

# The Eastern Continental Divide/Proclamation Line: Part of Blacksburg's Fascinating History

By Tom Sherman

The map below shows the Eastern Continental Divide which became an important part of Blacksburg's history.



King George III issued a proclamation on October 7, 1763, that created a boundary between Native American lands and colonial settlements. Running from north to south along the Appalachian Mountain range, the proclamation decreed that colonial settlers would henceforth be forbidden to settle in land west of the boundary, which was to be reserved for Native American use. No individuals or groups would be allowed to purchase western lands without the Crown's explicit consent. Colonial settlers currently living in the western territory were ordered to vacate their lands. In order to enforce the proclamation, Britain stationed troops at forts throughout the region.

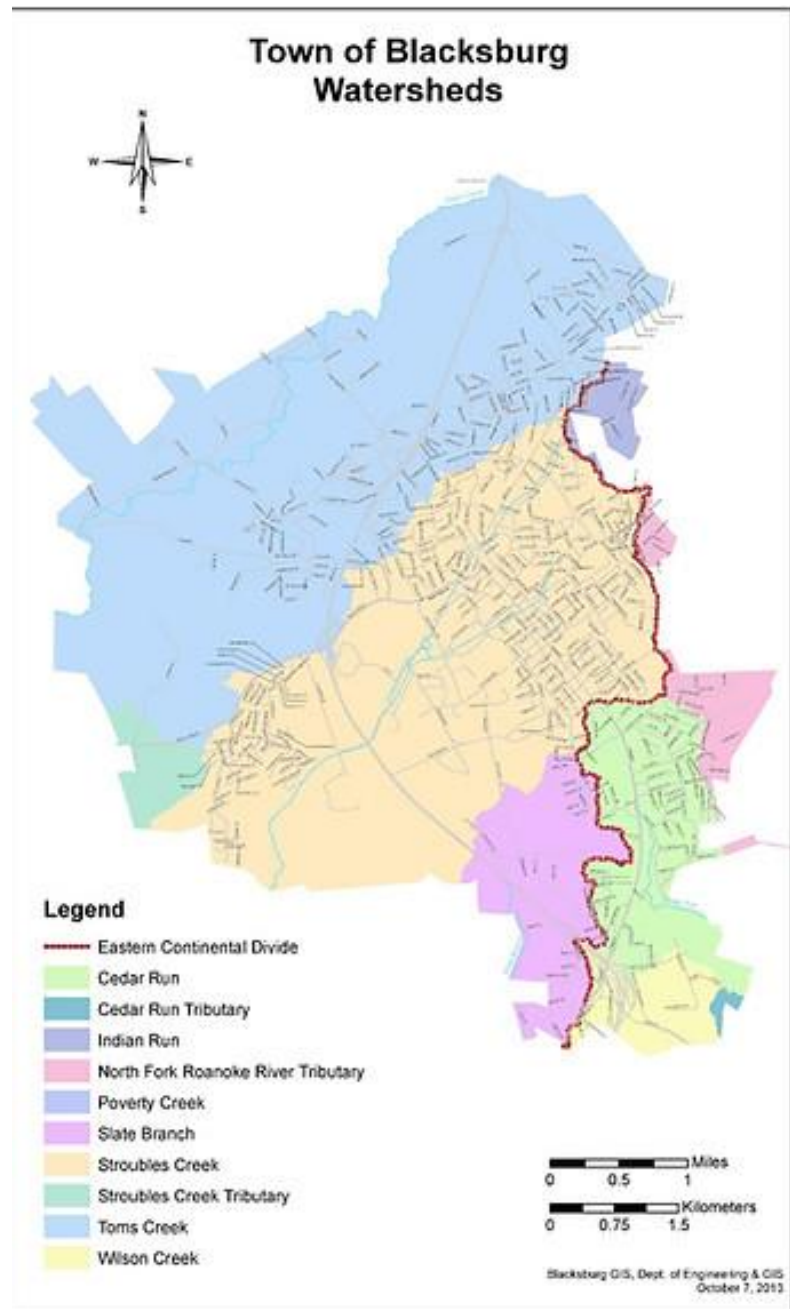
The royal decree came at the end of the French and Indian War, a conflict that had pitted the British against the French and their native allies. Although the British had defeated the French, the conflict was marked by a bloody cycle of violence and revenge on the frontier involving Native Americans and colonial settlers. As the British calculated the immense cost of putting down the uprisings, including Pontiac's Rebellion, they decided to reject a policy of mutual coexistence in favor of separating Native Americans and colonial settlers. The proclamation line thus represented an effort to placate the natives on the frontier, simplify administrative matters, and ease the cost of Britain's military expenditures in North America.

Blacksburg was a major player in United States history relative to this proclamation of 1763 and the "line" it created. The line is the Eastern Continental Divide which runs through Blacksburg. The Divide crosses South Main Street near Sunset Boulevard. A blue line crosses South Main Street there and a historical marker provides a short explanation of the Eastern Continental Divide.

When William Preston chose the spot to build his manor house, Smithfield, reportedly he intentionally chose to build West of the Proclamation Line/Eastern Continental

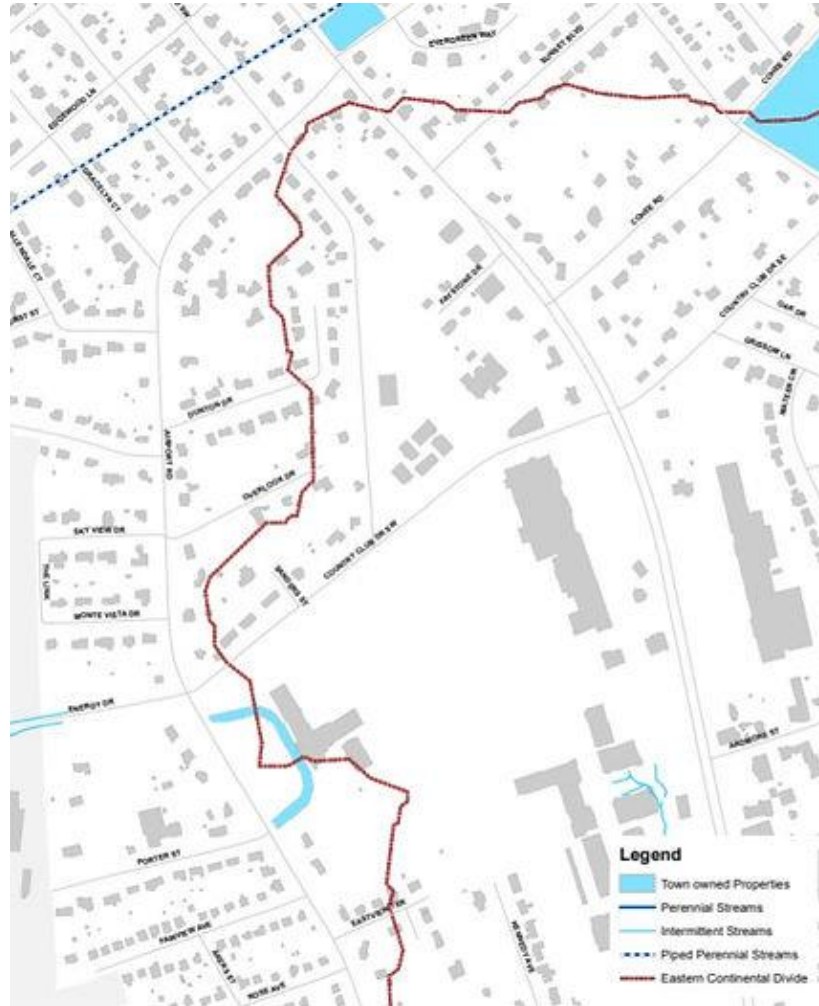
Divide. Today, Smithfield stands where Preston built it to the west of the Divide along Stroubles Creek.

**Map 1** (right) shows how the Divide runs through Blacksburg. The southern part of Town is to the east of the Divide. Water from the pond at First and Main flow into the Roanoke River and ultimately to Pamlico Sound and the Atlantic Ocean. Stroubles Creek runs out of the VT Duck Pond to the west into the New River and, ultimately, to the Mississippi River and the Gulf of Mexico.



**MAP 2** (below) shows the route of the Eastern Continental Divide through the south part of Blacksburg. In addition, to the blue line on South Main Street, the Divide is marked on The Hill, Blacksburg's golf course. Margret Beeks School building sits on top of the Divide. Below is a detail of the Divide in Blacksburg. Keep in mind that the Divide runs through a very populated part of Blacksburg. Much of the construction including road

building has resulted in altering elevations. This is particularly evident on South Main Street at Airport Road. Previously, Main Street ended at Airport which was the road out of town toward Christiansburg. The bulkheads on the east side of South Main indicate the extent to which elevations were altered to build South Main as it currently runs.



In the mid-18th Century, the Divide was a real flash point for people living in this area as well as for the thousands of settlers who were making their way west. Blacksburg was a main way stop for western bound settlers who made their way up the plateau and then out Price's Fork to cross the New River. The natural fords that these early settlers used are still visible in the New River. The restrictions imposed by the Proclamation were considered to be so odious in addition to others like the Stamp Act that just 13 years later, many in this area joined the revolutionaries who declared independence from King George and England in 1776.

In his just published book, "The Blacksburg Drama" historian Hugh G. Campbell tells Blacksburg's rich and long historic story. The book is available for purchase at the museum.