

PETTUS

BECKHAMVILLE & JUSTICE GASTON

About 3 miles north of Great Falls on the Chester County side of the Catawba river there is a marker commemorating an occurrence on "Alexander's Old Fields" on June 6, 1780. Some writers have called it the "Battle of Beckhamville," but it was more a skirmish than a battle.

South Carolina's capital city, Charles Town, had fallen into British hands 3 weeks earlier. General Cornwallis then divided the colony into sections, each headed by a colonel responsible for squelching any remaining resistance to British occupation. Colonel Houseman was sent to Rocky Mount at the Falls.

Colonel Houseman distributed handbills among the people instructing them to enroll as loyalists at specific places on specific dates. One place named was Alexander's Old Fields.

Houseman personally visited Justice John Gaston on Fishing Creek. Highly respected by his neighbors, Justice Gaston was 80 years old and had reared a large family of 9 sons and 3 daughters.

Gaston listened to Houseman courteously and without comment. After Houseman left, Gaston sent runners to call on the able-bodied men of the vicinity and request that they come to Justice Gaston's house that evening.

Thirty men came and agreed to Justice Gaston's plan to thwart the British. They elected John McClure and his brother Hugh as their officers and prepared for their encounter the following morning.

At Alexander's Old Fields about 200 soldiers, half of them British Regulars, were present along with a number of citizens ready to declare their allegiance to King George III.

Shortly, Capt. John McClure and his party of 33 men dressed in hunting shirts, deerskin trousers, and moccasins arrived. Each of the Patriots carried a rifle and wore an otterskin shot bag along with a butcher knife by his side.

The British forces were attacked and routed. No one was killed on either side but a number sustained wounds.

Immediately there was a price on Justice Gaston's head. Colonel Houseman sent 20 Redcoats to capture the old man--dead or alive. Gaston with his youngest son, 16-year-old Joseph, both with pistols and rifles, had already crossed the Catawba river and headed for the Waxhaws Church where the wounded were taken. Next, the two went to Mecklenburg County for sanctuary.

Meantime, the British destroyed the Gaston home as Justice Gaston's wife, Esther Waugh Gaston, and a young granddaughter watched from a nearby hiding place. The family bible was the only thing saved.

Justice Gaston returned home in August 1780 following the Whig victory at the battle of Hanging Rock. All 9 of his sons served in the Revolution and 4 were killed in battle. At Hanging Rock one brother's body was found lying across the body of another. Their mother is reported as saying, "I mourn their loss, but they could not have died in a better cause."

The example of the Gastons inspired others. Kathryn Steele, "Katy of the Fort," is said to have told 17-year-old son, John Steele, "You must go and fight the battles of our country. It must never be said that old Squire Gaston's boys have done more for the liberty of their country than Widow Steele's."

The skirmish at Alexander's Old Fields, then, was the opening wedge of upcountry Patriot resistance against the British and, as such, was as significant as a battle won.