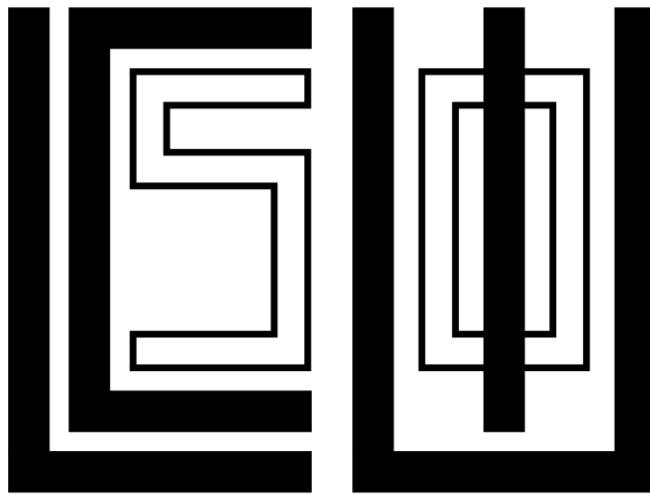


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The *Volunteer State*: An Etiology

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The prevalent folklore on why Tennessee is called the *Volunteer State* is that people from Tennessee have volunteered and fought bravely in many of our country's military endeavors and thus it has acquired the nickname the *Volunteer State*. The *OED*'s earliest reference to the *Volunteer State* is 1853. The *OED* also provides the following quote from the March 20th, 1950 issue of *Newsweek* that ascribes the original use of the term to the Mexican American War of the late 1840s:

A call for 2,800 volunteers [in the Mexican War of 1847] in Tennessee brought out 30,000 men and gave Tennessee its nickname, 'The Volunteer State'.

However, other sources attribute the nickname to earlier military endeavors. Consider the following on-line source regarding this topic:

Tennessee has had several nicknames, but the most popular is "**The Volunteer State.**" The nickname originated during the War of 1812, in which the volunteer soldiers from Tennessee, serving under Gen. Andrew Jackson, displayed marked valor in the Battle of New Orleans playing a prominent role in the War.
[source: <http://www.state.tn.us/sos/bluebook/online/bbonline.htm>]

Although this latter quote strongly asserts that the *Volunteer State* is an old nickname for Tennessee that has been around almost since its admission into the Union in 1797 there is some scholarly skepticism as to whether the nickname *Volunteer State* does go back to the War of 1812. This is made clear by a recent article in *Appalachian Magazine* entitled "Why Tennessee is Called the Volunteer State" although I will not detail this here (but see, <http://appalachianmagazine.com/2016/05/24/why-tennessee-is-called-the-volunteer-state/>).

One question that arises from this background is why Tennessee has been singled out to be called the *Volunteer State*. Surely other states must have had volunteers who fought valiantly in battle and played major roles in our early wars. I would like to suggest that the military association is a secondary interpretation, the original meaning of *volunteer* coming from agriculture: "volunteer plants" were common in Tennessee. The *Dictionary of Smoky Mountain English* (2004, 633) provides the following definition of *volunteer* as applied to plants:

A self-growing plant or crop of vegetables or grain that comes up from old seed either late in the season or in the spring.

References are then given for this usage from the 1960s through the 1990s in North Carolina and Tennessee. I am aware that it is also currently used in Kentucky and southern Indiana and maybe throughout the Midlands by at least some rural residents involved in agriculture. However, the usage is older: the *OED* provides a reference to this use of the word as far back to 1657. The *OED* gives the definition, "A flower or tree which grows spontaneously, a self-sown plant." The two earliest references in the *Dictionary of American Regional English* to *volunteer* are from Albany, New York in 1811 ("They [=Hessian flies] may be found in the volunteer wheat from two to six in every stalk") and Illinois in 1838 ("There is a considerable prospect for a second crop of rye (volunteer)" where in each reference the term is mentioned in passing as if it were common knowledge.

The meaning of *volunteer* as a “self-sown plant” apparently was common in early and mid 19th century America, especially in the South. The most detailed account of its usage in early America is discussed by Francis Lieber in his unpublished *Americanisms, Anglicisms, etc., etc.* Lieber was one of the only linguistically-trained academics in antebellum America. (See Andressen 1990 and Davis 2005, 2015 for information regarding Lieber’s writings and contributions to American linguistics) . He taught at South Carolina College (present day University of South Carolina) from 1835-1856, subsequently leaving there because of his antislavery views. Between 1849 and 1851 Lieber, who was at the time interim president of South Carolina College, compiled a manuscript written in 10 small notebooks (volumes) which he entitled “Americanisms, Anglicisms, etc., etc.” (which Heath 1982 and Andresen 1990 refer to as “Notes on Language”). These volumes, which can be found amongst the Lieber Papers in the Huntington Library, contain over 800 entries. Entries are on words and expressions that Lieber considered to be new (i.e. very recent) or whose usage or form was novel or unusual. Lieber was primarily interested in words and usages that he considered to be Americanisms or Anglicisms (i.e. words or usages in England but not in the U.S); but he was also interested in regionalisms within the United States. In all likelihood, Lieber began compiling the manuscript in response to John Bartlett’s *Dictionary of Americanisms* first published in 1848. He occasionally referenced Bartlett usually to say that Bartlett does not include something or does not have it right. Bartlett did not have an entry for *volunteer*. Lieber has the following entry:

Volunteer

In the South of the U.S., and, I believe, in the whole country, plants which grow spontaneously, but not wild ones, are called volunteers, e.g. lettuce which has sown itself from plants originally planted...In one word, Volunteer in this case expresses the opposite to intentional cultivation...[volunteer plants - plants that grow spontaneously but not wild]
v. 4, 120-121

Lieber’s comments make it clear that the use of the term *volunteer* for plants that grow spontaneously, but not wild, was especially common in the South and might have been known throughout the whole country.

With this understanding, I suggest then that the original reason that Tennessee gained the nickname the *Volunteer State* was because of the nature of its vegetation. I would speculate that the name predates the Mexican War and maybe even the War of 1812. That Tennessee in popular folklore gets singled out as the volunteer state due to the marked valor of its volunteer soldiers was because the word *volunteer* was already associated with Tennessee. It was a place where one frequently encountered volunteer plants. Perhaps because of this association between the word volunteer and Tennessee already existed, it became more readily available to use this term as a state nickname when its volunteer soldiers fought with gallantry in our nation’s early wars. The military explanation for the nickname the *Volunteer State* may be completely secondary replacing its agricultural origin: it is an etiology.

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