

Mark Your Calendar For *Liberty!*

The Official Outdoor Drama of Tennessee

Text and Photos by Jon Ruetz

Each summer, in Elizabethton, the great men and women who gave birth to Tennessee live once again.

Here, along the banks of the meandering Watauga River they loved so much, the memories of John and “Bonny Kate” Sevier; James Robertson; John Carter; Daniel Boone; Attakullakulla, his son Dragging Canoe; and so many more, are celebrated in *Liberty!*, the Official Outdoor Drama of Tennessee.



Liberty! will be presented July 14-30 in the Fort Watauga Amphitheater at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area located at 1651 W. Elk Ave., in Elizabethton. Performances begin at 7:30 each Thursday, Friday and Saturday evening during the last three weekends of July.

For 33 years, hundreds of volunteers have poured into Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area each July to entertain thousands of patrons with the retelling of the epic stories of bravery and foresight that led to establishing freedom in America and winning the fight to guarantee it, and opening the West to settlement.

The cast members come from throughout the Northeast Tennessee region, and from as far away as Southwest Virginia and Western North Carolina, determined that the stories they love and honor will not, and must not die.

“There is something so special that happens here,” says Sycamore Shoals Manager Jennifer Bauer. “You almost have to see it to understand, and fully appreciate it. We have watched delightful young people literally grow up among us, moving up in the ranks from one character to another. Their love and devotion for the park and our history is astounding and the beauty they create in this drama is breathtaking,” Bauer said.

The 75-acre park preserves a portion of the meeting ground the Cherokee lovingly named “the Old Fields.” It was here, in the crisp early spring of 1775, that a consortium led by Judge Richard Henderson of North Carolina met with the leadership of the Cherokee nation. They bargained and bartered for several days and the deal they struck — the Transylvania Purchase — was the largest private real estate transaction in American history, opening up most of what is now Kentucky and Tennessee to settlement.

Three years earlier, just a few hundred yards to the southeast, a group of frontier representatives had gathered beneath the shelter of the spreading limbs of a giant Sycamore tree.

There, in the early June warmth, more than 150 men had put their signatures to the Articles of the Watauga Association. It was the first free and independent government established on the American continent – fully four years before the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia.

The American Revolution raged on for four years, the military action gradually spreading south along the Colonial coast as the British employed a pincers strategy.

Charles Lord Cornwallis, widely regarded as the Crown's best field commander, led the Southern attack with a landing at Charlestown, S.C., Cornwallis took 10,000 prisoners and razed much of the city.

Commanding a regiment of dragoons, Lt. Col. Patrick Ferguson was Cornwallis' favorite field lieutenant. Hearing of the headstrong, unruly frontiersmen in what was then the Washington District of North Carolina, Ferguson pardoned a prisoner and sent him with warning: the frontier settlers would cease and desist their opposition to the Crown, and lay down their arms, or he would march his army over the mountains, hang the leaders, and lay waste to the country with fire and sword.

The frontier leaders — including Cols. Isaac Shelby, Charles McDowell, John Sevier, Andrew Hampton and Benjamin Cleveland — responded with a stunning preemptive attack.

The word went out calling for volunteers to meet at Sycamore Shoals on the 25th of September. Experts believe some 5,000 people lived on the frontier. As many as 1,300 men — many of them accompanied by their families — arrived and encamped at the famous river crossing.

So strong was the sentiment among the volunteers that a lottery, or draft, of sorts, had to be organized, forcing at least some of the men to stay behind as a skeleton defense force.

Considered “the father of education west of the mountains,” Rev. Samuel Doak was the founder of Martin Academy, later renamed Wash-ington College, and of Tusculum College, the first institutes of higher learning on the frontier, along with several of the earliest churches in the region.

Doak climbed upon a stump and beseeched the volunteers to go to “the aid of your brethren across the mountains, who are crying out like Macedonia unto your help.” He led the multitude in prayer, beseeching the Almighty to “arise in Thy might. Confound those who plot for our destruction. Crown this mighty effort with victory and smite those who exalt themselves against Liberty and Justice and Truth. Help us as good soldiers to wield the Sword of the Lord, and of Gideon!” A great “amen” echoed along the riverbank and the volunteers set out to strike the mightiest army in the world.

Returning over the mountains from whence many of them had come in search of freedom, they earned the enduring name, “the Overmountain Men.” They marched for 13 days through snow and rain, hundreds of miles to the southeast, halting to offer every man with a family the chance to leave without blame. Not a man turned back.

They found the British encamped on King's Mountain, just over the South Carolina line. In one of the most remarkable hours of American history, the lingering rain stopped, the clouds parted and the order was given to reprime rifles and prepare to attack. The Over-mountain Men let out an Indian war cry and charged. It took three tries, and just under 60 minutes. The western flank of the British army was overwhelmed and routed, and Ferguson was shot seven times, and killed.

Word of the stunning victory of the Overmountain Men spread like wildfire throughout the colonies, inspiring their fellow countrymen to rise up and redouble effort.

From George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, to Theodore Roosevelt, presidents of the United States have lauded the Overmountain Men with securing the turning point of the American Revolution.

The two-act drama concludes with the attack on King's Mountain, as imagined through the eyes of one of the volunteer's young bride-to-be, the self-explanatory exclamation point of Liberty!

For more information, visit the park's Web site at: www.tnstateparks.com/SycamoreShoals. Visit the drama's Web site at: www.liberty-drama.com. The park office phone number is 423-543-5808.

(Jon Ruetz of Jonesborough is the author of Liberty! A direct descendant of Colonel Benjamin Cleveland, he directed the drama for 12 years and now serves as producer and consultant.