

The Significance of Moore's Creek Bridge

I have had occasion to tease Editor Gray of the Raleigh Times two or three times in recent weeks, but this time I must seriously protest against misinformation heralded abroad in his columns. It was only a short while ago that the Times carried a protest of the same kind against a western professor of history who told a group of his students that Johnston surrendered to Sherman at Raleigh. I conceive the blunders in the following clipping from the Times far more serious; they are matters of fundamental importance in the history of the State.

The Times article:

Thousands are reported to have been at the celebration of the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge, the early and sanguinary eruption of North Carolina which led on to the Revolution and ultimate Statehood.

Without as much celebration as the Battle of Lexington which ushered in armed resistance to the British, Moore's Creek Bridge had really much more far-reaching results. It developed into a colony insurrection that carried so far as to cause the ouster of a Crown Governor. It brought on the Alamance disturbances. It brought the State in advance of a formal rebellion of the American colonies into open revolt.

As a battle, Moore's Creek was historic but without significance in itself. The Cape Fear section was loyal to Great Britain. It was, in fact, Tory in sentiment. At Moore's Creek the loyalists marched stupidly into a trap and were all but massacred.

But the so-called battle worked mightily in the making of a nation and the men who died there for their loyalty to a foreign government have left a trail of descendants who have long since forgotten the cause in which their ancestors gave up their lives.

It would be difficult to write the same number of words embracing more historical errors. In the

first place, the "early" sanguinary event of the Revolutionary period in North Carolina was the battle of Alamance, or the war of the Regulation. The revolution in North Carolina was well advanced when the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge was fought. Governor Martin had, in 1775, sent his family by sea from New Bern to New York, had himself retired to Fort Johnston, at the mouth of the Cape Fear, and as early as July, 1775, had found his position unsafe in the fort and had retired to the war-sleep Cruiser. The very day of that retreat, Colonel Ashe, with 500 men burned Fort Johnston to the ground.

Furthermore, the Hillsboro Congress, which met August 20th, 1775, after burning a proclamation issued by Governor Martin, proceeded to establish a provisional government for North Carolina, with Cornelius Harnett at its head. The state was divided into six military districts and as far as possible put upon a war footing. That was six months before the battle of Moore's Creek Bridge.

The War of the Regulation

The Times article makes the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge precede the Battle of Alamance, when, in fact, the latter preceded the former by five years. One of the questions of North Carolina history is whether to classify the War of the Regulators as a Revolutionary incident. The leaders of the later movement cooperated with Governor Tryon in suppressing the Alamance rebellion. A great majority of the Regulators who remained in the affected section were Tories when the real revolution developed. But the leaders who co-operated with Tryon possibly did so with little zeal. Yet their leadership in the later Revolution doubtless had its effect upon the surviving Regulators, who feared, or distrusted any movement headed by their former oppressors under Tryon. Thus were the attitudes of the parties of the Battle of Alamance simply reversed in the Revolutionary struggle.

It may be concluded that the Regulation movement was a revolutionary one, but was too early; while the former Regulators had the very incentive that the Scotch Highlanders had to abide by the

Crown when the real revolution arose four years later. The Scotch had been beaten at Culloden in 1745 and had been forced to swear eternal allegiance to the British Crown. Their coming to America had not broken the force of that oath. Moreover, speaking Gaelic, as they did, and marooned on the western side of the Cape Fear, they had probably not come into any real intimacy with the leaders in the Colony. On the other hand, the Regulators had been beaten at Alamance by eastern North Carolina forces led by the later revolutionary leaders and had been forced either to flee, as did thousands of them, to the western part of the state and to Tennessee, or to submit unqualifiedly to the terms of Governor Tryon, whom they see within a few weeks leaving the Province with the expressed regret of such men as Richard Caswell. Thus, one lesson in an abortive revolution and distrust of the leaders in the real revolutionary movement threw the remaining Regulators into the very same attitude toward the Revolution as the Scotch bore, and neither group can be much blamed for that attitude.

The Real Significance of Moore's Creek

The editor of the Times says: "As a battle Moore's Creek was historic but without significance in itself." But the significance of the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge is what makes it of genuine historic interest. As I see it, there would probably have been no Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, if it had not been for the defeat of the Scotch Highlanders. In the first place two thousand armed men under leaders who had had military experience, as had the older men of the Scotch army, was difficult to be matched among the patriots. In the second place, they would have been assured of local and British supplies if they had got possession of Wilmington. It seems to be established that their march to Wilmington was at the direction of General Clinton, who before sailing southward from Halifax, where the British army had retired from Boston, had sent orders to the Scotch to meet him in Wilmington.

As a matter of fact, Clinton sailed into the Cape Fear but learning of the defeat of the Scotch departed and sailed for Charleston, where only a few days before the Declaration of Independence he was defeated in his attack upon Fort Moultrie.

How The Colonies Would Have Been Divided

To discover the real effects of a reversal of the outcome of the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge, consider what the occupancy of Wilmington by an army of two thousand bold Scotch, later joined by a British fleet and land forces, would have meant. With supplies furnished by the British, against which there would have been no hindrance, the ill-supplied and short-term Patriots of the State would have been no match for any such force. North Carolina would have been lost to the Colonies. That would have meant the isolation of South Carolina and Georgia.

Therefore, it is rather safe to say that if there had been any Declaration of Independence at all on July 4, 1776, North Carolina, Georgia and South Carolina would scarcely have participated in the declaration.

The Victory the Key of Revolutionary Success

It is hard to conceive of a successful issue of the Revolution with the three southernmost colonies cut off from the ten more northern ones in the very outset. Every phase of the revolutionary movement thence on would have been changed. There need have been no cheering victory at Fort Moultrie. Greene's final effective tactics in the two Carolinas would not have followed. Something else as effective as these might have occurred in the southern colonies, but the whole course of events in the Carolinas and Georgia, and probably in the other ten states, would have been entirely different. In short, the British would have been nearer the subjugation of the colonies on July 4, 1776, than they ever approached. In short, the victory at Moore's Creek Bridge was a decisive battle, almost as much so as was that of Quebec in the French and Indian War.

or at least postponed the decision and gave the colonies the fighting chance, which several years later resulted in victory.

The Attitude of the Cape Fear Section

Editor Gray seems to have a distorted impression of not only the attitude of the Cape Fear section but also of the geography of the section itself. Count Robeson county out of the Cape Fear section. There is scarcely a drop of Robeson water drained into the Cape Fear River. The present Cumberland, Hoke, Moore, Lee, Chatham, Randolph, Alamance, and part of Guilford, part of Bladen and Columbus, and Brunswick comprise the Cape Fear section on the west and in the Haw-Deep area. Parts of Bladen and Columbus are in the Little Pee Dee, or Lumber River, area. On the east of the Cape Fear, New Hanover, Pender, part of Bladen, Sampson, Duplin, Harnett and bits of Wayne and Johnston, and south-west Wake comprise the Cape Fear drainage area.

The Tory sentiment dominated only in Cumberland, Hoke, Moore and Lee, the area of Scotch settlements, and in a measure in Chatham, Alamance, Orange, Randolph because of the reactionary effects of the failure of the Regulators' War.

The very fact that 500 men would join in the burning of Fort Johnston in July 1775, seven months before the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge, is evidence that there was a robust revolutionary sentiment in the lower Cape Fear area. In fact, the Tory sentiment seems largely confined to the Scotch element of Cumberland, Hoke, Northern Robeson, Scotland, Moore, and Lee as the counties now go, and to the Regulators' area in Chatham, Randolph, Alamance, and Orange. The Scotch or Scots of eastern Bladen, lower Sampson, Pender, and New Hanover, earlier comers than the great immigration after Culloden, were unaffected. I feel quite sure, of course, there were scattered Tories in all the counties. One of my own Sampson county ancestors was a Tory. On the other hand, my Alderman ancestors lived right near the Moore's Creek battle ground and the Revolutionary one of them is reported by tradition as participating in the battle and is actually listed among the soldiers following Washington later. The other six seem to have been Whigs, or at least not Tories. If seven out of eight holds for the Sampson-Pender area it is clear that the Whigs were largely in the ascendant in two of the most definitely described counties of the Cape Fear section.

And the very story that keeps alive the Tory connection of that Dollar ancestor indicates the predominance of the Whigs. He seems to have been a man of a fine sense of humor, as he told the joke on himself. So dangerous was it for a Tory to be seen in the Clinton section that he had slipped back from the Tory forces by night and was sneaking along a lane. All a quiver lest he should be detected, when a yearling lying in a jamb of a fence raised up and bellowed-like as he passed, he threw up his hands and blurted out: "I surrender." If this ancestor was a Scotchman or Scotsman, as the nativity of the Dollar ship-master indicates as to the nativity of that family, I must somewhat modify my statement that the non-Mac Scotch of the eastern area of the Cape Fear section were not Tories. I think that true of the lower area of Sampson and Pender, but the Macs of the Culloden period had penetrated Sampson from Fayetteville and the earlier Scotch arrivals in central and upper Sampson may have been affected by the prevailing Scotch sentiments of the Cross Creek section.

Senator Hoar's Ignorance.

I challenge Editor Gray to write an article more comprehensive of errors than that quoted.

However, ignorance of Moore's Creek Bridge was once almost universal. When Marion Butler, as senator, introduced the first bill in Congress for an appropriation for the improvement of the Battle Grounds at Moore's Creek Bridge, Senator Hoar, the scholarly Massachusetts senator of that day, confessed that he had never heard of the battle before. Yet there is no comparison in the significance of Lexington and Moore's Creek. But it is time the latter is recognized in all its significance.