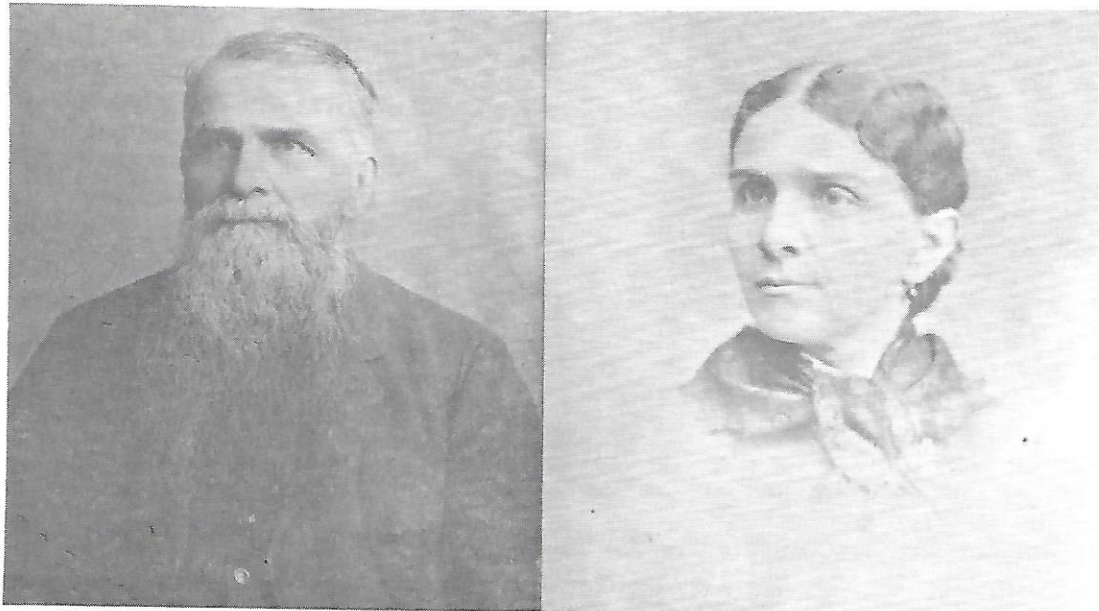


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The First Settlers



John and Lottie White Ratliff were among the earliest white settlers in these hills.

SETTLERS

Seeking independence and property, the first permanent white settlers moved into Buchanan County during the Revolutionary War years. By this time, land in the flatter farming areas of southwest Virginia was already populated, so the sturdy adventurers hauled up their meager belongings and walked into these isolated hills.

Some of the earliest to settle here may have been war deserters, using the forbidding terrain as a sanctuary. That is one theory on why the Stiltners came into Buchanan.

Winter in a Poplar Tree

H. Claude Pobst believed that Fredrick Stiltner (patriarch of the large Stiltner clan) had been a German mercenary in the British army during the war, participating in some campaigns around Norfolk before he deserted and made his way to this county. He is said to have reached Sword's Creek in Russell County where he spent a few weeks with a widow and her two children. When he left there, he crossed the Sandy Ridge and traveled down the Levisa River to the lower end of where Grundy now stands.

The traditional tale is that Stiltner, also called Stinger and Stitner, spent that winter in a hollow poplar tree near the mouth of Slate (allegedly near Grundy Junior High). With his rifle and two hunting dogs, he survived until

spring when he returned to the widow, married her, and brought her and her children back to Watkins Branch (now in Royal City) where they built a cabin.

There are several variations in the story. Hannibal Compton's history of the county says it may have been two brothers named Etinger, and Sam Varney Jr. also writes that these early pioneers were brothers, Chris and Dave Stegner, with a third brother whose name is not known. Chris is said to have settled at Bull Bottom, with Dave at the mouth of Poplar Creek, where he had a water mill. The third Stegner settled on Dismal River.

Despite the discrepancies, the Stiltners are still credited with being the first permanent white settlers in Buchanan, then called Sandy.

The truth, which is far less dramatic, is probably closer to Lon Ratliff's theory that several families settled about the same time, with no one particular family being the first. (Ratliff, who has done extensive research on the early families of the area, is of Charlottesville, formerly of Vansant.)

There is no way to prove anything, since the first settlers did not have official land grants until much later. Fredrick Stiltner Jr., possibly the son of the pioneer family, received a grant for 45 acres on the Levisa Fork in 1822, based on an 1816 survey. (6)