

# Historical Sketches of Wilkes County Published by John Crouch in 1902

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arranged to a man in Ireland named Cassart. His son, Christian Cassart, sold the lands, by power of attorney, to Hugh Montgomery, of Salisbury. Montgomery made a deed of trust to James Kerr, David Nesbit and John Brown, who were to divide the lands to his daughters, Rachel and Rebecca. Rachel married Gov. Montford Stokes and Rebecca married General James Welborn.

**First County Officers**  
Wilkes county was formed in 1777, but it was not organized until in the spring of the next year. Following this is a list of the first county officers, who took charge of the affairs of the new county on the 2nd day of March, 1778:

- Sheriff, Richard Allen.
- Treasurer, Richard Allen.
- Entry Taker, Benjamin Herndon.
- Surveyor, Joe Hendron.
- Register, John Brown.
- Ranger, John Brown.
- Coroner, Charley Gordon.
- Clerk County Court, William Leclair.

Representatives, Benjamin Cleveland and Elisha Issacs.

**Benjamin Cleveland**

**Ancestry**

A story has it that a beauty in the time of Charles the First named Elizabeth Cleveland, a daughter of an officer of the palace of Hampton Court, attracted the attention of her sovereign, and an amour was the result. When Oliver Cromwell became the rising star of the empire the same charms won his sympathies, and a son was born unto them. The mother retired from public gaze and subsequently married a man named Bridges. When this illegitimate son grew up he took his mother's name and was the reputed author of a book "The Life and Adventures of Mr. Cromwell, Natural Son of Oliver Cromwell," published after his death by consent of his son, first in 1731, a second edition, with a French translation in 1741, and yet another edition in 1760.

Whether or not Benjamin Cleveland descended from this man and from Oliver Cromwell is a matter of conjecture. But whether or not the story is a romance or records a series of facts it is nevertheless true that Colonel Cleveland had a copy of the book and claimed in this way to have descended from the illustrious Oliver Cromwell. Others of the Cleveland family made the same claim.

The Clevelands derive their name from a tract of country in the north Riding of Yorkshire England, still called Cleveland.

John Cleveland was one of the early immigrants to Virginia. He settled on the since famous Bull Run, and his occupation was that of house-joiner. His son, Benjamin Cleveland, the subject of this sketch was born there on the 26th day of May, 1738; and while yet very young his father moved some sixty miles to the south-west, located in a border settlement on Blue Run, some six or eight miles above its junction with the Rapidan near the line of Albemarle.

**Boyhood**  
When little Benjamin was about twelve years old, some drunken rowdies came to Cleveland's home one day when both parents were away from home. The rowdies commenced throwing the stools in the fire, when little Ben snatched his father's rifle from the racks and simply said, "gentlemen do not you see this?" They saw the gun and the determined attitude of the youth, which led them to think discretion the better part of valor, when one of the party said to his fellows: "We'd better be off; we don't know what this excited child might do." So little Ben's conduct caused the rowdies to leave.

Young Cleveland did not "fancy" farm life, but like Daniel Boone, he preferred a dog and gun and the forest. He spent much of his time from early youth in the wilderness, securing pelts and furs which found a market. Firehunting at that day was a very common and popular mode of entrapping the deer in warm weather, when they repaired to certain localities at night in shallow streams, where they could find food suiting their taste. The torch lights of the hunters would so dazzle the attention of the deer that he would stand in amazement watching the strange light, while the hunter had only to blaze away at its glaring eyes and bring it down.

There was an old Dutchman in that region who had a good stand for fire hunting, and young Cleveland wanted it himself. One day he peeled some bark off a tree and placed it in the water to resemble a deer. At night he concealed himself nearby where he could watch operations. In due time the Dutchman made his appearance—fired upon the supposed deer without bringing him down; he repeat-

ed his shot but still the deer remained unmoved. The Dutchman became alarmed and exclaimed, "It's de duv-vil," and at once abandoned that hunting ground. Young Cleveland chuckled not a little over the success of his stratagem.

**Cleveland Marries**

At length young Cleveland married Miss Mary Graves, in Orange county, whose father was quite wealthy. But his marriage did not reform his wild and reckless habits. He still loved gaming, horse-racing, and the wild frolicking common in frontier life. In company with Joseph Martin—afterwards General Martin—he put in a field of wheat on Pig river, about the year 1767, where he settled some four years before; but they were too indolent to fence it properly. When harvest time came there was something of a crop. As was the custom of that time, they invited their friends to join them in cutting the grain; for which occasion some liquor and a fiddler were provided, and a good time was necessary before entering upon the work, which ended in a debauch, and the grain was never harvested.

Tradition tells us that Cleveland took an active part in the French and Indian wars, but the facts are lost to history. No doubt he was initiated into the military service in that border conflict, which proved a training school for his Revolutionary career.

**Cleveland Moves To**

**Wilkes**  
In order to break away from reckless habits and old associates, Cleveland, about 1769, removed, with his father-in-law and family, to North Carolina and settled on the waters of Roaring River, then in Rowan, later Surry, and a few years later Wilkes county. Here Cleveland raised stock and devoted much of his time to hunting. Some time later he located on the noted tract on the north bank of the Yadkin, near Ronda, where Dr. James Hickerson now resides, known as the "Round About," taking its name from the horse-shoe shape of the land, nearly surrounded by the river.

**Cleveland's Kentucky Experience**

Daniel Boone, on one of his visits from Kentucky, gave such charming description of the "Dark and Bloody Ground"—that land of cane and pea vines, abounding with deer and buffaloes—its wild charm, its rich soil, and its tempting game—that Cleveland could not resist the temptation. In the summer of about 1772, in company with Jesse Walton, Jesse Bond, Edward Rice and William Hightower, he set out to visit the hunting grounds of Kentucky. When they had safely passed Cumberland Gap, and entered upon the borders of the famous Kentucky, with cheerful hopes and glowing prospects, they were unexpectedly met and plundered by a band of Cherokees, who relieved them of their guns, horses, peltry, and all that they possessed even to their hats and shoes. An old sorry shot gun was given in turn; with two loads of powder and shot, when they were threateningly ordered to leave the Indian hunting grounds. There was nothing else they could do. On their way home they kept their ammunition as long as possible; with one load they killed a small deer—the other was spent with effect. They were so fortunate as to catch a broken-winged wild goose, and at last had to kill their faithful little hunting dog. In after years Cleveland said that this dog, owing to the circumstances, was the sweetest meat he ever ate. With this scanty supply, and a few berries, they managed to hold out till they reached the settlements, but in a nearly famished condition.

Several months afterwards Cleveland, with a party of chosen men wended his way to the Cherokee towns, determined to recover the horses that had been taken from him and his associates. Cleveland applied to a noted Cherokee chief, known as Big Bear, who told him that the Indians, who had his horses would be likely to kill him as soon as they should learn the object of his visit. Big Bear sent an escort with Cleveland to several towns to aid him in recovering his property. He succeeded without much difficulty except in the last place. The Indian having the horse showed fight, raised his tomahawk and Cleveland cocked his rifle, when his friendly escort interrupted, and saved his red brother from a fatal shot by throwing him to the ground; but not before he had hurled his battle-axe at his antagonist, which did no harm than cutting away the bosom of Cleveland's hunting shirt. Then Cleveland, at the instance of the Indian guide, mounted the horse which was at hand and was riding away when the enraged Indian fired at him wounding the horse in triumph.

**Some Hunting Experiences**  
Reuben Stringer was a noted woodsman of the upper Yadkin Valley, and was often Cleveland's associate in his hunting adventures. They took an elk hunt together in the month of August, when these animals were in their prime. The elks were large and very wild, and gradually retired before the advancing settlements. A few years before the Revolu-

tionary war they were yet to be found at the foot of the Mountain ranges on the head waters of New river. Pursuing a wounded elk, Cleveland in attempting to intercept him at a rocky point of the river, where he expected the elk to cross the stream, found himself surrounded by a large number of rattlesnakes, coiled, hissing, and fearfully sounding their alarm rattles on every hand. From this dangerous dilemma his only deliverance seemed to be an instantaneous plunge into the river, which he made without a moment's hesitation, and thus probably escaped a horrible death.

One day while Stringer was busy in preparing a fire to cook some of their wild meat for a repast, Cleveland spread his blanket on the ground under a large oak and lay down to rest himself and soon fell asleep. In a few moments he suddenly awoke in a startled condition—why, he couldn't tell—and, casting his eyes into the treetops above, he saw a large limb directly over him, nearly broken off, hanging only by a slight splinter to the parent tree. He said to his companion, pointing at the limb; "Look, Reubin, and see what an ugly thing we have camped under!" "It has, indeed, an ugly appearance," replied Reubin, "but since it has apparently hung a great while in that condition, it may likely do so a good while longer." "Ah," said Cleveland, "as long as it has hung there, there is a time for it to come down, and I will not be in the way of danger," and gathered up his blanket to spread it in a safer place. As he was passing the fire he heard a crack above—the splinter had broken and the limb came tumbling down directly upon the ground where Cleveland but a few moments before had lain. They pulled the limb and found that its prongs had penetrated into the earth to the depth of fourteen inches. Stringer congratulated his comrade on his fortunate awaking and removal, "for," he added, "in one minute more, you would have been inevitably killed." "Ah Reubin," said Cleveland, "I always told you that no man would die till his appointed time; and when it comes there can be no possible escape."

**His War Record Begins**

In 1775, when Cleveland's neighbors and friends had occasion to go to Cross Creek to sell their surplus products and buy salt, iron, sugar and other necessities, they were compelled, before they were permitted to buy or sell, to take the oath of allegiance to the King. When Cleveland heard of these tyrannical acts, and attempts to forestall the politics of the people, he swore roundly that he would like nothing better than to discharge those Scotch scoundrels at Cross creek. Soon an opportunity was given him. In February 1776, the Highland Tories of that locality raised the British standard, when Captain Cleveland marched down from the mountains, with a party of volunteer riflemen; and tradition has it that he reached the front in time to share in the fight and in the suppression of the revolt. He scoured the country in the region of Wake Forest, captured several outlaws, some of whom he hung to trees in the woods, one of whom was Capt. Jackson, who was executed within half a mile of Ransom Sutherland's homestead, whose house and merchandise Jackson had caused to be laid in ashes a few days after the battle of Moore's Creek Bridge. "I don't recollect," said Colonel Sutherland in the University Magazine for September, 1854, "after Cleveland had done with them, to have heard much more of those wretches during the war."

**First Senator From Wilkes**  
When the British invaded Georgia in 1778 Colonel Cleveland and his regiment from Western N. C. served with distinction under General Rutherford. Returning from this service, in 1779, he was chosen to represent Wilkes county in the State Senate, being the first Senator from the county. The year previous he and Elisha Issacs were chosen to represent the county in the House of Representatives, or House of Commons, as it was then called, as the first Representatives of the county. In 1780 Colonel Cleveland marched with his regiment against the Tories assembled at Ramsour's Mill, but reached that place too late for service as Colonel Bryan's band was chasing them from the state. He also scoured the New River settlements, checking the Tory uprising in that section, capturing and hanging some of their notorious leaders and outlaws.

**Cleveland at King's Mountain**  
Then his King's mountain campaign—the crowning achievement of his life—the wounding of his brother Larkin Cleveland, while on the way near Lovelady Shoals, near the Catawba river; and then hurrying to "grapple with the indomitable Ferguson." The great service of Cleveland at this fight will be given in another chapter under the heading, "Battle of King's Mountain." Colonel Cleveland had assigned to him one of Ferguson's war horses which lived to an uncommon old age; he also carried home with him a snare-drum which he kept as long as he lived, pointing to it with pride as

a trophy of King's Mountain.

**Trouble For The Tories**

James Coyle and John Brown, two notorious Tory plunderers, passed through Lincoln county and robbed the house of Major George Wilfong of every thing they could carry away and then made off with a couple of his horses, using the clothes line for halter. Major Wilfong with a party followed the culprits, overtaking them near Wilkesboro, recovering the horses, but the ruffians made good their escape. Major Wilfong left the halter made of his clothes line with Cleveland, with which to hang the rascals, should they ever be captured. Not long after, as they were returning to Ninety Six, they were captured by some of Cleveland's scouts and brought to Wilkesboro and Colonel Cleveland had them hung with Wilfong's clothes line on the oak tree that is yet standing just north of the house in Wilkesboro.

**Captured By Tories; His Timely Rescue**

On the South fork of New river in the extreme southwestern portion of Ashe county (formerly a part of Wilkes) with a large boundary of land that was clear of timber and heavily set in grass. These lands—called the "Old Fields," and known by that name to this day—belonged to Colonel Cleveland, and served as a grazing place for his stock in peaceful days.

In 1781, having occasion to visit his New River plantation, Colonel Cleveland rode there accompanied only by a negro servant, arriving at Jesse Duncan's, his tenant, on Saturday the 14th day of April. Unfortunately for the Colonel, Captain William Riddle, a noted Tory leader, son of Loyalist Riddle, of Surry county, was approaching from the Virginia border with Captain Ross, a Whig Captive, together with his servant, now enroute for Ninety Six, where, it seems, the British paid a reward for Whig prisoners. Riddle, with his party of six or eight men, reached Benjamin Curbirth's some four miles above Old Fields, a fine old Whig and an associate of Daniel Boone, who was just recovering from a spell of fever. The

Tory Captain, probably from Curbirth's residence regarding solicited information, shamefully abused him and placed him under guard.

Descending the river to the upper end of the Old Fields where Joseph and Timothy Perkins lived—about a mile above Duncan's—both of whom were absent in Tory service, Riddle learned from the women that Cleveland was but a short distance away, at Duncan's with only his servant. Duncan, and one or two of the Callaway family there. Every Tory in the country knew full well that Cleveland was probably their worst enemy; how prominently he had figured at King's Mountain, and had given his influences for the Tory executions at Bickerstaff's and caused the summary hanging of Coyle and Brown at Wilkesboro. Riddle thought that such a prisoner would be a valuable prize to offer to his British at Ninety-Six, or it would be a crowning honor to the Tory cause to rid the country of probably their worst enemy.

The prospect was too tempting and he at once set about to capture Cleveland. His force was too small to run any great risk, so he concluded to resort to strategy. He resolved to steal Cleveland's horse in the quiet of the night, judging that the Colonel would follow their trail the next morning, supposing they had strayed off, when he would ambush him at some suitable place, and thus take "Old Round About," as he was called, unawares and at a disadvantage. The horses were taken that night, and a laurel thicket, just above Perkins' house, selected as a fitting place to waylay their expected pursuers. During Saturday, Richard Callaway and his brother-in-law, John Shirley, went down from the neighboring residence of Thomas Callaway to Duncan's to see Colonel Cleveland, and appear to have remained there over night.

Discovering that the horses were missing on Sunday morning, immediate pursuit was made. Having a pair of pistols, Colonel Cleveland retained one of them, handing the other to Duncan, while Callaway and Shirley were unarmed. Reaching the Perkins place, one of the Perkins women,

knowing of the ambush, secretly desired to save the Colonel from his impending fate; so she detained him as long as she could by conversation, evidently fearing personal consequences should she divulge the scheme of his capture to entrap him. His three associates kept on with Cleveland some little distance behind, Mrs. Perkins still following and retarding him by her inquiries. As those in advance crossed the fence which adjoined the thicket, the Tories fired from their place of concealment, one aiming at Cleveland, who, though some distance in the rear, was yet within range of their guns. But they generally shot wild—only one shot, that of Zachariah Wells, who aimed at Callaway, proving effectual, breaking his thigh, when he fell helpless by the fence, and was left for dead. Duncan and Shirley, escaped. Cleveland from his great weight—fully three hundred pounds—knew he could not run any great distance, and would only be too prominent a mark for Tory bullets dodged into the house with several Tories at his heels. Now flourishing his pistol rapidly from one to another, they pledged to spare his life and accord his good treatment if he would quietly surrender, which he did.

Wells by this time having reloaded his rifle, made his appearance on the scene, swearing that he would kill Cleveland; and aiming his gun, the Colonel instantly seized Abigail Walters, who was present, and by dint of his great strength, and under a high state of excitement dextrously handled her as a puppet, keeping her between him and his would-be assassin. Wells seemed vexed at this turn in the affair, and hurled his imprecations on the poor woman, threatening if she did not get out of the way that he would blow her through as well. Cleveland got his eye on Captain Riddle, whom he knew, or judged by his appearance to be the leader, appealed to him if such treatment was not contrary to the stipulations of his surrender. Riddle promptly replied that it was and ordered Wells to desist from his murderous intent, saying they would take Cleveland.

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