reaching global politics of the French and Indian War period, when this was not yet Tennessee or even the United States. Tragic events took place here and nearby, reminding us of our turbulent frontier history. It is indeed fortunate that good citizens and organizations had the foresight to preserve this site for present and future generations of Americans to understand and appreciate our past.”

For more information about this historic area, visit the Web site at www.tnstateparks.com/FortLoudoun, or phone Fort Loudoun at 423-884-6217.

To support the preservation efforts at the site, you can join the Fort Loudoun Association. Their address is P.O. Box 158, Vonore, TN 37885, and their phone number is 423-884-6217.

(A longtime contributor to The Tennessee Conservationist, Arthur (Butch) McDade of Pigeon Forge retired from the Great Smoky Mountains National Park after a 35-year career with the National Park Service. He is the author of the books The Natural Arches of the Big South Fork published in 2000 by UT Press in Knoxville and Old Smoky Mountain Days, published in 1996 by Panther Press in Seymour.)