Butler, John [1]

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by Lindley S. Butler, 1979

d. 1786

John Butler, brigadier general of the state militia and legislator of the revolutionary period, settled before May 1763 on the Haw River in the western edge of the Hawfields community, Orange County [2]. During the period when his brother William [3] was a leader of the Regulator movement [4], John Butler was sheriff of Orange County (1770). Although Butler testified to the General Assembly [5] that the Regulators had obstructed him in carrying out his duties, he was mentioned in a Regulator petition of October 1770 as one of only two public officials charging fair fees for their services. After the Battle of Alamance [6], Butler signed petitions for clemency for former Regulators and sought pardon for his brother, one of the few leaders outlawed.

When the Revolution began, Butler was appointed to the committee of safety for the Hillsborough District by the third provincial congress [7], and on 9 Sept. 1775 he was commissioned a lieutenant colonel of the minutemen from Orange County. He participated in the Moore's Creek Bridge [8] campaign, when the Orange County militia aided in occupying Cross Creek. He was elected a delegate from Orange County to the fourth provincial congress, which met in April 1776 at Halifax. There he was appointed to a committee for the purchase of arms, and on 22 Apr. 1776 he became a colonel of the Orange County militia, commanding the southern regiment. He was reelected a delegate to the fifth provincial congress in November 1776.

Active in military and civil affairs throughout the Revolution, Butler served four terms in the House of Commons: 1777, 1778, and two sessions in 1784. In 1781 he was elected to one term in the state senate. From 26 June 1781 until 3 May 1782 he was on the council of state. He was an active member of the General Assembly. In the April 1784 session he was chairman of two important committees, Propositions and Grievances and the Committee to Reply to the Governor's Message, and he served on the Committee on Privileges and Elections. Although a military officer, he sponsored in this same session a bill for relief of Quakers [9], many of whom were pacifists, and a bill to reduce the confiscation of Loyalist [10] property.

The General Assembly elected John Butler to the rank of brigadier general of the Hillsborough District on 9 May 1777. For the next seven years he held this position and rendered capable service as a recruiter of militia, a field commander in regular army campaigns, and an adversary of the Tories in the partisan warfare.

His field service as a militia general under Continental command included the command of a contingent of seven hundred militia sent to reinforce General Benjamin Lincoln at Augusta, Ga., in May 1779. In the ensuing maneuvers near Charlestown, S.C., Butler's militia performed well in the unsuccessful assault on the British works at Stono Ferry, 20 June 1779. The following year, Butler commanded a brigade under General Horatio Gates at the disastrous Battle of Camden [11] on 16 Aug. When Cornwallis [12] invaded North Carolina, occupying Charlotte [13] on 28 Sept. 1780, Butler had his brigade posted between Charlotte and Salisbury, occasionally skirmishing with the British. After the British occupation of Wilmington on 29 Jan. 1781, Butler was ordered to defend the Lower Cape Fear [14] region. However, General Nathanael Greene requested that the militia join his troop concentration in Guilford County [15], and Butler rendezvoused with Greene at High Rock Ford in March. Commanding a brigade on the front line in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse [16], 15 Mar. 1781, Butler vainly attempted to stem the early rout of the militia.

After Greene invaded South Carolina in April 1781, Butler remained in his district recruiting and sending reinforcements to the south. Encouraged by the presence of Cornwallis, the Tories of North Carolina rose in force in 1781. Under the notorious but brilliant leadership of David Fanning [17], the Loyalist militia in the center of the state terrorized and controlled large areas until the spring of 1782. Fanning's daring raid on the capital at Hillsborough on 12 Sept. 1781 achieved the capture of Governor Thomas Burke [18] and numerous civil and military officers. Informed of the raid, Butler, with some four hundred militia, ambushed Fanning's command of over nine hundred Tories on 13 Sept. at Lindley's Mill [19] on Cane Creek. After four hours of close fighting, resulting in a total of more than two hundred and fifty casualties on both sides, the outnumbered and outflanked Butler was forced to retire. Still hoping to rescue the governor, Butler pursued the Tories as far as Hammond's Creek, south of Elizabethtown, where he was surprised and defeated by a British force from Wilmington. Butler was joined by General Griffith Rutherford [20] in October, and the militia remained in the field near Wilmington until the British evacuation in November. As Tory strength receded, Butler handled the negotiations with Fanning, who finally left the state in May 1782.

Butler resigned his commission on 2 June 1784. Although elected to the House of Commons in 1786, he died that fall before the session opened. The sole heir to his Haw River plantation was his wife, Anne. Butler, who was described as a "plain and simple" democrat by an earlier biographer, demonstrated his strength of character by his loyal service to the state through the many adversities of the Revolution. A recent detailed study of the Battle of Lindley's Mill provides

abundant evidence of his competence as a tactical commander. In this battle, clever use of the terrain and effective leadership nearly wrested a victory from the capable Fanning. There were few instances in the war where heavily outnumbered militia fought so well. At a crucial time in the history of his state, Butler gave his last years as a legislator, general, and peacemaker.

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Butler, Lindley S. [27]
Origin - location:
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From:
Dictionary of North Carolina Biography, University of North Carolina Press. [29]

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