



Press Release

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Earliest land records returning to Washington County

JONESBOROUGH — After 124 years, Deed Book A is coming home.

Deed Book A, sometimes called the Watauga Purchase Book, contains the earliest land records for Washington County and Tennessee.

The volume is a copy of a portion of the original book, which was lost. It contains the earliest deeds and land grants for the county, beginning with the indenture made in March 1775 between the earliest settlers and Cherokee chiefs to purchase land holdings in what became Washington County and the surrounding area.

This particular copy contains the first 178 transcribed pages of the document. The remaining transcribed pages of Deed Book A are stored in the county's Register of Deeds office.

"This is a great day for the citizens of Washington County, past, present, and future," said County Archivist Ned Irwin. "The Public Records Commission identified recovery of county documents as a priority and, over the past two years, we have recovered over 12,000 documents that had left the county's custody. But Deed Book A is the most significant of all county records. All present day land titles trace their claims back to the records found in this book."

Why was Deed Book A in Nashville?

The copy of Deed Book A was sent to Nashville in 1897 as part of the county's exhibit for the Tennessee State Centennial celebrations. The state never returned the book. For several years now, the county has disagreed with the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA) on the book's ownership.

While the county and state both acknowledge that the transcription work was supervised by a Jonesborough resident named Nathan Shipley, it is the official title and duties that Shipley carried at the time of the transcription that were in question.

The last page of each volume of deeds in the book ends with the line: "Examined and Compared with the Original by Nathan Shipley." At the time of transcription, Shipley most likely served as a justice of the peace and land surveyor, therefore he was not an employee of the state as the Secretary of State's office contended.

Irwin notes that Shipley never served as Register of Deeds for the county and would not have been responsible for any document copying. Shipley was appointed Land Commissioner for Tennessee in 1815, more than eight years after copies of the land grants were to be filed in Nashville. Therefore, the copying of Deed Book A was not a state project and Shipley merely supervised the project in his role as county surveyor.

"Ned Irwin and Donna Briggs built a solid case for return of Deed Book A," said Mayor Joe Grandy. "We are fortunate to have such outstanding stewards of history in our corner, especially when it comes to the retrieval and preservation of important historical documents. Couple that with the tenacity of our region's legislators and we had a winning team on this project."

Tennessee Secretary of State Tre Hargett, who oversees TSLA, took a fresh look at the facts as clarified by Irwin and made the decision that the volume belongs to Washington County.

"Secretary Hargett should be always remembered by the citizens of this county for taking the courageous action he took on our behalf," Irwin said.

County, local delegation instrumental in document's return

In January, the Washington County Commission unanimously adopted a resolution requesting the return of the deed book. The County enlisted the assistance of State Senators Rusty Crowe and Jon Lundberg as well as State Representatives Alexander and Tim Hicks to plead the case for Deed Book A's return to Secretary Hargett's office.

"Locally, it took a team to get this book returned, and in our public officials and every private individual who helped and supported the effort, we had the greatest team one could have," Irwin said. "I especially want to thank Mayor Joe Grandy, who made this a personal priority, and County Attorney Allyson Wilkinson and my archives associate Donna Cox Briggs, who were invaluable."

The County Commission tasked Irwin and Wilkinson with contacting the Secretary of State's office and negotiating its return. However, it took local legislators with a passion for history making the return of Deed Book A their priority to get the ball rolling at a faster pace.

"I am thrilled as a State Representative for Washington County to be able to bring home one of the most valuable historic documents in our state," said State Representative Rebecca Alexander. "Growing up here and knowing the role that our town and community played in the development of our state is priceless. Ned Irwin and his staff did an outstanding job researching why the documents needed to be returned. I am very grateful to Secretary of State Hargett for seeing this was where the deed book needed to reside, and it is an honor to have played a small part in bringing it back."

Representative Hicks echoed Representative Alexander's comments, adding that the support the freshmen representatives received from area legislators was instrumental.

"Representative Alexander and Senator Crowe worked extremely hard on this, and I was more than happy to play a small part," said Representative Hicks. "We also had the unanimous support of the Northeast Tennessee Caucus of the General Assembly. It is good to know we can get things like this accomplished when people go through the proper channels, sit down and work together."

Since Representatives Alexander and Hicks are in their first terms in Nashville, they both looked to Senator Crowe for assistance in navigating the issue.

"I am proud that we have finally been able to prove that our archives here in Jonesborough is the rightful resting place for these priceless records. My Great Great grandfather was one half Cherokee Native American from Carter County...so this deed book is especially meaningful to me," Senator Crowe said. "My thanks to our county archivist, Ned Irwin, Secretary of State Tre Hargett, and Representatives Alexander and Hicks for their hard work in having our deed book returned to our county where it belongs. Thank goodness we are planning on bringing it home this coming June on statehood day."

A public celebration is in the works for June 1 to properly acknowledge the book's return.

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