

Soldier served with Gen. Sumter

William McElwee was the last survivor of Kings Mountain battle

In York County's Bethany Church cemetery there is a monument that reads, "Sacred to the Memory of William McElwee, Esq. who departed this life November 15, 1854, in the 93rd year of his age, being a revolutionary soldier in the war of 1776." McElwee was the last surviving soldier of the battle of Kings Mountain.

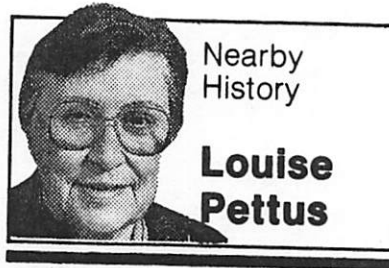
William McElwee III was born near Petersburg in Brunswick County, Va. He joined the forces of Gen. Thomas Sumter in 1780 just before Charleston fell to the British. His first fight was the skirmish near Brattonsville that is often called Huck's Defeat. As a lieutenant, he then fought at Rocky Mount and Hanging Rock in Lancaster District and at the battles of Fishing Creek (Chester County) and Kings Mountain.

In the late 1840s and 1850s Benson J. Lossing, a man who was fascinated by the events of the American Revolution, tramped over the area that Sumter's forces had fought and set out to reconstruct the events. In a book titled "Hours With the Living Men and Women of the Revolution," which was published by Funk and Wagnalls in 1889, Lossing told of his meeting with William McElwee III.

Lossing had arrived at Kings Mountain on a cold, snowy day in January 1849 and stopped at the home of a Mr. Leslie. Leslie not only offered to guide Lossing to the battlefield but brought out two fresh horses and accompanied him. Lossing made several sketches of the topography of the "strange battleground."

When the two men returned to Leslie's home, William McElwee, Leslie's father-in-law, was there. Lossing described the Revolutionary War veteran in this fashion: "He was a stout-built man, of medium stature, with an unmistakable Scotch face, flowing white

April 20 1991



hair, blue eyes, and, though 87 years old, seemed about as vigorous in mind as a hale man at sixty."

Lossing spent the evening listening to McElwee's experiences. First, Lossing asked, "When and where did you join Sumter?" McElwee said it was just before Clinton took Charleston and Cornwallis began to overrun the state. When Thomas Sumter retreated to North Carolina, McElwee was with him. When they returned to South Carolina it was to a camp at Clems Branch in upper Lancaster County.

At the Clems Branch camp, the men repaired their equipment with iron from Col. William Hill's Iron Works on Allison Creek. About 40 Catawba Indians reported from their scouting trips to observe the movements of the British armies.

Sumter's officers went out trying to recruit more soldiers to stand against the British. According to McElwee the recruitment efforts had little success until they "struck the camp of the wicked Tory Chris Huck on a hot night in July. We killed the leader and scattered his followers to the wind."

Pressed by Lossing to tell more, McElwee said, "Huck was a profane and profligate wretch. He hated Presbyterians intensely; murdered one of them on the way to a place of worship on a Sunday with his Bible in his hand, and burned a minister's house. When we struck Huck, he had about 200 hundred mounted men. Our party numbered only 133 all told. Timid men took courage and joined Sumter's standard."

At Clem's Branch that summer, Sumter was appointed a brigadier general. At the same time, McElwee was commissioned as a lieutenant. The British Gen. Cornwallis called Sumter his greatest plague in the Carolinas. According to McElwee it was then that South Carolinians began calling Thomas Sumter the "South Carolina Gamecock."

Five years after McElwee spent the winter at Clems Branch he married Rachel Newman and settled down near Kings Mountain the site of the battle that has since been called the "turning point of the American Revolution." The McElwees had 13 children.