

= Battle of Moore 's Creek Bridge =

The Battle of Moore 's Creek Bridge was a battle of the American Revolutionary War fought near Wilmington in present @-@ day Pender County , North Carolina on February 27 , 1776 . The victory of North Carolina Revolutionary forces over Southern Loyalists helped build political support for the revolution and increased recruitment of additional soldiers into their forces .

Loyalist recruitment efforts in the interior of North Carolina began in earnest with news of the Battles of Lexington and Concord , and Patriots in the province also began organizing Continental Army and militia units . When word arrived in January 1776 of a planned British Army expedition to the area , Josiah Martin , the royal governor , ordered the Loyalist militia to muster in anticipation of their arrival . Revolutionary militia and Continental units mobilized to prevent the junction , blockading several routes until the poorly armed Loyalists were forced to confront them at Moore 's Creek Bridge , about 18 miles ( 29 km ) north of Wilmington .

In a brief early @-@ morning engagement , a charge across the bridge by sword @-@ wielding Loyalist Scotsmen was met by a barrage of musket fire . One Loyalist leader was killed , another captured , and the whole force was scattered . In the following days , many Loyalists were arrested , putting a damper on further recruiting efforts . North Carolina was not militarily threatened again until 1780 , and memories of the battle and its aftermath negated efforts by Charles Cornwallis to recruit Loyalists in the area in 1781 .

= = Background = =

= = = British recruiting = = =

In early 1775 , with political and military tensions rising in the Thirteen Colonies , North Carolina 's royal governor , Josiah Martin , hoped to combine the recruiting of Scots settlers in the North Carolina interior with that of sympathetic former Regulators ( a group originally opposed to corrupt colonial administration ) and disaffected Loyalists in the coastal areas to build a large Loyalist force to counteract Patriot sympathies in the province . His petition to London to recruit 1 @,@ 000 men had been rejected , but he continued efforts to rally Loyalist support .

At about the same time , Scotsman Allan Maclean successfully lobbied King George III for permission to recruit Loyalist Scots throughout North America . In April , he received royal permission to raise a regiment known as the Royal Highland Emigrants by recruiting retired Scottish soldiers living in North America . One battalion was to be recruited in the northern provinces , including New York , Quebec and Nova Scotia , while a second battalion was to be raised in North Carolina and other southern provinces , where a large number of these soldiers had been given land . After receiving his commissions from General Thomas Gage in June , Maclean sent Donald MacLeod and Donald MacDonald , two veterans of the June 17 Battle of Bunker Hill , south to lead the recruitment drive there . These recruiters were also aware that Allan MacDonald , husband of the famous Jacobite heroine Flora MacDonald was already actively recruiting in North Carolina . Their arrival at New Bern was cause for suspicion by members of North Carolina 's Committee of Safety , but they were not arrested .

On January 3 , 1776 , Martin learned that an expedition of more than 2 @,@ 000 troops under the command of General Henry Clinton was planned for the southern colonies and that their arrival was expected in mid @-@ February . He sent word to the recruiters that he expected them to deliver recruits to the coast by February 15 , and dispatched Alexander Maclean to Cross Creek ( present @-@ day Fayetteville ) to coordinate activities in that area . Mclean optimistically reported to Martin that he would raise and equip 5 @,@ 000 Regulators and 1 @,@ 000 Scots . Martin is reported to have said " This is the moment when this country may be delivered from anarchy " , expecting a North Carolina Loyalist victory .

In a meeting of Scots and Regulator leaders at Cross Creek on February 5 , there was disagreement on how to proceed . The Scots wanted to wait until the British troops had actually

arrived before mustering , while the Regulators wanted to move immediately . The views of the latter prevailed since they claimed to be able to raise 5 @, @ 000 men , while the Scots expected to raise only 700 to 800 . When the forces mustered on February 15 , there were about 3 @, @ 500 men , but the number rapidly dwindled over the next few days . Many men had expected to be met and escorted by British troops and did not relish the possibility of having to fight their way to the coast . When they marched three days later , Brigadier General Donald MacDonald led between 1 @, @ 400 and 1 @, @ 600 men , predominantly Scots . This number was further reduced over the coming days as more men deserted the column .

= = = Revolutionary reaction = = =

With the reaction of the revolutionary war , word of the Cross Creek meeting reached members of the Revolutionary North Carolina Provincial Congress a few days after it happened . The colonies were broadly prosperous on the eve of the American Revolution . Pursuant to resolutions of the Second Continental Congress , the provincial congress had raised the 1st North Carolina Regiment of the Continental Army in fall 1775 , and given command to Colonel James Moore . Local committees of safety in Wilmington and New Bern also had active militia organizations , led by Alexander Lillington and Richard Caswell respectively . On February 15 the Patriot forces began to mobilize .

Moore led 650 Continentals out of Wilmington with the objective of preventing the Loyalists from reaching the coast . They camped on the southern shore of Rockfish Creek on February 15 , about 7 miles ( 11 km ) from the Loyalist camp . General MacDonald learned of their arrival , and sent Moore a copy of a proclamation issued by Governor Martin and a letter calling on the rebels to lay down their arms . Moore responded with his own call that the Loyalists lay down their arms and support the cause of Congress . In the meantime , Caswell led 800 New Bern militiamen toward the area .

= = = Loyalist march = = =

Macdonald , his preferred road blocked by Moore , chose an alternate route that would eventually bring his force to the Widow Moore 's Creek Bridge , about 18 miles ( 29 km ) from Wilmington . On February 20 he crossed the Cape Fear River at Cross Creek and destroyed the boats in order to deny Moore their use . His forces then crossed the South River , heading for Corbett 's Ferry , a crossing of the Black River . On orders from Moore , Caswell reached the ferry first , and set up a blockade there . Moore , as a precaution against Caswell being defeated or circumvented , detached Lillington with 150 Wilmington militia and 100 men under Colonel John Ashe from the New Hanover Volunteer Company of Rangers to take up a position at the Widow Moore 's Creek Bridge . These men , moving by forced marches , traveled down the southern bank of the Cape Fear River to Elizabethtown , where they crossed to the north bank . From there they marched down to the confluence of the Black River and Moore 's Creek , and began entrenching on the east bank of the creek . Moore detached other militia companies to occupy Cross Creek , and followed Lillington and Ashe with the slower Continentals . They followed the same route , but did not arrive until after the battle .

When MacDonald and his force reached Corbett 's Ferry , they found the crossing blocked by Caswell and his men . MacDonald prepared for battle , but was informed by a local slave that there was a second crossing a few miles up the Black River that they could use . On February 26 , he ordered his rearguard to make a demonstration as if they were planning to cross while he led his main body up to this second crossing and headed for the bridge at Moore 's Creek . Caswell , once he realized that MacDonald had given him the slip , hurried his men the 10 miles ( 16 km ) to Moore 's Creek , and beat MacDonald there by only a few hours . MacDonald sent one of his men into the Patriot camp under a flag of truce to demand their surrender , and to examine the defenses . Caswell refused , and the envoy returned with a detailed plan of the Patriot fortifications .

Caswell had thrown up some entrenchments on the west side of the bridge , but these were not

located to Patriot advantage . Their position required the Patriots to defend a position whose only line of retreat was across the narrow bridge , a distinct disadvantage that MacDonald recognized when he saw the plans . In a council held that night , the Loyalists decided to attack , since the alternative of finding another crossing might give Moore time to reach the area . During the night , Caswell decided to abandon that position and instead take up a position on the far side of the creek . To further complicate the Loyalists ' use of the bridge , the militia took up its planking and greased the support rails .

= = Battle = =

By the time of their arrival at Moore 's Creek , the Loyalist contingent had shrunk to between 700 and 800 men . About 600 of these were Scots and the remainder were Regulators . Furthermore , the marching had taken its toll on the elderly MacDonald ; he fell ill and turned command over to Lieutenant Colonel Donald MacLeod . The Loyalists broke camp at 1 am on February 27 and marched the few miles from their camp to the bridge . Arriving shortly before dawn , they found the defenses on the west side of the bridge unoccupied . MacLeod ordered his men to adopt a defensive line behind nearby trees when a Revolutionary sentry across the river fired his musket to warn Caswell of the Loyalist arrival . Hearing this , MacLeod immediately ordered the attack .

In the pre @-@ dawn mist , a company of Scots approached the bridge . In response to a call for identification shouted across the creek , Captain Alexander Mclean identified himself as a friend of the King , and responded with his own challenge in Gaelic . Hearing no answer , he ordered his company to open fire , beginning an exchange of gunfire with the Patriot sentries . Colonel MacLeod and Captain John Campbell then led a picked company of swordsmen on a charge across the bridge .

During the night , Caswell and his men had established a semicircular earthworks around the bridge end , and armed them with two small pieces of field artillery . When the Scots were within 30 paces of the earthworks , the Patriots opened fire to devastating effect . MacLeod and Campbell both went down in a hail of gunfire ; Colonel Moore reported that MacLeod had been struck by upwards of 20 musket balls . Armed only with swords and faced with overwhelming firepower from muskets and artillery , the Scots could do little else other than retreat . The surviving elements of Campbell 's company got back over the bridge , and the Loyalist force dissolved and retreated .

Capitalizing on the success , the Revolutionary forces quickly replaced the bridge planking and gave chase . One enterprising company led by one of Caswell 's lieutenants forded the creek above the bridge , flanking the retreating Loyalists . Colonel Moore arrived on the scene a few hours after the battle . He stated in his report that 30 Loyalists were killed or wounded , " but as numbers of them must have fallen into the creek , besides more that were carried off , I suppose their loss may be estimated at fifty . " The Revolutionary leaders reported one killed and one wounded .

= = Aftermath = =

Over the next several days , the Patriot forces mopped up the fleeing Loyalists . In all , about 850 men were arrested . Most of these were released on parole , but the ringleaders were sent to Philadelphia as prisoners . Combined with the capture of the Loyalist camp at Cross Creek , the Patriots confiscated 1 @, @ 500 muskets , 300 rifles , and \$ 15 @, @ 000 ( as valued at the time ) of Spanish gold . Many of the weapons were probably hunting equipment , and may have been taken from people not directly involved in the Loyalist uprising . The action had a galvanizing effect on Patriot recruiting , and the arrests of many Loyalist leaders throughout North Carolina cemented Patriot control of the state . A pro @-@ Patriot newspaper reported after the battle , " This , we think , will effectually put a stop to loyalists in North Carolina " . Despite the hard feelings on both sides , the prisoners were treated with respect . This helped convince many not to take up arms against the Patriots again .

The battle had significant effects within the Scots community of North Carolina , where Loyalists refused to turn out when calls to arms were made later in the war , and many were routed out of

their homes by the pillaging activities of their Patriot neighbors . Flora MacDonald ended up returning to her native Skye in 1779 , and when General Charles Cornwallis passed through the Cross Creek area in 1781 , he reported that " [ m ] any of the inhabitants rode into camp , shook me by the hand , said they were glad to see us and that we had beat Greene and then rode home . "

When news of the battle reached London , it received mixed commentary . One news report minimized the defeat since it did not involve any regular army troops , while another noted that an " inferior " Patriot force had defeated the Loyalists . Lord George Germain , the British official responsible for managing the war in London , remained convinced in spite of the resounding defeat that Loyalists were still a substantial force to be tapped .

The expedition that the Loyalists had been planning to meet was significantly delayed , and did not depart Cork , Ireland until mid @-@ February . The convoy was further delayed and split apart by bad weather , so the full force did not arrive off Cape Fear until May . As the fleet gathered , North Carolina 's provincial congress met at Halifax , and in early April passed the Halifax Resolves , authorizing the colony 's delegates to the Continental Congress to vote for independence from Great Britain . General Clinton used the force in an attempt to take Charleston , South Carolina . His attempt failed ; it represented the end of significant British attempts to control the southern colonies until late 1778 .

The battlefield site was preserved in the late 19th century through private efforts that eventually received state financial support . The Federal government took over the battle site as a National Military Park operated by the War Department in 1926 . The War Department operated the park until 1933 , when the National Park Service began managing the site as the Moores Creek National Battlefield . It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1966 . The battle is commemorated every year during the last full weekend of February .

= = Troop numbers = =

Early accounts of the battle often misstated the size of both forces involved in the battle , typically reporting that 1 @,@ 600 Loyalists faced 1 @,@ 000 Patriots . These numbers are still used by the National Park Service . Historian David Wilson , however , points out that the large Loyalist size is attributed to reports by General MacDonald and Colonel Caswell . MacDonald gave that figure to Caswell , and it represents a reasonable estimate of the number of men starting the march at Cross Creek . Alexander Mclean , who was present at both Cross Creek and the battle , reported that only 800 Loyalists were present at the battle , as did Governor Martin . The Patriot forces were also underreported since Caswell apparently casually grouped the ranger forces of John Ashe as part of Lillington 's company in his report .