

PETTUS

THE FERGUSON RIFLE

On top of Kings Mountain is a cairn of stones bearing this inscription:

*To the Memory of Col. Patrick Ferguson
Seventy-First Regiment, Highland Light Infantry
Born in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in 1744
Killed October 7, 1780 in Action at Kings Mountain
While in Command of the British Troops
A Soldier of Military Distinction and Honor.*

Today, Colonel Ferguson is remembered best as the inventor of the Ferguson rifle.

Patrick Ferguson, son a well-to-do landowning family, entered military service at the age of 14. He had fought in Germany and in the West Indies before coming to America.

The traditional British firearm was a musket, nicknamed "Brown Bess" for its walnut stock. The musket, also used by many Americans, was not very accurate. Ferguson studied a new gun developed in Pennsylvania but popularly known as the Kentucky Rifle.

The American rifle was far more accurate than the musket but took longer to load (one round about every two minutes compared with the musket's one round each 15 seconds).

In 1776, at the onset of the American Revolution, Patrick Ferguson obtained a patent for his new breechloading rifle. Ferguson demonstrated the new rifle to astonished British army officers. The rifle could be fired six times a minute, instead of the four times a minute of the Brown Bess. What's more it was accurate at 200 yards, beyond the reach of the Brown Bess.

Ferguson even demonstrated his rifle to King George III who was impressed sufficiently to tell Ferguson that the rifle would be the official gun of the British army. George III ordered Ferguson to command a special corps of riflemen in America. This group performed at the Battle of Brandywine in September 1778. The rifle performed well but Ferguson was badly wounded.

Unfortunately for Ferguson, his general was Sir William Howe, a rather stupid man, who resented the fact that Ferguson had "gone over his head" in demonstrating the rifle to the King. Howe took advantage of Ferguson's slow recovery to disband his rifle corps and put the rifles in storage in Nova Scotia.

Ferguson got back into action after the fall of Charleston in 1780. He was given a command of 1,100 American Loyalist militiamen whose task it was to seek out the rebels in upcountry South Carolina. Thus it was that Ferguson was at Kings Mountain in York County on October 6, 1780 facing 1,700 frontiersmen.

The frontiersmen, mostly from Tennessee, took advantage of the terrain and used the Kentucky Rifle well. Colonel Ferguson was killed while leading a charge.

Military historians believe that the Ferguson rifle was too technically advanced for the British army to accept it. It would have drastically changed field tactics, new manuals would have had to have been written, and new attitudes developed.

It is interesting that the Americans weren't ready for the Ferguson breechloading rifle either. It was more than 40 years before the American army adopted a version of the Ferguson rifle, called the Hall rifle.

In 1855 Kings Mountain Military Academy was established by Asbury Coward and Micah Jenkins as a preparatory school for the Citadel. As a part of their military training, the boys each summer hiked from Yorkville to the battle site and undoubtedly heard from their instructors the story of Ferguson and his rifle. But when these cadets went off to the Civil War many took with them muzzle-loading rifles--hardly better than those used in the Revolutionary War.