

Battle of Moores Creek

EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT OF NORTH CAROLINA

After numerous failed attempts by Europeans to colonize North Carolina in the first half of the seventeenth century, English settlers moving south from Virginia finally established a firm foothold during the 1650s. Settlement of the Lower Cape Fear region began with Brunswick in 1727 and Wilmington in 1740. Originally part of one colony with South Carolina, North Carolina became a separate royal colony in 1729. By 1775, its population was estimated to be 265,000 whites and 80,000 blacks, mostly slaves. During this period, Scotch Irish, German, Scottish Highlander, Welsh, and English settlers began moving from the coastal areas to the interior of the colony.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION COMES TO NORTH CAROLINA

As the economic and political controversy between King George III of Great Britain and the thirteen British colonies in North America gave way to open rebellion, North Carolina became a colony of divided loyalties. The royal assembly, which was popularly elected, opposed Royal Governor Josiah Martin. Yet many people could not bring themselves to actually fight against the mother country. North Carolinians were generally split among three groups—those who remained loyal to King George and Great Britain, those who supported rebellion, and those who stayed out of the controversy altogether. King George's supporters were known as Loyalists or Tories and included many Scottish Highlanders. Called Patriots, Whigs, or Rebels, supporters of independence from Great Britain were increasingly prepared to act by the mid-1770s.

Tensions between Martin and the royal assembly boiled over in 1774 when the governor refused to call the assembly into session. In response, mass meetings were held and a provincial assembly was established independent of the governor. During its 1774 and 1775 sessions, this provincial assembly elected delegates to the two Continental Congresses and generally supported the growing sentiments of rebellion. By June 1775, Martin had dismissed the royal assembly, unsuccessfully sought British troops, and abandoned North Carolina's colonial capital of New Bern. After a brief stay at Fort Johnson on the Cape Fear River, he went into exile on a British naval vessel off the coast.

THE FIRST BRITISH CAMPAIGN TO SECURE THE SOUTHERN COLONIES

Though in exile off the coast of North Carolina, Martin lobbied British authorities for support in regaining control of the colony. His lobbying paid off. After initial battles at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, British commanders were preparing for a major offensive in the northern colonies. However, they believed that a quick campaign in the Carolinas prior to such an offensive could rally Loyalists and subdue the rebellion in the southern colonies. The campaign plan called for British troops from New York under Sir

Henry Clinton to rendezvous off the North Carolina coast with additional forces under Lord Charles Cornwallis sailing from Cork, Ireland, under the protection of Sir Peter Parker's fleet. In the meantime, a Loyalist army from the interior of the colony would march to meet the British forces off the coast by late February 1776. The combined force would then regain control of North Carolina before heading to the primary target of Charleston, South Carolina.

Martin's planned Loyalist militia mobilized as a force of sixteen hundred Scottish Highlanders at the settlement of Cross Creek in the interior of North Carolina. Commanded by Brigadier General Donald MacDonal and Lieutenant Colonel Donald McLeod, the Loyalist militia began the march to the coast on February 18, 1776, with only five hundred muskets. The Loyalists planned to advance along the southwest side of the Cape Fear River to the coast, link up with the British troops arriving by sea, and retake the colony. In the meantime, the Patriots had established several militia groups, while the Continental Congress had authorized two regiments of the Continental Line. Colonel Richard Caswell of the militia and Colonel James Moore of the First North Carolina Continentals planned to intercept the Loyalists before they reached the coast. On February 25, a force of 150 Wilmington militiamen under Colonel Alexander Lillington arrived at the bridge where the Negro Head Point Road crossed Widow Moore's Creek, a creek named after an early settler in the area and subsequently known as Moores Creek. Beating the Loyalists to the bridge, Lillington established earthworks on the east side of the creek. Caswell arrived at Moores Creek Bridge on the following day with an additional eight hundred militiamen and established earthworks on the west side of the creek. After learning of the Patriot force at Moores Creek Bridge, the Loyalists prepared for battle. [5]



Figure 1. A map of the Moores Creek campaign, February 1776



Figure 2. Bill Ballard's drawing of the decisive moment during the Battle of Moores Creek Bridge

THE BATTLE OF MOORES CREEK BRIDGE

The Loyalists began a six-mile march to Moores Creek Bridge at one o'clock on the morning of February 27. Just before dawn, they discovered abandoned earthworks on the west side of the creek-Caswell had moved his militiamen to Lillington's earthworks on the east side. In addition, the Patriots had removed planks from the bridge and greased the stringers. McLeod decided to send Captain John Campbell's Scottish Highlanders on a broadsword charge across the remains of the bridge. To the sounds of bagpipes, drums, and the cry "King George and broad swords," the Highlanders reached the other side of the creek. Concealed behind Lillington's earthworks with two cannon, known as "Old Mother Covington and her daughter," the Patriots opened fire on the Highlanders with deadly consequences. The charge quickly fell apart as Loyalists began retreating in panic, some drowning in Moores Creek. Around thirty Loyalists were killed and forty were wounded during the brief engagement. Far more damaging to Great Britain's southern plan was the capture of 850 Loyalists in the days following the battle. The lopsided Patriot victory came with only two militiamen wounded, including the mortally wounded John Grady.

THE AFTERMATH AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BATTLE

Although the Loyalist militia was effectively routed at Moores Creek Bridge, the British naval and land forces commanded by Clinton, Parker, and Cornwallis rendezvoused off the North Carolina coast between March and May 1776. Leaving the colony to the Patriots, the British fleet attempted to capture Charleston but withdrew to the colony of New York after being turned back by Patriot militia on Sullivan's Island at the entrance to the city's harbor. The British failure to secure the Carolinas in 1776 left the southern

colonies under Patriot control for several years. During this time, peace in the region was interrupted by the 1776-1777 Cherokee War, the 1778 British capture of Savannah in Georgia, and the unsuccessful 1779 attempt by Patriot and French forces to retake Savannah. However, it was not until 1780 that Great Britain would mount a full-scale campaign to subdue the southern colonies. Beginning with the successful siege of Charleston, this campaign ultimately led to the 1781 British surrender at Yorktown, following major battles at Camden, Kings Mountain, Cowpens, Guilford Courthouse, and Eutaw Springs.

Though the Battle of Moores Creek Bridge was a relatively minor engagement, it influenced the course of the American Revolution in significant ways. The Patriot victories at Moores Creek Bridge and Sullivan's Island ended British hopes of easily quelling the rebellion in the southern colonies. In North Carolina, the battle strengthened the Patriot position by reducing organized Loyalist opposition. Perhaps most important, this early victory provided a needed boost to Patriot morale. The battle was to the southern colonies what Lexington had been for the northern colonies. Emboldened by the victory at Moores Creek Bridge, North Carolina's provincial assembly approved the Halifax Resolve, which instructed the colony's delegates to the Continental Congress to vote for independence from Great Britain.