

Butterfly Battleground

While the Revolution gained momentum between Patriots and Tories, the emotional impact was so great that it affected the children of both parties. On at least one occasion in what began as harmless play turned ugly from the impact of a divided nation.

Just prior to the Revolution, in 1775, James and Ellen Hope and their children moved from Pennsylvania into what is now Gaston County, North Carolina. When Independence was declared, the politics of the Hope family automatically placed them on the side of the new nation; but the Mullinax family who lived nearby were staunch Tories. These Tories delighted in antagonizing their Patriot neighbors.

One day, in late spring or early summer of 1780, while James Hope was in South Carolina serving under General Sumter, James Jr. and a bonded girl named Nelly was working in their father's field, some of the Mullinax children came up and enticed the them to play at a nearby spring. In an attempt to quench their thirst droves of butterflies gathered at the spring to suck water from the sand. In spontaneous play the children began throwing rocks at the colorful insects as they darted from sunlight to shade. In their warfare, the Mullinax children began calling the numerous yellow butterflies Tories and made war on the blue ones the called "Damn Rebels." This stirred the patriotic blood of young James Hope who shouted his protest and a fight ensued. Nelly joined in the fracas with her hoe and artfully placed a gaping wound on the head of on of the Mullinax boys. This broke up the fight and all retreated to their home territories.

The news of the bloodletting on the butterfly battlefield spread over the Tory community and soon a group of women arrived at the Hope home demanding James be thoroughly whipped. Ellen Hope would have none of it and sent the boy to fetch his father who was just across the North-South Carolina border.

That evening Hope and his son paused neared the cabin. The Patriot knowing the Tories would like nothing better than capture him sent his son to spy out the situation. James soon returned with news that three Tories were in the house waiting for him. One of them was Mullinax, the father of the children who caused the trouble. James and his father laid low until the men became drunk and boisterous. Believing the time was right, Hope burst into the cabin, but one of the drunken Tories grabbed Ellen and threatened to kill her if he did not surrender.

Planning to hold the Patriot until morning and turn him over to British officer Ban Tarleton, Mullinax ordered the captive to open a hole up in the ceiling where they planned to imprison him. Hope was given a shovel to pry off the boards and when he was not as fast as the Tory wanted, Mullinax struck him across the neck with the broadside of his sword.

This insult infuriated the Patriot and he swung the shovel delivering a brutal blow to Mullinax's head. In a flash, he turned his fury upon the other two and subdued them. While James and James Jr. held the three at gunpoint Ellen tied them up. Young James was sent to the home of Patriot Barnett with word that Hope was leaving to take his three captives to Sumter's camp in South Carolina, and to meet him along the way.

Along the way, Hope and Barnett were joined by two Carroll brothers and continued with them to the Patriot camp. But the Tory women around the "Butterfield Battleground" continued to harass the women and children of local patriots. James Hope was allowed to return to his home to move his family to a safer environment. The family came to safety on Turkey Creek, an area patrolled by Patriot forces and near Lacey's Fort, which overlook the area. While James Hope had been in many skirmishes including the battle at Stallings and Williamson Plantation, he was absent at the August 1780 Battle of Hanging Rock busy moving his family out of harm's way.