

In 1766, he came to minister to 'the scum of the earth'

Anglican official's diary details a life of poverty throughout region

Before the American Revolution, South Carolina was a Royal Colony. The official church was the Church of England, or Anglican.

The back settlements - such as those in York, Lancaster and Chester counties - were overwhelmingly Scotch-Irish and Presbyterian. There was no love lost between the Anglicans and the Presbyterians, but this did not keep a newly ordained Anglican minister by the name of Charles Woodmason from attempting to establish Anglican congregations in the backcountry.

In 1766, Woodmason began a six-year stint of ministering to rough frontiersmen. He kept a journal, and from that journal we get a good idea of what life was like in this area at the time.

If one ignores his rantings about the "beggarly Irish Presbyterians, the scum of the earth," there is still much to be gained by reading his journal, which was

published in 1953 by the University of North Carolina under the title, "The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution."

Woodmason observed much poverty. He wrote that many of the men and women of his congregation were "bareheaded, barelegged and barefoot."

Yet, he said the heat was such that he could hardly bear the weight of his wig and gown during service. (There were communities that were exceptions to Woodmason's assessments. The Waxhaws, for instance, in no way fit Woodmason's descriptions.)

After two years of constant travel, Woodmason estimated he had ridden near 6,000 miles, most of it on one horse. He had baptized nearly 1,200 children, given more than 200 sermons and "raised" (or initiated) 30 congregations.

He had distributed books, medicines, seeds, fish hooks and small tools.

March 1768 was sharp and cold. Woodmason wrote, "Their Cabbins quite open and expos'd. Little or no Bedding, or anything to cover them. Not a drop of anything, save Cold Water to drink. And all their Cloathing, a Shirt and Trousers ... No shoes or stockings, children run half naked. The Indians are better Cloathed and Lodged."

And then he could not help adding, "All this arises from their Indolence and Laziness."

It was not unusual for Woodmason to be caught by darkness out of sight of any habitation.

"On the Banks of this Stream I was obliged to pass the Night in my Wet Cloaths it raining hard all Night, and freezing in the Morning..."

When he became ill, Woodmason reflected not only on his own misery but the misery he observed in others: "No Physician, No Medicines, No Necessaries,

Nurses, or Care in Sickness. If You are taken in any Disorder, there You must lye till Nature gets the better of the Disease or Death relieves you. Tis the fashion of these people to abandon all Persons when Sick, instead of visiting them. So that a Stranger who has no Relatives or Connexions, is in a most Terrible Situation!"

Still, in spite of his troubles, Woodmason traveled on baptizing, marrying and burying his widely scattered congregations.

"There's not a Cabbins but has 10 or 12 Young Children in it. When the Boys are 18 and Girls 14 they marry, so that in many Cabbins You will see 10 or 15 Children."

Woodmason added, "Yet these Poor People enjoy good Health ..." He could not help but wonder why and thought it must be the isolation which cut off the "Epidemic Disorders" of the cities.

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