The mystery of war hero 'Horseshoe Robinson'

He's a legend with differing stories, making the truth hard to find

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A certain Revolutionary War hero serves as a good example of someone who, without intending to, has left a legend so powerful that it has lasted two-and-a-quarter centuries. There's truth and fiction in the legend of "Horseshoe Robinson," whose name was actually James Robertson – at least that is his name on his tombstone.

NEARBY HISTORY

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The inscription on his tombstone near Romulus, Ala., reads: "Major James Robertson, A native of S.C. died April 26, 1838, aged 79 years, Well known as Horseshoe Robinson, he earned a just fame in the war of independence, in which he was eminent in courage, patriotism and suffering. He lived fifty-six years with his worthy partner, useful and respected, and died in hopes of a blessed immortality. His children erect this monument as a tribute justly due to a good husband, father, neighbor, patriot and soldier."

"Horseshoe Robinson: A tale of the Tory ascendancy in South Carolina, in 1780" is the title of a book written by John Pendleton Kennedy in 1835. Then, in 1858, Clifton Tayleure wrote "Horseshoe Robinson; or The battle of King's Mountain: A legendary patriotic drama in three acts..."

The problems in tracing the true facts about James Robertson are many. The only real agreement is that James, or "Horseshoe," was a fine man and brave soldier.

One source says he was a native of South Carolina; another says he was born in Virginia. Kennedy first met the hero in the winter of 1818-19 when Horseshoe was living in present-day Oconee County. The old soldier told Kennedy of his escape from Charleston after it was captured by the British, vivid scenes of fighting, capture of British soldiers, etc. Years later, in 1838, a Tuscaloosa, Ala., newspaper reporter read sections of the book to Horseshoe and asked for his reaction. Horseshoe replied, "There is a heap of truth in it, though the writer has mightily furnished it up."

In the 1870s, Lyman Draper set out to collect all the information he could from descendants of Revolutionary War veterans and ended up with enough correspondence, newspaper clippings, pension records, etc. to fill 54 reels of microfilm. The name James Robertson appears in Draper's Kings Mountain Papers 17 times. Draper has James "Horseshoe" Robinson only once – in a copy of his obituary.

Horseshoe says he was not called that name, but was known as James, until after the war when he lived on his "Plantation in the Horseshoe Bend of the Fair Forest creek which was bestowed upon him by the Legislature of South Carolina in consequence of the services he had rendered during the war."

Horseshoe further told the reporter he was born in Virginia and entered the Army in his 17th year. Kennedy wrote that Horseshoe's name was derived from his occupation as a blacksmith and from the curved creek which circled about his home in the Waxhaws of South Carolina. As an old man in Alabama, Horseshoe heard the novel read and said, "It is all true and right in its right place." A correspondent of Draper claimed that he was named for the horseshoe loop of Sugar Creek, separating York and Lancaster counties. Before the close of the war, he said he commanded a troop of cavalry and his military title was captain. His tombstone has "Major" as his rank.

Under Act of Congress, June 7, 1832, Revolutionary soldiers could apply for pensions. James Robertson, a resident of St. Clair County, Ala., did so.

He is on the Revolutionary Pension Roll as having the rank of "private, S.C. Continental Line."

Were there two James Robertsons? One who had a novel written about him and another who was in the battle of Kings Mountain? Was one born in Virginia and the other in South Carolina, perhaps in the Waxhaws of Lancaster County?

Whatever the answer, remember that identification was not positive in Horseshoe Robinson's day. No birth certificates, no Social Security number and no DNA testing.

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