

Biography

John Chesnut

by James D. Schaffer
Great 4 Grandson

John Chesnut was born in 1747 in the Bullpasture Mountain settlement of Augusta County, within the Colony and Dominion of Virginia. Born to William Chesnut (1712–1783), a native of County Antrim, Ireland, and Catherine Callahan (1730–1779), John is recognized as one of the earliest documented births among the region's settlers. The Bullpasture settlement, first officially surveyed in April 1746, was a frontier community composed of approximately 15 to 20 Scots-Irish families. Local lore suggests the name "Bullpasture" originated with early hunters who encountered distinct herds of wild buffalo grazing along the river valleys.

As a Royal Colony under King George II, Virginia was under the direct administration of the British Crown, with the formal title "Dominion" signifying its elevated provincial status. Under English common law, Chesnut was born a British subject—a status carrying permanent allegiance to the Crown that would define the first thirty years of his life.

In about 1765, Chesnut married Patience Gum in Augusta County. The couple went on to have eight children.

During the American Revolutionary War, Chesnut shifted his allegiance to the patriot cause, serving in 1777 under Captain John Hopkins in the Augusta County Virginia Militia. This unit operated primarily in the war's Western Theater, defending the backcountry against British-aligned forces. Revolutionary War pension records indicate that Captain Hopkins' company routinely garrisoned at Fort Randolph in Point Pleasant, Virginia (now West Virginia)—the site of the famous 1774 "Battle of Point Pleasant" fought three years prior—where they engaged in skirmishes with Shawnee Native American forces, as well as suppressing localized Loyalist uprisings closer to home.

Following the war, Augusta County records note that John and Patience were preparing to "remove" from Virginia in 1790. Their migration took them southwest down the Shenandoah Valley into Greene County, Tennessee, which was then transitioning into the federal Southwest Territory. By 1804, following the path of their four sons, John and Patience relocated to Knox County, Kentucky, where they purchased land within the Talbot Survey along the Laurel River basin.

John Chesnut passed away in Knox County, Kentucky on May 5, 1805, at the age of 58. While his exact burial site remains unverified, historical context indicates he was interred in the vicinity of modern-day London, Kentucky, near the family's Rough Creek homestead.

It wasn't until 1826 that the original Chesnut land became part of Laurel County after it was carved from Knox County.

Sources

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"Historical Records of Virginians in the Revolution", John H. Gwathmey, page 147

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