

Richard Henderson Biography

Richard Henderson

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Biography

Richard Henderson (1735-1785), American jurist and land speculator, was important in the early expansion of the frontier. He established the short-lived Transylvania Colony in Kentucky.

Richard Henderson was born on April 20, 1735, in Hanover County, Va. During the early 1740s his family moved to Granville County, N.C., where his father became sheriff. Richard served as constable and, later, as deputy to his father. After studying law for a year, he passed the bar examination in 1763 and, about the same time, married Elizabeth Keeling. The couple had two sons.

In 1764 Henderson organized Richard Henderson and Company to take advantage of opportunities for land and profit in the West. He hired Daniel Boone to explore the region beyond the mountains, sending Boone into Kentucky in 1769.

Because of his family position and his legal training, Henderson was appointed an associate justice of the Superior Court of North Carolina in 1768. But his judgeship brought considerable difficulties; thus, when his term expired in 1773, he returned to western land speculation.

During the winter of 1774-1775 Henderson organized the Transylvania Land Company and soon opened negotiations with Cherokee Indian leaders for several million acres between the Kentucky and Cumberland rivers on which to found a new colony. In March 1775 the Transylvania leaders concluded the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals, thereby, theoretically, clearing the area of Indian claims.

During the summer, settlement began, and Henderson himself led settlers through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. There he tried to establish the new colony of Transylvania. However, conflicting land claims of North Carolina and Virginia, continuing warfare with marauding Indian bands, and the unwillingness of the frontiersmen to accept Henderson's autocratic views, prevented this. When, in December 1776, Virginia created Kentucky County, Henderson's colonizing was effectively ended.

Henderson eventually received some 400,000 acres of western lands to compensate for his expense and effort. He later helped survey the Virginia--North Carolina boundary, was instrumental in establishing a settlement at Nashville, and served several terms in the North Carolina Legislature.