

Forsyth, Benjamin ^[1]

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Early 1760s–28 June 1814

Benjamin Forsyth, officer in the Rifle Corps during the War of 1812 ^[2], was born probably in Virginia, although some accounts give Stokes County ^[3], N.C. Family tradition says that his parents were James and Elizabeth Forsyth, that his father died while the boy was still young, and that his mother remarried. Benjamin received some education, as evidenced by his letters, and he also possessed property. Beginning in 1794, he bought land in Stokes County and by 1810 owned 3,000 acres and enslaved seven people. In 1797 he married Bethemia Ladd, by whom he had six children: Elizabeth Bostic (1798), Sally Almond (1800), Effie Jones (1803), Bethemia Harding (1805), James N. (1808), and Mary L. (1811). Forsyth served in 1807 and 1808 as a representative in the General Assembly from Stokes County.

Commissioned a second lieutenant in the Sixth United States Infantry on 24 Apr. 1800, Forsyth served two months after which he was honorably discharged. Eight years later, when the United States went on a war footing following constant friction with both Great Britain and France during the Napoleonic Wars, he was commissioned a captain in the Rifle Regiment and thereafter served in the army until he was killed in action, being promoted to major on 20 Jan. 1813 and breveted lieutenant-colonel on 6 Feb. 1813. The Rifle Regiment (later the Rifle Corps) was the elite branch of the service. In 1809 their uniforms consisted of green coats "faced and turned up" with brown and yellow, green pantaloons, fringed white vests, and leather caps high in front with "U.S.R.R." in large yellow characters and finished off with "tall nodding black plumes."

In August 1812 the Rifle Regiment arrived on the Canadian front where it engaged in guerrilla tactics, brief encounters, and scouting, and where it also spearheaded larger operations combining land and water movements. Forsyth led his troops in attacks on Gananoque (1812) and Elizabethtown (1813); in combined operations against York (1813) and Fort George (1813); at the Battle of Chrysler's Island (1813); and in his final campaign around Odell Town (1814). The most noted of his hit-and-run operations was the night raid across the frozen St. Lawrence River on Elizabethtown. At about 10:00 P.M. on 6 Feb. 1813, Forsyth led a band of volunteers on a twelve-mile march up the American side of the river, across the ice, and back down the Canadian side to surprise the sleeping British garrison. The Americans liberated a group of their own prisoners, captured 52 British and 134 stand of arms, and returned home safely by 8:00 A.M. North Carolinians were bursting with pride over the exploit, following as it did on the heels of such dismal news as Hull's surrender at Detroit. A typical toast was offered to "Major Forsyth and his gallant band of North Carolinians; May their Eagles, as heretofore, always summon them to victory and to glory."

Forsyth led the landing party in the capture of York on 26 Apr. 1813; and again on 25 May 1813 he led the initial attack on Fort George. "Distinguished marks of respect" were received by the riflemen for their valor. He was with Colonel Alexander Macomb ^[4] during the miserable march through snow, sleet, and rain to Chrysler's Island where he was slightly wounded in the American defeat. Following a grim winter at French Mill, Forsyth was again in the forefront of the American army as it attacked LaColle Mill and attempted to capture Odell Town. Because he could not bring himself to follow orders by retreating into an ambush, he was killed. Brigadier General George Izard ^[5] reported, "The Indiscretion of poor Forsyth prevented the entire success of the [ambush]—he has paid for it with his life." He became legendary to his men and his North Carolina compatriots because of his dazzling excursions and flashy achievements. Yet he was reprimanded by his superior officers upon occasion for the very same qualities, although in a final evaluation Dearborn regarded him as "an excellent officer, and, under suitable circumstances, would be of important service."

At the close of the war the Forsyth family moved to Tennessee, never to return. A resolution of appreciation was adopted in December 1817 by the General Assembly ^[6] offering to educate his son and authorizing the presentation of a sword to him. When James N. Forsyth was fifteen years old, he was sent to the Academy at Hillsborough at state expense and then to The University of North Carolina ^[7]. James left the university, joined the navy as a midshipman, and died when his ship was lost at sea in 1829. The county of Forsyth ^[8] was erected by the legislature in 1849 and so named in honor of the military hero of the War of 1812.

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Additional Resources:

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