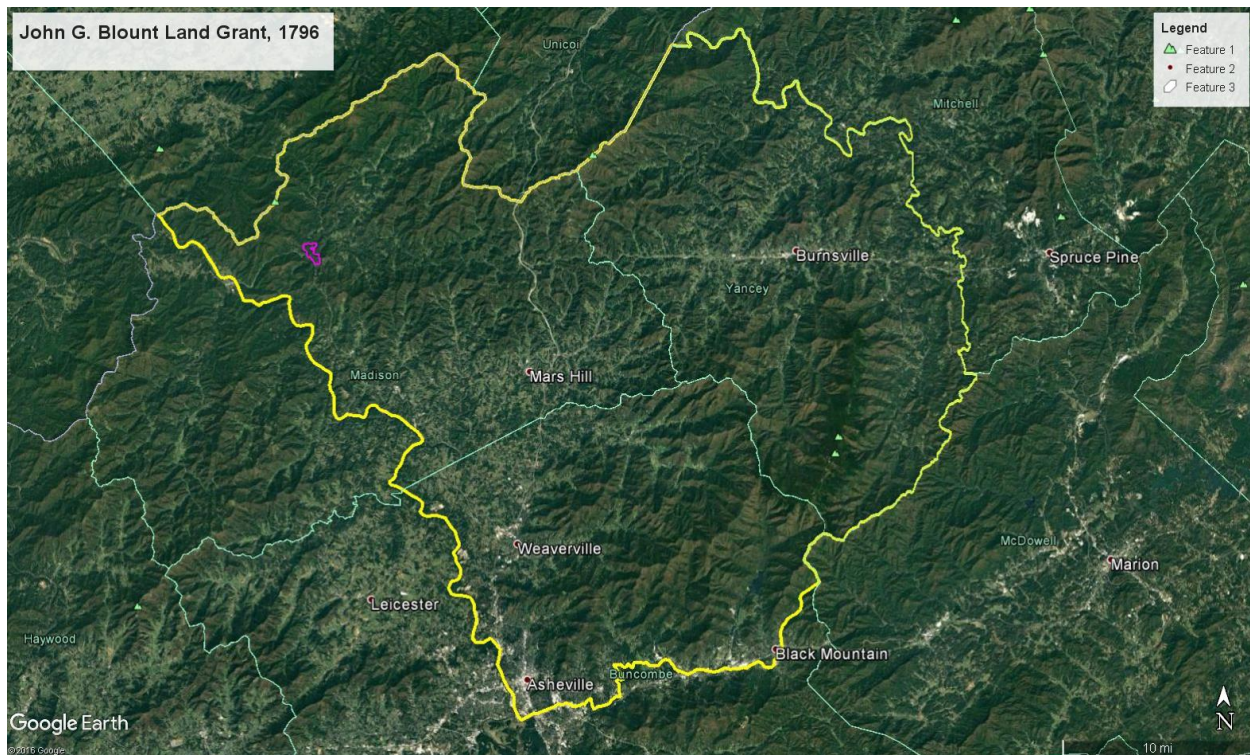


The Early Years

Though the true land-ownership history of the region starts well before written records are available, with the Cherokee Indians calling this area home for hundreds of years, the documented history starts in the late 1700s, not long after the American Revolution. In November 1796, John Gray Blount, a wealthy politician and later a land speculator from eastern North Carolina, was granted, by the State, 320,640 acres along the French Broad River for the cost of “2 pounds 10 shillings¹” per 100 acres. John Gray was a brother of William Blount, signer of the U.S. Constitution and the governor of the Southwest Territories, later to become the state of Tennessee in June 1796. A number of areas and features in North Carolina and Tennessee still bear the Blount name.

The 1796 deed description, though somewhat vague, does describe the tract as being on the “North East side of French Broad River”, extending from near Asheville, along the French Broad, past Warm Springs (now Hot Springs) all the way to Paint Rock on the Tennessee line, then trending northeast to the Unaka Mountains (near current Erwin, TN), and then south along the Blue Ridge back to the beginning. This tract, though described as Buncombe County (since Madison Co. was not formed until 1851), would contain the eastern half of present-day Madison County, all of current Yancey and the northeast corner of Buncombe County (see map, below). To get an idea of size, by comparison, present-day Madison County encompasses about 289,000 acres.



Google Earth image showing the outline of the 1796 land grant in yellow. Current county borders are shown in light green and the outline of Bear River Lodge is shown in pink in the western portion of the tract.

¹ About \$9 in 1796 or about \$300 in today's dollars

Interestingly, though John Gray obtained the deed in November 1796, in late 1797 the land was sold at auction for nonpayment of taxes by the 'High Sheriff' of Buncombe County for 115 pounds, 15 shillings². The tract was sold to John Strother, a respected surveyor, but also a friend and business associate of John Gray. Strother had another interesting role in the history of this area, as in 1799 he was the principal surveyor in a small group that meticulously surveyed the North Carolina/Tennessee border from the Virginia state line southwestward all the way to Paint Rock. This is a line, still recognized today, along some of the highest ridges in the Appalachians, later followed by sections of the Appalachian Trail.

The exact relationship or business arrangements between Strother and Blount is unknown, but in Strother's last will and testament, dated 11-22-1806, he actually bequeathed the land back to Blount. In the meantime however, from 1799 until his death in 1815, Strother sold over 300 parcels, typically 50-100 acres each, to many individuals, including several Baileys, Sheltons, McFarlands, Claytons and Candler, along with dozens of other families that have roots in the area. Even after his death, his agents, acting as executors for Strother's will, continued to sell tracts until the mid-1830s. However, it was the direct heirs of John Gray Blount that progress the Bear River Lodge heritage. In 1835 a deed is recorded, in then Yancey County, between sellers Thomas H. and William A. Blount, sons of John Gray, and a purchaser, George Robert Washington Gahagan, where 4994 acres was sold "on the waters of the Brush Creek, Doans Creek and the different forks of Laural [*sic*]" for a grand total of \$625. This tract has direct ties to the current Bear River Lodge acreage, and will be fully described in the next chapter of our story.

To be continued...

² About \$500 in 1797 or about \$16,000 in today's dollars