

Celebrating **AMERICA 250**



Rutherford County

“We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

—the Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

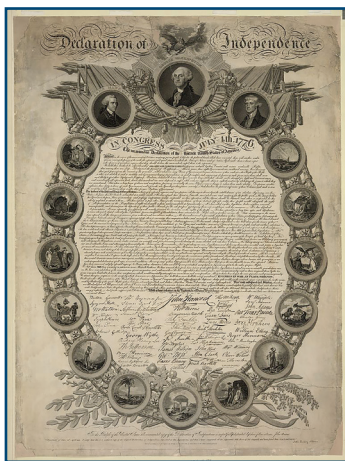


Painting of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

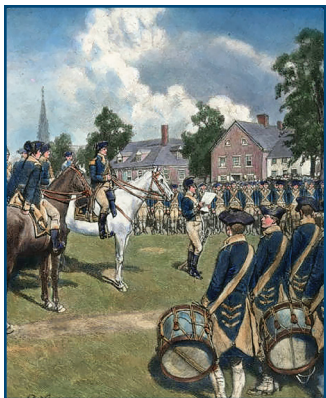
July 4, 2026, marks 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This document separated the Thirteen Colonies from Great Britain and marked the birth of a new nation—the **United States of America**.

For years, colonists under the rule of King George III had felt their freedoms were being increasingly threatened. Frustrated with the lack of representation in the British government, the colonies moved to cut ties with Britain and create a new country of their own.

The founders of our nation believed that “all men are created equal.” This idea was rooted in the philosophy of natural rights and the belief that government should work for the interests of all citizens.



Artistic rendering of the Declaration of Independence. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



*Painting of the
Battle of Kings Mountain.
Image courtesy of the Tennessee
State Library and Archives.*

After the Revolution, many others were inspired by these stirring words, striving to make Jefferson's words a reality for everyone. After the Civil War ended almost 100 years later, the Declaration's vision of equality was advanced in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution, which ended slavery and guaranteed all persons the "equal protection of the laws."

Before Statehood

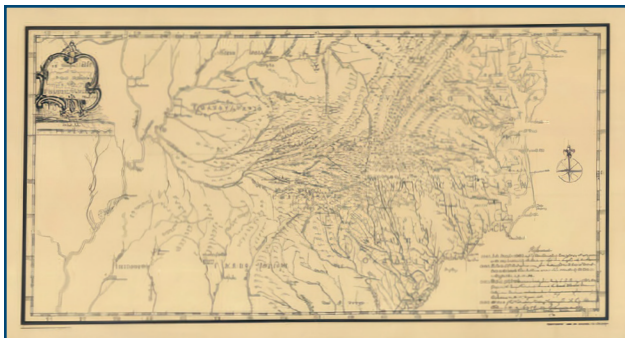
Before European settlers arrived here, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Shawnee, Creek, and Choctaw tribes hunted and camped in what would become Rutherford County. Two indigenous trails—the Nickajack Trail and the Creek War Trace—converged around the site of present-day Murfreesboro. This period from early settlement until statehood was a time of transition for the tribes. Those hunting in Middle Tennessee clashed with white settlers and retaliated in kind. After treaties between settlers and native tribes failed, militia under Nashville founder James Robertson wiped out Cherokee Chief Black Fox's camp in 1794, opening the way for permanent European settlements.



*Map of Indigenous tribes in
North America, c. 1775.
Image courtesy of the Tennessee
State Library and Archives.*

Tennessee: The First Frontier

Originally part of North Carolina, Tennessee was admitted as the 16th state to the Union on June 1, 1796. Early settlers in this rugged, uncharted territory shared an independent, pioneering spirit.



Map of Tennessee. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

In the years before the American Revolution, the first white settlers in what would eventually become Tennessee established the Watauga Association to organize a local government. This representative organization negotiated a lease of land from the Cherokee Nation.

In 1777, North Carolina formally claimed this area as a territory. After the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, many veterans migrated here to settle on ample land along the new country's western edge. As the nation grew and Tennessee became a state in 1796, its citizens continued to embody the enterprising spirit of 1776 in the centuries that followed.



*Painting of the Gathering at Sycamore Shoals.
Image courtesy of the Tennessee State Library and Archives.*

Sites in Rutherford County.

The end of the Revolution brought about American independence and created a new nation. After the war, many veterans received land grants for their wartime service and settled in what would soon become Rutherford County. The legacy of these founders remains on the landscape today and can be experienced at the sites listed below.

Heritage Center of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County

225 W. College St.,
Murfreesboro, Tenn.

The Heritage Center's award-winning exhibit *Two Families, Two Revolutions* reflects how the ideals of the American Revolution, embodied in the Declaration of Independence, profoundly shaped Tennessee families in different ways. As the Revolutionary War was ending, William Armstrong Sr. came to the Holston River Valley in search of new opportunities. As the Civil War was ending, Mat Gardner came to the Duck River Valley as a newly emancipated freedman. Both built lasting, influential farms and established institutions that nurtured and inspired their communities. From handcrafted furniture to handstitched quilts, this exhibit shares the rich stories of these civic-minded and hardworking families from early statehood through the Civil War to the present day.

The Heritage Center is free and open to the public Monday through Friday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.



*Photographs from the Two Families,
Two Revolutions exhibit at the Heritage Center.
Images courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

Rutherford County Courthouse Museum

South Public Square, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Tour the Rutherford County Courthouse Museum, housed in a ca. 1858 historic courthouse, to experience Rutherford County's transformation from a frontier county seat to a booming 21st century city. The museum highlights the county's history before, during, and after the Revolutionary War, including exhibits, unique artifacts, and *The Pride of Tennessee* mural featuring prominent figures in Tennessee history. A partnership between the Rutherford County Archives, the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation, and the city of Murfreesboro, the museum is free and open to the public Monday through Friday 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.



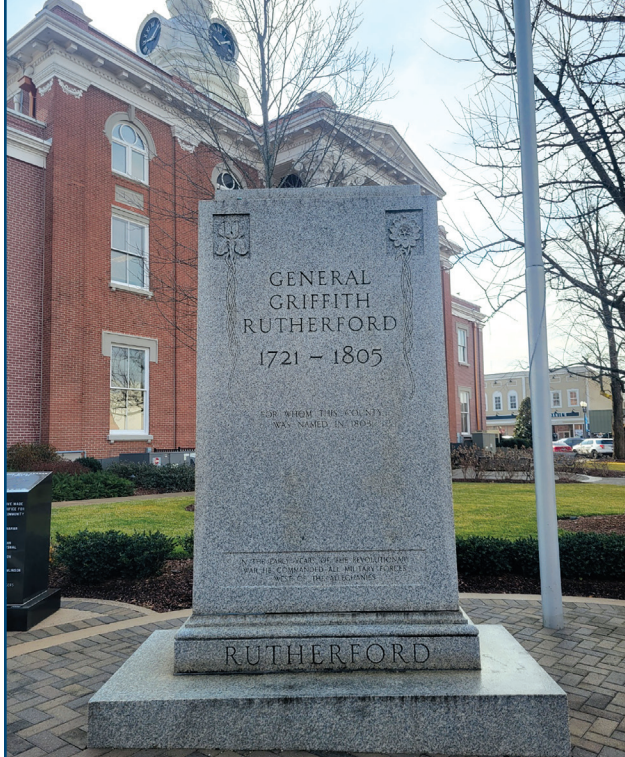
*Photo of the Rutherford County Courthouse.
Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

Griffith Rutherford Memorial

*North Public Square and North Maple Street,
Murfreesboro, Tenn.*

This memorial stone, placed in 1946, honors Griffith Rutherford. Rutherford was a Revolutionary War soldier and a pioneer of Tennessee.

Born in Ireland in 1720, Rutherford emigrated to Rowan County, North Carolina, as a young child. As an adult, he worked as a surveyor and sheriff and served in the North



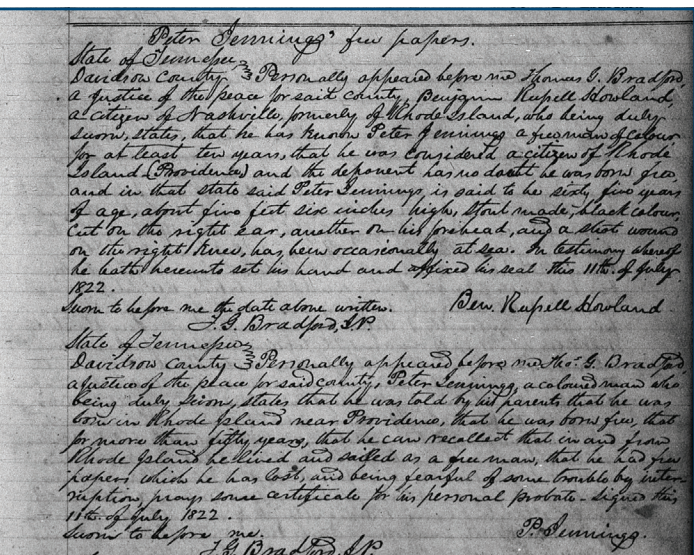
Photography of the Griffith Rutherford monument on the square in Murfreesboro. Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.

Carolina legislature and colonial assembly. Rutherford attained the rank of brigadier general during the American Revolution. In 1781, he was captured by British forces and imprisoned for a year in St. Augustine before eventually being released. After the war, Rutherford moved west to Sumner County where he founded the Shiloh Presbyterian Church. In 1793, he served in the Tennessee House of Representatives. Rutherford County was named in his honor.

Peter Jennings Homesite and Bakery

Corner of Vine Street and Church Street, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Peter Jennings (1752–1842) was a Black artillery soldier in the Revolutionary War. He served in Rhode Island’s 5th Black Artillery Regiment directly under Gen. George Washington. Jennings participated in battles in Trenton, Brandywine, and Yorktown. Upon his retirement in 1822, Jennings settled in Murfreesboro, joining the small free Black population that emigrated from northern cities.



Peter Jennings' freedom papers.
Image courtesy of the Rutherford County Archives.

Tennessee's first state constitution in 1796 allowed all free men to vote, which may have been part of what brought Jennings here.

Jennings opened a bakery and was well known for his bread and cakes as well as teaching fencing and boxing to young men. He became an engineer and supervisor on town water projects and entertained workers and community members with his storytelling of his time at sea.

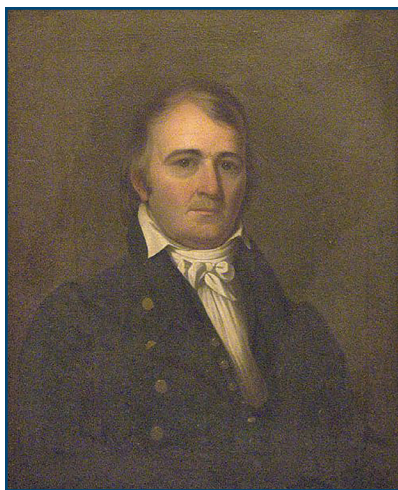
Although no structures remain from Jennings' time at this site, the location remains a reminder of Jennings' impact in Murfreesboro and his determination to make the most of his freedom.

Lt. Col. Hardy Murfree Historical Marker

Corner of West Vine Street and South Maple Street,
Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Murfreesboro is named for Lt. Col. Hardy Murfree (1752–1809). Murfree served in the North Carolina Continental Army at the battles of Brandywine, Germantown, Monmouth, and Stony Point. After the war, Murfree participated in the Constitutional Convention of North Carolina, supporting the ratification of the Constitution. He moved to Tennessee following the death of his wife, Sarah Brickell.

Murfree received land grants in Rutherford, Williamson, and Davidson counties. For 20 years he traveled back and forth between Tennessee and North Carolina, before permanently relocating to Williamson County in 1806. He died in 1809 and divided his land among his children. Two of his children, Matthias and Sallie, settled in Rutherford County. When Rutherford County was choosing a new county seat, Murfree's children campaigned to name the new town after him. Hardy Murfree's family members built a strong civic tradition in Middle Tennessee.



Portrait of Hardy Murfree.

*Image courtesy of the
Tennessee Portrait Project.*



*Hardy Murfree historical marker on Vine Street.
Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

Lytle Cemetery

*Beside Haynes
Lumber Company
739 NW Broad
St., Murfreesboro,
Tenn.*

The Lytle Cemetery is the final resting place of Capt.

William Lytle, a Revolutionary War patriot and founder

of Rutherford County. He fought at the battles of Strong Point, Green Mountain, and Germantown. Lytle moved from North Carolina to Tennessee shortly after the war. In Tennessee, he helped arrange a treaty with the Cherokee in 1791. On the Stones River, Lytle built his home and one of the early mills and cotton gins in Rutherford County.

Lytle donated 60 acres of land for the new county seat of Murfreesboro in 1812. Today, the Sons of the American Revolution chapter maintains the cemetery to honor Lytle's legacy.



Lytle Cemetery.

*Image courtesy of the MTSU Center
for Historic Preservation.*

Black Fox Camp Spring

U.S. 41 and Red Mile Road, Murfreesboro, Tenn.



Black Fox Camp Spring is named for the Cherokee Chief Black Fox, who hunted and camped in the area. The spring marked the southeastern edge of the Cumberland Settlements, a site near present-day Nashville where James Robertson and John Donelson established a fort on the Cumberland River and fortified stations throughout Middle Tennessee.

Black Fox Spring.

*Image Courtesy of the
Rutherford County Archives.*

This area became contested when settlers from the Cumberland Settlements expanded outward and overpowered the Cherokee camped here. The spring later became one of Rutherford County's earliest settlements when Revolutionary War veteran William Kelton established his family farm in the area in 1801.

In 1837, the federal government removed Cherokee, Chickasaw, Creek, Choctaw, and Seminole tribes from Tennessee to present-day Oklahoma to clear land for white settlement. This march became known as the Trail of Tears. On their forced march westward, Cherokee stopped one last time here at Black Fox Camp Spring.

Cannonsburgh Village

312 S. Front St., Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Established in 1976 as part of Murfreesboro's celebration of the United States Bicentennial, Cannonsburgh Village is an open-air living history museum that shares the



Cannonsburgh Village.

Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation



Early image of Cannonsburgh Village.

Image courtesy of the Shacklett Collection, Rutherford County Archives.

history of local craftsmanship, traditions, and community life in Murfreesboro. The village consists of a collection of restored and replicated historical buildings that were relocated to this former industrial site along Lytle Creek. Each one is steeped in history and curated to transport visitors to a time when life was defined by simplicity, hard work, and ingenuity

Stones River National Battlefield

3501 Old Nashville Highway, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Established by the National Park Service in 1927, Stones River National Battlefield (and the adjacent National Cemetery) preserves and interprets the Battle of Stones River, December 31, 1862–January 2, 1863.

In honor of the nation's 250th birthday in 2026, Stones River National Battlefield launched “Stories of Service and Sacrifice” that will share 250 individual histories of veterans interred at Stones River National Cemetery. Visit the park in person as well as their National Park Service website and social media to find these stories highlighting service members from conflicts spanning over two centuries of American history.



*Stones River National Battlefield Visitor Center.
Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation*

Old City Cemetery

320 E. Vine St., Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Access to the cemetery is by appointment only with City Hall. Driver's license required.



*Monuments to Revolutionary Patriots in City Cemetery.
Image courtesy of the MTSU Center for Historic Preservation.*

Old City Cemetery is one of Murfreesboro's oldest burial grounds and is the final resting place for veterans, families, the enslaved, and many early residents. It is also the original site of the First Presbyterian Church, built in 1820. The church hosted the Tennessee General Assembly in 1822 when the legislature nominated Andrew Jackson for the presidency. It later served as a Civil War hospital until it was destroyed later in the war. Today, visitors can view markers placed by the Daughters of the American Revolution honoring a number of Murfreesboro's Revolutionary War soldiers and founders, including John Bradley, William Burnett, William Cocke, Brig. Gen. Joseph Dickson, Peter Jennings, William Kelton, Robert Smith, William Stark Smith, and Samuel Wilson.

John Bradley served as a private and sergeant in Company B of Virginia's 3rd and 7th regiments. When he moved to Tennessee, Bradley purchased land, raced horses, and owned a track. Bradley later donated land for the first Bradley Academy, a school built in 1806 to educate the sons of white families. Bradley was buried on his farm northeast of Murfreesboro; a memorial stone honoring him also rests in Old City Cemetery.

William Burnett (1759–1845) joined the Continental Army in North Carolina. He guarded a weapons supply on the Roanoke River. Later, Burnett guarded Gloster Courthouse and fought at Yorktown. Burnett migrated to Rutherford County around 1807, settling along Hurricane Creek.

William Cocke (1759–1837) was born in Hanover County, Virginia. He enlisted in the Virginia Regulars in 1779 and again in 1781. Cocke moved to Rutherford County in the early 1800s. The Rutherford County Court ordered him to assist in constructing a road from the Williamson County line with Ezekiel Murphy as overseer. He was buried on his farm near Rockvale, Tennessee. The Daughters of the American Revolution erected a memorial stone in his honor.

Brig. Gen. Joseph Dickson (1745–1825) enlisted in the Rowan County, North Carolina, militia in 1775, serving under Gen. Griffith Rutherford (for whom the county was named). As a captain in the militia, Dickson led his men through battles in South Carolina. Dickson continued his military service after the Revolution, rising to the rank of brigadier general.

After the war, Dickson served as a state senator and U.S. House Representative, where he assisted in electing Thomas Jefferson to the presidency. In 1803, Dickson moved to Rutherford County, where he practiced law, helped organize Murfreesboro's First Presbyterian Church, and was a founding member of the first Masonic Lodge. He served in the Tennessee legislature from 1807 to 1811. His commemorative marker was placed in 1973 by his descendants.

Peter Jennings (1752–1842) was a Black artillery soldier in the Revolutionary War. He served in Rhode Island directly under Gen. George Washington. Jennings participated in battles in Trenton, Brandywine, and Yorktown, but he is known for being one of the men present at Valley Forge when Washington was there. After the Revolutionary War, Jennings became a sailor for approximately 20 years. Upon his retirement, Jennings settled in Murfreesboro. Jennings was born a free man of color and lived and worked as a free man during a time when most Black people in Murfreesboro were enslaved.

William Kelton (1753–1813) was born in Pennsylvania but grew up in North Carolina. Although little is known about his Revolutionary War service, he served in North Carolina. After the war, Kelton served in the Morgan District militia in Burke County before migrating to Rutherford County around 1801. Kelton purchased 610 acres of land grant near Black Fox Camp. As an early resident, Kelton signed the petition to the state of Tennessee to create Rutherford County. He served as one of the first grand jurymen of the county.

Capt. Robert Smith (1752–1822) served in the Powhatan Militia and in the 1st Light Dragoons in Virginia during the American Revolution. In 1804, he and his wife, Mary Jarratt Smith, moved to Tennessee. They settled on the Stones River where Salem, Tennessee, is today. Smith sat on juries, served as trustee for Bradley Academy, and helped found Salem Methodist Church. He built an estate of 640 acres and provided enslaved labor to build many early roads in Rutherford County. He was buried on his farm, but the marker here honors his Revolutionary War service.

William Stark Smith (1759–1830) served as a sergeant in the 7th Virginia Regiment and was wounded in the Battle of Brandywine. He received a land grant in Rutherford County and built a log home on what would become Wild Acres Farm. Smith increased his land holdings to a 200 acre estate served by 29 enslaved people.

Samuel Wilson (1758–1830) served in the American Revolution. After the war, he settled near where the Stone River National Battlefield is today. Wilson received 640 acres of land in what was then Davidson County for his service. He arrived in the area to claim his land grant by 1788. He planted the first corn crop in the area. When he died between 1827 and 1830, Wilson was buried on his farm, near the Stones River National Cemetery.



This 2026 brochure is a project of the Heritage Center of Murfreesboro and Rutherford County, the Tennessee Civil War National Heritage Area, and the Center for Historic Preservation at Middle Tennessee State University.

Text by Paige Hurley and Laura Holder.

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