

# ***PRESBYTERS AND SEDITION: YORK COUNTY AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION***

by Sam Thomas

The lack of religious tolerance was one of the primary "movers" behind the formation of the American colonies.

Nowhere was this more true than with the "backcountry" piedmont section of the Carolinas, where York County found itself as the center of this religious settlement. The first settlers, who were made up almost entirely of Scots-Irish Presbyterians, began drifting into the northern part of the county during the 1750s from Lancaster and Mecklenburg Counties.

The early ethnic make-up of York County supports this. York County, on the eve of the Revolution, was said to have been composed of 70% Scots-Irish; 20% English; and 10% Welsh, Huguenot and native Irish.

As there were no villages yet established in the area, and would not be until after the war, the first Scots-Irish settled in loose communal family-related groups called "clachans," much as they had in Northern Ireland.

These clachans were located around the communal Presbyterian meetinghouses, and became the forerunners of the congregations.

The congregation generally encompassed an area within a 10 mile radius of the church/meetinghouse.

The Carolina piedmont, stretching from Rowan and Iredell Counties in North Carolina southward to Fairfield County in South Carolina, was heavily populated by these Presbyterians.

Of the first 27 churches begun in the piedmont prior to the start of the Revolution, 25 were Presbyterian (with 1 Lutheran and 1 Baptist).

The oldest congregation in York County is Bethel Presbyterian, located just six miles east of Clover on Hwy 557.

This congregation was formed by William Richardson from a part of the Waxhaw congregation in Lancaster County around 1764.

Settling in the Carolina Backcountry of York County, these Scots-Irish enjoyed their independence.

Being so far from the colonial capital in Charleston, the Presbyterians were allowed to practice their faith and way of living without worry of interference from the British Crown.

The resentments which many of the Scots-Irish harbored towards England were brought with them when they arrived in the colonies.

These resentments would boil to the surface in 1780 as the Presbyterian Rebellion.

The southern theater of the American Revolution was not the same war as that fought in New England and the mid-Atlantic colonies.

The American Revolution in the South was a war within a war.

This war, as fought in the Carolina Piedmont, and York County in particular, was an ethnic and religious war.

One noted English historian later remarked that, "Throughout the revolted colonies...the foremost, the most irreconcilable, the most determined in pushing the quarrel to the last extremity, were the Scotch-Irish..." Presbyterians.

George Bancroft, the great religious historian of the late 19th century once claimed, "...the first voice publicly raised in America to dissolve the connection with Great Britain came, not from the Puritans of New England, nor the Dutch of New York, nor the planters of Virginia, but from the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians.

As the eminent scholar and history professor of Davidson College, Chalmers Davidson has put it, "The seeds of resistance to British authority were sown in the Presbyterian Churches that made captains and colonels out of deacons and elders.

As a result of this public outcry by the Scots-Irish, the Presbyterian churches became the focal points in rallying the rebels and in gathering the wrath of the British and Tories.

Many Presbyterian churches were destroyed in the course of the war, by the enemy because as one British officer explained, "All Presbyterian churches are sedition shops."

In 1780 alone, Old Waxhaw Presbyterian in Lancaster County, Rocky Creek Presbyterian in Chester County and Bethesda Presbyterian in York County were all burned by Tory raids.

Patrick Ferguson had even made it known that after leaving Kings Mountain, he intended to "spend one night in Bethel Church, leave it in ashes by day-light...and be on the east side of the Catawba before nightfall."

The first four years of the American Revolution had given the Carolina backcountry and the Scots-Irish little trouble, but everything changed in 1780 with the fall of Charleston to the British and the invasion of the Backcountry by British Lord Cornwallis and his troops.

The one event which pushed the residents of York County and the rest of the Backcountry into opposition to Royal authority was the massacre of a group of Virginia troops under Colonel Abraham Buford in Lancaster County by American Loyalists under British Cavalry officer Banastre Tarleton.

After the massacre, the entire state of South Carolina south of Winnsboro was under British control and in fear of "Bloody Ban."

The one major pocket of resistance was in York County, and was led by the members, such as William Hill, Hugh Alison, Thomas and Andrew Neel, Samuel Watson and others of the Bethel Presbyterian congregation.

In a June 1780 report to Lord Cornwallis, British Colonel George Turnbull made reference to these men and other like them when he said, [they] "...keep the candle of rebellion still burning in the backcountry."

Page 4

As Cornwallis moved northward toward Charlotte, in his attempt to subjugate the remainder of the state in the summer of 1780, the activities of the Tories in the region increased.

One of the most active was Captain Christian Huck, originally from Pennsylvania, an officer in the command of Mathew Floyd.

Both of these were intense Tories.

In early July 1780, Huck was sent on a search and destroy mission against the Presbyterian rebels in York County.

Huck's first raid was the burning of William Hill's iron works on Allison Creek in the eastern part of the county.

He then continued on a southward sweep hoping to capture William Bratton and other rebels in the Bethesda area.

On July 11, Huck was disappointed in not finding William Bratton at his home.

But Martha Bratton was.

Huck knew that Bratton had recently joined Sumter's forces, and he began to question Martha about the whereabouts of her husband.

Refusing to divulge the location of her husband and his force, Huck then threatened her with a reaping-hook.

As the story goes, she was saved just in time by one of the other Tory officers.

From the Bratton homestead, Huck's force moved up the road to the home of James Williamson.

Here the Tories camped and waited for the next day to continue their pursuit of the rebels.

At daybreak the Tories were surprised by Bratton and his men, and in the ensuing battle Huck was killed and the rest of his force was either captured or killed.

After Cornwallis' forced retreat from the Backcountry to safety in Camden, he noted the inhospitality of the countryside and its inhabitants, comparing the area to being in the midst of a "nest of hornets."

These were, almost entirely, "Presbyterian hornets."

Tarleton was the first to directly lay the blame for British failures in the Backcountry, noting in his memoirs that the war in the Carolina Backcountry was not a civil war or a revolution, but instead a "Presbyterian Rebellion."

Probably no one knew this better than Patrick Ferguson.

Ferguson had been detached from Cornwallis and the main British army to keep an eye on the British left flank and to keep the rebels in the backcountry from interfering with the planned thrust northward.

In late September, Ferguson had moved to Gilbert Town (present-day Rutherfordton, NC) where he issued his famous threat to the overmountainmen of the Watauga settlement in eastern Tennessee (a Presbyterian settlement) to stay out of the way or he would come over the mountains and burn their homes.

Ferguson didn't realize he was speaking to a bunch of typical, hard-headed Presbyterians.

For as we know, the mountainmen immediately assembled an army and marched out to meet Ferguson.

When Ferguson heard that they were marching against him, he began a hasty retreat back to the safety of the British army.

Realizing that he was not going to make it back to the safety of the main army, Ferguson took refuge on Kings Mountain, boasting that, "all [the] rebels outside hell" could not dislodge him from that mountain.

Page 6

We all know how empty these words were.

Around the base of the mountain gathered men from nearly every Presbyterian congregation south and west of the Catawba river.

During the battle which lasted a little over an hour, and concluded with an astonishing American victory, the entire British left flank was wiped out.

This event proved to be the turning point of the war, as it forced Cornwallis to continue towards Wilmington, NC and British supplies, and then to Yorktown.

With the British army out of the picture the rebellion quickly began to wind down. So if it had not been for the Presbyterians of York County, we might all be speaking real English today.

The Presbyterian Rebellion in the South, although of relatively short duration, played a tremendous part in the history of this country.

"The Sword of the Lord and of Our Gideons!"