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North Carolina in the US Revolution [1]

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On April 19, 1775, Massachusetts militiamen clashed with British regulars at Lexington Green[3]. Until that point, North Carolinians had maintained a strained yet loyal allegiance to the mother country. Legal battles had been waged between Whig and Tory forces within the state, and Governor Josiah Martin [4] dissolved the General Assembly on April 7. Nevertheless there had been few physically violent confrontations. However, when word of the Lexington skirmish arrived in New Bern on May 6, open warfare seemed inevitable. North Carolina newspaper editor James Davis [5] wrote, “The Sword is now drawn, and God knows when it will be sheathed.”

Throughout 1775, North Carolina Whigs organized their resistance to the Crown. Provincial Congresses [6] were called to order. Two such bodies had formed in 1774 and early 1775, leading to Martin’s order to close the Assembly. John Harvey, the former Speaker of the Colonial Assembly, oversaw the first two congresses before his death in the summer of 1775. The Third Provincial Congress of North Carolina, organized in August, elected attorney Samuel Johnston [7] at its head. The body ordered the enlistment of North Carolina’s first soldiers in the Continental Army and developed the thirteen-member Council of Safety [8] to oversee the colony’s resistance. Delegates appointedCornelius Harnett [9] the head of the Council, and divided the colony into six military districts for the purpose of organizing militia and arranging representation in the executive body.

In early 1776, British authorities planned to exploit the allegiances of thousands of Scottish settlers who lived along the Cape Fear River [10] near Cross Creek (present day Fayetteville). Word was sent to the Loyalists to organize and prepare for a landing of British regulars along the coast. Soon hundreds of Highland Scots were enlisting in Tory regiments in the region and marching towards Wilmington. The Council of Safety acted swiftly to counteract their intentions, and on February 27, 1776, Patriot troops intercepted and destroyed the Loyalist force at Moore’s Creek Bridge [11].

Two months later, on April 12, 1776, the Fourth Provincial Congress passed the Halifax Resolves [12], officially endorsing independence from Great Britain. North Carolina representatives presented the resolves to the Continental Congress on May 27, the same day that Virginia offered a similar resolution. Within two months, representatives of the Continental Congress, including North Carolinians Joseph Hewes, William Hooper [13], and John Penn [14], signed the Declaration of Independence. In November, the Fifth Provincial Congress approved North Carolina's first state constitution and appointed Richard Caswell governor.

The fall of 1776 also witnessed a retaliatory expedition taken against the Cherokee [15] in the western part of the state. A large force of North Carolina militia led by Brigadier General Griffith Rutherford [16] and supported by a secondary force of South Carolina militiamen marched into the far southwestern counties of North Carolina laying waste to Cherokee villages. This action was officially sanctioned by the Continental Congress in retaliation for Cherokee raids that previous summer in the Catawba and Yadkin River valleys. Nevertheless, many western North Carolina militiamen probably saw the operation as a potential land grab.

During 1777, North Carolina Continental soldiers, regular troops enlisted for periods ranging from twelve months to the duration of the war, served in George Washington's campaigns near Philadelphia. They participated in the battles of Brandywine and Germantown in September and October, before going into winter quarters at Valley Forge. The North Carolina Continental brigade lost so many men in the fall and winter that nine regiments that should officially have totaled 4,500-5,000 men only had 1,072 men present for duty. Two hundred and four of men died at Valley Forge, and six of the regiments were officially disbanded.

While North Carolina troops died in the north, the state itself saw relative peace. After the destruction of the Loyalist forces at Moore's Creek Bridge, few Tories actively resisted Whig rule. In New Bern and Edenton, Patriot merchants such as John Wright Stanly [17] and Richard Ellis [18] sent fleets of privateers to wage war on British shipping. These privately armed merchantmen captured British and Loyalist vessels and had them adjudicated at North Carolina's admiralty courts [19], thereby providing goods and prize money to the state's people. With a small, relatively ineffective state navy, and unable to rely on the equally fledgling Continental Navy, North Carolinians used privateering as their means of engaging the British at sea.

In June 1778, the North Carolina Continentals who had survived the Philadelphia campaign and Valley Forge, took part in the war's largest battle at Monmouth New Jersey. Afterwards they were detached and sent back to North Carolina. The following March, a large force of North Carolina militia led by Brigadier General John Ashe [20] took part in an expedition into the hinterlands of Georgia. Between Augusta and Savannah, they were attacked and the entire force destroyed at Briar Creek. Three months later, North Carolina Continentals and militia fought at the American defeat at Stono Ferry in South Carolina.

In March 1780, the North Carolina Continental Line was sent to Charleston to help defend the city against a British siege. On May 12, the city fell, and with it nearly every single North Carolina Continental surrendered. In the summer of 1780, a British army led by Charles Cornwallis [21] began advancing into the South Carolina interior. At Camden on August 16, 1780, Cornwallis's army engaged a small American force commanded by Major General Horatio Gates. Among the Whigs were nearly 3,000 North Carolina militia commanded by Governor Richard Caswell [22]. The battle was a disaster for the Americans, and the entire Whig army was swept from the field. The only bright moment for Patriot forces in North Carolina would have been their defeat of a large Loyalist force at Ramsour's Mill a few days after Camden.

Despite the tragedies at Charleston and Camden, the end of 1780 brought American victories at King's Mountain, where North Carolina riflemen helped eliminate a Loyalist force led by Major Patrick Ferguson. Only a few months later, North Carolina militia and riflemen helped Daniel Morgan [23]'s Continental army defeat at Cowpens [24] a British force led by Banastre Tarleton. Over the course of six months, Patriot forces destroyed nearly one-quarter of the army Cornwallis had marched with from Charleston.

From January to March 1781, Cornwallis's army pursued Morgan, and his successor Nathanael Greene, in what became known as the "Race to the Dan." The campaign included several skirmishes, namely Cowan's Ford, Bruce's Crossroads, Clapp's Mill and Weitzell's Mill. The campaign culminated in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse [25], the largest engagement fought in North Carolina during the war. Although an American defeat, Cornwallis lost nearly 27% of his army; so many men that he had to retreat to British-held Wilmington [26]. Charles Fox, a British Parliamentarian, reportedly exclaimed upon learning of Cornwallis's losses, "Another such victory will ruin us.

After Guilford, as Cornwallis's army marched for Virginia, and Greene headed into South Carolina, North Carolina became a battleground for an ongoing civil war between local Patriots and Tories. Loyalist David Fanning [27] terrorized the region, and in September captured Governor Thomas Burke [28] and most of the General Assembly in a raid on Hillsborough. He was subsequently attacked by North Carolina militia forces in an aborted rescue attempt at Lindley's Mill however Fanning escaped with Governor Burke in tow. After Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown the following month, Fanning left North Carolina for the relative safety of the British forces at Charleston. Two years of intermittent fighting continued, but no major actions took place in North Carolina. In September 1783, the war ended with the Treaty of Paris [29]. Finally, the sword had been sheathed.

References and additional resources:

Documenting the American South [30]

NC Digital Collections [31] (Government & Heritage Library and NC State Archives)

Resources in libraries [32] [via WorldCat]

UNC Documenting the American South. *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina.* "Letters concerning the news of the Battle of Lexington in Massachusetts." [3] Volume 9, p. 1229-1239. 1886. Accessed May, 2010.

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