

# Battle Of Kings Mountain Bicentennial Edition

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## Kings Mountain: Story Of Contradiction

By  
**ED SMITH**

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This article, which has undergone some revision, deletions and additions, was first published in the Kings Mountain Herald on Oct. 7, 1971, the 191st anniversary of the Battle of Kings Mountain. The author was awarded The Smithwick Cup by the N.C. Society of County and Local Historians for the story. Mr. Smith says that the first published historical account of the Battle of Kings Mountain was written by General Joseph Graham in the early 1800s. General Graham's home Vesovius Furnace is where the Smiths now live, so this present article was written "probably in the same room where General Graham wrote his first account of the Battle. I hope he approves of mine," Smith said.)

The Battle of Kings Mountain was a story of contradictions.

Few events in the history of the two Carolinas have received more attention from historians, dramatists or fiction writers. Yet much of what has been written has been inadequate, or in error, and despite all of this attention a great deal of what actually happened there remains a mystery today.

The basic facts are not open to dispute, and are in fact well known. On October 7, 1780, a rainy, unseasonably-chilly Saturday afternoon, a force of back-country Whig militia attacked a force of largely back-country Tory militia on a hilltop near Kings Mountain, and in a bitter one-hour battle fought at unusually close range, totally defeated the King's supporters.

The Tories were commanded by a highly-competent British army regular, Major Patrick Ferguson, who was killed during the fighting. The Whig forces consisted of a number of separate militia units from along the Southern frontier, each under its own officers but loosely under the command of Colonel William Campbell of Virginia.

Consequently, the time and place of battle, its leading participants and its outcome are well known. When one attempts to fill in many of the details, however, or to speculate on the whys and wherefores, confusion results.

Much of the basic research on the Kings Mountain battle was done long ago. Later writers have tended to copy the earlier findings, and unfortunately no real modern effort has been made to fit recent historical discoveries into the overall picture of Kings Mountain. This article represents an effort to fill out that picture in fuller detail.

For two centuries, now, the Battle of Kings Mountain has been regarded by historians as a classic, textbook example of frontier warfare.

It is also regarded as the first battle in which rifles played a decisive role. It is an unusual

fact, however, that not a single member of the American force was an active member of the Continental Army. All were volunteers, members of local militia units who set out on their own initiative, without orders from the regular army, to take part in the expedition against Ferguson's Tories. Colonels Isaac Shelby and John Sevier risked bankruptcy by pledging their own resources to underwrite the expedition (should the state government refuse to honor their expense vouchers) and the Americans took a desperate risk in setting out without doctors or medical supplies and very short on both food and ammunition.

On the other side, Major Ferguson's own 125-man Provincial Corps — though a well-trained regular army unit — consisted of American-born volunteers from New York and New Jersey. The remainder of his forces were local Tory militia, mostly new recruits.

The Battle of Kings Mountain would be civil war, in many cases literally kin against kin and neighbor against neighbor. Consequently — as such fights usually are — it was unusually savage in nature, with casualty rates much higher than the normal engagement of that period.

### BRITISH SURPRISED

It was shortly before three o'clock in the afternoon when the American force caught up with Major Ferguson in his hilltop encampment southwest of the main peak of Kings Mountain. Originally their number had totalled over 1,800 men, but fatigue, short rations and the need for haste had thinned their ranks materially. Many of these men had travelled for several hundred miles to get there; others lived within sight of Kings Mountain.

They were not expected, or were at least ahead of schedule. Ferguson's intelligence activities had given him a fairly accurate picture of the size and makeup of the movement against him, but his last word had placed the frontiersmen some 50 miles away on Green River still gathering their forces. Apparently the British commander had not expected them to move as swiftly or as boldly as they did.

**"My brave fellows, we have beaten the Tories before, and we can beat them again ... When we come up to the enemy, aim as well as you can and fire as quick as you can, and stand your ground as long as you can. When you can do no better, get behind trees or retreat, but I beg you ... don't run off! If we are repulsed let us make a point of returning and renewing the fight."**  
Col. Benjamin Cleveland

From this point on, however, speculation plays a major role in any writing on the events of that day. This is particularly true regarding the British side, for their leader did not survive the battle and his papers were never evaluated.

Historians have been puzzled by Ferguson's conduct at Kings Mountain, since he was a demonstrably-capable officer. It has been generally believed that he intended to fight a defensive battle from atop the ridge, and that his acceptance of battle under those conditions was due to over-confidence, or contempt of the foe.

According to tradition, he is supposed to have boasted that neither God Almighty nor all the rebels in hell could drive him off the hilltop. But this could have as easily been a corruption of his public reassurances to the local Tories that he would not abandon them to the Whigs by retreating to the protection of Lord Cornwallis' army at Charlotetown. Further, though he was one of his army's top experts on field fortifications, Ferguson made no efforts to establish a defensive position on his hilltop, and in his dispatches to Cornwallis asking for reinforcements he clearly expressed his intentions to "give rather than receive" an attack. For these reasons it may well be that historians generally have been in error as to the British leader's intentions at Kings Mountain.

It appears logical — to this writer at least — that Ferguson was simply surprised and attacked in a temporary encampment atop the hill by an enemy alert enough to land the first blow.

**ACCIDENTAL VICTORY**  
All did not go smoothly for the American side either. In fact it actually appears evident today that Kings Mountain was as much an accidental victory for them as would be the case at Cowpens some three months later! It subtracts little credit from the frontiersmen to say so, however, for they quickly adapted themselves to a changed situation and made the most of it.

The American plan of battle had been to surround the British encampment and attack from all sides simultaneously. Had they succeeded in doing so, the odds are very good that the Battle of Kings Mountain might have reached an entirely different conclusion with the possibilities ranging from a British victory to that of a more-likely draw, with both sides left scattered and vulnerable.

In simple terms, had the original plan of attack been successful, it would have forced Ferguson into adopting necessary counter-measures while there was still time to have done so successfully. As it turned out, however, he would be totally late in recognizing the true nature of the attack against him.

General J.F.C. Fuller whose book "British Light Infantry in the Eighteenth Century" is the standard reference work on this subject, wondered why Ferguson did not simply cut his way out of the trap on the hilltop. He points out that in order to have surrounded the hill the frontiersmen would have had to spread themselves disastrously thin. Frontiersmen, wielding rifles without bayonets, habitually formed themselves into a thin skirmish line and fought from behind cover. They did so at Kings Mountain. Muzzle-loading weapons were slow to load and fire. Consequently the volume of fire from along any given portion of the circling force would have been so weak that the besieged force could easily have cut its way clear to safety. Yet to remain on the hilltop would have been foolhardy for any competent military man, Fuller said, for on the summit, at the center or vortex of the attackers firepower, its concentration of perhaps one to two thousand rounds per minute would be lethal. So it would indeed prove to be for the Tories.

Further, once free of the trap, the besieged troops could have counter-attacked along the thin

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## KM - A Springboard For Many Leaders

By ED SMITH

The Battle of Kings Mountain proved to be a springboard launching the careers of many frontier leaders.

A form of rough but pure democracy ruled in those days. Militia elected their officers, and the mere fact that a man could be chosen to be a leader in battle by the tough-minded frontiersmen spoke eloquently enough as to his abilities.

Many of the men who figured prominently at Kings Mountain went on to set examples in other endeavors as well, in settling the frontier and building a new nation. Though not without struggles, setbacks and—often controversy, they became generals, Congressmen, Senators, state legislators, judges and county officials. Many were successful traders, farmers and businessmen. At least three served as Governors of their respective states.

Even some who had served that day on the other side of the line were able to overcome the stigma of their Tory associations, to go home eventually and live out successful lives amid their former enemies!

Colonel William Campbell, of Virginia, who had been elected at least titular leader of the expedition by his peers, went on to fight later at Guilford Courthouse. Promoted to general, he died in 1781, of pneumonia while serving under LaFayette in his native state.

Colonel Isaac Shelby went on to become one of the frontier's most outstanding leaders. He helped establish the state of Kentucky, and served as its first Governor. During the War of 1812 he served as a general, leading twelve regiments of Kentucky militia in the invasion of Canada.

Colonel John Sevier was as stirring and picturesque a figure as the frontier ever produced. After the war he played a leading role in the breaking away of the western counties from North Carolina and the establishment of the state of Franklin. Arrested for "treason" by North Carolina authorities, Sevier leaped from a courthouse window in Morganton at his trial and rode home unscathed! Later pardoned, he helped form the state of Tennessee and served as its first Governor.

Jesse Franklin, a twenty-year-old captain under Colonel Benjamin Cleveland at Kings Mountain, found a later career in politics. He served as state legislator, U.S. Congressman and Senator, and in 1820-21, as Governor of North Carolina.

Major Joseph Winston, also of Cleveland's Wilkes County regi-



Ferguson



Shelby



Sevier

ment, went on to be a militia general, state legislator and U.S. Congressman. The town of Winston (now part of Winston-Salem) was named after him.

Col. Cleveland himself was not as lucky. After the war he lost his large land holdings and home in Wilkes County in a legal battle over land titles. He moved to South Carolina, and though in poor health reestablished himself as a farmer and local judge. As a crippled, older man his weight ballooned to over four hundred pounds, a far cry from the muscular, robust frontiersman he had been in youth.

Col. James Williams of South Carolina was the ranking American casualty at Kings Mountain, receiving a mortal wound near the battle's conclusion. Though his reputation as an opponent of the British was firmly established, he was engaged in a bitter dispute with his fellow South Carolina Colonels, Edward Lacey and James Hill as to who was senior officer present, and thereby commander of that state's forces. Lacey ended his military career as a brigadier general, then served as both judge and legislator.

Major Joseph McDowell did more than his part to rid the Piedmont Carolinas of Tory influence, fighting all the way from Ramsour's Mill to Kings Mountain to Cowpens. He served several terms later as a U.S. Congressman.

Another victim of Kings Mountain was Col. William Graham, who survived physically but found his reputation tarnished. Col. Graham was Lincoln County's most outstanding civil and military leader, the North Carolina area closest to the battlefield. He had served conspicuously in the war, contributed greatly in feeding and equipping his men and thrown his own home open to refugees from the war. Yet shortly before the battle began he received an urgent message from home, his pregnant wife was desperately ill and needed his help. Graham asked for permission to leave. His replacement, Major William Chronicle, was killed during the fighting, and Graham found himself branded by many as a coward. He never again took part in public life.

Lieutenant Colonel Fredrick Hambricht, who led the local Lincoln County troops for most of the battle, was himself seriously wounded. He recovered, however, and lived to be ninety years old, leaving many descendants in this area.

## Many KM Participants Took Part In Executions

By ED SMITH

There was a popular saying during the Revolutionary Period that "A Tory is a creature whose head is in England and whose body is in America—so his neck ought to be stretched!"

There were American Tories, too, who prescribed similar treatment for "rebels" and "traitors to the Crown".

Many of the men who fought at Kings Mountain—on both sides—had taken parts in such executions. Practically everyone there approved of them, as did society as a whole. The North Carolina legislature had only recently passed a bill legalizing the summary execution of any

Tory caught engaging in acts of terrorism, upon the concurrence of two local magistrates. In nearby Virginia, a certain Captain Lynch was acquiring such renown for his relentless pursuit of active supporters of the Crown that his name would find its way into our language.

It was a two-way street, however. Colonel William Campbell—who had himself taken an active part in the execution of several notorious Tories—narrowly escaped a similar fate when captured by a band of their fellows. Captain Jesse Franklin, who served at Kings Mountain as Colonel

Cleveland's adjutant, escaped death by hanging under similar circumstances when the bride his captors were using broke under his weight and he was able to get away in the darkness. Franklin lived to serve later as a very credible Governor of North Carolina, the only participant in the battle to do so.

Franklin's superior in the Wilkes County militia, Colonel Cleveland, was himself a relentless pursuer of Tories, causing the execution of many of them. Cleveland became noted for acts of both impulsive

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