In 1975, a small group of people took their first steps toward a dream they shared. On September 24th of that year, they stood together at a place called Dunn’s Meadows near downtown Abingdon, Virginia. Their dream and all that it might encompass lay right there before them. All they had to do was take that first step. They did.

The Overmountain Victory Trail Association (OVTA) was born that year. Their dream: to make sure the story of the Overmountain Men and their campaign to the Battle of Kings Mountain would never be forgotten. They set out that September 24, 1975 to retrace the steps of the Overmountain Men. Steps that led them 225 miles and 14 days to a small mountain top along the South Carolina border. A small mountain called Kings Mountain. A mountain where the courage and commitment to the ideals of independence were tested on October 7, 1780. A mountain where those ideals prevailed. A mountain where the dream was born.

Its now over 25 years later. All but two of those original dreamers are gone-passed on or moved on. But the dream is still there, unchanged, undiminished, serving as the guide for a whole new set of dreamers. New dreamers who still follow the footsteps.

The story of the Overmountain Men — it is simply one of the great stories in the chronicles of the American Experience. It starts back in the latter part of the 18th century when people began moving over the Appalachian Mountains into what is now upper east Tennessee. 1770 it was. They came from Virginia, from North Carolina, from Pennsylvania. They came to this vast wilderness where none of European descent had lived before. They came to the lands of the Cherokee. They came, they built their homes, they came to stay.

They came to lands that were called the Western District of North Carolina. This western district ran from the crest of the Appalachians all the way west to the Mississippi River. They were “over the mountains” now and they became known as the Overmountain People.

The Watauga Settlement was first. Covered the modern day area of Elizabethton and Johnson City, Tennessee. The Sycamore Shoals of the Watauga River was the center of the settlement. Watauga is the Cherokee word for beautiful. The shoals had served as the primary river crossing on the Great Warrior’s Path for thousands of years. The Watauga Old Fields, flat rich bottom land, stretched along the rivers southern bank. The Old Fields became the heart of the new settlement. This was to become the first permanent settlement outside the original 13 colonies.

Over the next couple of years, two more settlements sprang up. The Settlements North of the River Holston, in modern day Bristol, Tennessee/Virginia (the city is split by the state lines) and the Nolichucky Settlements further south between modern day Johnson City and Greeneville, Tennessee.

By 1772 there were enough people in the Watauga Settlements that they had difficulty managing their civic affairs. Petitions to the North Carolina legislature to assist them in land disputes and criminal proceedings and military help against the Cherokee and Shawnee went unanswered. They were Over the Mountains. They were on their own.
Their solution tells us a great deal about these people. They formed the Watauga Pact and drafted a set of rules for them to live by. The first instrument "declaring self governing" to be approved on this continent. Four years before the Declaration of Independence it was.

And then the War came. The Revolutionary War. They were lucky. It started in the north and had stayed there for 5 years. They were untouched and unbothered by the travails that are a part of the landscape of war. But then things changed.

The war had drug on for 5 years. Britain’s King George wanted out. It was a stalemate. The British army under General Clinton was locked down in the North against General Washington and his Continental Army. The King thought it had become too expensive to fight this war across the expanse of an ocean. The British War Minister proposed a solution. Why not sail into the southern colonies, seize the sea ports, raise an army of Loyalists from the countryside—an army they wouldn’t have to pay or clothe—and then march north through the Carolinas and Virginia building the army even larger as they went and trap General Washington up against Clinton and the British red-coat regulars.

In February, 1780 the British fleet sailed into Charleston Harbor and laid siege. Charleston fell in early May. The British now had their foothold in the southern colonies. General Charles Cornwallis, appointed commander over this British southern invasion, issued a proclamation when Charleston fell.

"Any man who shall raise arms against the King, or assist others in the raising of those arms, SHALL BE SUBJECT TO HAVE HIS PROPERTY CONFISCATED."

These words began a reign of terror in the Carolinas that has not been rivaled in our country’s history. Bands of Tories, the Loyalists who supported King George and adhered to the Crown’s sovereignty, roamed the countryside, persecuting those they suspected of being Whigs or separatists. Riders would come into a house in the middle of the night and take what they wanted—clothing, livestock, dishes, cookware, guns.... the women. The men would sometimes be beaten, sometimes killed. The peace that these people had known and had built out of the raw land was shattered and gone. Maybe forever.

And then the approach of summer of 1780. The Waxhalls in late May—the area south of what’s now Charlotte, North Carolina. General Buford and his American army meet Colonel Banastre Tarlton and his mounted dragoons. Tarlton, probably the most ruthless officer in the British army. Buford’s men were defeated and surrendered—raised the white flag. Tarlton rode his dragoons into their midst and with saber hacked 113 of them to pieces. The terror reached a new level.

Then Camden in August. The entire American Southern Continental Army was crushed and wiped out in one afternoon. There was nothing or no one left to protect the countryside. The British Army was on the move, northward, unstoppable. The terror grew and it spread.

A British Army major, Patrick Ferguson, was given the job of building the western wing of this Tory Army from the countryside (the mountain wing). Cornwallis was in the middle and Tarlton was at work on the right (the coastal wing).

Ferguson was a brilliant organizer and soon had over a thousand well-trained men at his disposal—the American Legion they were called. In his eyes, everything was as it should be. His army was growing and new ground was being taken. Everything except for one thing that is. Those militiamen over from the mountains who appeared out of nowhere, struck hard and fast, and then dissolved back into the darkness of the forest. Colonel Issac Shelby. Twenty-nine years old. Commander of the Sullivan County Militia of the Western District of North Carolina—the Settlements North of the River Holston. Lt. Colonel John Sevier. Commander of the Washington County Militia of the Western District of North Carolina—the Nolichucky Settlements.

Through July and August of 1780 the militias of the Overmountain Men came. They pricked Ferguson with small victories and became a constant worry. Ferguson responded in late August with a message sent by a prisoner he released:

“Lay down your arms or I will march my army over the mountain and hang your leaders and lay fire and sword to your homes and fields.”

Do not doubt that that was the wrong thing to say to those people—to those Overmountain Men. The morning of September 25, 1780 saw over a thousand of those Overmountain Men
muster at the Sycamore Shoals of the Watauga River. The site is now Sycamore Shoals State Historic Park in Elizabethton, Tennessee. Colonel Shelby, 240 men. Colonel Sevier, 240 men. Colonel William Campbell of (Abingdon) Virginia, 400 men, Colonel McDowell of the North Carolina Piedmont (current day Morganton, NC), 150 men. Their purpose, their plan, was simple. Do not let Ferguson and his army cross the mountains. Find him, stop him, destroy him. That was their dream. The next morning, they took their first footsteps towards their dream.

But what does all this to do with the Pemberton Oak? Captain John Pemberton commanded a company under Colonel Isaac Shelby. When the call for the grand muster at Sycamore Shoals went out, each captain mustered his company at his home or place of choosing and then they rode together to Sycamore Shoals. Captain Pemberton mustered his company at his home, beneath a large oak tree in his yard. The same tree we today call the Pemberton Oak.

![Fig. 1. The old Pemberton oak as it looks today.](Photo courtesy of the author.)

It is a big tree—an old tree, a white oak (*Quercus alba*). Testing by the National Park Service back about 1980 showed it to be over 500 years old. The DBH, while hard to measure because of the butt swell, is nearly 8 feet. There are huge, thick laterals that were cabled in the 1960’s to prevent their breaking in high winds.

Such advanced age is pretty rare for a white oak. Indeed 300 or so years is considered advanced old growth for this species. But it stands there. Still. It’s owned by Sue Vaughan, a descendent of Captain Pemberton. The farm has stayed in the Pemberton Family all these years. Sue is a sweetheart, opening her yard to all who wish to visit with the tree—pass an hour in its shade, contemplate what it has to say. Those who admire old trees have no doubt walked up to one and wrapped their arms around it to feel the age, the essence, the passing of the years. The awe! The Pemberton Oak has much to say.

The work of those dreamers back in 1975 finally bore fruit (naw, not acorns) in 1980 when President Carter signed legislation designating the route of the Overmountain Men from Abingdon, Virginia to Kings Mountain South Carolina as one of American’s National Historic Trails—the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail. It joined the ranks of Lewis and Clark, Pony Express, The Oregon Trail, the California Trail and the Mormon Trail. Respon-
sibility for managing the trail was given to the National Park Service. Their first chore was to develop a Comprehensive Management Plan that defined the trail, its associated historic sites, and how it would be taken care of. The management plan identified 34 sites along the trail that warrant preservation and protection. The Pemberton Oak is one of those sites. The Overmountain Victory Trail Association (OVTA) became the primary vehicle to take care of the trail and to......tell it's story.

And the OVTA has been doing that for more than a quarter century now. Each year, on September 24th we take our first steps from Dunn’s Meadows in Abingdon. We stop at the Pemberton Oak about 2:00 PM that afternoon and we hold muster just as Captain John Pemberton did on that same day back in 1780. We stand under the same tree and pay tribute because it is the only known living “artifact” from the Campaign of the Overmountain Men.

And then we move on down the trail, following the same route (as much as we can), camping in the same campsites (as much as we can) for the next 14 days until October 7th, the anniversary of the Battle, when we walk into Kings Mountain National Military Park at 3:00 PM in the afternoon.

We follow the footsteps. We tell the story. Boy, do we tell the story. Each day, each night, the communities turn out to feed us our meals and to hear the story of the Overmountain Men. School children, old timers, eager minds and questioning eyes regardless of age, hang on the words. For a moment or two they ride their imaginations and follow the footsteps. They explore the spaces between left foot and right where the story of the Overmountain Men, the story of America resides.

This story was brought to life last year by Charter Communications of Hickory, North Carolina and their production, in association with OVTA, of a new video called, The Road to Kings Mountain. A grant from Stonecutter Foundation in Spindale, North Carolina, allowed OVTA to place that video in over 100 schools along the trail just weeks before the 2001 reenactment.

The dream is being achieved by the new dreamers. The story IS being told. But wait! Stop! When we lose a piece of the trail, we can never stand on that spot and tell the story quite as well ever again. That is becoming our new dream. That is our new reality.

Of the 312 total miles in the trail, only some 50 remain that have not been covered up by modern highways or shopping centers or subdivisions. At the annual meeting in October 2000, the OVTA pledged itself to the protection and preservation of what remains-of those last 50 or so miles of the Campaign of the Overmountain Men. We have developed a trail protection plan and we have contracted to begin the GIS computer mapping of the trail. When that’s done, we’ll find out who owns the land. We’ll find ways to work with those landowners to achieve the highest level of protection that is practical and possible. We’ll keep walking the trail each year. We’ll keep telling the story. We’ll do our best to make sure there’s as much of the trail left to stand on and tell the story from.

But I’ve left you hanging haven’t I? Up over the mountain on the morning of September 26th, 1780. Following the Yellow Mountain Road over the crest of Roan Mountain. Down into Roaring Creek and the headwaters of the North Toe River. Down to Grassy Cove, now Spruce Pine. A choice. From here they must drop off the crest of the Blue Ridge (actually the Blue Ridge Parkway today). There are two routes. If they chose one, Ferguson and his army might be coming up the other at the same time and get in behind them. Their homes, their families would be at the mercy of Ferguson and his men. The decision is made. They split their forces. Campbell and his Virginians go down through Turkey Cove and the waters of Armstrong Creek where they spend the night of September 29th. Shelby and Sevier follow the Yellow Mountain Road down into the North Cove where they spend the night of September 29th (current OVTA president Allen Ray lives on the lands where the Overmountain Men camped that night). Shelby and Sevier receive a visitor that night, Colonel McDowell, himself. He brings word that some 350 militia men from north Central North Carolina will meet them tomorrow at his home in what is now Morganton, NC. He also brings word that Ferguson is encamped at Gilbert Town (current-day Rutherfordton, NC)-three days ride south of his home.

Then the next morning, September 30th, Shelby and Sevier up over Linville Mountain (overlooking Linville Gorge and Hawk’s Bill and Table Rock). Campbell and his men follow

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the North Fork of the Catawba River (north of Marion, NC). They come back together later that day and finish their march to McDowell’s -Quaker Meadows is the name his home is known by. Early evening, Colonel Ben Cleveland and Major Joseph Winston ride in with their 350 men. There is great cheer in camp this night. Their army has grown. They know where their enemy is.

October 1st, on the road. Hard rain. Stop. Send out scouts. No sign of Ferguson. Decide to spend another day at the same camp. Also decide they need an overall commander—a general officer. Militias were not military men. They were volunteers who were called up or called upon to meet some emergency or community need. Enlistments ranged from 30 to 90 days. When the job was done, they went home. They were not issued uniforms or arms. They came to the muster at Sycamore Shoals with their own food, own rifles, own horses, own resolution to bring this business to an end.

So, on October 2nd, 1780 Colonel William Campbell of Virginia was selected to lead the campaign of the Overmountain Men. He had traveled the furthest, brought the most men, and, was the only colonel not from North Carolina. He was the likely choice.

The next morning, October 3, the chase resumed. Traveling about five miles and camped along the waters of Cane Creek. Most important now to get scouts out and not be trapped or ambushed by Ferguson. Next morning October 4, approach Gilbert Town prepared to do battle. Ferguson is gone. Has been gone since late September. Heads hang. Disappointment covers the ranks. They’ve been on the road over a week now. Snow on top of the Roan. Hard rain the last two-and-half days. Food’s almost gone. Eating parched corn and jerky. They are chasing a ghost across the countryside. They are following a thousand-man army. There is nothing left to eat. They are tired. They are hungry. Their dream is dimming.

The pursuit begins anew the next morning. Travel 15 miles or so. Camp at Alexander’s Ford of the Green River (south of Rutherfordton, NC). Middle of the night. A rider comes in yelling loudly for the camp commanders. The sentries almost shoot him. He is blindfolded and taken to Shelby and Sevier and Campbell. He is Colonel William Lacy of the South Carolina militia who has been tracking Ferguson. His men have captured scouts taking a message from Ferguson to Cornwallis. The message asks for reinforcements (Tarlton and his murderous dragoons?) and says that he is retreating towards Charlotte and Cornwallis’s headquarters by way of the road passing Kings Mountain.

Lacy suggests they meet up the next day at the Cowpens in South Carolina—a Tory-owned gathering place for cattle to be shipped to market in Charleston. Lacy and his men arrive in the afternoon. The Overmountain Men arrive just after sunset. They have ridden 29 miles this day. It is the evening of October 6th. It is their thirteenth day on the campaign. It begins raining. Harder. The night is dark—the first quarter moon was two days ago on the 5th.

The best 900 men, the best 900 horses, are selected. The drive for Ferguson has to happen now. If he is reinforced, or if he reaches Cornwallis in Charlotte, the day is lost. Into the night they ride. They remove their frocks or blankets to wrap their flintlock to keep them dry. Through the night, through the rain and the dark, they ride. Resolute men, bound together by their common purpose. They will not fail. They must not fail.

Crossing the Cherokee Ford of the Broad River (east of Gaffney, SC). They stop. They must rest. Shelby rides up, “NO, I will NOT stop, I will ride into the very heart of Cornwallis himself before I stop.” They continue on.

It is mid-day on October 7th. The rain stops. They pause near a house and send in a scout to collect information. They learn that Ferguson and his Army have set camp atop the open, flat crest of Kings Mountain. A girl in the house had delivered eggs to Ferguson’s own camp that morning. These men, these Overmountain Men, do not stop to hold council as an army of military men might do. They simply do not stop. From horseback, they make their battle plans. They will surround the mountain. Each colonel with his militia will take their position and as one, will drive to the crest. (We learn later that Ferguson has said the God Almighty and all his angels will not remove him from this mountain).

The Overmountain Men dismount and hobble their horses back a ways from the mountain. They approach on foot. It is three o’clock. Campbell and his men up one side approaching the crest. They are spotted and fired on and driven back down. Shelby and his men from the other side of the mountain. They too are spotted and fired on. The first ten minutes of the
Battle of Kings Mountain have passed. In those ten minutes, all the other colonel’s have gotten their men in place and are ready. As one, the Overmountain Men, the “yelling boys”, split the air with their war cries and the fire of their rifles. Three times they charge the crest. Three times they are driven back down. Ferguson rides the crest, a blue and white checkered shirt, atop a white horse, blowing commands on his silver whistles. The forth time the charge comes, the Tory line breaks. Ferguson sees that it is not God Almighty and his angels that have come to remove him, it is the Overmountain Men. It is his end.

He breaks for the end of the mountain, right into John Sevier’s men. Nineteen year old John Gilliland sees him coming. Raises his rifle, aims, pulls the trigger. Click. Doesn’t fire. Turns to the man beside him. Sixty-two year old Robert Young. “There’s Ferguson, Get him.” Robert Young answers, “I’ll see what “Ol’ Sweet Lips” can do, (he’d named his rifle after his wife). When Ferguson hit the ground he had eight bullet holes in him. No one knows who did the killing for sure, but Robert Young gets credit. His rifle, Sweet Lips, hangs in the State Museum in Nashville, Tennessee.

A little after four o’clock in the afternoon. The battle is over. It lasted an hour. There are some 65 wounded patriots. There are 28 who will not see the sun set that day. Every single soldier under Patrick Ferguson is either dead or captured. Every single one. The battle is over. The dream is real. Hope begins to spread again.

The Battle of Kings Mountain was the turning point of the Revolutionary War. Three months later, Tarlton and the entire light infantry capability of the southern British Army was defeated at Cowpens (January, 1781). Three months after that, Guilford Courthouse (March, 1781). While the British won the field that day, their commanders lamented that “one more such victory and our cause shall surely be lost.” And it was. Cornwallis surrendered to General Washington at Yorktown in October. The war was over. The American colonies were a free and independent country. The Battle of Kings Mountain helped make that happen.

Fig. 2 An antique postcard (front and back views) from the early 1900’s, showing the famous Pemberton Oak.

Courtesy Gay and Edie Sternberg.
The Pemberton Oak? It’s days are numbered, I am afraid. Martin Milner of the Tennessee Division of Forestry inspected the tree back in 1998 and gave us a prescription to extend its life as long as possible. The tree has heart rot, nearly hollowed out. You wouldn’t know it to look at it, though. A crown spread of probably 150 feet or so. Good mast production in peak years. Martin’s advice was to apply balanced fertilizer under the crown spread twice a year and apply fungicide and insecticide up in the cavity. We’ve been doing that. We have a little revolving fund that helps pay for that.

Oh yeah, Allen Ray picked up a fallen limb. He cut a 2-inch thick disk and then hand sanded and hand rubbed it with linseed oil to a deep, glowing luster. We mounted that on a plaque. The Pemberton Preservation Award. We’ve only given out two. They go to someone who has made a significant, tangible, on-the-ground contribution to the protection of the trail—someone who has actually saved a piece of the trail. What better legacy, huh?

And speaking of legacy, we had some new people join the march last year for the first time. The Bowens from Georgia. They had a whole handful of ancestors in the Battle. They collected a bag full of acorns from the Pemberton Oak. Alan and Scott Bowen, they own a large tree farm in North Georgia. The acorns are in the ground now. Some are growing.

And so I close. We know, one day, a big wind or snow or an ice storm will bring the tree down. It will fall and take its place among the ranks of the Overmountain Men as a memory that we cherish. It will take its place in the Story.

Thanks for listening to our story. Good-bye my friends. Mike.

For more information about the annual reenactment or joining or supporting the Overmountain Victory Trail Association, or to order the Road to Kings Mountain Video, contact OVTA at PO Box 242421, Charlotte, NC 28224-2421. The cost of the video is $25.00. Please make check payable to OVTA. Half the proceeds go towards protecting the Trail!

Mike Dahl has been with the OVTA since 1978. He has followed the footsteps of the Overmountain Men during the annual reenactment over 20 times. He worked as a planner with Tennessee State Parks for 22 years and is a 1977 graduate of the Forest Recreation program at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He has wrapped his arms around the Pemberton Oak. Didn’t even go half way around.

(Editor’s Note: Watch for an update on the Pemberton Oak in the next issue.)