

Backcountry Loyalists in North Carolina ^[1]

By Eric Medlin, September 2022

Many Americans think of the [Revolutionary War](#) ^[2] only as a conflict between the American colonists and the British, but the conflict was also a civil war. Colonists could be supporters of British rule, known as Loyalists, or Patriots, opponents of British rule. Loyalists and Patriots fought against one another in all thirteen colonies. [Native American tribes](#) ^[3], [enslaved and free black people in the Americas](#) ^[4], and the [French](#) ^[5] also fought with Loyalists or Patriots to help each side during the war. Factions were divided, and alliances and conflicts between these groups helped determine how the war was conducted in its final year.

Every state had its share of Loyalists and Patriots. Some areas of the colonies, such as in New England, were strong supporters of the Patriot cause and were supportive of independence. But the conflict between Loyalists and Patriots was particularly strong in North Carolina. North Carolinians fought several of the Revolutionary War's most consequential battles mainly against fellow residents of the state.

There were many factors that impacted whether North Carolinians were Loyalists or Patriots. One's status of enslavement and their relationship with their enslaver (in the case of black people in the Americas), or tribal affiliation (in the case of Native American people) were some important factors. Another important factor was location and where the person lived and where they were from. There was an east-west divide throughout the history of the colony of North Carolina. The backcountry, approximately west of present-day Orange County, was the area of settlement west of navigable rivers and the ports and towns near the coast. It was a center of Loyalist support. Although some Loyalists such as [Samuel Andrews](#) ^[6] were from the East, many Loyalists were from the backcountry and supported the monarchy and colonial policies. Loyalists were not convinced by Patriot actions and propaganda. They were not motivated by restrictions on coastal shipping and trade like the Patriots. Generally, loyalists were less economically reliant on these forces. There was also a divide over slavery. Eastern Patriots were mostly enslavers with large plantations. They differed greatly from the poorer backcountry settlers who enslaved fewer people. Some Loyalists were part of ethnic groups that had a close connection to Great Britain. The most notable were the [Highland Scots](#) ^[7] that had been invited by governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[8] in the 1730s to settle in the Cape Fear River Valley.

In North Carolina, some Loyalists were former members of the [Regulator movement](#) ^[9]. During the 1760s and early 1770s, Regulators opposed colonial authority. They spent nearly a decade attacking tax collectors and marching against the royal government. But many of the Patriot leaders in North Carolina had been opponents of the Regulators and had defeated them in [battle](#) ^[10]. Backcountry loyalists hated these Patriots nearly as much as they hated colonial authorities.

The Loyalists in the North Carolina backcountry fought Patriots from the early days of the war. In July 1775, royal governor [Josiah Martin](#) ^[11] fled to a ship off the coast of North Carolina. From there, he issued a call for Loyalists to march east and take back the capital New Bern. Martin praised the Loyalists of the backcountry in his [August 1775 proclamation](#) ^[12] that ordered the colony to stop rebelling. He noted "His Majesty's faithful and loyal subjects in the Interior and Western Counties of this Province" and praised them for their "steadfast duty to their King and Country that hath hitherto resisted all the black artifices of falsehood, Sedition, and Treason..."

Many Loyalists, mostly from the [Cape Fear River Valley](#) ^[13] area, answered Martin's call. They formed an army near present-day Fayetteville, led by men such as Donald MacLeod, [Donald MacDonald](#) ^[14], and [John Campbell](#) ^[15], and reached the vicinity of Wilmington. The two armies met at Moore's Creek Bridge near Wilmington in February 1776. At the [following battle](#) ^[16], the Patriots routed the Loyalists in February 1776. The entire Loyalist army was captured. Loyalist sentiment decreased for several years following this battle.

The conflict grew substantially after the British captured [Charleston](#) ^[17], South Carolina, in early 1780. At that time, the British army started to move into the backcountry. British leaders called for Loyalist troops. Large numbers of Loyalists from North and South Carolina answered and formed sizable militia companies. They helped the British win key battles in South Carolina such as the [Battles of Waxhaws](#) ^[18] and [Camden](#) ^[19].

In most battles, Loyalist militias fought alongside regular British soldiers. But at the [Battle of Kings Mountain](#) ^[20], they were mostly left to their own. The Battle of Kings Mountain took place near the South Carolina–North Carolina border, and was the largest militia-only battle of the war. Patriots led by [Benjamin Cleveland](#) ^[21], [Isaac Shelby](#) ^[22], and others surprised and surrounded a Loyalist force. The Patriot militia killed the Loyalists' leading officer, [Patrick Ferguson](#) ^[23], and captured more than 600 men.

After Kings Mountain, North Carolina Loyalists were mainly reduced to skirmishes and small conflicts. They supported the successful raids of [David Fanning](#) ^[24], a successful Loyalist guerrilla who once kidnapped the governor of North Carolina. But their strength never reached the heights of early 1780, and Fanning's men were eventually defeated. Following the British surrender at Yorktown, many Loyalists lost their property and fled the country, often moving to England or Canada. Some stayed and, despite losing much of their land and often facing legal challenges, contributed to the growth of the new state of North Carolina.

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People:



^[30]

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[39]

A cartoon depicting three Natives, representing America, murdering six loyalists. From Library of Congress [39].

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