

Catawba Indians in the Revolutionary War

About the time the Declaration of Independence was signed (July 4, 1776), British warships were planning to take the city of Charleston by setting up a base on nearby Sullivan's Island.

Gen. William Moultrie of the Continental Line got wind of the British plans and, in spite of orders to the contrary, made the decision to resist the occupation. Under Moultrie's command was the Third South Carolina Regiment which included a group of militia men known as the "backcountry rangers."

The backcountry rangers included Catawba Indians who had not only fought against the Cherokees, their traditional enemy, but had switched from support of the Crown to the colonial cause as early as 1772. In that year the British royal government men who ruled South Carolina had changed from paying Catawbas to track runaway slaves and other chores given as favors in years past.

After Moultrie's men won the battle of Sullivan's Island, the backcountry rangers headed back to the northwest where the Cherokees, who remained loyal to the British, were raiding the white settlements. Catawba warriors went along with the rangers headed by Col. Andrew Williamson. This group was soon joined by Col. Thomas Sumter who would four years later make the Catawba Indian Land his base of operations.

The Catawbas (also spelled Catoppas in some of the literature) proved to be valuable in the Cherokee campaign as scouts. Maurice Moore wrote that

Andrew Williamson, who had been promoted to General, valued highly his advance guard of 25 Catawbas.

Charleston fell to the British in May 1780. The only resistance to the British in South Carolina came from Francis Marion, the "Swampfox," and Thomas Sumter, the "Gamecock." Sumter came to the Catawba Indian Land to recruit among the groups who hated the English the most---Scotch-Irish settlers and the Catawba Indians.

Sumter made camp first on Hagler's Hill, site of Old Town, that is located on the present-day Anne Springs Close Greenway near Fort Mill. There were few provisions available. The soldiers called the camp "Starve Belly." Then Sumter moved the camp across Sugar Creek to Clems Branch (in Lancaster County not far south of Pineville, NC).

The Clems branch spot had better pasturage for the horses. Gen. Richard Winn of Camden wrote that the "friendly Indians drove us beef from their own stocks and several times brought out their whole force and encamped near us."

Records show that 41 Catawbas enlisted at Clems Branch and served under Capt. Thomas Drennan. Catawbas appear to have been present at the Sumter-led battles of Rocky Mount, Fishing Creek and Hanging Rock.

Thirty-five Catawba warriors joined Col. William R. Davie on the north side of Waxhaw Creek and were assigned to patrol the region ---again serving as "eyes and ears" for Whig soldiers. The group that assisted Davie was headed by the Catawba chief, General New River.

When Camden fell to the British April 25, 1781, the Catawba soldiers took their wives and children to stay with a friendly tribe in Virginia. In North Carolina they joined Gen. Nathaniel Greene's forces and played a major role as scouts for Greene's success at the Battle of Guildford Courthouse. They were also in the Battle of Eutaw Springs.

David Hutchison, a white neighbor, wrote: "When General Greene turned South, the Indians brought their women and children from Virginia. . . . They received word at Charlotte, about thirty miles from their towns, that all was gone; cattle, hogs, fowls &c., all gone."

When William Moultrie became governor of South Carolina in 1785 nearly one-half of his inaugural address dealt with the need for a sensible plan to protect the Catawba Indians and their land from undue pressure of white encroachment.

Moultrie's plan was only partially adopted.

Louise Pettus