

John Chambers, Survivor of the Revolution

During the Revolutionary War John Chambers of Bullock Creek enlisted in the militia under Col. William Bratton and Capt. John Steel who were with Gen. Thomas Sumter's forces.

On August 18, 1780, two days after the fall of Camden, Sumter's forces were viciously attacked by the cavalymen, or "Dragoons," of Banastre "Bloody" Tarleton at the mouth of Fishing Creek. Unaware that the enemy was anywhere near, many of the soldiers were bathing in the creek while General Sumter was taking a nap.

An 1855 Yorkville Enquirer article reported that "Captain Chambers had the misfortune to be cut down, and rode over by the British dragoons, who made many thrusts at him as they passed. While they were charging over him he retained his senses, from the effect of pain caused by the trampling of the horses, whose shoes were armed with calkers." (A dictionary definition of "calks," is that they are extensions, or spiked plates, on horseshoes designed to prevent the horse from sliding.)

After the last horse passed over Chambers he "fell in a swoon." When he came to, Chambers found that so much sand had been kicked on him that the flow of blood from his wounds had been checked (or as he would have said, "staunched").

Chambers and two out of five of his comrades were captured by the British and put in prison. One out of five were killed. General Sumter and the remainder of the troops managed to escape.

Miraculously, Chambers survived many days and nights in prison, probably without any medical attention. The prison was probably in or near Camden but the records do not state where Chambers was held. Then, under guard, he and his fellow prisoners began a tortuous march to Charleston where a prison ship awaited them.

Chambers had a burning fever and the sun was hot but, still, he and 5 or 6 of his comrades, managed to escape their guards at Rafton Creek (in Sumter County). In the desperation of getting away from the British guards, Chambers and another soldier, Eli Crockett of the Waxhaws, were separated from the other escapees.

The newspaper account stated that "These two continued together, hunted like wild beasts, by British and Tories for fifty miles." They avoided any human contact in fear that the stranger would be a Tory sympathizer. For six days they had no food except one ear of corn that was snatched off a stalk while they were pursued through a cornfield by Tarleton's men.

On the sixth day it is reported that they reached Cane Creek (in Lancaster County's Waxhaws) and in a desperate attempt to avoid capture, crossed and recrossed the creek. Late in the day they stood on a hill where they could see the house of a Mr. Simpson but they could also see Tarleton's Dragoons. Then, what must have later seemed like a miracle, Chambers and Crockett "meeting a negro girl, and having little hope of surviving that dreadful day they entrusted her with their secret and their lives."

The girl took the message to her mistress. Mrs. Simpson was willing to risk her house being destroyed and her aged husband being taken as a prisoner. She sent her daughter, ". . . afterwards Mrs. Good, with a loaf of bread and a bottle of milk for her famishing countrymen."

Eli Crockett "nearly suffocated" when he took his first mouthful of food in six days. It was all that Chambers could do to revive him. Still, the two men managed to go on and cross the Catawba River, making good their escape.

John Chambers never fully recovered from his extraordinary ordeal. He bore the marks of the horses' hooves for the remaining 22 years of his life, dying on 27 December 1802. He was 60 years of age. His estate papers state that he was taken prisoner and "suffered inexpressibly." The Enquirer stated that "he lived for some years beloved and respected."

By Louise Pettus