

Cockrill, Ann(e) Gower Robertson Johns(t)on ^[1]

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by Megan Morrow, SLNC Government and Heritage Library, August 2023

February 10, 1757-October 13, 1821



Postcard with a historical depiction of Fort Nashborough, ca. 1930-1945. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons and the Boston Public Library.

^[2]Ann(e) Gower Robertson Johns(t)on Cockrill was a teacher, land owner, and one of the first white settlers of the Cumberland Settlement in Tennessee. She was born on February 10, 1757, in Wake County, North Carolina to John Randolph Roberston, Sr. and Mary Gower. Ann had 13 siblings, one of whom was [James Robertson](#) ^[3], an important figure in the history of Tennessee's white colonization. Ann likely moved to the [Watauga Settlement](#) ^[4] (near present day Elizabethton, Tennessee, then in western North Carolina) around the time James did, between 1770 and 1780. While there, she lived with her brother Charles near present day Johnson City, Tennessee. She had her first daughter, Mary Polly, at 15 years old in May 1772 by Isaac (David) Nehemiah Johns(t)on. Later in 1772, the two married in Johnson Lick, a part of Davidson County, Tennessee. Isaac and Ann had three daughters together: Mary Polly, Elizabeth Betsy, and Charity. Isaac was likely significantly older than Ann, though his age is uncertain.

The Watauga Settlement was a significant part of North Carolina's western frontier before Tennessee's statehood. As the Watauga Settlement was created inside Cherokee land boundaries, resistance to white colonization from American Indian tribes like the Cherokee was common and strong. Parts of the settlement were attacked regularly. One such attack involving Ann occurred on July 21, 1776 when members of the Cherokee tribe attacked [Fort Watauga](#) ^[5] (then Fort Caswell) in the Watauga Settlement. Most historical [accounts](#) ^[6] of the attack agree that "the Cherokees laid siege to Fort Caswell for about two weeks...." During this attack, Ann helped to defend the fort. By dumping "wash-day" buckets of boiling water on the sieging Cherokee warriors, Ann and other women defenders repelled an attack that attempted to burn part of the fort. Though the defense of the fort was successful, Ann was wounded in the exchange.

In 1777, Ann's brother James left the Watauga Settlement for a new home further west on the Holston River. He speculated on establishing permanent settlements further west into Middle Tennessee along the Cumberland River. The new settlers would arrive either by land with James Robertson or by river travel with Colonel [John Donelson](#) ^[7]'s flotilla. Ann's husband, Isaac, died suddenly in 1777, when a tree fell on him at [Fort Patrick Henry](#) ^[8]. With Isaac's death, Ann became a 19-year-old widow and single mother of three. After her first husband's death, Ann elected to join her brother's Middle Tennessee settlement plans.

Ann began her voyage to Middle Tennessee with Donelson's river boat flotilla, The Adventure, in winter 1779. The party

of Ann's flatboat consisted of: Charles Robertson, her brother and leader of the boat; Charlotte Reeves, wife of James Robertson, and her children; and Ann with her three daughters. The flotilla was meant to leave in November 1779, but the snowy and icy weather made it difficult to sail the flatboat. Conditions improved and the flotilla departed on December 22, 1779.

The voyage, like the Watauga Settlement, was also subject to attacks from American Indian tribes, as there were many Chickamauga towns along the Tennessee River through which the flotilla passed. The Chickamauga people (a dissenting branch of the Cherokee tribe) were actively protesting^[9] the terms of the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals^[10] and the Transylvania Purchase^[11], and fought against white colonization. The Chickamauga resistance captured one boat from the flotilla along with its 28 passengers.

Harsh conditions and cold temperatures slowed the river travel substantially. The voyage had to stop frequently to encamp on the river banks due to adverse conditions; one such stop lasted two months. Ann likely met her second husband, John Cockrill, during one of these river bank stops, as he was also traveling in the Adventure flotilla. On February 20, 1780, the flotilla tried to start sailing again, but strong currents brought by spring stopped the expedition once more. By March 1, the voyage was able to begin again. Finally, on Monday, April 24, 1780, they reached their destination. Ann's brother, James Robertson, was waiting for them with the overland party.

John Donelson documented the arrival of the flotilla. He wrote on April 24, 1780:

"This day we arrived at our journey's end at the Big Salt Lick [French Lick], where we had the pleasure of finding Captain Robertson and his company. It is a source of satisfaction to us to be enabled to restore to him and others their families and friends, who are entrusted to our care, and who sometime since perhaps despaired of ever meeting again. We have found a few log cabins which have been built on a cedar bluff above the Lick by Captain Robertson and his company."

Ann soon became a Sunday school teacher for children in the Cumberland settlement. Estimates of her class size range from 20 to 50 students. She was likely the first white teacher in Middle Tennessee. Her desire to teach carried over from The Adventure flotilla's river travel. During the boat expedition, she taught her daughters and nephews to read and write. Popular history states that she constructed shallow boxes filled with clean sand during the river expedition and taught the children to trace letters in the sand with a stick or their fingers.



Cockrill Springs Historical Marker 3A-36. Centennial Park, Nashville, Tennessee. Image courtesy of Brent Moore, Flickr.

^[12]In the fall of 1780,

Ann married her second husband, John Cockrill, at one of the forts of the Cumberland Settlement. They had six children together: John, Jr., Ann "Nancy," James, Sterling, Susanna, Mark, and Martha Ann.

The Robertson and Donnelson expeditions established Fort Nashborough ^[13] (today Nashville, Tennessee) after the two parties joined. Chickamauga attacks, like the Battle of the Bluffs ^[14] on April 2, 1781, threatened Fort Nashborough in its infancy. Despite losses from the attacks, the fort, the settlement, and Ann all survived. On May 10, 1784, "Ann Cockrill, formerly the widow Ann Johnston" was awarded ^[15] 640 acres of land from the North Carolina legislature for "defending the Country" from American Indian resistance. The grant was explicitly issued to her, and she was the first woman to receive a land grant in her own name in Tennessee. Her husband, John, was also issued a grant under the same act. Ann was allowed to claim the grant "wherever they can find vacant lands." The tract she and John selected had a strong freshwater spring, and they named their granted land "Cockrill Springs" ^[16].

On July 2, 1787, Ann's brother, Mark Robertson, died. Mark willed Ann's "three daughters, Mary, Elizabeth, and Charity," about 5000 acres of land on the Duck River in Middle Tennessee.

Ann died on October 13, 1821 in Tennessee. She was originally buried at Cockrill Springs, but the site was revitalized into Centennial Park ^[17] in 1903 and her grave ^[18] was relocated to the Nashville City Cemetery ^[19] in 1911. A marker for Ann stands at Centennial Park, and Cockrill Springs is a marked location within the park, located behind the Musicians Corner.

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Additional Resources:

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[Pioneers and Explorers](#) [29]

[Women](#) [30]

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Origin - location:

[Mountains](#) [32]

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25 August 2023 | Morrow, Megan

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http://grundych.org/05_Res/Beersheba/Beersheba_Vol_1-3_R2.pdf [17] <https://www.conservancyonline.com/park> [18]

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