

KATY OF THE FORT

The Scots-Irish pioneers of this area in general hated the English. When the American Revolution began they threw themselves wholeheartedly on the side of the Whigs. Nowhere in the whole nation do we find more vigorous opposition to the English than in the three S. C. counties of York, Lancaster and Chester.

The pioneer women were just as vigorous in their activities as the men. As the armies under Lord Cornwallis pursued the American patriots under Generals Thomas Sumter and William R. Davie, the women not only looked after their families and the crops but served as lookouts and messengers. To add to the danger, the Cherokee Indians were allied with the English.

As a protection against the Cherokees, several forts were built. One was a fortified blockhouse on Fishing Creek in present Chester County called Steel's Fort. It was on the land of Thomas Steel who had been killed during the French and Indian Wars. The fort was left in the hands of his widow, Katherine Fisher Steel, who became known as "witty Katy of the Fort."

Katy of the Fort became a legend. Of all the "stout-hearted, high-souled matrons," as Daniel Stinson labeled the pioneer women of the area, Katherine Steel was the most admired. Stinson described her as "of a mirthful disposition, as well as romantic and fond of adventure, " [having] "superior firmness and courage....she would laugh away the fears of her timid companions, when she could not reason them into bravery."

Katherine Steel's son, John, was a captain of a mounted troop under Sumter. Once, when John was carrying important papers to Sumter he stopped to rest at his mother's home with his troop of men. As she combed her son's long hair and prepared to tie it into a queue, a lookout shouted that British troops were coming down the lane.

The soldiers scattered in all directions as if no one knew what to do. Immediately, says Stinson, Katherine Steel perceived the problem and quickly took over. She ordered the men to mount their horses while she took down the posts that barred the horses. Her son John, the quickest of them all, was mounted and jumped his horse over the bars before she could get the bars down. As she lowered the bars other horsemen were following John. Some of the Americans were slow and the British were soon upon them firing their rifles.

When shot off their horses two of the men fell on Katherine Steel. Several more were wounded and several captured. Covered with the blood of wounded men, Katherine struggled to her feet. She had several bullet holes in her dress. Without pause she turned to looking after the wounded.

The Tories, aware that Katherine was leader of the Whig women and the mother of Capt. John Steel, burned the house and destroyed everything useful. Meantime, Captain Steel was able to deliver the important papers to Sumter.

John Steel was never wounded though he participated in every battle in the area. When the war was over he settled down on his father's place and attempted to bind the wounds of former enemies.

Like her son, Katherine Steel was willing to forgive her neighbors who had fought on the other side. Stinson says that she was known for holding out "the hand of friendship to the erring, reclaiming the depraved, and restraining the vindictive ferocity of her younger son and her sons-in-law."

Katherine Steel "retained to the last of light the sprightliness and sweetness of disposition that had distinguished her in youth....Her personal appearance was striking and attractive, and her face bore the impress of the spirit that shone forth in so many noble actions."

By Louise Pettus