

Adventures on the American Frontier

Westward Over the Blue Ridge Mountains

Revised Edition



Edith McCall

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York



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This book has been substantially edited, revised, and updated to retain the spirit of the original work but with a modern understanding of historical events and a more sensitive awareness of human equity.

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ISBN: 978-0-88092-922-6

Publisher: Dr. T.M. Kennnitz
Editor: Jennifer Ault
Book and Cover Designer: Kerri Ann Ruhl
Cover and Interior Illustrator: Christopher Tice

Printed and bound in Unionville, New York, on acid-free paper using vegetable-based inks at the Royal Fireworks facility.

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Thomas Batts Finds the Great Warpath

It was an autumn day in Virginia in 1671. The United States of America was not yet a country. The land was almost all wilderness, except for a settled strip along the Atlantic Ocean. There, colonies had sprung up—little villages near the mouths of rivers, with a scattering of farms between them. The people who lived there had come, mostly from England, to find a new home in America.



Even then, there was a western frontier, but it was less than a hundred miles from the Atlantic Ocean. There were a few forts on that frontier. They had been built because of

the fur-trading business. It had not taken the colonists long to learn that Native Americans would bring them fine furs in exchange for knives or cloth or beads.

One of the forts was named Fort Henry. It stood where Petersburg, Virginia, is today. The man in charge of Fort Henry was General Abraham Wood. Like many other men, General Wood looked often to the western wilderness and wondered what was out there. But unlike most of the others, General Wood did something: he went exploring.

Each time he headed west, he found himself climbing hills that led only to higher hills. Beyond the higher hills was a long ridge of mountains. The mountains rose like a great wall, running from Pennsylvania and New York in the north to Georgia in the south. At first, the colonists thought they could find a river that would cut through the mountains. Just on the other side, they were sure, was the Great Western Sea—the Pacific Ocean. But all of the rivers they followed flowed down to the Atlantic Ocean, not west through the mountains.

“We’ll have to look for a river that starts just over the mountain ridge,” they decided. “It will go to the Pacific, and we can open a road to it. Then we’ll be able to trade with China.”

There was still plenty of room between the mountain wall and the Atlantic Ocean. No one was crowded in the colonies, and there was still a great deal of farmland to be cleared. But General Wood wanted to learn more about the land over the mountains. He wanted to find that river to the Pacific. So he organized an exploring party to look for it.

On the first day of September in 1671, General Wood said goodbye to a little group of five men on horseback. There was Captain Thomas Batts, leader of the group, Robert Fallam, young Thomas Wood, and Jack Nason, who had been the general's servant for many years. The fifth man was a Native American from the Appomattox tribe named Perecute. Perecute had lived at Fort Henry for years and could speak English.

“Good luck, gentlemen!” said General Wood. “I wish I were young enough to go with you. Find that river to the Pacific, and we'll all be rich. The trade of the world will go through Fort Henry.” He watched the five riders until they disappeared from sight.

After only the first few days, the explorers found the traveling rough. The wilderness was much more difficult to cut through than they were prepared for. Then tragedy struck when poor Thomas Wood became sick and died. The men mourned the loss and continued on.

Just before the explorers crossed the mountain ridge, the trail became too rough for the horses. They left the animals at a Native American village and set out on foot for the rest of the trip up the mountains, with two tribesmen from the village to help carry their packs.

On the other side of the mountain ridge, the men began to pick their way down a hillside covered with trees, brush, vines, and briars that made the going slow. Perecute climbed a tree to get a view of what was before them, and there, below him, was the shining ribbon of a river. The group went on, as fast as the wilderness would let them, to get to the river that ran north and west.

As they neared the river, they came upon a pathway through the brush. They had been traveling for two weeks, and Captain Batts was relieved to find a trail that would make their progress faster and easier.

Perecute bent over to study the dusty trail. It was an old trail, and many moccasined feet had traveled it.



“What do you make of it?” asked Captain Batts.

“Moccasin prints tell of tribes that go northwest not long ago,” said Perecute. “If we go northwest, too, we will not meet them.”

“Good,” said Captain Batts. “The trail follows the river, and it’ll be easier if we use it than cutting our way through the wilderness.”

But the two Native Americans from the mountain village were also studying the trail. They pointed at the footprints and talked in troubled voices.

“What are they saying?” asked Captain Batts.

Perecute translated for the Native Americans. “They fear we will meet the enemy on this trail,” he said. “It is the Great Warpath, and over it travel war parties that come down from the north. The trail is many miles long, following the valley between the mountains we have crossed and those to the west. These two men do not want to go on.”

“But we must go on!” insisted Captain Batts. “We came over the mountains to find a river to the Pacific Ocean. This could be the river, but we must follow it farther to know. Tell them we will pay them well, but we must go on.”

The Native Americans finally agreed to go a little farther. Over the next few days, the travelers saw forests, open meadows, and fields where old, dry cornstalks stood. There were signs of many old campfires near the trail. Captain Batts asked Perecute more about the trail. Perecute had not traveled it himself, but he had heard of it. At the south end was an important Cherokee village; to the north was the land of the Iroquois tribes.

Each day, the two Native Americans from the village studied the trail closely, and each day, they were less willing to go on. Even Perecute began to talk of danger and to ask that they turn back. The river was about to swing away from the trail to wind between the mountains to the west.

“There is evil beyond those mountains,” Perecute told Captain Batts. “We cannot go on.”

Captain Batts was disappointed. He was sure that he could see ocean mists as he followed the river’s winding path through his spyglass. He called Robert Fallam to his side.

“Look there, Robert,” he said. “See those white patches through the mists? I think they’re sails. The Pacific must be just beyond that next ridge.”

Robert studied the patches of white through the glass. “Possibly,” he said. “But I think more likely they’re white cliffs on the ocean’s edge, like those back in England on the shore of the English Channel.”

No matter what they thought they saw, both men were sure that the river led to the sea. They made their way to the riverbank to study it more closely. They could tell that the water had been higher not long before. The rivers of Virginia went up and down each day with the ocean tides on the coastal plain where the colonies had been built. “Tidewater lands” they called them because of the tides in the rivers.

“See the mark of high tide on the bank?” Captain Batts asked the men. “That means we can’t be many miles from the ocean.”

While they explored, the Native Americans had gone hunting for much-needed food. When they came back to camp, the mark of fear was strong on their faces.

Perecute hurried to meet Captain Batts. “They heard the beating of drums while they were in the woods,” he explained. “The warring tribes are near!”

“Then we’ll start back,” said Captain Batts. “But first we will mark this spot and claim it for our king.” He and Robert took branding irons with letters on them. They heated them to red hot in the fire, and then each burned his initials on four trees. They also burned onto trees the name of Charles

II, King of England, the name of the Virginia governor, and the name of General Abraham Wood.

“One more mark,” said Captain Batts. “We’ll mark one tree with a *P* for Perecute, who has been so faithful to us.”

When that was done, the captain called out in a loud, clear voice, “We take this land for King Charles II. Long live King Charles, King of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Virginia!”

He raised his rifle then, as did each man of the company. At a signal, they all fired together. Then, the ceremony over, the men turned back the way they had come.

When they reached Fort Henry, they told General Wood about the river they had found. He, too, was excited about it. None of them knew that the high water mark was there because there had been little rain, and the river was simply low. Nor did they know that the New River, as it came to be called, was really the upper end of the Kanawha River, which empties into the Ohio River, not the ocean. The Ohio River flows west to the Mississippi River, which flows south to the Gulf of Mexico.

They did not know that beyond the second ridge of mountains were more mountains, ending with a ridge steeper than the others, and that beyond that was more wilderness and many even greater mountains before the Pacific Ocean began.

The men told of the Great Warpath, not knowing that it would be of more importance than the river they had found. In the days to come, that trail would be followed by almost every man who made his way over the Blue Ridge, and in

time, the Native American trail would be the white man's road, leading from cabin to cabin and village to village. It was the first great trail to the wilderness.



Gabe Arthur Walks the Warrior's Path



“This time, map the way to the Pacific Ocean so we can send traders there,” General Wood told James Needham. It was a year and a half after Thomas Batts’s trip over the Blue Ridge. Along with his work of getting more Native Americans to bring furs to Fort Henry, General Wood had been trying to get another exploring party to the land over the mountains. So far, every party had been turned back by the difficult terrain or by unfriendly Native Americans.

“We’ll do our best,” said James. He shook hands with General Wood and finished getting ready to go.

General Wood reached up a hand to young Gabriel Arthur, who sat on his horse, waiting for James to start out. "Take care, Gabe, and good luck to you," said the general. Gabe had worked at Fort Henry since he had come to America from England. He was like a son to General Wood.

"I'm sure I'll have stories to tell when we get back," said Gabe as he shook General Wood's hand. He expected to ride back into Fort Henry in about two months. In fact, it would be a year before he returned, and the stories he would tell would be of adventures that no young man had ever lived to tell.

Gabe found much to see as he and James rode toward the mountains. To stay clear of a Native American village where another exploring party had been turned back, they swung farther to the south than Captain Batts had gone, into what is now North Carolina.

Along the way, they met some members of a Cherokee tribe, who led them to the Yadkin Valley. The group headed west from there and saw the Great Smoky Mountains with their crown of blue haze.

For four days they climbed up hills and rode down into valleys. Then they reached a ridge that was higher than the rest. James noticed that from there on, the streams ran down the west side of the mountains instead of heading toward the Atlantic Ocean. "We should see the Pacific Ocean soon," he said hopefully.

But they saw no ocean. Travel become more and more difficult as the wilderness closed in around them. Often they had to go through tangles of vines and briars. In the valleys,

they pushed through tall cane, sometimes eight or ten feet high. Its broken stalks were sharp and cut the horses' legs and feet. All of the horses but one became too lame to go on.

Two weeks after they left the Yadkin Valley, they came to a river that was larger than the others. "Is this the river Captain Batts talked about?" James wondered aloud.

But the Cherokees shook their heads. They knew the river well because their tribe had a village on its bank that was surrounded by log walls, and they led the group there. Later the river would be known as the Little Tennessee River.

The old chief came from the village to welcome them. Soon the explorers were inside, and the Cherokees threw welcoming feasts for them.

Gabe was going to take the one horse they had left to a grassy place at the riverbank where he could eat, drink, and grow strong again, but the Cherokees had other ideas. They had seen horses before, but they had never had a chance to be close to one for long.

"Tie him here," a Cherokee told Gabe, and the man pointed to a pole that stood in the middle of the village. Other Cherokees brought corn for the horse to eat and bear's oil with which to rub the cuts and sores on his legs and body. A circle of Cherokees almost always stood around watching him.

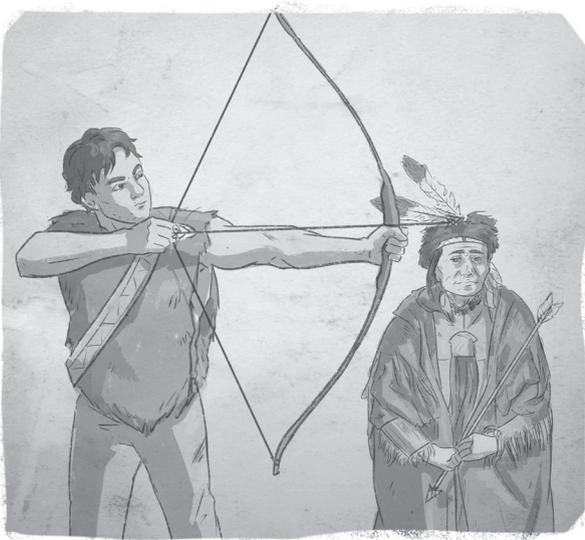
Nothing seemed to be too good for the visitors to the Cherokee village. They went to one feast after another and watched dances in their honor by the hour. James found that

the Cherokees were more than willing to trade furs for some of the white man's belongings.

At the end of nine days, James called Gabe to one side. "I want go back to Fort Henry to tell General Wood what we've learned and to bring back some goods to trade here. He'll be disappointed that we haven't found a way to the sea, but I think he'll be glad to know of the trade we can get."

Gabe nodded, and James went on. "While I'm gone, do all you can to learn the language," he said. "Make friends, and talk to them about bringing furs to Fort Henry."

Gabe agreed, and James left on the horse the next morning.



The Cherokees were happy to teach Gabe their ways of working and playing. The old chief took a special interest in him. He invited Gabe to talk with him often, and he let