



On June 17, 1889, in Decatur, Ala., a crowd assembled around John Sevier's casket for a photograph before his reinterment in Knoxville, Tenn. (Image: Tennessee Historical Society Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives)

# An 'Admirer of Patriotism and Merit Unequaled'

## A.W. Putnam's Monumental Tribute to John Sevier

By GORDON BELT

On Sept. 7, 1851, the *Nashville Daily Gazette* triumphantly announced the dedication of a monument erected in Nashville City Cemetery honoring Tennessee's first governor, John Sevier. The newspaper's editors declared, "This monument, in design and execution, is worthy of the distinguished man whose many virtues and heroic services it is intended to commemorate."

From his arrival at the Watauga Settlement in 1773 until his death in 1815, John Sevier established his reputation as a pioneer, soldier and statesman of the Early Republic. A celebrated soldier, admired politician and founding father of the state of Tennessee, Sevier led an adventurous life. He commanded a frontier militia into battle against British loyalists at King's Mountain during the Revolutionary War. He waged a relentless war against the Cherokees in his effort to claim America's first frontier. He forged the state of Franklin from the western lands of North Carolina and later became Tennessee's first governor.

Sevier's memorial at the Nashville City Cemetery provided Tennesseans with a fitting tribute to a man historian Carl S. Driver later described as "Tennessee's First Hero." Stone masons carved upon this 15-foot marble shaft a relief depicting two swords crossed, surmounted by a wreath, and beneath an Indian tomahawk and quiver of arrows. The noted North Carolina historian John H. Wheeler described this design as "emblematic of the triumph of our arms under the heroic auspices of General Sevier, and the blessings of peace and the arts of civilization succeeding the bloody and protracted Indian wars which illustrate the early history of our State, in which he acted a most arduous, responsible, and distinguished part."

For nearly four decades, the monument erected at Nashville's City Cemetery stood as the only memorial tribute to John Sevier on Tennessee soil. Few Tennesseans realized, however, that Sevier's body remained buried in an plot of land hundreds of miles away in an overgrown field in Alabama with little more than a charred oak stump and a small headstone to mark his grave.

Sevier died on Sept. 24, 1815, while surveying conquered Creek territory in present-day Alabama. Buried with military honors not far from where he fell ill along the east bank of the Tallapoosa River, Sevier's epitaph was without embellishment. Following his death, all memory of "Tennessee's First Hero" faded into the distant past. Sevier's grandson lamented, "That arm that so often drew the sword in defense of his country has long moldered in the soil of a sister State and Tennessee does not now know where the mortal remains of



As knowledge of John Sevier's modest grave in Decatur, Ala., spread, citizens throughout Tennessee felt compelled to honor their first governor here at home. In 1851, A.W. Putnam erected this 15-foot tall cenotaph on the grounds of Nashville City Cemetery and dedicated it to the memory of Sevier's accomplishments as a "Noble and successful defender of the early settlers of Tennessee." (Image: Gordon Belt)

General John Sevier lies."

Aggrieved to discover that no monument to Sevier existed in Tennessee's capital city, Albigeance Waldo Putnam vowed to correct posterity's oversight. As a lawyer, businessman, public official, writer, and founding member of the Tennessee Historical Society, A.W. Putnam devoted much of his life to preserving Sevier's legacy and documenting the memory of Tennessee's earliest settlers. In 1859, Putnam published *History of Middle Tennessee; or, Life and Times of Gen. James Robertson*, which chronicled the founding of Nashville and the formation of Middle Tennessee's earliest settlements. Putnam located and preserved a variety of historically-significant letters, documents and official records, and he interviewed many surviving members of Tennessee's pioneering families in an effort to safeguard the memories of their ancestor's accomplishments. Putnam collected the papers of Sevier's son, George Washington Sevier, and he first published the text of one of Tennessee's founding documents, the Cumberland Compact. Putnam eventually donated all his papers to the Tennessee Historical Society, now held in trust at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, and he urged others to do the same. Putnam's collection provided a window into Sevier's world and a rich narrative of early Tennessee history found nowhere else.

Putnam's adoration for Sevier extended well beyond the boundaries of scholarship. In 1825, he married Catherine Ann Sevier, daughter of George Washington Sevier, and eldest granddaughter of John Sevier. Upon Catherine's untimely death in 1834, Putnam remarried in the same year, to Cornelia Virginia Sevier, his deceased wife's sister. In his autobiography, Putnam recalled how his church expressed disapproval of his marriage to Cornelia:

Some Presbyterian Ministers and

members of the Church considered the marriage to a sister of a deceased wife as forbidden in the rules of the Church and by the word of God, even insisting that it was as much prohibited as to marry a cousin, a blood-relation of the second degree.... I have considered the question...but in my case it was for the best. We were married—and this second wife installed as rightful mother of my dear children, mistress of my servants, head of my household, and we were happy.

On Sevier's grand obelisk at Nashville City Cemetery, Putnam instructed stone masons to inscribe words that reflected our young nation's feelings of patriotism towards Tennessee's founding father as a projector of Manifest Destiny. In his memorial tribute, Putnam, declared Sevier to be a "Noble and successful defender of the early settlers of Tennessee," and his epitaph proudly proclaimed Sevier "served his Country for Forty years faithfully and usefully and in her service died."

Sevier's posthumous benefactor held no desire for public recognition. The words engraved on the cenotaph only revealed Putnam as an "Admirer of Patriotism and Merit Unequaled," leaving the identity of the owner of Sevier's monument at Nashville City Cemetery a complete mystery. The *Daily Gazette* credited "This elegant tribute to one of Tennessee's earliest defenders" to "the munificence and public spirit of a single individual," unnamed by the paper, "a gentleman who has devoted much of his time to the investigation of the early history of Tennessee."

By the late 1880s, Tennesseans sought a proper burial site for their first governor. In 1889, members of the Tennessee Historical Society, government officials, Sevier descendants, and noted historians succeeded in their efforts to exhume Sevier's mortal remains and deliver them to Knoxville. Following a grand ceremony that included rousing speeches from the governors of Tennessee and Alabama, grave diggers unearthed Sevier's remains and loaded them onto a funeral train which traveled from Decatur, Ala., to Knoxville, Tenn. There, at least 10,000 onlookers greeted the procession at the Old Knox County Courthouse to witness Sevier's return to native soil.

Though Sevier's remains now rest in peace on the Old Knox County Courthouse Lawn, Putnam's memorial at Nashville City Cemetery still stands as resolute and firm as the man he chose to exalt.

Putnam once wrote of Sevier, "His was a busy life; never at rest, never a retired man or private citizen." The same could also be said of A.W. Putnam. His tireless devotion delivered Sevier from the shadows of obscurity and far beyond the pages of history. Putnam cast Sevier's legend into stone and placed his memorial tribute alongside Nashville's most prominent citizens at Nashville City Cemetery, ensuring that posterity recalled the legacy of "Tennessee's first hero."

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