

ENOCH GILMER--KINGS MOUNTAIN SPY  
by Louise Pettus

On October 5, 1780 a small band of Revolutionary patriots gathered at Cowpens to deliberate the course to follow in their pursuit of Colonel Patrick Ferguson of the King's 71st Regiment. Ferguson was believed to be somewhere between them and Lord Cornwallis to the east.

The first intelligence of Ferguson's location was gained on October 6 by Joseph Kerr, a crippled boy in Col. James Williams' company. Kerr found Ferguson's men camped at Peter Quinn's home about five or six miles from Kings Mountain. Kerr pretended to be a Loyalist and entered the camp where he estimated that Ferguson had about 1500 men. Then, hardly noticed, Kerr left to report to the patriot officers.

Next, Major Chronicle recommended a South Fork lad, Enoch Gilmer, to scout the enemy. About Gilmer it was later written: "Gilmer can assume any character that occasion may require; he could cry and laugh in the same breath, and all who saw it would believe he was in earnest; that he could act the part of a lunatic so well that no one could discover him; above all, he was a stranger to fear."

Gilmer planned to stop every few miles to see what the local people knew about Ferguson's movements. The first stop was at the home of a Tory where Gilmer posed as a sympathetic loyalist who needed to find Ferguson's headquarters. Gilmer got so much detail on Ferguson's plans and his communication with Cornwallis that he immediately returned to report to Gen. William Campbell who had assumed the role of chief officer.

Campbell had about 1100 troops --the estimates running at 666 North Carolinians, 200 from South Carolina, 200 from Virginia and 30 from Georgia.

Again, Enoch Gilmer was sent ahead to reconnoiter. The army crossed the Cherokee Ford on the Broad River. They became concerned when Gilmer did not return but soon across a valley they recognized the voice of Gilmer singing an old English tune, "Barney Linn." The song signaled that the way was clear. "Gilmer's heart was so glad that the chase was nearly over and the game almost in sight, that he had given vent to his soul in a mirthful song."

Beef found at Cowpens fed the troops at the site of an abandoned Tory camp.

The rain poured and the men took their blankets from their shoulders to wrap their guns and powder as they marched.

Again Gilmer went forward. At the home of a family named Beason he was informed that Ferguson's camp was nine miles away. As the troops left, a girl came out and told Col. Campbell that Ferguson and his men were on Kings Mountain.

Campbell went three miles more and stopped at another cabin. Inside he found Gilmer "partaking of the best of the house and hurraing for King George." An old woman and her granddaughters had fed Gilmer well. Campbell could not resist having fun with Gilmer. He ordered a rope put around his neck and marched him out, presumably to be hung. The girls' cried and begged for Gilmer's life. Campbell told them he would hang Gilmer out of sight of their home so that they would not be upset.

As soon as the patriots were on the road again, Gilmer gave his latest intelligence to Campbell. Plans were laid for the impending battle.

Luck was with the patriot forces. Not only had they had the valuable information secured by Joseph Kerr, the crippled boy, and Enoch Gilmer, the consummate actor, but, in sight of the foot of the mountain, they captured a young Tory carrying a despatch from Ferguson to Cornwallis. Col. Frederick Hambricht had recognized John Ponder, a Tory in disguise.

Then, within a mile of Ferguson's camp, they found a Whig, Henry Watkins, just released by Ferguson, who gave them all of the information they needed for setting up their lines for battle. The battle of Kings Mountain lasted only 50 minutes but now is recognized as the patriot victory that "turned the tide" of the Revolution in favor of the Americans.