

“NEIGHBORHOOD IN CONSTANT ALARM”: THE BATTLE OF RAMSOUR’S  
MILL AND PARTISAN DIVISIONS IN THE CAROLINA BACKCOUNTRY  
COMMUNITIES DURING THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

By

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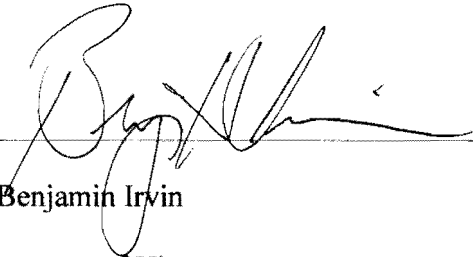
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## **Abstract**

This thesis tracks the development of partisan divisions in the Carolina backcountry during the American Revolutionary War by examining the events and processes that influenced their creation. Chapter one studies how mills created local relationships and interactions within the Carolina interior through their means for food production, drawing the local populace in for social and economic engagement. Chapter two discusses the progress of loyalist and patriot entrenchments from the beginning of the war in 1775 when neutrality predominated until the threat of British invasion in 1780. The passage of local resolves, the Cherokee conflict of 1776, the intervening years of relative peace, the capture of Charleston, and rumors of violent massacre and crime are discussed. In chapter three, a thorough examination of the understudied Battle of Ramsour's Mill of June 1780 features as a case study into the divisions that occurred during the bloodiest portion of the war in the southern theatre as well as the new roles mills acquired as military staging areas and strategic production sites for food provisions. The consequences of the outcome of this understudied conflict within the American Revolution at large are reevaluated in conclusion.

### **Introduction: “Determined to kill”**

On the early morning of June 20, 1780, William Simpson, a patriot militiaman out on scouting duty, rode in silence at a leisurely pace alone through the North Carolina backcountry. A thick blanket of fog surrounded Simpson and his horse in the lush landscape of woods and scattered clearings, the moisture clinging to his skin and linen hunting shirt. With a raised arm, the rider swept aside beads of perspiration on his brow, squinting ahead towards the first rays of sunlight peeking through the mist. But with the dawn the quiet calm soon broke.

An eruption of musket fire came soaring over the thick oak forest from behind, startling both man and beast. Surprise marked the horse’s face with pricked ears and widened eyes as he neighed an acknowledgement to the loud crackling that continued to pour across the trees. Simpson turned about in his saddle, sucking in the humid air with a gasp of shock. The hesitation lasted only a moment before Simpson kicked his mount into a full gallop with a shout, sending wet Carolina earth into the air beneath the animal’s pounding hooves. Although the fog and woods obscured a path, Simpson navigated the wilderness with ease and confidence. He knew this land, he knew his home. Just a few short miles away on the Catawba River sat the small house he and his siblings once played in as children and a brief distance further stood Ramsour’s Mill, the local focal point of the backwoods community.

Simpson knew the source of the gunfire was near the mill. Loyalist militia had gathered at the mill over the course of the past few days. A small contingent of patriot militia dispatched Simpson on his scouting mission earlier that morning to monitor the area near the camp. An engagement must have ignited. Simpson pushed ahead driven by anger, aimed not at the loyalist party directly, but a personal enemy within their ranks, his older brother, Reuben Simpson. A

descendant later recollected that William “rushed back as fast as his horse could run and when the horse was exhausted, he ran afoot, determined to kill his Tory brother.”<sup>1</sup>

The imaginative construction of the above event serves to exemplify the very real hatred that raged between brothers in the Carolina backcountry as they chose sides during the American Revolution. Bitter ruptures occurred not only between siblings, but parents and children, neighbors, and friends. The divisions were not always clearly defined and loyalist and patriot sympathies mingled seemingly sporadically among the different communities.

This thesis plots the development of these partisan divisions by examining the events and processes that influenced them. Chapter one studies how mills created local relationships and interactions within the Carolina interior through their means for food production, drawing the local populace in for social and economic engagement. Chapter one also examines the ethnic, religious, and cultural makeup of these constructed communities essential to the understanding of how its inhabitants cooperated. Chapter two discusses the progress of loyalist and patriot entrenchments from the beginning of the war when neutrality predominated until the threat of British invasion. How the passage of local resolves, the Cherokee conflict of 1776, the intervening years of relative peace, the capture of Charleston, the looming invasion of British forces, and rumors of violent massacre and crime influenced perceptions of the war are all covered in this section. In chapter three, a thorough examination of the understudied Battle of Ramsour’s Mill of June 1780 features as a case study into the divisions that occurred during the bloodiest portion of the war in the southern theatre. The partisan violence that developed among the general population of these mill communities often valued mills for their qualities as military staging areas and strategic production sites of food and provisions. The Battle of Ramsour’s Mill

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Sherrill, *Annals of Lincoln County North Carolina*, (Charlotte, NC: Observer Printing House, 1937), 39.

centered around one of these structures. The consequences of the outcome of this understudied conflict are reevaluated as the conclusion to chapter three.

Despite the Battle of Ramsour's Mill's apparent importance within the southern theatre, little attention has been paid to its occurrence in historical scholarship. One of the most comprehensive and well-known texts on the American Revolution, Robert Middlekauff's *The Glorious Cause*, donates a short paragraph to the Battle of Ramsour's Mill, more generous than some other works that only describe Ramsour's Mill as a small insignificant skirmish.<sup>2</sup> Most historians haven't given the battle more than a few pages of interest even in works focused particularly on the southern theatre of the war.<sup>3</sup> The main reason why such rare consideration has been given to Ramsour's Mill is not entirely due to a lack of knowledge of its occurrence, but rather a lack of known resources to describe its details and offer it any depth of understanding.

The major sources that historians have used for Battle of Ramsour's Mill and the events of the two weeks leading up to its incidence are made up almost entirely of secondary accounts published in the nineteenth century, written by authors who were not present at the battle. The most reliable of these sources is General Joseph Graham's account published in 1825.<sup>4</sup> General Graham was a participant in the partisan fighting that took place in the Catawba River Valley serving under General Rutherford and personally knew many of those involved in the battle on both sides. Graham created his narrative of the battle by collecting testimony from those

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 458.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Birkheimer, "The Battle of Ramsour's Mill," unpublished student manuscript written for Dr. Lawrence Babits' military history course at East Carolina University, (Greenville, NC: 1992); John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 106-110; William L. Carpenter, "The Battle of Ramsour's Mill," pamphlet, (Lincolnton, NC: Lincoln County Historical Association, 1995); Patrick O'Kelley, *Nothing but Blood and Slaughter: The Revolutionary War in the Carolinas*, 3 volumes, (Blue House Tavern Press, 2004), 2: 180-187; Michael C. Scoggins, *The Day It Rained Militia: Huck's Defeat and the Revolution in the South Carolina Backcountry, May-July 1780*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2005), 85-87; James K. Swisher, *The Revolutionary War in the Southern Back Country*, (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 2008), 179-184.

<sup>4</sup> General Joseph Graham, "Battle of Ramsour's Mill," *Catawba Journal*, (Charlotte, NC: 1825).

involved, making it the most trust worthy of the published resources available to historians on Ramsour's Mill. Other published accounts of the battle include C.L. Hunter's in 1877, David Schenck's in 1889, William A. Graham's in 1904, and William L. Sherrill's in 1937.<sup>5</sup> Two additional accounts both written by Wallace Reinhardt in 1903 and 1937 respectively, offer supplemental material that was collected from childhood conversations with an elderly Adam Reep, an alleged participant in the battle.<sup>6</sup> All of aforementioned works base nearly all of their statements upon General Graham's original 1825 account, however, and offer only small amounts of new rather unreliable information gathered from second, third, or even fourth generation descendants of participants. All of the recent historical scholarship that has offered a description of the Battle of Ramsour's Mill have nearly exclusively utilized General Graham's 1825 account, and those later accounts based entirely off of his, as their sole resources in providing evidence for their narratives.

With access to only secondary sources, it is little surprise that recent historians have ascertained only a limited analysis of the Battle of Ramsour's Mill and its participants. The study presented in chapter three has utilized several previously unknown or unused primary sources in reevaluating the narrative of Ramsour's Mill, while also revisiting the traditional secondary sources for verification, comparison, and evaluation of their accuracy. The primary sources used for this process include local property records, extant muster rolls, correspondence, journals, memoirs, and pension records. Federal pension records offer an incredible amount of intimate details from patriot militiamen that fought in the battle. The government offered pensions to

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<sup>5</sup> C.L. Hunter, *Sketches of Western North Carolina*, (Raleigh, NC: The Raleigh News Steam Job Print, 1877), 206-218; David Schenck, *North Carolina, 1780-1, Being a History of the Invasion of the Carolinas*, (Raleigh, NC: Edwards & Broughton, 1889), 51-63; William A. Graham, "The Battle of Ramsour's Mill," (unknown publisher, 1904); Sherrill, 36-40.

<sup>6</sup> Wallace Reinhardt, "The Battle of Ramsour's Mill," *Catawba County News*, October 1903; Wallace Reinhardt, "Account of the Battle of Ramsour's Mill," (Warren A. Fair publisher, 1937).

veterans of the Revolution in the early nineteenth century and several backcountry inhabitants took the offer. Since many backcountry residents lacked a high level of literacy and left little written records to reference, these pension records, which are extensive recollections of the veterans dictated to a justice of the peace or lawyer who transcribed them, offer unique insight into the battle. Individual pensions cannot always be taken at face value because of inaccuracies that arise from the lapse of time, failing memory of the veterans, or personal bias. By collaboratively examining and comparing the details of several of these pensions along with the other extant primary records, however, factual agreement can be established between the sources.

The title of this thesis includes an excerpted quote from Henry Wakefield, a militia soldier in the Carolina backcountry who later applied for a federal pension. The full quote reads that “At this time [summer of 1780] the country [Carolina interior] was overrun with Tories and the neighborhood in constant alarm.”<sup>7</sup> The quote connects the key aspects of the thesis, which is founded in a study of community development and relations, identified by Wakefield’s use of the word “neighborhood.” The words “constant alarm” also suggests the immense tension and fear that pervaded inhabitants of the Ramsour’s Mill community.

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Wakefield, Federal Pension #W35.



## **“A very fruitful Spot”: The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of Revolution and the Importance of Mills as Social Exchange Points**

In order to understand the partisan conflict of 1780 a comprehension the location and how the people there interacted socially and economically, influenced their interactions that created possible motives for their sympathies during the American Revolution. The development of mills and their importance to these backwoods communities is a central component of this environmental context.

The Carolina backcountry constituted a large corridor of land that started about fifty miles inland from the Atlantic coast and stretched to the eastern foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, often labeled the Blue Ridge.<sup>8</sup> This swath of land differed markedly from the coastal and low-country areas of the Carolinas, not only in terms of geography and environment, but also in regards to the lifestyle, economy, social practices and ethnic makeup of the people that inhabited the two distinct areas. In the South Carolina low-county, rice and indigo plantations dominated under the ownership of wealthy English families who used African slaves in their operation.<sup>9</sup> Charleston, the largest city in the southern colonies, was an urban center of shipping,

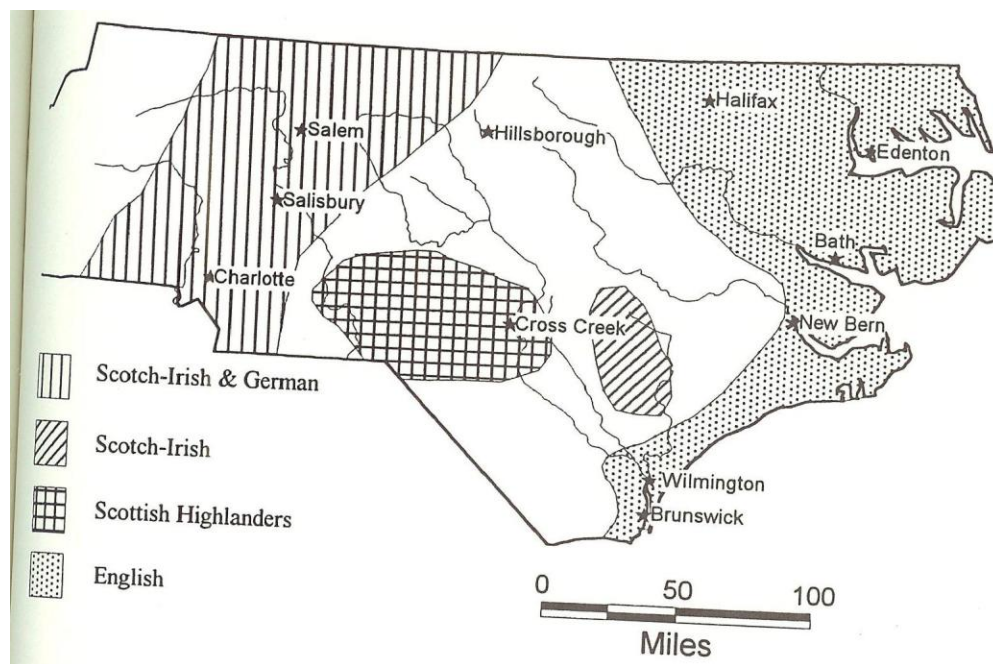
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<sup>8</sup> Scoggins, 19. Also see Ed Southern ed., *Voices of the American Revolution in the Carolinas*, (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2009), xiii.

<sup>9</sup> Uzal Johnson, a loyalist surgeon serving in the low country of South Carolina during the Siege of Charleston in 1780 describes the area as follows: “The part of Georgia and South Carolina we have marched through coming from Savannah is a low, flat country. Sandy soil, not a stone to be seen. The Roads level and good. The natural produce of the land along the Sea Coast of Georgia is chiefly Pine, scarcely a stick of other Timber to be seen. When cleared and cultivated Corn, Cotton and Indigo are raised on the upland, the low swamps laid out in Rice Plantations. Along the Sea Coast much the same land in South Carolina, some Oaks and Hickery [*sic*, hickory] intermixed with the Pines. This part of S. Carolina thick[ly] settled, the most of the Planters very wealthy by manufacturing Indigo, Cotton and Rice. Very bad water in this low country.” See Uzal Johnson, *Uzal Johnson, Loyalist Surgeon: A Revolutionary War Diary, 1780-1781*. Bobby Moss Gilmer, ed. (Blacksburg, SC: Scotia Hibernia Press, 2000), entry for Tuesday, 28 March 1780; journal pages 17-18. For a detailed account of South Carolina slavery and plantation development, as well as demographic and population data on the South Carolina low-country during the eighteenth century see Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974). A population graph of South Carolina showing the disparity of the numbers of whites and blacks due to the plantation economy’s reliance on African slavery appears on Wood, 152.

connecting the Carolinas with the rest of the eastern seaboard and the Caribbean. The land to the west was far from the bustle of Charleston and the surrounding slave plantations and coastal residents dismissively referred to it as the “backcountry.”

Until the 1730s Catawba and Cherokee Native Americans solely populated much of the backcountry.<sup>10</sup> Eventually small groups of settlers, mostly poor Germans, Welsh, and Scotch-Irish began to move further west into the interior of the Carolinas. By the time of the American Revolution, nearly one half of the Carolinas’ population survived in the backcountry, and eighty percent of South Carolina’s white population lived there.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic distinctions between the eastern and western portions of the colonies were greater than black and white, however. The great majority of settlers in the west, especially in the Catawba River Valley, were of



Distribution of European ethnicities in North Carolina in 1775. The Catawba River, just west of Charlotte, is encompassed by Scots-Irish and German settlers. Lee, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Scoggins, 19.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Edgar, *Partisans & Redcoats: The Southern Conflict That Turned the Tide of the American Revolution*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 2.

Presbyterian Scots-Irish origin or ancestry from northern Ireland. The Scots-Irish were individuals whose ancestors had moved from Lowland Scotland and northern England to the Ulster Province in northern Ireland in the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> Germans were a secondary immigrant group to the area. This religious and ethnic makeup of the Catawba River Valley heavily influenced the inhabitants' relations among themselves and the British. On the eastern coasts of the Carolinas, English settlers made up the majority, creating a stark contrast with the interior. Scottish highlanders existed in large numbers in the south-central portion of North Carolina.

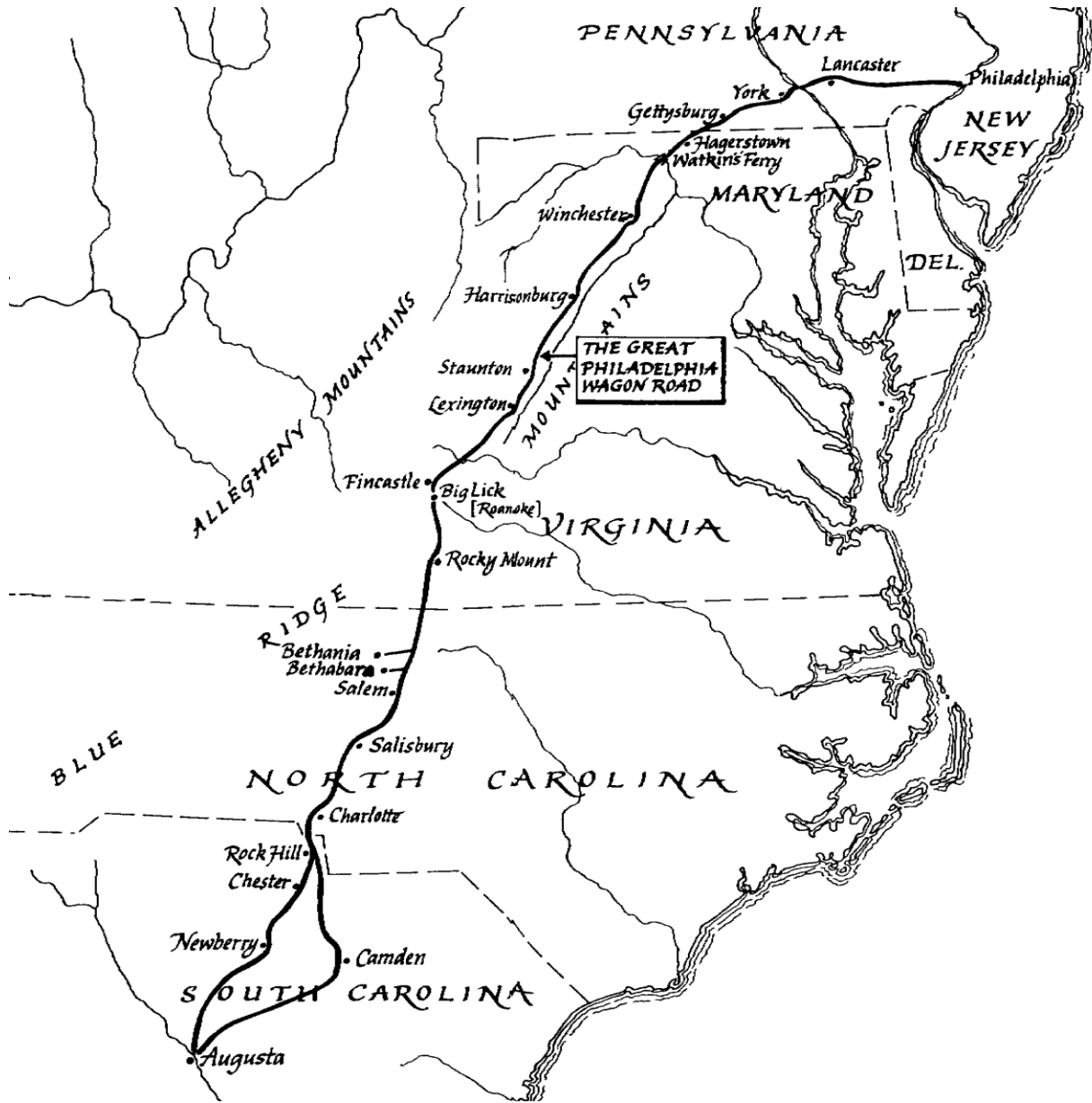
Beginning in the 1740s and 50s, the Great Wagon Road that ran from Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia and into the western Carolinas helped facilitate a large migration of hundreds of new settlers. These pioneers helped to establish the western North Carolina towns of Salem-Winston, Salisbury, and Charlotte which all developed upon the road's path. The settlers that came to the area included first generation Americans traveling down from Philadelphia's harbor after debarking from their trans-Atlantic voyage. A great number of settlers were also from families that had been in the colonies for two, three, or sometimes several generations, however. These individuals came almost entirely from southern Pennsylvania and Virginia and sought backcountry lands because of its cheap and abundant availability, a commodity which was shrinking and becoming more expensive in the east. Between 1700 and 1776 over 100,000 European settlers moved to the Carolina backcountry, but almost all of them arrived in the last decade of that span from 1766-1776.<sup>13</sup>

The Scots-Irish Presbyterian settlers that dominated the backcountry had immigrated from Virginia and Pennsylvania or Ireland directly because of economic reasons. Andrew and

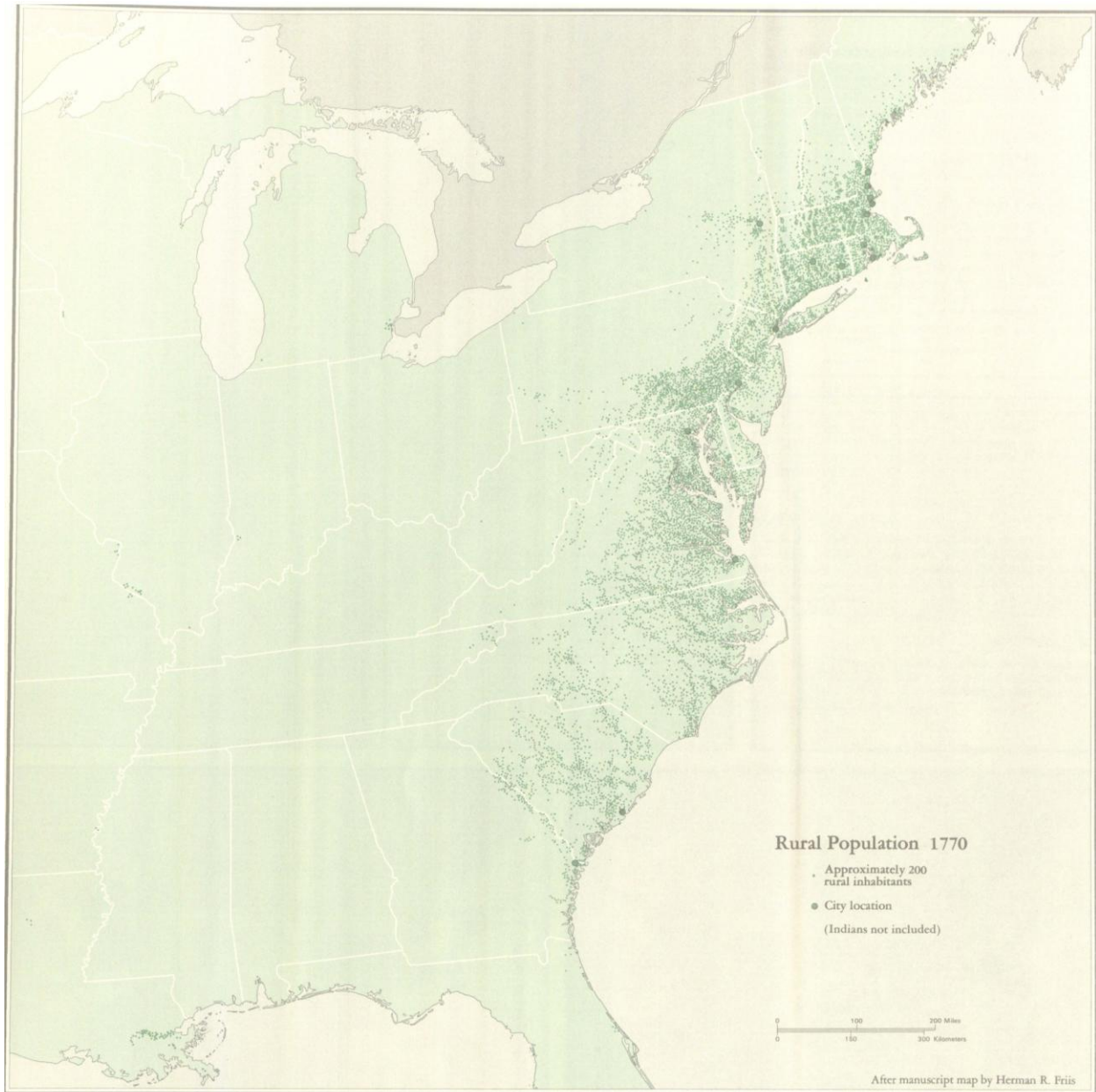
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<sup>12</sup> Scoggins, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Southern, xiii.



The Great Wagon Road.  
[http://www.georgianindex.net/America/wagon\\_road.html](http://www.georgianindex.net/America/wagon_road.html)



Rural Population of the British North American colonies in 1770. Each small green dot corresponds to 200 rural inhabitants. The Catawba River Valley appears within the red box. Lester J. Cappon, ed., *Atlas of Early American History: the Revolutionary Era, 1760-1790*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

Elizabeth Jackson, left Ireland for the Waxhaws region of the backcountry in the 1760s where Andrew Jr. would be born.<sup>14</sup> John C. Calhoun's grandparents were from Ireland, had moved from Virginia to the Waxhaws in 1756.<sup>15</sup> Presbyterian Reverend William Martin posted a notice on his church door in January 1772 that "favorable opportunity" existed in Carolina's backcountry where people could "enjoy life in abundance with the free exercise of their religious sentiments."<sup>16</sup> In September of that year 467 families listened to the clergyman's call and left Ireland for the Catawba River Valley of the Carolinas.<sup>17</sup>

The animosity that the British and colonists of English origin that lived closer to the coast had for Scots-Irish Presbyterians ran high due in large part to the centuries old conflict between Ireland and Britain. Reverend Charles Woodmason, a traveler from Charleston, described the backcountry as "a very fruitful Spot... but it is occupied by a Sett of the most lowest vilest Crew breathing – Scotch Irish Presbyterians from the North of Ireland."<sup>18</sup>

The backcountry was a land of wooded hills and vibrant valleys. The forests that covered the wilderness were made up of towering oak and hickory trees with pine, maple, and understory bushes mixed between. Dense canebrakes sprouted up in the lowest areas along the many rivers and streams that cut through the rich soil. These rivers and their tributaries that snaked through the backcountry corridor began in the higher elevations of the Appalachian Mountains eventually combining together into the Santee River that flowed out into the Atlantic on the South Carolina coast.

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<sup>14</sup> Edgar, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Edgar, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Edgar, 5; Scoggins, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Edgar, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Woodmason, *The Carolina Backcountry on the eve of the Revolution; the Journal and other writing of Charles Woodmason, Anglican itinerant*, Richard J. Hooker ed., (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 88.

The Catawba River that runs just west of the then small town of Charlotte, North Carolina transects the North-South Carolina border and is the main geographic area at the focus of this study. The Catawba River Valley had many arterial streams and creeks running off of it and settlers made their homes along these waterways. The water of the rivers remained clouded with the soil and vegetation of the thick forests that grew beside them. During heavy rains the banks of the Catawba and its tributaries flooded to enormous levels beyond their normal depths. The fords along these waterways were points of access across the land and during the war became strategic crossing locations for militia groups and the British and American armies. Mills built upon these same waterways utilized water-powered wheels to grind the grain of the local settlers, acting as centers of food production and economic importance. They likewise became strategic points of interest during the war.

When settlers first arrived in the area, no mills existed and colonists relied on the forests' abundance to survive. In the clearings and forests along the rivers and streams a variety of wild game could be hunted including deer, turkeys, quail, ducks, geese, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, bears, foxes, squirrels, wolves, and even panthers. The muddy waters of the Catawba and its streams were filled with catfish, trout, bream, and other fish. Flocks of thousands of wild passenger pigeons still darkened the sky, casting huge mobile shadows upon the ground. This abundance of life attracted and sustained European settlement to the area, early settlers even utilizing buffalo in their diet, the creatures having roamed the area until hunting eliminated them from the Carolinas in the 1760s. Historian Walter Edgar explains that "ironically, it was the buffalo runs or paths, transformed into trading routes by Indians and Europeans, that became the highways that helped open up the backcountry to settlers."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Edgar, 2.

William Brown, a planter in Albemarle County, Virginia decided to leave with his family for the Carolina backcountry in 1769. William and his family of ten were typical of the settlers that came to the backcountry in search of more land and a better living. William's son, Tarleton Brown was twelve years old when the family made the journey down the Great Wagon Road. Brown later wrote his memoirs recalling that journey, describing what he and his family found when they arrived at their new home. Brown reiterates the abundance of wild animals that roamed through the woods along the river banks: "The forest abounded with all kinds of game, particularly deer and turkeys – the former were almost as gentle as cattle. I have seen fifty together, in a day's ride in the woods. The latter were innumerable, and so very fat, that I have often run them down on horseback."<sup>20</sup>

When they first arrived the Brown family used a "bark tent" as "shelter for several weeks" until they could "erect a rude dwelling of logs."<sup>21</sup> The homes of the backcountry largely consisted of small wooden structures, usually one story, but sometimes two. Two examples of these backcountry homes still stand today, one built in 1771 in the Saxe Gotha District of South Carolina and the other built in 1780 in Alamance County, North Carolina. The structures utilized the huge pine trees of the surrounding forest for their lumber, while chimneys were made from local fieldstones. Settlers filled the crevices and openings between the wooden beams with clay from the rivers. Windows were rare and usually a small door acted as the only opening. Many built their homes along the waterways and the Catawba and dotting the river and its tributaries with homes, spread apart at the distance of each landholder's tract.

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<sup>20</sup> Tarleton Brown, *Memoirs of Tarleton Brown*, 1843. Published 1862, Charles I. Bushnell, ed., 8.

<sup>21</sup> Brown, 8.





Typical backcountry home built in 1780, Alamance County, NC. Author's photograph, July 2009.

Brown explains that “having cleared a piece of land, we planted and found the soil to be exceedingly fertile in the river swamp, producing abundant crops.”<sup>22</sup> The growth of agricultural crops was surprisingly not the central focus of the backcountry economy at first, however. The early absence of mills in the area that settlers required to grind corn and other grains into flour for consumption and sale required them to look toward alternative means of survival and profit after diminishing larger game from the forest. Cattle raising strangely enough took the place of agriculture during the early period of backcountry settlement. Cattle were already present when the settlers arrived, roaming freely in the woods like wild animals. During the seventeenth

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<sup>22</sup> Brown, 8.

century in Virginia, and the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in the Carolinas, free range cattle raising was common near the coastal areas of these respective colonies.<sup>23</sup> During the first decades of South Carolina's settlement in the 1670s and 80s, the early settlers developed a subservient relationship to the colony of Barbados in which they raised beef and sent it to the populous sugar plantations in the Caribbean.<sup>24</sup> African slaves had been instrumental in instituting the practice of free range livestock grazing at this time. Slave dealers that sold to South Carolina even had a preference for slaves captured from the region of the West African Gambia River because of their experience in tending large cattle herds in their native land.<sup>25</sup> The consequences of these free range livestock practices would stretch decades beyond their original introduction. Wild cattle, pigs, and even horses traveled further into the interior of the Carolinas and by the time Tarleton Brown reached the backcountry they were numerous inhabitants of the forests while most human habitation was still miles away.

Brown states that in 1769 in the Carolina backcountry "it was a very common thing to see two hundred [cattle] in a gang in the large ponds. In any month in the year, beeves in the finest order for butchering, might be obtained from the forest." In one spring, one enthusiastic settler marked "seven hundred calves."<sup>26</sup> Not only did wild cattle and pigs offer settlers economic opportunity, but wild horses as well. Brown describes that "there were a great many wild horses running at large in the forest when we first settled in the district, a number of which were caught and sold by various individuals, who pursued exclusively, the business for a livelihood."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed description and analysis of these free range cattle practices in early Virginia and how these practices transformed the environment and influenced events see Virginia DeJohn Anderson, *Creatures of Empire: How Domestic Animals Transformed Early America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Wood, 32-34.

<sup>25</sup> Wood, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, 9.

Brown explains that “our produce for market was beef, pork, staves, and shingles.” The beef and pork originated from the wild livestock, while the wooden staves and shingles were a virtue of the immense woodlands and access to lumber. These products dominated while “there was but little corn planted in that section then; and indeed there was scarcely any inducement to plant more than sufficed for our own consumption, there being but few mills in the country, and consequently very little demand for the article.”<sup>28</sup> This all changed once settlers caused cattle numbers to decline and the wild horses to disappear.

Mill construction in the 1760s and 70s catalyzed a move towards an agriculturally based economy. Mills required flowing water to power their wheels and the Catawba and its several creek and stream offshoots were an excellent environment for their construction. “Very inferior” roads which were “not much better than common bridle paths” soon developed into thoroughfares of commerce for farmers who needed to transport their crop to the local mill to be ground into flour.<sup>29</sup> These roads crossed waterways by way of fords or ferries. Mills and their common areas soon became the local focal point of community interaction, individuals who sometimes lived miles away from each other coming together at the mills first out of necessity and later out of the desire for social gathering. By the time the American Revolution began, mills and the agricultural revolution they had caused made farming the dominant livelihood of the backcountry. The mills not only transformed the economies of the backcountry, but increased the level of social exchange, transfer of political news, and trade in goods from the east acting also as a central marketplace.

Religion remained a pillar of these Scots-Irish settlers’ existence and Presbyterianism soon dominated the Catawba River Valley. Presbyterian Meeting Houses remained few and far

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<sup>28</sup> Brown, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Brown, 9.

between, however, only twenty-one existed across the entire Carolina backcountry (one located in the Waxhaws region south of Charlotte). As a result ninety percent of the backcountry population did not attend church services.<sup>30</sup> In the absence of religious meeting houses, the social bonding and communal exchange that typically occurred at churches was left to the mills that were so important to the backcountry inhabitants' livelihoods.

Although Scots-Irish dominated the settlement of the Catawba River area, there were some English, Welsh, and German immigrants that made their way to the river valley. A German settler, Derrick Ramseur, was the first that built a grist mill in the area in 1769, the mill passing to his son Jacob Ramseur in 1772 after his death. A buckskin bound memorandum book belonging to Derrick's other son, John Ramseur, details how to build a plow, wind mill, reel, and barrel, information he obtained on a trip to Pennsylvania foreshadowing the family's interest in mill construction.<sup>31</sup> The scarcity of mills made them an economic boon to their owners, some millers charging one-tenth of whatever they ground for their customers.<sup>32</sup> The mill became the central hub of social interaction for the entire vicinity and locals erroneously pronounced and later spelt it "Ramsour's Mill." The mill would become a location of contention and vicious battle between the inhabitants less than a decade later.

Another entrepreneur of the Catawba River Valley was William Hill who immigrated to the area from Ireland in 1762. There was iron ore on Hill's property and in 1775 Hill began operating an open-pit mine and iron forge, the southernmost example in the entirety of British

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<sup>30</sup> Edgar, 10.

<sup>31</sup> John Ramsauer Memorandum Book (1752-1795). University of North Carolina, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection. Collection# 01747-z.

<sup>32</sup> Edgar, 21.

North America.<sup>33</sup> Like Ramsour's Mill, William Hill's iron furnace would also become a place of interest during the American Revolution.

Not everything was peaceful in the backcountry prior to the Revolutionary War. Many incoming settlers seized lands that had for centuries belonged to Cherokee Native Americans and during the French and Indian War the Cherokee, with French encouragement, launched a massive attack upon the backcountry settlements in retaliation. Families on the frontier clamored to scattered forts and war broke out that included massacre as much as battle. Savagery took place on both sides of the conflict. Cherokee raiding parties killed men, women and children indiscriminately and Carolina militia responded in kind. Both sides practiced scalping as well, the trophies treated like animal hides. During the conflict the South Carolina House of Assembly in Charleston raised the bounty on Cherokee scalps from 25 to 35 pounds.<sup>34</sup> Carolina militia made three campaigns into Cherokee territory from 1759-1761.<sup>35</sup> With British assistance the militia pushed the Cherokees to the western edges of the colonies, but the conflict remained prominent within the memory of both the settlers and the natives. In 1769, eight years after the conflict's end, it was still clear to John Stuart, the Royal Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the southern district, that the seizure of their land still angered the Cherokees. Stuart spoke of the Catawba River Valley in saying "near the Boundary, that Country is full of inhabitants, which in my memory was considered by the Indians as their hunting Ground, such is their rage for settling far back."<sup>36</sup> It was clear to Stuart and others that the Cherokee were not content with the settlements after their defeat.

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<sup>33</sup> Edgar, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar, 13.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed account of the Cherokee War see Tom Hatley, *The Dividing Paths: Cherokees and South Carolinians Through the Era of Revolution*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119-140.

<sup>36</sup> Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (New York: Atheneum, 1952), 121.

The Catawba, a much smaller tribe than the Cherokee, remained allies to the English during the entire Cherokee conflict of the French and Indian War and helped to protect backcountry colonists. The Treaty of Augusta in 1763 established a reservation for the Catawba as recompense just southwest of Charlotte, North Carolina which remains in existence to this day.<sup>37</sup> The trading relationship that the settlers and Catawba developed at this time would go on to influence the Catawba's decision to ally with the patriot militia when partisan warfare broke out in the area during the American Revolution.

On top of the struggles with the Cherokee, the War of the Regulation created conflict in North Carolina between backcountry inhabitants and government officials in the east regarding taxes, culminating and ending in the Battle of Alamance in 1771. The Regulator Movement is a complex subject enough for a book of its own. The Catawba River Valley was far enough away that many inhabitants here did not get involved in the conflict as intensely as those further to the east. Those in Mecklenburg County and much of the rest of the Catawba River Valley largely did not heed Governor Tryon's militia requests in 1771.<sup>38</sup> There are no direct parallels that can be drawn between the divisions that occurred during the Regulator Movement and the partisan conflict during the American Revolution. Two individuals, Francis Locke and Griffith Rutherford were busy enforcing tax laws in the Catawba River Valley during the Regulator Movement in 1771, yet they both would become the two highest ranking patriot militia officers involved in the build up to the Battle of Ramsour's Mill in 1780.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Edgar, 13.

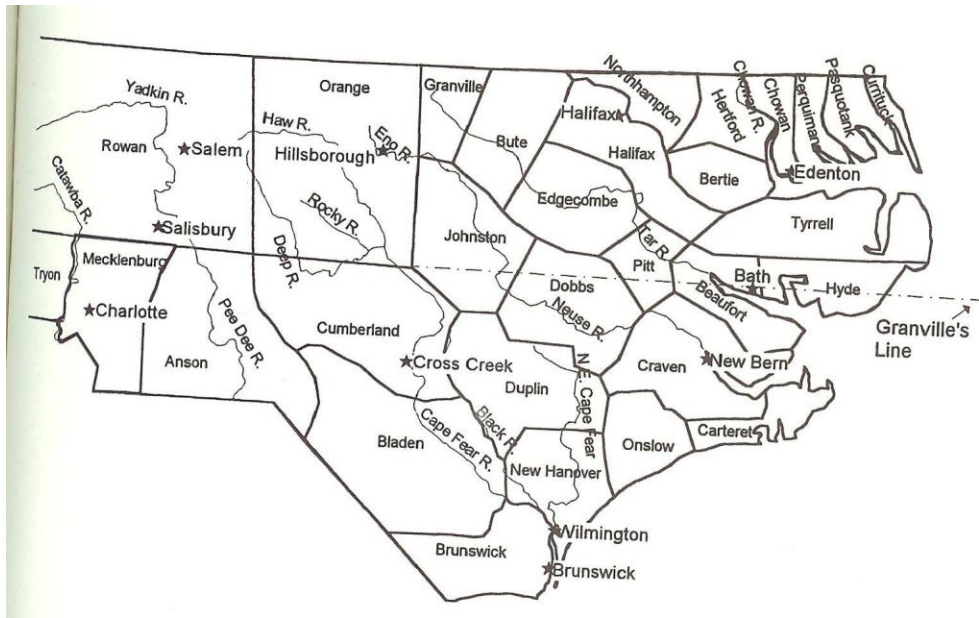
<sup>38</sup> Wayne E. Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001), 78.

<sup>39</sup> NC Assembly Session of Nov-Dec 1771. "Bill for further enabling Francis Locke, Andrew Allison, Griffith Rutherford, and William Temple Coles to collect taxes." North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC. Call# 3A.464, Box 5.

Between 1771 and 1775 conflict remained relatively eased and talk of British taxes remained rather removed from backcountry concerns. Mills continued to develop and Ramsour's Mill became the center of social exchange, trade, and community activity for Catawba River Valley inhabitants in Tryon, Mecklenburg, and Rowan Counties of North Carolina. The Catawba River made up the boundary between Tryon and Mecklenburg, while Rowan lay to the north. Rowan and Tryon were the westernmost counties of North Carolina, bordering the Appalachian Mountains and Cherokee Territory. Aside from the small towns of Charlotte located in Mecklenburg County, and Salisbury and Salem in Rowan County, the inhabitants of these three counties lived a distance from each other. Each family owned individual tracts of land upon which they lived and worked. Because of this mills were essential to the development of communities through the gathering of distant neighbors. Corn was the staple crop and family members brought the harvest to Ramsour's Mill on Clark's Creek, a small tributary of the Catawba, for grinding. The mill, unlike taverns of the New England colonies did not exclude individuals because of gender or age. Men, women, and children of all ages could be found gathering near the mill on any given day. Several roads threaded the forests and crossed fords at the rivers and streams to reach the location.<sup>40</sup> In this way, the mill not only increased community interaction, but road quality and transportation of trade goods. The unique qualities that the mill possessed within the community, and the river fords on the roads necessary to access them, would certainly be of importance if fighting were to break out once again. Peaceful trade and interaction took place, but the threat of another Cherokee attack from the west always loomed. Such was the state of the Catawba River Valley of the Carolina backcountry in 1775.

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<sup>40</sup> Edgar, 21.



North Carolina counties in 1769. The counties that encompassed the Catawba River Valley include Tryon, Mecklenburg, and Rowan, outlined in red. The Catawba River forms the border between Mecklenburg and Tryon. Lee, 23.



**Prelude to Civil War: The Carolina Backcountry from 1775 - May 1780**

The American Revolution had four distinct phases in the Carolina backcountry. The first which in 1775 featured the most zealous patriots and loyalists declaring their sentiments, while the majority remained neutral. This period establishes the sentiments of backcountry inhabitants possessed before ongoing events of the war began to influence their evolution. A mostly combined effort to fight the Cherokee threat from the west encompassed most of the second phase in 1776. The extreme cruelty shown against the Cherokees during this phase contains the origin of the militia's capacity to commit such heinous acts which backcountry inhabitants would come to perpetrate against each other as partisan divisions deepened. The third phase was one of relative peace from 1777 to 1780. The fourth phase, from 1780-1781 by contrast involved the heaviest fighting in the south and some of the bloodiest battles of the war as a British invasion prompted everyone in the backcountry to choose sides. This chapter discusses the first three of these four phases, the events of which they encompass greatly influenced the decisions made in the fourth.

When the Revolution broke out in April 1775, backcountry inhabitants had already been concerned about ongoing tensions in other parts of the colonies. The actions of the Catawba River Valley colonists over the course of the next five years constitute the build up to the widespread partisan conflict which would erupt in the summer of 1780. In 1775, interest in the course of the war in the east, further conflict with the Cherokee, and local developments all fed a growing division amongst the backcountry communities that would eventual divide the inhabitants between patriot and loyalist.

In Mecklenburg County a convention was assembled in Charlotte on May 19, 1775 and after receiving news of the Battles of Lexington and Concord by express, the assemblage allegedly declared independence on May 20, 1775. The document, referred to as the Mecklenburg Resolves, Mecklenburg Declaration, or Meck Dec for short, has become somewhat of a legend in North Carolina history. The date of the supposed document even appears on North Carolina's state seal and flag.<sup>41</sup> The University of North Carolina's Wilson Library has a collection of period documents written by signers or witnesses of the resolves which allows for a reconstruction of the possible text of the Mecklenburg Resolves (see Appendix A).<sup>42</sup> John McKnitt Alexander, one of the alleged signers wrote that at the assemblage in Charlotte "a motion was made to declare ourselves independent of the Crown of Great Britain, which was carried by a large majority."<sup>43</sup> While the actual document does not survive and skepticism still pervades about its existence, it is without question that Mecklenburg's leading citizens did meet in May 1775 to discuss the volatile situation in the colonies.<sup>44</sup> This gathering is evidence of the backcountry's knowledge and concern at an early stage for the ongoing conflict.

Upon hearing of the Mecklenburg Resolves, Royal North Carolina Governor Josiah Martin wrote "I have seen a most infamous publication, importing to be resolves of a set of people styling themselves a committee for the county of Mecklenburg, most traitorously declaring the entire dissolution of the laws, government and constitution of this country, and setting up a system of rule and regulation repugnant to the laws and subversive of his Majesty's government."<sup>45</sup> Governor Martin later stated that the Mecklenburg Resolves "surpass all the

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<sup>41</sup> Southern, 5; O'Kelley, 1:28.

<sup>42</sup> Mecklenburg Declaration Papers (1775-1982), University of North Carolina, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, collection #00501.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Southern, 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

horrible and treasonable publications that the inflammatory sprits of this Continent have yet produced.”<sup>46</sup>

Following the Mecklenburg Resolves and news of the outbreak of war, Catawba River Valley residents began to fear a British encouraged attack by the hostile Cherokees and a repeat of the atrocities that they had experienced less than fifteen years ago. In Tryon County, just across the River from Mecklenburg, a group of residents adopted the Tryon Resolves. The document, which was signed by forty-nine leading male citizens on August 14, 1775, vowed resistance to any aggressive actions perpetrated by the British. Unlike the Mecklenburg Resolves, the Tryon Resolves did not go so far to declare independence, and instead stated “firmly to resist force by force, and hold sacred till a reconciliation shall take place between Great Britain and America on Constitutional principals, which we most ardently desire”<sup>47</sup> (see Appendix B for full text of the resolves). Some of the signers of the resolves would go on to fight in the Battle of Ramsour’s Mill in less than five years, some on the side of the patriot militia while others joined the side of the loyalists. The individuals who remained loyalists may have signed the resolves by their own choice or may have been pressured into the act as the last line of the document reads that the group would “hold all such persons as inimical to the liberties of America who shall refuse to sign this association.”<sup>48</sup> Such an ingrained threat would become commonplace in the following years as both patriot and loyalist recruiters forced oaths of allegiance to any they encountered, a refusal often times resulting in the destruction or seizure of property or even death. Many settlers who favored greater representation and freedom for the colonies would increasingly draw the line at signing their name to a document “they considered

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<sup>46</sup> Hugh F. Rankin, *The North Carolina Continentals*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 13.

<sup>47</sup> Tryon Resolves, 14 August 1775. Alfred Nixon, “The History of Lincoln County,” *The North Carolina Booklet*, Vol. IX, no. 3, January 1910.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

treasonous to their lawful sovereign, a decision that pushed them into the ranks of the hard-line Loyalists.”<sup>49</sup>

In the summer of 1775 the Provincial Congress of South Carolina sent a delegation to the Carolina backcountry to persuade the people there to join the patriot cause.<sup>50</sup> Some desired to stay loyal to Britain out of fear of losing a royal land grant, while some leaders including William Hill (the owner of the iron furnace) immediately threw their support to the patriots. Ethnic or religious background does not provide a simple explanation for why some became loyalists and others patriots although the Scots-Irish “were the dominant cultural group of the Carolina back country, and they brought with them a long heritage of pride and clannishness, developed over centuries in a contested and often lawless frontier that was the site of nearly constant invasions, wars, feuds, and banditry on both large and small scales.”<sup>51</sup> Many based their decision out of their own personal connections within the community, whether they be familial, social, or economic. Most of the backcountry inhabitants wanted to be left alone, however, and many thought that the conflict with England as a low-country problem that should not concern them.<sup>52</sup> When a large group of neutral individuals and loyalists refused to sign a document that threatened force if they did not join the patriot cause, a loyalist uprising occurred in the South Carolina backcountry in October 1775.<sup>53</sup> 1500 loyalists attacked a patriot fort at Ninety Six on November 19, 1775 marking the first blood of the Revolution in the Carolina backcountry.<sup>54</sup> This initial violence was only the beginning, these initial incidents usually involving the most ardent loyalists, while neutral individuals had the ability to remain uninvolved.

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<sup>49</sup> Scoggins, 25.

<sup>50</sup> Scoggins, 27; Edgar 31.

<sup>51</sup> Southern, 13.

<sup>52</sup> Southern 17; Edgar 30.

<sup>53</sup> Scoggins, 31.

<sup>54</sup> O’Kelley, 1: 59-63.

In June 1776, General Sir Henry Clinton, the commander of British forces in North America, made his first attempt to capture the city of Charleston. Weather conditions and a successful patriot defense of Sullivan's Island prevented the success of the attack, causing Clinton's fleet to return to New York.<sup>55</sup> The attempted attack brought the Revolution closer to the minds of the backcountry inhabitants, however.

While the threat of a British invasion loomed on the eastern coast, most backcountry inhabitants were more concerned about an attack from the Cherokee. As early as the summer of 1775, John Stuart, the Royal Superintendent of Indian Affairs recognized that "nothing can be more alarming to the Carolinas than the Idea of an attack from Indians."<sup>56</sup> In July 1776, that fear became a reality when the Cherokee made their long-dreaded attack on the entire southern frontier from Virginia to Georgia, with the Carolina backcountry sustaining the brunt of the attack. It started with rumors as early as May that white colonists had been killed and "horribly mutilated," their bodies butchered into many pieces.<sup>57</sup> In June reports surfaced that a British agent, Alexander Cameron had instructed the Cherokee to not take prisoners, but to kill indiscriminately.<sup>58</sup> Finally, in July credible reports of Cherokee raids on men, women, and children in ambushes near their homes came to the militia leaders' attention.<sup>59</sup>

Tryon County militia Brigadier General Griffith Rutherford warned on July 14 that "the Indins is making Grate prograce, in Dstroying & Murdering, in the frunteers of this County, 37 I am informed was killed last Wedensday & Thursday, on the Cuttaba [*sic*, Catawba] River, I am also informed that Colo McDowel 10 men more & 120 women & Children is Beshaged... I

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<sup>55</sup> John S Pancake, *This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782*, (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1985), 20-25; A detailed description of this first attack on Charleston appears in O'Kelley, 1: 115-131.

<sup>56</sup> John Stuart to Earl of Dartmouth, 21 July 1775, *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, William L. Saunders, ed., 10 Volumes (Raliegh: various publishers, 1886-90), Vol. 10: 117-118.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, 159.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

<sup>59</sup> Edgar, 36.

Expect the Next account to here, that they are all Destroyed.”<sup>60</sup> Rutherford, a Scots-Irish settler of the backcountry community near Ramsour’s Mill would become a prominent leader in the ensuing Cherokee offensive of 1776 and would later be a leading figure during the conflict with the loyalists in the summer of 1780.

Upon increasing reports of Cherokee attacks, the Committees of Safety that Tryon and other counties had created soon went into motion, calling up their militia. In July 1776 the Rowan County Committee declared that “[The British intend] letting loose upon our defenceless frontier a torrent of blood, by the savage rage of Indian barbarity; who are ordered a supply of arms and ammunition, by Lord North, immediately to attack us, and [who] resent the inhuman cruelties of the last war. Ripping infants from the wombs of their expiring mothers; roasting Christians to death by slow fire.”<sup>61</sup> When the first Cherokee prisoners were taken at an early engagement, patriot militia found local loyalists disguised as Native Americans among their numbers.<sup>62</sup> This was proof to the patriots that the British had in fact encouraged the Cherokee to strike while colonists in the east were preoccupied with the attack on Charleston. While this was not in reality true, loyalist sympathizers of the Catawba River Valley had kept up relations with the Cherokee throughout 1776.<sup>63</sup> The resulting emotions of this discovery inflamed the anger felt towards loyalists who declared their position.

Backcountry inhabitants that would later belong to both the patriot and loyalist sects rallied to fight the Cherokee. Many who were united in this campaign against the “savagery” of the Cherokee would soon be divided during the summer of 1780. David Ramsay, a local

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<sup>60</sup> Griffith Rutherford to the Council of Safety, 14 July 1776, *The Colonial Records of North Carolina*, 10: 669.

<sup>61</sup> The Journal of the Committee of Safety for Rowan County, in John H. Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina from 1584-1851*. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Company, 1851), 366.

<sup>62</sup> Edgar, 36.

<sup>63</sup> David Fanning, *The Narrative of Colonel David Fanning, A Tory in the Revolutionary War with Great Britain, Giving an Account of his Adventures in North Carolina*, 1790. John Wheeler, ed., (Published Richmond, VA, 1861), 3-4.

inhabitant reflects on this unification stating that the Cherokee attacks “increased the unanimity of the inhabitants... Several who called themselves Tories in 1775 became Whigs in 1776, and cheerfully took arms in the first instance against the Indians.”<sup>64</sup> The patriot leaders in Charleston urged the backcountry militia to “cut up every Indian cornfield... and burn every Indian town.”<sup>65</sup> That exact mission was soon completed, the militia bands going west into and across the Blue Ridge Mountains razed any Cherokee crops or villages that came within their path. The militia killed or sold into slavery any Cherokee prisoners that they captured along the way as well.<sup>66</sup>

Resentment towards the Cherokee ran high and little mercy was offered to any that crossed paths with the militia of the Catawba River Valley. North Carolina leaders asserted that to end the conflict the militia must “carry fire and Sword into the very bowels of their country and sink them so low that they may never be able again to rise... To extinguish the very race of them and scarce to leave enough of existence to be a vestige in proof that a Cherokee nation once was, would perhaps be no more than the blood of our slaughtered countrymen might call for... mercy to their Warriors is cruelty to ourselves.”<sup>67</sup> In September, the Battle of the Black Hole occurred in which a group of loyalists and Cherokee warriors surrounded over 1,000 patriot militia in a gorge exposed to their deadly fire from above.<sup>68</sup> Catawba Native Americans, who had supported the backcountry settlers in the fighting against the Cherokees during the French and Indian War supported the patriot militia during this battle and aided them in an astounding victory. The previous establishment of a permanent reservation for the Catawba near Charlotte and the trade relations and social exchanges that occurred at the local mills solidified the relationship between Catawba and many of the Catawba Valley militia over the past ten years.

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<sup>64</sup> Lee, 143.

<sup>65</sup> Edgar, 36.

<sup>66</sup> Edgar, 37.

<sup>67</sup> North Carolina Delegates to the North Carolina Provincial Council, 7 August 1776, in Lee, 159-160.

<sup>68</sup> O’Kelley, 1: 165-167; Scoggins, 34.

After the Battle of the Black Hole an increased offensive was launched into Cherokee territory. Among the groups of militia in this massive offensive was General Rutherford of Tryon County who led 2,400 North Carolina militiamen from the Catawba River Valley deep into Cherokee Territory.<sup>69</sup> In a letter from patriot Captain William Moore to General Rutherford on November 18, 1776, Moore describes the vicious attack of his men on the Cherokee villages.<sup>70</sup> Capt. Moore had little power to restrain his men from scalping their victims, and when the militia took three Cherokee prisoners, Moore was the only one that voted against selling them into slavery. Moore explains that “The greater part [of his men] swore bloodily that if they [the three prisoners] were not sold for slaves upon the spot they would kill and scalp them immediately.”<sup>71</sup> The profit from the slave sale collected 242 pounds of the 1100 pounds total plunder that the militia collected on their individual campaign.<sup>72</sup> It is clear that economic profit was not a small motivation for many of the backcountry inhabitants to unite in their retaliation against the Cherokee. Moore also extorts Rutherford that more authoritative leadership is needed to control the militia as he was unable to control his men several times during the expedition. Rutherford most likely recognized this as he would later become one of the most respected patriot leaders in the Catawba River Valley in 1780.

While the Cherokee attacks may have caused some loyalists to temporarily join the patriot militia, the Rowan County Committee foreshadowed greater divisions to come writing that the British “declaring their intention to attack this province, by arming one part of us under British officers against the other; by which cruel means each neighborhood would be engaged in bloody massacre with its adjacent, in that bitter scourge to humanity, a civil war. Brother against

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<sup>69</sup> Scoggins, 33.

<sup>70</sup> Captain William Moore to General Griffith Rutherford, 18 November 1776, University of North Carolina, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, collection #02188.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*



brother, and son against the father.”<sup>73</sup> The scene of civil war that the committee wrote of would become a reality less than four years later.

By February 1777 the Cherokees had lost over thirty-six towns and nearly all of their corn crop which they had relied upon for subsistence.<sup>74</sup> Several Cherokee families roamed the forests without homes and starvation threatened throughout the winter. Finally in May 1777 the leaders of the Cherokee Nation signed a treaty that abandoned all their lands east of the Blue Ridge Mountains.<sup>75</sup>

The savage fighting and gruesome atrocities that took place during the Cherokee conflict of 1776-1777 displayed the extreme lengths that backcountry inhabitants could extend violent retaliation. Although partisan militia would not perpetrate the awful acts of murdering women and children, enslaving prisoners, and bringing wanton destruction to entire villages, loyalist and patriot conflict would see many terrible examples of violence committed against both sides in the years to come. Property seizure and destruction, crop annihilation, massacre of prisoners, and other acts were among those common in the later partisan fighting. The experience and exposure that both patriots and loyalists obtained from their involvement in the Cherokee campaigns undoubtedly influenced these later acts of cruelty and revenge.

After backcountry colonists made settlement with the Cherokee, fighting eased and the Revolution seemed a distant war for the next few years. From 1777-1779 backcountry inhabitants stayed aware of the events further to the east and tensions between neighbors of different political sympathies increased, but violent confrontation between loyalists and patriots

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<sup>73</sup>The Journal of the Committee of Safety for Rowan County, in Wheeler, 366.

<sup>74</sup> Scoggins, 34; Lee, 160.

<sup>75</sup> Edgar, 37; Scoggins, 34. For a more detailed account of the Cherokee War of 1776 see Hatley, 191-203; Swisher, 53-84. For an analysis of the war see Lee 158-163.

remained minimal as several individuals stayed neutral or failed to declare their true feelings. The Catawba River Valley experienced relative peace during these years.

Since the start of hostilities in 1775, fighting in the American Revolution had centered in the northern colonies and Canada. General George Washington had retaken Philadelphia and Boston, while commander of the British forces, British General Clinton, sat in New York. A stalemate had formed leaving Washington's men worn and tired and Clinton's patience strained to its last ounce. The southern colonies of Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, had not been forgotten, though. Clinton and the British knew that there was strong support in the South for royal authority and it was confidently believed that an invasion there would soon be fueled by this loyalist fury.<sup>76</sup> In fact North Carolina did in fact contain a greater number of loyalists in proportion to its population than any other colony.<sup>77</sup>

It was the defeats by General Washington in the Saratoga campaign that finally led Clinton to turn his attention to the southern loyalists in December 1778. This month marked the British capture of Georgia's sea port of Savannah.<sup>78</sup> A port city was essential for getting ships docked and much needed soldiers landed in this new theatre of war and would also allow for tighter military operations with the Caribbean colonies which French and Spanish forces, allied to the United States, threatened constantly.

The British sack of Savannah was just the beginning and Clinton's strategy proved to be very successful. With this sign of increased British action within the south, loyalists in the Carolina backcountry began to assert their convictions more strongly and some more enthusiastic supporters traveled south into Georgia to aid in the colony's conquest. Among these loyalist zealots was Lieutenant Colonel John Moore of the Catawba River Valley. Lt. Col. Moore had

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<sup>76</sup> Pancake, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Rankin, 3.

<sup>78</sup> Pancake, 32; a detailed account of the Siege of Savannah appears on O'Kelley, 1: 216-222.

received a commission in the British provincial forces and was an influential member of the Ramsour's Mill community. Moore was a rather wealthy farmer, he and his father, Moses Moore, owned several acres of land on Indian Creek, the river tributary just south of Clark's Creek where Ramsour's Mill sat.<sup>79</sup> Like many individuals in the Catawba River Valley, the Moore family did not always appear as loyalists. Moses Moore had signed the Tryon Resolves in 1775 and John Moore had taken part in the fight against the Cherokees in 1776.<sup>80</sup> With the passage of time, and increased patriot insistence of oaths of loyalty or militia duty, Moore had declared out right his alliance with the British government. Moore's choice would have enormous reverberations through the Catawba River Valley later in the summer of 1780. At the time being, however, Moore had involved himself in the British consolidation of Georgia and took part in the Battle of Fair Forest and Kettle Creek.<sup>81</sup>

A bold, joint American-French attempt to retake Savannah in October 1779 was repulsed and soon the whole southernmost colony was retaken by royal forces.<sup>82</sup> In February 1780, General Clinton launched a massive siege force of 8,700 against Charleston.<sup>83</sup> By May 1780, the Siege of Charleston was coming to a decisive end causing panic in the Carolina backcountry as the area became open to a full scale British invasion from the east. After such victories, General Clinton regarded all of Georgia and South Carolina as restored to the crown and left General Lord Charles Cornwallis in charge of the southern army.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Tryon County Land Entry Book (1772), University of North Carolina, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, collection #00986-z.

<sup>80</sup> Tryon Resolves, 14 August 1775. Alfred Nixon, "The History of Lincoln County," *The North Carolina Booklet*, Vol. IX, no. 3, January 1910. Also see Appendix B.

<sup>81</sup> O'Kelley, 1: 239-240, 246-251.

<sup>82</sup> Pancake, 30-35; a detailed account of this second Siege of Savannah appears in O'Kelley, 1: 312-353.

<sup>83</sup> Scoggins, 38.

<sup>84</sup> An explanation of Charleston's capture appears in: Pancake, 56-72. For more extensive studies of the Siege of Charleston see David K. Wilson, *The Southern Strategy: Britain's Conquest of South Carolina and Georgia, 1775-1780*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 193-241; O'Kelley, 2: 35-121; Swisher, 111-141.

Before Charleston's fall, the Continental Congress had dispatched several forces into South Carolina to hopefully augment the city's defenses and perhaps prevent the loss of the port. Colonel Abraham Buford commanded one of these detachments with about 350 Virginia soldiers. Buford and his men were just a short distance outside of Charleston when they discovered that the city had fallen on May 12<sup>th</sup>. This turn in events forced Buford and his men to begin a hasty retreat. Immediately following the capture of Charleston, Cornwallis led the British army into the interior of South Carolina. The British commander fortified several strategic positions and sought to clear South Carolina of any remaining hostile troops, including those Continental soldiers now retreating north.

Knowing Buford was beyond the reach of his main army, Cornwallis detached Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton with a group of dragoons. When Tarleton and his cavalry overtook Buford on May 29, the Battle of Waxhaws ensued in which the British slaughtered many of the Continental soldiers, while others suffered severe saber wounds. The dynamics of the battle and several other factors, rather than a British predisposition to cruelty, caused the horrific violence that occurred that day. Suffice to say, the Waxhaws incident warrants an entire discussion of its own separate from this work.<sup>85</sup> The fact that such violence did occur is evident, however, and even Tarleton himself admitted that his soldiers acted with "a vindictive asperity not easily restrained."<sup>86</sup>

Regardless of whether or not the Battle of Waxhaws can truly be labeled a massacre, the fact that Carolinians perceived it as a massacre is what caused individuals that witnessed the

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<sup>85</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Battle of Waxhaws and its implications see Austin W. Smith, "'Sunk deep in the American breast': A Reexamination of the Battle of the Waxhaws and an Analysis of the Perception of the Incident as Massacre," unpublished manuscript, (December 2009). Also see Thomas A. Rider, "Massacre or Myth: No Quarter at the Waxhaws, 29 May 1780," History MA Thesis, (University of North Carolina, 2002). For several other accounts of the battle see Buchanan, 82-85; Edgar, 55-57; Lee, 198; O'Kelley, 2: 154-160; Scoggins, 44-46; Wilson, 242-261.

<sup>86</sup> Banastre Tarleton. *Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces*, 1787, (Reprint, North Stratford, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, 1999), 71.

battle's carnage firsthand, or heard of it through local exchanges, to be so enraged. The bodies of the dead and wounded that were brought to the Waxhaws settlement immediately following the incident presented the most compelling evidence to persuade Carolinians that the battle was indeed a massacre and slaughter. Local inhabitants used the Waxhaw Presbyterian Meeting House as a hospital where they hauled the wounded to in wagons. The slain and butchered men that lay recovering for months in the Waxhaw Church and in the homes of several of the residents incited individuals to label the battle as a massacre and caused the British to be viewed as an intrusive threat.<sup>87</sup> News of the event traveled fast to the nearby Catawba River Valley in Tryon and Mecklenburg Counties, just a few short miles from the Waxhaws. Henry Lee, an American cavalry commander in the South during the war later reminisced that "This tragic expedition [the Waxhaw Massacre] sunk deep in the American breast, and produced the unanimous decision among the troops to revenge their murdered comrades."<sup>88</sup> A young Andrew Jackson joined Thomas Sumter's partisan band of patriot militia days after he saw the horrors of the Waxhaws battle.<sup>89</sup> Several other individuals joined their local militias shortly after the Waxhaw incident, many of whom had not involved themselves with the fighting before this time.<sup>90</sup>

Events and circumstances began to force backcountry inhabitants to definitively choose sides with no middle ground available as there had been throughout the past five years. As historian Walter Edgar explains "Neutrality would no longer be an option. The men of the

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<sup>87</sup> A local North Carolina resident commented on the Waxhaw Massacre saying that "the most of our men were cut and slain to pieces for Tarleton showed no quarter to them." Richard Sanders, Federal Pension #S3847.

<sup>88</sup> Henry Lee, *Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States*, 1812, Published (New York: University Publishing, 1869), 165.

<sup>89</sup> Edgar, 57. The event would continue to drive Jackson's antipathy towards the British as his career developed and when he encountered the British again at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814. See Meacham, 11, 31-33.

<sup>90</sup> Several examples abound in the U.S. Federal Pensions. Many of these new enlistments took place within the Catawba River Valley, near the Waxhaws, and around Salisbury, where several of the survivors and wounded of the Waxhaw incident were brought in June 1780.

backcountry would have to make up their minds and choose to support the Revolution... or else. There was no room for anyone who thought otherwise.”<sup>91</sup> As the month of June 1780 began, militia on both sides of the conflict began to rally and it soon became clear that “the worst of the Revolutionary War in the Carolinas would not come from Charleston’s fall or Tarleton’s cruelties. The worst would come from the partisan bands, Tory and rebel alike, who waged a simmering, savage war against each other.”<sup>92</sup> In making their decision to join either side, Catawba River settlers would recall the events that had transpired from the Mecklenburg Resolves to the Battle of the Waxhaws, taking into account not only the recent violence, but the familial, social, and economic bonds that had been formed at the local mills and on the battlefields against the Cherokee.

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<sup>91</sup> Edgar 33.

<sup>92</sup> Southern, 73.

## 3

**“A warm and obstinate fight”: The Battle of Ramsour’s Mill**

The partisan conflict that broke out in the Carolina backcountry during the summer of 1780 saw divisions between families, friends, and neighbors as the intensified violence and approaching British army pressed every inhabitant, regardless of age or gender, into choosing between declaring themselves a loyalist or patriot. While several works attempt to discuss this volatile summer at large, a focus will be given in this chapter to a particular battle and geographic area within that fighting. The Catawba River Valley, which has been at the center of the two previous chapters, was the location of Ramsour’s Mill, a hub for the community that developed around its use. The site of the mill would become the battlefield of between the local residents on June 20, 1780 and the consequences of the result would have implications for the remainder of the war.

At the start of June 1780, British authorities were assured of the abundance of loyalists in the Carolina backcountry. Loyalist leader Patrick Ferguson wrote to Cornwallis on May 30 that there was “no reason to doubt that the inhabitants are very well disposed to take an active part... I have a much confidence that great benefit will be rendered from that body.”<sup>93</sup> Ferguson later encouraged Cornwallis that if “the loyal inhabitants, if critically excited & supported by a battalion or two, might re-establish the king’s authority in the back of the Carolinas & secure the possession of the southern provinces.”<sup>94</sup> The same letter warned about “restraining them from acts of violence and inhumanity,” something that could spread support for the patriots.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Patrick Ferguson to Cornwallis, 30 May 1780, PRO 30/11/2/58-59. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

<sup>94</sup> Patrick Ferguson to Cornwallis, 6 June 1780, PRO 30/11/2/92-93. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London, Microfilm.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

Rumors of Tarleton's recent alleged massacre at the Waxhaw settlement was not leaving a good impression of British authority upon the populace. On top of this on June 3, General Clinton, who was about to turn complete control of British forces in the south over to Cornwallis, issued a proclamation that would have significant consequences. Clinton's proclamation forced "every man to declare and evince his principles" so that British and loyalist forces could have the "opportunity of detecting and chasing from among them" any neighbors who might be closet patriot sympathizers.<sup>96</sup> This proclamation caused huge consternation throughout the Carolina interior. Several inhabitants of the Catawba River Valley had remained at peace with their neighbors regardless of their political leanings because of their unwillingness to get involved in the conflict or cause disruption within the community. Friends and neighbors who had loyalties on opposite sides had been able to tolerate each other and continue commerce and social engagement for the most part around Ramsour's Mill, but now Clinton was forcing each of them to take sides. Those who did not desire to declare themselves a loyalist, but likewise did not want to get involved with the patriot militia would be treated "as rebels and enemies to their country" according to Clinton's proclamation.<sup>97</sup> The document proved to be a monumental detriment to the British and Clinton admitted it later in his memoirs.<sup>98</sup> When Clinton finally left for New York just a week later, General Cornwallis still shared the same sentiments as his superior stating that "In a civil war, there is no admitting of neutral characteristics, and... those who are not clearly with us must so far be considered against us."<sup>99</sup> Lord Francis Rawdon, a subordinate of Cornwallis later tried to explain the great error of Clinton's demand stating "That unfortunate

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<sup>96</sup> Edgar, 55.

<sup>97</sup> Edgar, 55. Also see Scoggins, 50.

<sup>98</sup> Henry Clinton, *The American Rebellion, Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775-1782*, (Published Yale University Press, 1954), 181.

<sup>99</sup> Edgar, xv.



Proclamation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June has had very unfavourable consequences.”<sup>100</sup> Rawdon goes on to say that before the proclamation had been given “the majority of the Inhabitants in the Frontier Districts, tho’ ill Disposed to us, from circumstances were not actually in arms against us.”<sup>101</sup>

The British would no longer tolerate neutrality, but neither would the patriot partisans. While some loyalists rose because of their commitment to the king, others did so because they felt threatened by patriot actions to force recruitment as part of the patriot draft which required an oath to the new American government. The backcountry militia operated on a combination of a volunteer and draft system. Company commanders of the patriot militia would first call upon volunteers to serve within their area. The terms of service could range from a few days to a few months depending on the situation at hand. If enough volunteers were not made available, the commanders mandated a draft of eligible men from the river communities. The draft allowed for a rotation of men so that not all of the individuals from a certain area would be absent, leaving homes defenseless to Cherokee or loyalist raids. Draftees could also find or hire a substitute, usually an unmarried family member such as a brother or son, or a slave or indentured servant. Company commanders usually stayed in service throughout the year.<sup>102</sup> Regardless of who you were, however, if the militia draft called upon you, service and an oath of loyalty was expected. The punishment for remaining neutral and refusing the oath could mean the seizure or destruction of property or even physical reprimand by violent patriot bands. Loyalist John Cook of “was whipped and imprisoned by Whigs for refusing to take an oath” and in 1780 was forced

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<sup>100</sup> Lord Rawdon to Lord Cornwallis, 7 July 1780, PRO 30/11/2/252-255. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Scoggins, 32-33.

to flee his 520 acre plot of land in the South Carolina backcountry.<sup>103</sup> Another loyalist, John Bishop, “was plundered and beaten for refusing to sign a Whig association.”<sup>104</sup>

These combined pressures of the patriot draft and Clinton’s proclamation forced many in the backcountry who would have liked to have stayed neutral to choose sides, many opting for loyalty to the crown. The capture of Charleston and the inevitable arrival of Cornwallis’ army also encouraged loyalist support. The presence of the British forces gave a form of legitimacy to loyalists that they had not felt before.<sup>105</sup> John Fisher “bore arms with the Americans” but after the taking of Charleston “raised a troop of horse for the British service.”<sup>106</sup> From another perspective, violent atrocities such as those perpetrated by Tarleton against Buford and his men caused some of those inclined to be loyalists instead to second guess themselves, while for those predisposed towards the patriot side the violence spurred them into resistance or retaliation.<sup>107</sup>

The cruelty of the violence that ensued after the assumed massacre at the Waxhaws went in cycles of vengeance in which one side would avenge an act of brutality by the other side with another act of similar or worse brutality. The same backcountry inhabitants who had taken up arms together and committed horrible atrocities against the Cherokee, were now turning on each other and utilizing their previous experiences of vengeance against neighbors and former friends. Moses Hall, a patriot militiaman of the backcountry recorded a provocative example of the psychological implications such violence had on the minds of some of these individuals:

“The evening after our battle with the Tories... we went to where six [loyalist prisoners] were standing together. Some discussion taking place, I heard some of

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<sup>103</sup> John Cook, loyalist pension application AO12/48/247 and AO12/109/102, appears in Gregory Palmer, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution*, (London: Meckler Publishing, 1984), 172.

<sup>104</sup> John Bishop, loyalist pension application AO13/125/1, appears in Palmer, 68.

<sup>105</sup> Lee, 176.

<sup>106</sup> John Fisher, loyalist pension application AO12/51/256 and AO12/109/138, appears in Palmer, 274.

<sup>107</sup> Lee, 177.

our men cry out, “Remember Buford,” and the prisoners were immediately hewed to pieces with broadswords. At first I bore the scene without any emotion, but upon a moment’s reflection, I felt such horror as I never did before nor have since... [The next morning] I discovered lying upon the ground... [what] proved to be a youth about sixteen who, having come out to view the British troops through curiosity, for fear he might give information to our troops, they [the loyalists] had run him through with a bayonet... The sight of this unoffending boy, butchered... relieved me of my distressful feelings for the slaughter of the Tories, and I desired nothing so much as the opportunity of participating in their destruction.”<sup>108</sup>

Hall’s story evokes the very intimate emotions of horror and anger that coupled themselves with the experience of murdering familiar members of one’s community, self-justified in vengeance. Vengeance did not limit itself to breaches between friends and neighbors alone, but encompassed divisions in families regardless of age or gender. In a skirmish at the home of a local loyalist by the name of Stallion, a group of fifty patriot militia attacked a smaller group of loyalists. One of the leaders of the patriots was a Captain Love whose sister was married to Stallions. In the fight, Mrs. Stallions was amongst the loyalists and her presence did not stop her brother from ordering his men to fire, killing her in the process.<sup>109</sup>

Cornwallis was optimistic about loyalist support when he planned his invasion further north from Charleston in early June 1780. Cornwallis planned to march from Charleston in a northwest arch leading first to Camden then up into western North Carolina into Charlotte and Salisbury directly into the Catawba River Valley.<sup>110</sup> Cornwallis dispatched Lieutenant Colonel George Turnbull and Lord Francis Rawdon to make two separate advances into the interior. In

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<sup>108</sup> Moses Hall, Federal Pension #W.10105.

<sup>109</sup> Thomas Young, *The Memoir of Major Thomas Young* (Penfield, GA: *Orion* magazine, 1843).

<sup>110</sup> Graham, 1.

order to prepare the loyalist forces for their arrival, Cornwallis dispatched Lieutenant Colonel John Moore of the loyalist militia to his home in Tryon County where he was a well recognized and respected leader of the Ramsour's Mill community.

While Moore made his way back home to the Catawba River, the immediate escalation of patriot militia organization in the river valley in the weeks prior to the Battle of Ramsour's Mill began after news of the Waxhaw incident reached Charlotte in the first days of June 1780. Brigadier General Griffith Rutherford, the same militia commander that had led Mecklenburg County militia against the Cherokee four years ago, ordered out the militia volunteers of the Catawba River out *en masse* and Rutherford sent out recruiters to supplement the patriot force.<sup>111</sup>

Significantly, the draft allowed exemption for the millers who operated the grist mills along the river tributaries of the area.<sup>112</sup> This included Jacob Ramseur, the owner of Ramsour's Mill. The continued operation of mills for the production of food was essential not only to the subsistence of the backwoods communities, but also for commerce and for supplying the militia with food provisions.

Company commanders in charge of calling for volunteers or rounding up draftees within a community often utilized the communal gathering location of a mill to reach the greatest number of individuals in the area. As a consequence mills became a point of military recruitment and organization. Captains also conducted militia drills near the mills as it was a central location for members of the community to gather from their homes. As early as 1775 examples of recruitment occurred at Ramsour's Mill, while several more instances occur from 1780-82.<sup>113</sup> Micajah Brooks was just a boy of fourteen when he was recruited while at the mill.<sup>114</sup> The use of

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<sup>111</sup> Graham, 1.

<sup>112</sup> Robert McKeown, loyalist pension application AO12/48/345 and AO12/109/204, appears in Palmer, 560.

<sup>113</sup> Walter Carson, Federal Pension #S32165; Matthias Egner, #S21745.

<sup>114</sup> Micajah Brooks, Federal Pension #W27694.

the mill as a staging ground by the militia is also commonly mentioned in several federal pensions.<sup>115</sup>

Unlike the militia regiments in the east, the Carolina backcountry militia were primarily mounted militia. These men did not have the training to fight on horseback like European cavalry, but the horses provided speed and mobility between the wide spaces of the Carolina interior.<sup>116</sup> William Bull, South Carolina's Lieutenant Governor noted that "In the backcountry almost every militia man marches on Horseback."<sup>117</sup> The horses created a tactical advantage, but also a burden because of the necessity of their feeding and care. Several instances occur when patriot or loyalist militia allowed their horses to feed on the crops of neighbors that allied themselves with the opposing side. Robert Knox, a patriot militiaman from Tryon County noted that when his party "marched to Moses Moore's home, father of Lieutenant Colonel John Moore, the soldiers destroyed his oats by throwing them over to the horses."<sup>118</sup>

By June 3, 1780, over eight hundred had responded to General Rutherford's call for patriot militia. On June 7, loyalist Lt. Col. Moore reached his home on Indian Creek, just a few miles south of Ramsour's Mill. A buckskin clad Tryon County land record book from 1777 shows the immense wealth and land that Moore and his family possessed, claiming ownership to over a thousand acres.<sup>119</sup> Moore, in his well worn British officer uniform and sword, announced himself to the Ramsour's Mill community as a Lieutenant Colonel and shared his plans to organize royal support in the vicinity. Moore gave a detailed account of the siege and capture of

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<sup>115</sup> Thomas Morris, Federal Pension #W8465; Benjamin Brown, #S16327; Claiborn Gentrey, #S3391; Thomas Gist, #S1762; John Grant, #S6930; Henry Marsh, #W9531; John Cunningham, #W6752; David Thurmond says his regiment used Ramsour's Mill as a staging area after the Battle of Cowpens in 1781, David H. Thurmond, #S32010; John Bird states that he "rendevoused at a Dutchman's [German's] house, whose name was Ramsour," #S10372.

<sup>116</sup> Scoggins, 26.

<sup>117</sup> Lieutenant Governor William Bull to the Earl of Hillsborough, 7 June 1770.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Knox, Federal Pension #S8803.

<sup>119</sup> Tryon County Land Entry Book (1772), University of North Carolina, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, collection #00986-z.

Charleston to his friends and explained that the British army was advancing towards the area. A meeting was set for a gathering of prominent loyalist in the area to meet at the home of Moore's father, Moses Moore, on June 10. Forty men arrived at the meeting that day and Moore told them that it was not in the interest of Cornwallis that they should embody in force at the time, but rather hold themselves in readiness and procure the harvest for the year as usual. Cornwallis had recognized that the harvest and access to a mill was essential if the British campaign into the backcountry was to be successful. As soon as the loyalists of the area had acquired the harvest and the subsistence to feed the approaching army, Cornwallis would direct his forces into the valley to support those loyal to the crown. In a letter to Clinton, Cornwallis made his orders to Moore clear: "In regard to North Carolina... I sent Emissaries to the leading Persons amongst our friends, recommending in the strongest terms that they should attend to their harvest, prepare provisions, & remain quiet until the King's Troops were ready to enter the Province..."<sup>120</sup>

After the closure of the meeting on June 10, Moore received information that Major Joseph McDowell, one of Rutherford's men, was with a scouting party of twenty men nearby. Moore believed his group to be of sufficient strength to overtake him and went in pursuit. Unable to overcome McDowell, Moore ceased the chase, but in the progress learned of Rutherford's call for militia. In a decision to counter this show of force by the patriot leadership, Moore decided to ignore Cornwallis' admonishment to await the harvest and ordered the loyalist leaders to gather as many as they could and meet at Ramsour's Mill on June 13.

Moore did not choose the meeting place for the loyalists arbitrarily, Ramsour's Mill being a central location for the community and a strategic tool for the ongoing maintenance of a military force in terms of food production. Because of their ability to draw people to them, militia often planted ambushes at mills. Andrew Kennedy recalls getting "half a bushel of Corn

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<sup>120</sup> Cornwallis to Clinton, 30 June 1780, Sir Guy Carleton Papers, Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.

to feed our horses” from a mill when British soldiers ambushed his band.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, patriot John Purvings “was sent to get Meal [by his commanding officer] & while at the Mill was fired on by a company of Tories.”<sup>122</sup> The procurement of provisions from mills was so important to a mobile militia force that some leaders appointed soldiers to exclusively work at acquiring food from nearby mills. William Walton was drafted “for the purpose of trucking wheat to Mills to be ground into flour for the Army.”<sup>123</sup> Other soldiers had the explicit duty of guarding mills for their sides’ respective use. Patriot David Mabry “was put on guard to prevent Tories from burning the mills in the neighborhood.”<sup>124</sup> Another man, Joseph Witherington was “to guard a Mill & the army stores there collected for about three weeks.”<sup>125</sup> Patriot leaders ordered John Corner to serve “3 months at a merchant Mill, making flour for the army.”<sup>126</sup> Cornwallis utilized mills throughout the time his army was in the back country as well.<sup>127</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton explained of the Catawba River Valley later in 1780 that “the mills in its neighborhood were supposed of sufficient consequence to render it a necessary post.”<sup>128</sup> With such a premium placed upon the security and access to mills, it is no surprise that Lt. Col. Moore chose to embody the loyalists at Ramsour’s.

On June 13, two hundred men met Moore at Ramsour’s Mill and the next day several hundred more arrived including Major Nicholas Welch, another commissioned officer and loyalist leader of the community. Welch was a strong and charismatic figure and was the only other member of the group other than Moore that wore a regimental uniform. Welch apparently

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<sup>121</sup> Andrew Kennedy, Federal Pension #W161.

<sup>122</sup> John Purvians, Federal Pension #S32459.

<sup>123</sup> William Walton, Federal Pension #S17184.

<sup>124</sup> David Mabry, Federal Pension #W17072.

<sup>125</sup> Joseph Witherington, Federal Pension #S1938.

<sup>126</sup> John Corner, Federal Pension #S17899.

<sup>127</sup> Dudley Gatewood states that the British army “procured supplies from some mills in the neighborhood” in 1780. Dudley Gatewood, Federal Pension #S6873.

<sup>128</sup> Tarleton, 159.

displayed several guinea pieces as evidence of his payment by British officials and he allured more to the crowd by spreading stories of the British success at the Waxhaws, avoiding mention of the alleged slaughter that took place.

General Rutherford was forty miles to the southeast when he heard of the growing loyalist embodiment at Ramsour's Mill. Not wanting to leave the North-South Carolina border open to British incursion, Rutherford ordered Colonel Francis Locke of Rowan County and Major David Wilson of Mecklenburg along with several militia Captains who were natives of the Ramsour's Mill area to return to Tryon, Mecklenburg, and Rowan Counties to make every effort to raise men. James Collins was a teenager living in the Carolina backcountry when he agreed to join the patriot band. Collins explains the situation at the time of his enlistment. "...times began to be troublesome, and people began to divide into parties. Those that had been good friends in times past, became enemies; they began to watch each other with jealous eyes, and were designated by the names of Whig and Tory. Recruiting officers were out in all directions, to enlist soldiers."<sup>129</sup> William Davie, a patriot cavalry officer in the militia with Rutherford relates that "the militia were everywhere in arms, but every place wanted protection."<sup>130</sup> The next day, June 15, Rutherford learned that Lord Rawdon had pulled back to Camden, so Rutherford soon decided it safe to advance north back towards Ramsour's Mill and aid Col. Locke in the dispersal of the loyalists.

While Moore's loyalists gathered at Ramsour's Mill, several backcountry inhabitants congregated a short distance away at another community structure, Hill's iron works just across the border in South Carolina. The iron works were the only commercial structure of any

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<sup>129</sup> James Potter Collins, *Autobiography of a Revolutionary Soldier*, John M. Roberts, ed., (Clinton, LA: Feliciana Democrat, 1859), 22.

<sup>130</sup> William R. Davie, *The Revolutionary War Sketches of William R. Davie*, Blackwell P. Robinson, ed. (Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, Division of Archives and History, 1976), 7.



importance aside from Ramsour's Mill in the area and was "very profitable, both to the proprietor and all the country around."<sup>131</sup> The owner, William Hill, was an ardent patriot and had converted the operation of his iron furnace from creating domestic tools to producing cannonballs and weapons. Ninety slaves made up the workforce of the complex, making Hill one of the wealthiest slave owners in the western Carolinas.<sup>132</sup>

Around the second week of June a British messenger arrived at William Hill's iron works where a large group of locals had gathered to discuss the ongoing loyalist and patriot movements nearby. The messenger delivered the text of Clinton's proclamation of June 3 and with the crowd visibly disturbed, Hill alleges that he addressed them announcing that "if we could not raise a force to meet the foe, we could keep in a body, go into North Carolina meet our friends & return with them to recover our State."<sup>133</sup> After his speech the crowd's "former state of despondency [was] visibly reduced, and the poor Commissioner was obliged to disappear with his proclamation & protections for fear of the resentment of the audience."<sup>134</sup> Upon learning of the incident, Lieutenant Colonel Turnbull described the place to Cornwallis stating "it has been a refuge for runaways, a forge for casting ball and making rifle guns. I would propose to destroy this place."<sup>135</sup>

Heeding Turnbull's advice Cornwallis sent Captain Christian Huck with a raiding party to the location on June 18 and they "destroyed all the property they could not carry away. Burned the forge furnace, grist and saw mills together with all other buildings even to the negro huts, &

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<sup>131</sup> Collins, 25.

<sup>132</sup> William Hill, *Col. William Hill's Memoirs of the Revolution*, 1815, A.S. Salley, Jr., ed (Columbia, SC: Historical Commission of South Carolina, 1921), 8.

<sup>133</sup> Hill, 7.

<sup>134</sup> Hill, 7.

<sup>135</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Turnbull to Lord Cornwallis, 15 June 1780, PRO 30/11/2/158-159. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

bore away about 90 negroes.”<sup>136</sup> Another account by James Collins states “Lord Huck, provoked at the non-compliance of the people, determined to take vengeance; and to that end mustered his forces, charged on the ironworks, killed several men, set the works on fire, and reduced them to ashes.”<sup>137</sup> The destruction of the iron works inflamed several more individuals to flock to the patriot militia prepared to march upon Moore’s loyalists at Ramsour’s Mill. Collins’ father who had wanted to stay neutral during the conflict soon changed his mind after hearing of the destruction of William Hill’s iron works stating afterwards that he was “determined to take my gun and when I lay down, I lay down my life with it.”<sup>138</sup>

The same day that Captain Huck destroyed Hill’s iron works, General Rutherford reached the Tuckaseegee Ford on the Catawba River on the way to Ramsour’s Mill. The road Rutherford traveled was one of the many that had developed because of the mills construction. The heavy rains of the summer nearly caused the ford to be impassable, however.<sup>139</sup> That night Rutherford issued a dispatch to Colonel Locke, who along with Major Wilson and several Captains had been sent ahead to organize volunteers and recruits from the area. The express ordered Locke to join Rutherford on the evening of the 19<sup>th</sup> or morning of the 20<sup>th</sup> a few miles in advance of the ford. The rider, for unknown reasons, never reached Locke, however, and Locke and the others had no knowledge that Rutherford had marched north to rendezvous with them.<sup>140</sup> To Locke’s knowledge, Rutherford was still south of the Carolina border protecting against a British incursion.

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<sup>136</sup> Hill, 8.

<sup>137</sup> Collins, 25.

<sup>138</sup> Collins, 25.

<sup>139</sup> The names of Beattie’s Ford, Cowan’s Ford, and other important crossing points like Tuckaseegee Ford and Sherrill’s Ford can still be found on maps of the Catawba Valley. Tuckaseegee Road and Beattie’s Ford Road are in Charlotte; Cowan’s Ford Dam is near Cornelius; and the town of Sherrill’s Ford is in Catawba County. The fords themselves, though, no longer exist; all are submerged beneath the waters of Lake Norman.

<sup>140</sup> Richard Brown explains that Rutherford was not in the battle “on account of the miscarriage of a dispatch.” Richard Brown, Federal Pension #W1545. Samuel Martin states that Rutherford did not arrive to the battle “owing to a miscarriage by express of a communication.” Samuel Martin, #S9003.

The morning of June 19 was very wet and Rutherford ordered his men to discharge their weapons. The loud noise produced from this firing alarmed several in the neighborhood and several came in arms to join the party. Crossing the river, Rutherford encamped about sixteen miles away from Ramsour's Mill for the night awaiting Locke's arrival. Colonel Locke and the other militia officers under his command had been busy gathering as many volunteers and draftees that they could to respond to the loyalist threat. News arrived that the loyalists under Lt. Col. Moore at Ramsour's Mill now amounted to nearly 1300. Locke's entire force amounted to only about 400 when on the night of the 19<sup>th</sup> Locke convened an officers meeting to determine their course of action. After a brief debate, the patriot leaders agreed to attack on the morning of June 20. At first this course of action seems foolish, only 400 against 1300 well positioned enemies. In many of the traditional accounts of the Battle of Ramsour's Mill patriotic rhetoric is used to describe the "courageous" decision of Locke's militia. In Joseph Graham's 1825 account he attributes "insinuation of cowardice" to the officers decision to attack. In more recent scholarship, historians discuss Locke's desperation and unwillingness to abandon the area and the militia members' homes to the loyalists. While this last explanation undoubtedly did factor into Locke's choice, the most potent reason why Locke and his men chose to attack as soon as possible against an overwhelming number of enemy forces has been absent from any published narrative. During the course of research for this study federal pensioners who took part in the ensuing battle explain that the larger loyalist force had captured a group of their comrades the day before. The captors planned to hang the men the morning of June 20, the same morning that the battle took place. John Hargrave, a militiaman who had volunteered "for the purpose of fighting the Tories who were very numerous" relates that "That having got together about 400 they heard that the Tories had taken Maj. (then) Edward Hampton & John Russell Lieut. & had

condemned them to be hanged, but that they, having determined to rescue them, met the Tories 1400 or 1500 in number at a place called Ramsour's Mill.”<sup>141</sup> If this story of captured soldiers and an attempt by the patriots to save their companions are true, then it would explain why such a small group of militia prematurely attacked a much larger group of the enemy, knowing full well that Rutherford’s additional forces could aid if allowed time. Some previous writings on this issue have wrongly idealized the situation with no knowledge of the captured prisoners or their impending hanging, and rather attributed the “bravery” and “audacity” of the patriot militia to their preemptory assault.

The presence of Ramsour’s Mill dictated the layout of the landscape that the impending battle would take place upon. Moore and his men camped out on a defensive hill near Ramsour’s Mill, utilizing the structure to produce flour to stockpile provisions. Nearby was a mill pond created by the damming effect of the mill’s wheel. A small footbridge connected the opposite sides of Clark’s Creek upon which Ramsour’s Mill sat. Christian Reinhardt owned most of the land near the mill and his house, barn, stables, and store house stood nearby as well. Christian Reinhardt was a patriot, but his wife, Barbara, was the brother of Nicholas and Philip Warlick, two German loyalists among Moore’s men.

Many of the loyalists that made up Moore's force were Germans of the area. When many German immigrants had come to the colonies from Europe they were forced to give an oath of allegiance to Great Britain. Staunch in their abidance with the oath, the Germans were unwilling to break it when the war broke out.<sup>142</sup> The Warlick brothers, Nicholas and Philip were among

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<sup>141</sup> John Hargrave, Federal Pension #S32297. Samuel Bryson was another prisoner of the loyalists stating that they “took him & one of his brothers prisoner & carried them on under guard to the battle ground. Soon after the battle commenced he made his escape & after much risk & difficulty got home.” Samuel Bryson, #S1644.

<sup>142</sup> Graham.

them. Nicholas was a leading captain amongst the loyalist ranks that Locke's patriot force faced the next morning.

On the dawn of June 20, 1780, a heavy rain had left a heavy fog over the Catawba River Valley. Colonel Locke's plan was roughly organized for the mounted soldiers to strike first, followed by the infantry under the cover of this fog right before the sun rose. When Locke's men approached, one of Moore's pickets on the road leading to the mill fired into the horses. Surprise for the most part was maintained, however, and the loyalist encampment hurried to prepare its defense. A two hour battle commenced in which both sides maneuvered around and upon the hilltop and, as Rutherford later wrote, "a warm and obstinate fight ensued."<sup>143</sup> The hill was eventually taken by Locke, while Moore, Welch, and the majority of the loyalists fled. A total of about 70 men were dead and 100 wounded on each side, making for a total of 340 casualties across the mill's grounds.<sup>144</sup> In addition to this, the patriot militia took several hundred loyalists captive and brought to the jail in Salisbury.<sup>145</sup> In a letter to Major General Caswell, General Rutherford exaggerated these numbers in favor of his militia forces in order to portray a more favorable victory than it actually was. Rutherford claims "their number killed and wounded about 200. Ours about 30."<sup>146</sup> In comparison, Colonel Moore claimed just the opposite exaggerations, trying to lessen the significance of his loss when he explained to British

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<sup>143</sup> Brigadier General Griffith Rutherford to Major General Caswell, 29 June 1780, Richard Caswell Papers, PC.242, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC.

<sup>144</sup> Buchanan, 110.

<sup>145</sup> Nathaniel Watson remembered "helping to take a large number of Tory prisoners from Ramsour's Mill to Salisbury jail." Nathaniel Watson, Federal Pension #S3454. Joseph Woodall recalls "guarding a parcel of Tories said to be 300 in number that had been taken at Ramsour's Mill on the Catawba River." Joseph Woodall, #S32081. Philip Drum "guarded the prisoners taken there to Salisbury." Philip Drum, #W2079. John Stilwell "after Ramsour's Mill assisted in guarding a number of Tories to Salisbury where they were placed in jail." John Stilwell, #W7209. William Quiry also guarded the prisoners on their way to the jail. William Quiry, #R8540.

<sup>146</sup> Rutherford to Caswell, 29 June 1780.

authorities what had occurred stating that “between twenty & thirty were killed or wounded” and “that an hundred & fifty may have been made prisoners.”<sup>147</sup>

The number of men on either side of the conflict is an issue of contention in both contemporary and modern accounts of the battle. Several idealized recollections attribute the virtue of freedom or the favor of God to the patriot success and exaggerate the number of loyalists and diminish the number of patriots involved in the battle in order to inflate these notions of predetermined or righteous victory.<sup>148</sup> In reality, some 300 of the 1300 loyalists at the battle did not have any sort of weapon when the fighting began and fled immediately after the first shot. In order to more accurately determine the number of individuals involved in the fighting on June 20, a collaboration of the extant primary sources can render such figures. The patriot militia under Locke most likely contained 400 men, while the loyalists under Moore boasted 1000 armed and 300 unarmed partisans.<sup>149</sup>

Musket fire was extremely close and heavy during the battle and its density is marked by several examples of wounds, or damaged clothing. One tree used as a barrier by two Tory brothers was grazed by three musket balls during the struggle. When the smoke cleared by the end of the battle, the two brothers both lay dead at its roots. James Murphy received a musket

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<sup>147</sup> Lord Rawdon to Lord Cornwallis, 24 June 1780, PRO 30/11/2/189/190. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

<sup>148</sup> See Prayer of John Miller who attributes God’s “favors” to the victory at Ramsour’s Mill. On Edgar, 66.

<sup>149</sup> The following individuals give numbers on the total patriot or loyalist forces involved in the battle. By a comparison of them the numbers of 400 for the patriot side and 1300 (300 not engaged) for the loyalist side are informed estimates of the actual number present. The following citations list the source’s name followed by (claimed patriot #, claimed loyalist #). If only one claim is stated, a question mark indicates no claim. William R. Davie (300, 1100), William Hill (300, 1000), Samuel Alexander (300, 1000), James Thomas (? , 900), William Guest (? , 800), Samuel Gordon (450, ?), Richard Winn (? , 1000), Alexander Dan (? , 300), Robert Brevard (300, several hundred), Daniel Bryson (400, 1300), John Hargrave (400, 1400), Daniel McGoodwin (300, ?). See Davie, 7; Hill, 8; Samuel Alexander, Federal Pension #W1530; James Thomas, #S6233; William Guest, #W21239; Samuel Gordon, #S30441; Richard Winn, *General Richard Winn’s Notes of 1780*, 1780, Samuel C. Williams, ed., *The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, vol. 43, no. 4 (October 1942), 202; Alexander Dan, #S2905; Robert Brevard, #R1181A; Daniel Bryson, #W5940; John Hargrave, #S32297; Daniel McGoodwin, #W9555.

ball in his hand, leaving him handicapped in his loading and firing for the rest of the battle.<sup>150</sup> Another patriot soldier, Joseph Wasson, was shot five times during the exchange of musket fire. Wasson, unable to stand from his wounds, lay on the ground trying to gain as much cover as possible as he reloaded his musket and continued to fight on until the battle's end. Adam Brevard, a patriot, had the button from his pantaloons shot off, leaving the soldier caught off guard in the tense fight as he tried to hold up his pants.<sup>151</sup> In a similar incident, Thomas Shield had his sword shot from his waist.<sup>152</sup>

The North Carolinians on both sides of the fight, aside from Lt. Col. Moore and Major Welch, lacked any uniform. Men of the Carolina backcountry wore linen hunting shirts and breeches. Deerskin jackets or accoutrements were also common. Floppy hunting hats to shield the sun outnumbered the tri-corner that was so popular in most parts of the colonies.<sup>153</sup> In order to tell their side apart from the loyalists the patriots devised to place a small piece of white cloth in their hats. It seemed that the white cloth was a poor idea because after the battle many patriots found their comrades shot in the head, the loyalists apparently having used the white symbols as a bulls eye. The loyalists stuck small green twigs within their own hats to acknowledge their allegiance. These symbols of a white cloth and green twig continued throughout the summer of 1780, Thomas Young, a militiaman at the Battle of King's Mountain in October, recalling "the paper which the Whigs wore in their hats, and the pine knots the Tories wore in theirs, these being the badges of distinction."<sup>154</sup>

Recognition of the individuals on the opposing sides of the conflict caused many that took part in the fight to act upon personal anger or vengeance in issuing horrible acts of violence

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<sup>150</sup> James Murphey, Federal Pension #R7512.

<sup>151</sup> Hunter, 235.

<sup>152</sup> Thomas Shield, *SC Roster*, 860.

<sup>153</sup> Woodmason, 94.

<sup>154</sup> Young, *Memoir of*.

upon their fellow family members, neighbors, and former friends. Men on the both sides knew each other through family, social or economic connections formed from interactions at the mill in previous years, or through common service in the Cherokee War of 1776. Loyalists killed Captain John Bowman during the battle, recognizing him as Sherriff of Burke (formed from Rowan) County who had arrested several who had not taken the patriot oath of allegiance. A loyalist wounded Captain James Houston at the beginning of the battle and later, when the loyalists retreated in defeat, Captain Houston spotted the man that inflicted his injury and, exacting revenge, shot him in the back as he fled from the field.<sup>155</sup> An early patriot sympathizer who had signed the Mecklenburg Resolves in 1775, Humphrey Hunter, recognized and killed another man who had signed the document with him five years ago and now fought with the loyalists.<sup>156</sup>

The battle became so close that fierce hand-to-hand combat broke out with musket fire nearly ceasing as men tried to defend themselves from attackers right at their sides. The militiamen had no bayonets and only a few swords and knives. Most soldiers resorted to their fists and the butts of their guns to fight amongst the thickly entangled group. With the opponents in such close proximity to each other men recognized others on the opposite side and shouted insults and angry remarks.

More than one example of fratricide took place during the battle. William Simpson, a patriot scout, rushed to the battle to kill his brother Reuben.<sup>157</sup> Peter Costner, a loyalist, was killed during the fight by his brother Thomas, a patriot, who buried the corpse of his sibling after the fight.

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<sup>155</sup> Sherrill, 37. James Houston, Federal Pension #W13500.

<sup>156</sup> Humphrey Hunter, gravestone at Steele Creek Memorial Cemetery, Charlotte, NC, author's visit July 2009; Southern, 13.

<sup>157</sup> Sherrill, 39.



While many accounts of the Battle of Ramsour's Mill try to idealize its "patriotic victory," they fail to recognize that egregious acts of cruel and unnecessary violence took place. When the loyalist soldiers retreated across the small footbridge that spanned Clark's Creek, many fell into the mill pond and pursuing patriot militia forcibly drowned them in the pond's waters. Nineteenth century authors most likely left details like this out of their accounts of the battle because of its ability to tarnish an ideal recollection of the victory. The fact that this took place is evident in many personal statements by participants in the fighting, however. Jacob Hilsabeck, a patriot militiaman who arrived just after the battle, states "at Ramsour's Mill they had an engagement and defeated the tories, many of them taking the mill pond and getting drowned."<sup>158</sup> James Patterson, a soldier in the battle, "joined in the pursuit of the Tories after their defeat," several perishing "having been driven in the mill pond and drowned."<sup>159</sup> Another patriot soldier, Levi Mote, admits to having "drove many of [Moore's] men into the mill pond." David Black, yet another soldier states that "we soon forced them [the loyalists] to take the mill dam."<sup>160</sup> Loyalist surgeon Uzal Johnson and loyalist soldier Anthony Allaire both spoke to survivors of the battle who told them "they were obliged to swim the river at a mill dam. The Rebels fired on them and killed thirty."<sup>161</sup>

The violence that prevailed at Ramsour's Mill did not avail children and women of its horrors. On the morning of the battle, knowing that Locke and his men were coming soon and that a battle would undoubtedly ensue, Christian Reinhardt took his wife, his two children, and several negro children across Clark's Creek to the opposite side of the loyalist encampment.

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<sup>158</sup> Jacob Hilsabeck, Federal Pension #S7013.

<sup>159</sup> James Patterson, Federal Pension #W10861.

<sup>160</sup> David Black, Federal Pension #S10393.

<sup>161</sup> Uzal Johnson, *Uzal Johnson, Loyalist Surgeon: A Revolutionary War Diary*, 1780-1781, Bobby Moss Gilmer, ed., (Blacksburg, SC: Scotia Hibernia Press, 2000), entry for 23 June 1780. Also see Anthony Allaire, *Diary of Lieut. Anthony Allaire*, 1780. (New York: New YorkTimes Press, 1968), entry for 23 June 1780.

There Reinhardt instructed his wife and the children to stay hidden among a dense patch of trees along the western side of the mill pond.<sup>162</sup> William Falls, the fourteen year old son of patriot Captain Gilbreath Falls watched as his father was shot from his horse and killed by a loyalist neighbor. When the loyalist tried to steal from his the corpse of the elder Falls, the younger Falls took up his father's sword and drove it through the thief. Falls was deeply affected by the encounter and sought revenge later in the war when he took part in Pyle's Massacre, a slaughter of several hundred surrendering loyalists.<sup>163</sup>

The officers of the patriot militia shared relatively the same social status and economic livelihood within the Catawba River Valley as the soldiers they commanded did. Because the men lacked any barriers of this kind, Colonel Locke and the several captains under his command fought in the battle in the same capacity as the men they issued orders to. As a consequence, many patriot officers exposed themselves to danger more readily and most of them lay dead at the end of conflict. The battle counts more officer deaths in proportion to private soldier deaths than any other battle of the war. The officers acted as the situation required and rank made little distinction. James Barkley, a patriot soldier reflects this loss stating that the loyalists were "defeated with great loss, out of 10 captains on the whig side seven were killed and one wounded."<sup>164</sup>

The loss of life for the loyalist militia was about equal to that on the patriot side, but the strategic loss of the battle was devastating to future British efforts in the Catawba River Valley and the backcountry as a whole. Immediately after the engagement, General Rutherford, having arrived on the scene, dispatched patriot cavalry to capture as many loyalists as possible. Davie, one of those sent out for this task, states "many came and surrendered voluntarily, a great number

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<sup>162</sup> Levi Mote, Federal Pension #S7245.

<sup>163</sup> William Falls, Federal Pension #S6834.

<sup>164</sup> James Barkley, Federal Pension #W44.

were taken prisoners, some flying to South Carolina, others at the plantations, and in a few days that district of country lying between the river, the mountains, and their [South Carolina] line was entirely cleared of the enemy.”<sup>165</sup> William Green, another patriot soldier, relates that “the Battle of Ramsour’s Mill relieved the territory of North Carolina from the enemy.”<sup>166</sup>

The possession of Ramsour’s Mill allowed the patriot militia to retain their ability to produce food and provisions for themselves as the war continued. Rutherford and his men arrived shortly after the battle in time to “behold the dead and hear the groans of the dying.”<sup>167</sup> One of the men under Rutherford described that they “found the bodies of men & horses that had been slain in the skirmish still lying on the ground.”<sup>168</sup> South Carolina militia took several supplies that Moore and Welch had gathered for their loyalist army at the mill, vitalizing the patriot movement in the Carolina border region. William Hill, whose iron works had been burned relates that he and his men “got authority from the civil & military authority of that State [North Carolina] to impress or take waggons, horses, provisions of all kinds, from the enemy that was in that action [Ramsour’s].”<sup>169</sup> Robert Gracey of the patriot militia stated “at Ramsour’s Battle he<sup>170</sup> obtained a horse.” The mill became a central staging ground for patriot operations for the next several months.

Patriot confidence rose after the success at Ramsour’s Mill, the first major victory for the Americans since Charleston fall over a month ago. This confidence created bold actions by violent partisans that may not have been attempted before the battle, however. Just a few days after the battle, Patrick Carr and a small group of patriot militia left the camp at Ramsour’s Mill

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<sup>165</sup> Davie, 7.

<sup>166</sup> William Green, Federal Pension #W24319.

<sup>167</sup> Leonard Marbury, Federal Pension, #R6892.

<sup>168</sup> Josiah Martin, Federal Pension, #W1047.

<sup>169</sup> Hill, 8.

<sup>170</sup> Robert Gracey, Federal Pension #S8635.

for the home a loyalist that they suspected took part in the fighting. When Carr asked if he had been with Moore and his party on June 20, the man explained that General Rutherford had pardoned him. Carr then proceeded to take the man out into the woods and shot him. Word of this murder traveled back to the patriot leaders at the camp, but Carr was never punished for the incident.<sup>171</sup> Such murders, along with looting and other crimes continued to rise throughout the summer of 1780. American General Nathanael Greene related the following upon arriving in the backcountry later that year: “The spirit of plundering which prevails among the Inhabitants adds not a little to our difficulties. The whole country is in danger of being laid waste by the Whigs and Torrys, who pursue each other with as much relentless fury as beasts of prey.”<sup>172</sup> Greene went on to say “Nothing but blood and slaughter has prevailed among the Whigs and tories, and their inverteracy against each other must, if it continues, depopulate this part of the country.”<sup>173</sup>

While partisan conflict continued in the Carolina backcountry throughout 1780, the loss at Ramsour’s Mill had serious implications. The outcome extremely diminished loyalist support for the British incursion into the interior. Lord Rawdon informed Cornwallis of the defeat at Ramsour’s two days after on June 22: “Mr. Moore, in spite of your Lordships earnest advice & in contradiction to your express direction, has called forth the Loyalists in Tryon County. The consequence was that early on the 20<sup>th</sup>, the second day after their assembling, they were attacked near the South Fork of the Catawba River by General Rutherford, & entirely dispersed.”<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> O’Kelley, 189-190. Another incident shortly after the battle recalls the capture of Patrick Moore, the brother of John Moore. Moore soon managed to escape shortly afterwards, however. O’Kelley, 190.

<sup>172</sup> Nathanael Greene to Samuel Huntington, 28 December 1780, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, 11 volumes, Richard K. Showman, Dennis M. Conrad, Roger N. Parks, and Elizabeth C. Stevens, editors, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1976), 7: 9.

<sup>173</sup> Greene quoted on O’Kelley, 2: 9.

<sup>174</sup> Lord Rawdon to Lord Cornwallis, 22 June 1780, PRO 30/11/2/179-182. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

Rawdon justifiably feared that “in consequence of this disaster... the advantage on the part of the Rebels may shake the fidelity of our new-found Militia on the Borders.”<sup>175</sup>

Lt. Col. Moore entered Cornwallis’ camp several days later with only thirty loyalists in his company, an insignificant band compared to the 1300 that he had commanded just days before. A furious Cornwallis threatened to court martial Moore because of his disobedience and error. In an attempted defense, Moore exaggerated the number of men engaged in the conflict to make it sound as if he had been greatly outnumbered. Moore claimed he “collected about Eight Hundred Men. The Rebels had nearly a thousand; two hundred of which were Continentals.”<sup>176</sup> Moore’s description is almost laughable. No Continental soldier was near the Catawba River for miles around in June 1780. Moore was simply trying to lessen his responsibility for the loss, the consequences of which other British commanders continued to report.

Colonel Nesbit Balfour, commander of the British garrison at Fort Ninety Six of the South Carolina interior noted the impact and psychological effect that the patriot victory at Ramsour’s Mill had caused: “I find the enemy [the patriot militia] exerting themselves wonderfully and successfully in stirring up the people. Many that had protection [loyalists] have already joined them... They have terrified our friends.”<sup>177</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Turnbull expressed his concerns to Cornwallis more loudly: “The last time I had the Honor of writing your Lordship our affairs in this Quarter were in a very Prosperous way and had it not been for that Weak Silly man Moore who led a Parcell of those poor Innocent Devils of North Carolina into a Scrape, we should have been now in Perfect Peace and Quietness on this Frontier.”<sup>178</sup> In his rage, Turnbull

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<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Lord Rawdon to Lord Cornwallis, 24 June 1780, PRO 30/11/77/18-19. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

<sup>177</sup> Edgar, 89.

<sup>178</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Turnbull to Lord Cornwallis, 6 July 1780, PRO 30/11/2/250-251. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

wrote harshly of the Scots-Irish inhabitants he had a strong antipathy towards: “Moore’s Defeat made me march some days sooner than I intended up amongst my good Friends the Bounty Irish. I wish I could say something in their favor. I Believe them to be the worst of the Creation – and Nothing will Bring them to Reason but Severity. Numbers had left their Plantations and severall have Run off since I was amongst them after Submitting and Embodying.”<sup>179</sup> Having learned more about the Battle of Ramsour’s Mill, Cornwallis’ own worries about the effects the incident would have increased: “The affair of Tryon County has given me great concern, altho’ I had my apprehensions that the Flame would break out somewhere, the Folly & Imprudence of our friends is unpardonable.”<sup>180</sup>

This lull in loyalist zeal proved to be fatal for Major Patrick Ferguson, a loyalist officer who commanded partisan forces in the Carolinas a few months later at the Battle of King’s Mountain. King’s Mountain was a decisive defeat for the British and they never recovered from the loss. The devastating event caused Cornwallis to abandon the Carolinas and turn his attention to Virginia where in January 1781 the Battle of Yorktown reassured an American victory in the war two years later. It is not hard to imagine that if Lt. Col. Moore had not gathered the loyalists of the Catawba River Valley prematurely, potentially over a thousand additional men could have joined Ferguson in his campaign, almost guaranteeing him success instead of failure.

After the war’s close, James Karr, a loyalist from the Catawba River Valley who had taken part in the Battle of Ramsour’s Mill in June 1780 contacted his old friend General Griffith Rutherford. Karr and Rutherford had known each other for years prior to the war and served together in the Cherokee War of 1776. When partisan fighting divided friends and neighbors in June 1780, Karr and Rutherford took opposite sides. Patriot militia confiscated Karr’s property

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<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Lord Cornwallis to Lord Rawdon, 29 June 1780, PRO 30/11/77/18-19. Cornwallis Papers, British National Archives, London. Microfilm.

and Karr fled the area. In 1783, Karr wrote to Rutherford for reconciliation and help in regaining his property and reuniting with his family whom he had lost contact with. Rutherford's verbose and angry response speaks volumes of how deep partisan divisions split friends and family. Rutherford reminded Karr that he had "rejected my advise, at a time when if you had taken it, you and I at this time Could have Injoyed a frendly Corospondance, but you ware deffe."<sup>181</sup> Rutherford went on to excitedly ask "How Sir Can you Expect to find frends in this State? ... As to youre General Conduct as an Honest Neghbour you have cause to think you deserve countanance, but as a open enemy you must know that you deserve none."<sup>182</sup> Rutherford then offered a solution to Karr's problem by stating "you crave my advise – my advise is that you send for youre famely if it Suts you & goe to Novescho [Nova Scotia] where I understand the Royal Brut, of Brittan has made provision for all his Loyalests in North America."<sup>183</sup> In a post-Revolution society, the inhabitants of the Catawba River Valley offered no amnesty to those they once called neighbors. The local mill was once the site of friendly conversation between friends, forming a unique community in the Carolina backcountry. In June 1780, that mill became the site of that same community's rupture at the Battle of Ramsour's Mill.

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<sup>181</sup> General Griffith Rutherford to James Karr, 22 July 1783, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC. Document #PC1097.1.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusions

Mills drew the inhabitants of the Carolina backcountry to them through their ability to produce food and economic opportunity, creating a center of community interaction. Mills brought about the replacement of free range cattle raising with corn based agriculture, the creation of roads, and a place for trade and social exchange. Ramsour's Mill took on these roles within the Catawba River Valley.

During the early phases of the American Revolution partisan divisions began to develop, influenced by events throughout the first four years of the war. The passage of the Mecklenburg Declaration and the Tryon Resolves drew out the most ardent loyalists and patriots, while others remained neutral. The coming of the Cherokee War largely unified the backcountry against a foreign threat, yet created a catalyst towards violent retribution that would continue into the partisan conflict that enveloped the region just four years later. The capture of Charleston and the Waxhaw Massacre began to test the limits of the cohesion of backcountry communities.

In June 1780, partisan divisions matured and led to the Battle of Ramsour's Mill. The British proclamation of June 3 and patriot militia drafts challenged the ability for individuals to remain neutral. Mills took on new roles as military staging grounds and strategic sites of food production. The value of Ramsour's Mill surrounded the structure in conflict. Personal vengeance and extreme violence spawned out of the experiences of the previous years. Ultimately, the consequences of the Battle of Ramsour's Mill had a profound impact, altering the level of loyalist enthusiasm and lessening British chances at victory.



## Appendix A

### Possible Text of the Mecklenburg Resolves – May 20, 1775

*The following text is quoted from several letters of correspondence from testimonies of signers of the Mecklenburg Resolves from the University of North Carolina's Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson Library.<sup>184</sup> The actual document does not survive. Captain James Jack traveled from Charlotte to Philadelphia with a copy of the original document and informed the North Carolina delegates of the Second Continental Congress of its signing. The delegates never presented it to the Congress, because the assemblage was still interested in reconciliation with Britain.<sup>185</sup> Some evidence persists that Thomas Jefferson obtained a copy and possibly utilized some of the rhetoric of the document in his own Declaration of Independence a year later such as the use of "inalienable rights."*

That whosoever directly or indirectly abetted or in any way, form or manner countenanced to unchartered & dangerous invasion of our rights as claimed by G. Britain is an enemy to this County – to America & to the inherent & inalienable rights of man.

We the Citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby desolve the political bands which have connected us to the Mother Country & hereby absolve ourselves from allegiance to the British crown & abjure all political connection, contract or association with that nation who have wantonly trampled on our rights & liberties & inhumanely shed the innocent blood of American patriots at Lexington.

We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people – are & of right ought to be a sovereign & self-governing association under the controul of no power other than that of our God & the general government of the congress, to the maintenance of which independence civil & religious we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes & our most sacred honor.

As we now acknowledge the existence & controul of no law or legal officers, civil or military, within this County, we do hereby ordain & adopt as a rule of life, all, each & every of our former laws – wherein nevertheless the crown of great Britain never can be considered as holding rights, privileges, immunities, or authority therein.

It is also further decreed that all, each & every military officer in this County is hereby reinstated in his former command & authority, he acting conformably to these regulations. And that every member present of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer, viz. a Justice of the peace in the character of a "Committee-man" to issue adopted laws – to preserve peace, union & harmony in sd. County & to use every exertion to spread the love of country & fire of freedom established in this province. A selection from the members present shall constitute a Committee of public safety for sd. County.

That a copy of these resolutions be transmitted by express to the President of the Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia, to be laid before that body.

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<sup>184</sup> Mecklenburg Declaration Papers (1775-1982), University of North Carolina, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, collection #00501.

<sup>185</sup> O'Kelly, 1:28.

Signed by:

Ephraim Brevard, James Harris, Richard Barry, Charles Alexander, Benjamin Patton, Robert Irwin, William Graham, Adam Alexander, Thomas Polk, Hezekiah J. Balch, William Kennon, Henry Downs, Zaccheus Wilson, Matthew McClure, John Flennequin, John Queary, John Davidson, Abraham Alexander, John Phifer, John Foard, Ezra Alexander, Waightstill Avery, Neil Morrison, David Reese, Hezekiah Alexander, Richard Harris, John McKnitt Alexander

## Appendix B

### The Tryon Resolves – August 14, 1775

The unprecedented, barbarous and bloody actions committed by British troops on our American brethren near Boston, on 19 April and 20th of May last, together with the hostile operations and treacherous designs now carrying on, by the tools of ministerial vengeance, for the subjugation of all British America, suggest to us the painful necessity of having recourse to arms in defense of our National freedom and constitutional rights, against all invasions; and at the same time do solemnly engage to take up arms and risk our lives and our fortunes in maintaining the freedom of our country whenever the wisdom and counsel of the Continental Congress or our Provincial Convention shall declare it necessary; and this engagement we will continue in for the preservation of those rights and liberties which the principals of our Constitution and the laws of God, nature and nations have made it our duty to defend. We therefore, the subscribers, freeholders and inhabitants of Tryon County, do here by faithfully unite ourselves under the most solemn ties of religion, honor and love to our county, firmly to resist force by force, and hold sacred till a reconciliation shall take place between Great Britain and America on Constitutional principals, which we most ardently desire, and do firmly agree to hold all such persons as inimical to the liberties of America who shall refuse to sign this association.

[Signed:]

John Walker, Charles McLean, Andrew Neel, Thomas Beatty, James Coburn, Frederick Hambright, Andrew Hampton, Benjamin Hardin, George Paris, William Graham, Robt. Alexander, David Jenkins, Thomas Espey, Perrygreen Mackness, James McAfee, William Thompson, Jacob Forney, Davis Whiteside, John Beeman, John Morris, Joseph Hardin, John Robison, James McIntyre, Valentine Mauney, George Black, Jas. Logan, Jas. Baird, Christian Carpenter, Abel Beatty, Joab Turner, Jonathan Price, Jas. Miller, John Dellinger, Peter Sides, William Whiteside, Geo. Dellinger, Samuel Carpenter, Jacob Mauney Jun., John Wells, Jacob Costner, Robert Hulclip, James Buchanan, Moses Moore, Joseph Kuykendall, Adam Simms, Richard Waffer, Samuel Smith, Joseph Neel, Samuel Loftin

**Note in relation to the Battle of Ramsour's Mill:**

Of the above signers, both Benjamin Hardin and Joseph Hardin would fight on behalf of the patriot militia at the Battle of Ramsour's Mill. Moses Moore was the father of Lt. Col. John Moore, the commander of the loyalist force at the battle.

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