

The Lincoln Courier.

LINCOLN, N. C., FRIDAY, JAN. 6, 1892.

NO. 35.

Professional Cards.

J. W. SAIN, M. D.,

Has located at Lincoln and offers his services as physician to the citizens of Lincoln and surrounding country.

Will be found at night at the Lincoln Hotel.

March 27, 1891

Bartlett Shipp,

ATTORNEY AT LAW,
LINCOLN, N. C.

Jan. 9, 1891.

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FOR THE COURIER. NARRATIVE OF THE BATTLE OF COWAN'S FORD.

Through the courtesy of Judge Schenck I have the pleasure of presenting the readers of the COURIER with Robert Henry's Narrative of the Battle at Cowan's Ford February 1, 1781. The manuscript of this narrative is in the handwriting of Mr. Henry and has recently been published in pamphlet form by Judge Schenck. This account differs from that of other historians and materially from much of the local tradition as to who killed the brave General Davidson. As this is the story of one of the active participants of an engagement that occurred while the British under command of Lord Cornwallis were passing from the soil of Lincoln to Mecklenburg county it will I think prove an interesting matter for your readers. As the reader of the narrative will doubtless be interested in Mr. Henry, I will in this introduction present such a sketch of his life as I can obtain from Judge Schenck's pamphlet and "King's Mountain and its Heroes" by Dr. Draper.

His father, Thomas Henry, was from the north of Ireland and died soon after the Revolution of rheumatism contracted during the war. Robert was born in a raft on January 10th 1765. Dr. Draper locates his birth place in Rowan, Judge Schenck in Tryon county. He was born in Mecklenburg county. In 1768 Tryon was cut off Mecklenburg. This portion of Tryon was afterward Lincoln; Lincoln was divided and Mr. Henry's birth place fell in the present county of Gaston, and is in the vicinity of Tuckasee Ford on the Catawba River about ten miles below Cowan's Ford. Full of patriotism, though young, he shared in the trials and perils of the Revolution. At the youthful age of sixteen he was with the brave South Fork boys at the memorable battle of King's Mountain.

Captain David Vance who fought at King's Mountain on that Glorious day was subsequently one of the Commissioners to locate the boundary line between North Carolina and Tennessee. Captain Vance also fought at Ramsaur's Mill, Musgrove's Mill and the Cowpens and was the grandfather of Governor Vance. Robert Henry was one of the Surveyors. While on that survey Captain Vance gave an account of the battle in which he related Major Chronicle's testimony to the courage and trustworthiness of the youthful soldier. Before making the attack on Ferguson they counted the number of horsemen they could raise but intended to report more, when they came to the South Fork Boys, Campbell mentioned to Chronicle that the lad whom he had with him should not bear the enumeration. Chronicle replied that he was a son of "Old rugged and Tough," that his cheek was too well hooped to leak—the lad (Robert Henry) then is now our surveyor.

During the heat of the battle when the Whigs had advanced to the hill close to the Tory lines young Henry took position by a log across a hollow and there remained firing until the British charged bayonets. As he was getting ready to give the enemy another shot the bayonet charges came dashing along. One of the enemy was advancing rapidly on young Henry, who was in the act of cocking his gun, when his antagonist's bayonet glanced Henry's gun barrel, passing clear through one of his hands, and penetrating into his thigh. Henry in the melee had shot the Tory, and both fell to the ground—the young Whig hero completely transfixed. When his South Fork friends retired to the bottom of the hill, reloaded and in turn chased their enemies up the mountain, William Caldwell, one of Henry's companions, seeing his situation, pulled the bayonet out of his thigh; but finding it sticking fast to the young soldier's hand gave the wounded limb a kick with his boot, which loosened the bloody instrument from its hold.

Henry suffered more in the operation of extracting the bayonet, than when the Briton made the effective thrust, driving it through his hand into his thigh. Again upon his feet, he picked up his gun with his uninjured hand and found it empty—how he could not tell; but supposed, as he received the terrible bayonet thrust, that he must, almost instinctively, have touched the trigger, and discharged his rifle, and that the ball must have cut some main artery of his antagonist as he bled profusely.

Mr. Henry was one of the first settlers in Buncombe county, taught school on the Swannoo the first school taught in Buncombe county. He was a surveyor and in 1795 was one of the party who run the boundary line between North Carolina and Tennessee. He subsequently studied law and practiced his profession many years in Buncombe county. He enjoyed the reputation of being "a great land lawyer" his practice as a surveyor no doubt making him formidable in such suits. He owned the White Sulphur Springs about five miles South west of Asheville. It was a popular resort in summer for wealthy planters from the South and was the scene of much gaiety and pleasure. He served in the House of Commons in 1833 and 1834—was a clear and forcible speaker. He died in the county of Clay, North Carolina January 6th 1863 within four days of attaining the patriarchal age of ninety eight years and was undoubtedly the LAST of the heroes of King's Mountain.

His brother, Joseph Henry, referred to in the narrative was a conspicuous character in the early history of Lincoln as the records in the court house attest. He served many years in the office as sheriff and subsequently removed to Buncombe county.

The fact the British crossed is a quarter of a mile above the present ford and just below the G. D. Abernethy mill. The old ford was reopened in 1844 on the occasion of a great whig barbecue during the celebrated Harrison campaign on the east bank of the river where the engagement occurred. With that exception it has remained closed until the last year or so when it is again coming into use. The lower ford leading through the island was also in use then and known as the horse ford—the upper was called the wagon ford. General Davidson did not know which one the British would take. The tradition of today is and I think correct that the British had as a pilot a Tory named Frederick Hagar. On this subject I quote some authorities. General Joseph Graham in his narrative of this engagement as recorded in Judge Schenck's "North Carolina 1780-81" says: "The command of the front was committed to Colonel Hall of the Guards who had for a guide Frederick Hagar a renegade Tory who lived in two miles of the place. Again he says "The General was shot with a small rifle ball near the nipple of the left breast and never moved after he fell. It was well known that their pilot, Frederick Hagar had a rifle of this description and it was always believed he shot him. Most of the other Tories returned on or before the close of the war, but Hagar went to Tennessee, and stayed there until some of the Davidson family moved to that country, when he moved, with eight or ten others all fugitives from justice, and made the first American settlement on the Arkansas River near Lix Post; married and raised a family there and died in the year 1814."

Col. Wheeler in his last History Reminiscences of North Carolina states that "General Davidson is riding from the point where he expected the enemy to cross to the place where they did was fired upon, a rifle ball passed through his heart and he fell dead from his horse; as the British only had muskets and the Tories rifles and he was slain by a rifle shot, it is believed he was shot by the hand of a Tory." In a foot note he adds "It is said and the tradition is that a Tory by the name of Hager shot General David-

son."

Hunter in his sketches of Western North Carolina says, "With judicious forethought, Cornwallis had hired the services of Frederick Hager, a Tory on the western bank, and under his guidance the bold Britons plunged into the water, with the firm determination of encountering the small band of Americans on the eastern bank."

From the account of the passage of the Catawba river at Cowan's Ford by Stedman the English Commissary and historian who accompanied Cornwallis in his Southern Campaigns, the natural inference is that General Davidson was not shot by this Tory guide, as he says no sooner did the guide (a Tory) beat the report of the Sentinel's musket than he turned around and left them. I present one paragraph from Stedman: "The light infantry of the guards, led by Colonel Hall, first entered the water. They were followed by the grenadiers, and the grenadiers by the battalions, the men marching in platoon to support each other against the rapidity of the stream. When the light infantry had nearly reached the middle of the river they were challenged by one of the enemy's sentinels. The sentinel having challenged thrice, and receiving no answer immediately gave the alarm by discharging his musket, and the enemy's picket were turned out. No sooner did the guide (a Tory) who attended the light infantry to show them the ford, hear the report of the sentinel's musket than he turned around and left them. This, which seemed to portend much mischief in the end proved a fortunate incident. Colonel Hall, being forsaken by his guide, and not knowing the true direction of the ford, led the column directly across the river to the nearest part of the opposite bank."

I have thus been somewhat particular to give the historical and traditional accounts of the Tory Fred Hager and the killing of General Davidson, because as the reader will see, Mr. Henry occupying an excellent position for observation details the circumstances of his death by another hand.

I think the reader will be interested in Gen. Graham's summary of the result of the battle which I now quote: "At Cowan's Ford, besides General Davidson there were killed James Scott of Lieutenant Davidson's picket, Robert Beatty of Graham's cavalry and one private of General Davidson's infantry—in all four. We had none wounded or taken. The enemy's loss as stated in the Charleston Gazette two months after, was Colonel Hall of the Guards, and another officer, and twenty nine privates, thirty one in all, killed, and thirty five wounded. They left sixteen who were badly wounded they could not be taken at Mr. Lucas' (the nearest farm) and a surgeon under the protection of a flag was left with them. Two wounded officers were carried on biers, and such of the other wounded as could not walk were carried in wagons. Some of their dead were found down the river some distance, lodged in fish traps and on brush about the banks on rocks &c. An elegant beaver hat, made agreeably to the fashion of those times masked inside, "The property of Josiah Martin, Governor," was found ten miles below. It was never explained what means his excellency lost his hat. He was not hurt himself."

Colonel Wheeler is authority for the statement that Lord Cornwallis narrowly escaped with his life as his horse was killed under him.

In a letter to the writer under date of 14th Inst. Judge Schenck attests his implicit confidence in the correctness of Mr. Henry's narrative. I take the privilege of giving his words: "I only regret that I did not have this account by Mr. Henry before I wrote my history. I feel confident that it is the only correct account of that battle which has ever been written. It bears the impress of truth and is corroborated by all the natural evidence surrounding the scene."

A debt of gratitude is due the

memory of Robert Henry for his interesting contribution to our Revolutionary history and Judge Schenck for placing the same before the public.

A. NIXON.

ROBERT HENRY'S NARRATIVE.

I will proceed to point out and correct some of the errors in Wheeler's History of North Carolina, so far as respects the transactions of Cornwallis crossing Cowan's Ford, on Catawba river, the 1st of February, 1781; then I will give my own version of that transaction; then I will give the common report of the transaction shortly after it happened.

Wheeler's History, p. 232 '33: "Here" (meaning at Cowan's Ford) "about six hundred militia under General Davidson were posted, and a slight skirmish occurred. A British Colonel (Hall) and three privates were killed, and thirty six wounded."

If we take this account to be true, we must conclude that these militia were very bad marksmen; for they had time to have fired five rounds each, which would have been three thousand single shots, at distances varying from fifty yards to less than twenty yards, over a naked sheet of water; that their enemy was not obscured by smoke, being in water above the waist band and hanging together by their muskets; that not a single gun was fired by them whilst in the water. This story, if it bears telling, cannot be accredited to be true, that in firing three thousand single shots they only killed four, including Col. Hall, and wounded thirty six. The story appears further incredible from this—that in common battles on land, there are as many, and of ten more, men killed than wounded where the whole force from head to foot is exposed to fire of the opposite party. In the present case, the body, from above the waist band to the top of the head was exposed—for all below was under water and secure from lead. Wounds in the upper part [of the body] are doubly as apt to kill as those in the lower extremities, from the waist-band downward; hence we would expect double as many killed on this occasion as wounded—but the reverse is told, that only four were killed, including Col. Hall, and thirty-six wounded.

A further mistake may be noticed. The account states that Davidson had six hundred militia, whereas he had only three hundred. The whole of this quotation should pass for nothing.

The next error that I will notice is on page 235 of Wheeler's History, which I quote: "Soon after the action commenced" (meaning at Cowan's Ford) "General William Davidson was killed, greatly lamented by all who knew him as a patriotic, brave and generous officer." The true statement is that: Davidson was killed by the first gun that was fired on the British side on the occasion, for they did not fire a gun whilst in the river; and the gun that killed him was fired at the water's edge on the Mecklenburg side; and if Davidson's clothes had been examined, it is probable that they would have shown the mark of powder. The whole of the Americans had left their stands or posts at the water's edge and judiciously fled, lest the British might hem them in by the river; and an utter silence prevailed—not a gun fired on either side. Silence was first broken by the report of the gun that killed Davidson.

A further quotation from the same page: "The Company commanded by Gen. Graham was the first to commence the attack" (at Cowan's Ford) "on the British as they advanced through the river, which was resolutely continued until they reached the bank, loaded their arms and commenced a heavy fire upon his men, two of whom were killed." The whole of this is a gratuitous statement, for Gen. Graham was not there—not was there either of fear or private killed at that place except Gen. Davidson; nor was there any one wounded there except Robert Beatty, who afterwards

died of the wound. Gen. Graham and his company may have been at Davidson's camp, three quarters of a mile from the Ford, and two of his men might have been killed there, if they were too tardy in making their escape before the British arrived there.

Another quotation from Wheeler's History, p. 264: "At day break the British army under Cornwallis, on the 1st February, 1781, entered the waters of Catawba, then swollen by heavy rains, at Cowan's Ford. The morning was dark and rainy. The light infantry under Col. Hall entered first, followed by the grenadiers and the battalions. The picket of Gen. Davidson challenged the enemy; receiving no reply the guard fired. This turned out the whole force of Davidson, who kept up a galling fire from the bank."

Observe the morning was dark but not rainy. Davidson's army was stationed three quarters of a mile from the Ford, and did not fire a gun at the British whilst in the river, nor after they came across; all the firing by the American side in the river and on the bank was done by the guard.

Now, I will give my own version of the transaction of Cornwallis crossing the Catawba River at Cowan's Ford, 1st February, 1781. Robert Beatty, a lame man, had taken up a school near the Tuckasee Ford, and had taught two days, and was teaching the third, when news came to the School-house that Cornwallis was camped at Forney's, about seven miles from the School house; that Tarleton was ranging through the country catching whig boys to make musicians of them in the British army. The master instantly dismissed the scholars, directing them to go home and spread the news, and retired himself. I went home, and that night Moses Starret, George Gillespie, Robert Gillespie, and Charles Rutledge came to my father's! We lay on that night, and shortly before day-light my brother, Joseph Henry, who had left the army to give the news, and had crossed Catawba at John Beattie's in a canoe; and when he left the army; it was expected that Cornwallis would cross the river at Tuckasee Ford. Early in the morning this company crossed the river at Beattie's, about two miles below Tuckasee Ford, where we hid our canoe, staid some time at Beattie's—then went up to the Tuckasee Ford, and the army was at Cowan's Ford, we went up the river to John Nighten's, who treated us well by giving us potatoes to roast, and some whiskey to drink. We became noisy and mischievous. Nighten said we should not have any more whiskey. I proposed to go to the camp at the Ford, if they would let me have a gun and ammunition. My brother and he would give me this; Charles Rutledge proposed also to accompany me—he had a gun and ammunition; when Moses Starret gave him his gun. When about to start, I gave Nighten a hundred dollar Continental bill for a half a pint of whiskey. My brother gave another bill of the same size for half a dozen of potatoes. We dispatched the whiskey. Being thus equipped, we went to the Ford, which was about a mile and a half. When we arrived, the guard that was there, thirty in number, made us welcome; the officer of the guard told us that Cornwallis would certainly attempt to cross that night or early in the morning; that each one of the guard had picked their stands to annoy the British as they crossed, that when the alarm was given they would not be crowded, or be in each other's way—and said we must choose our stands. He accompanied us—Charles Rutledge chose the uppermost stand, and I chose the lowest, next the getting on place of the Ford; the officer observed, that he considered that Davidson had done wrong, for that the army should have been stationed at the Ford—instead of which it was encamped three-fourths of a mile off, and that some person acquainted in the neighborhood of

(Continued to last page.)