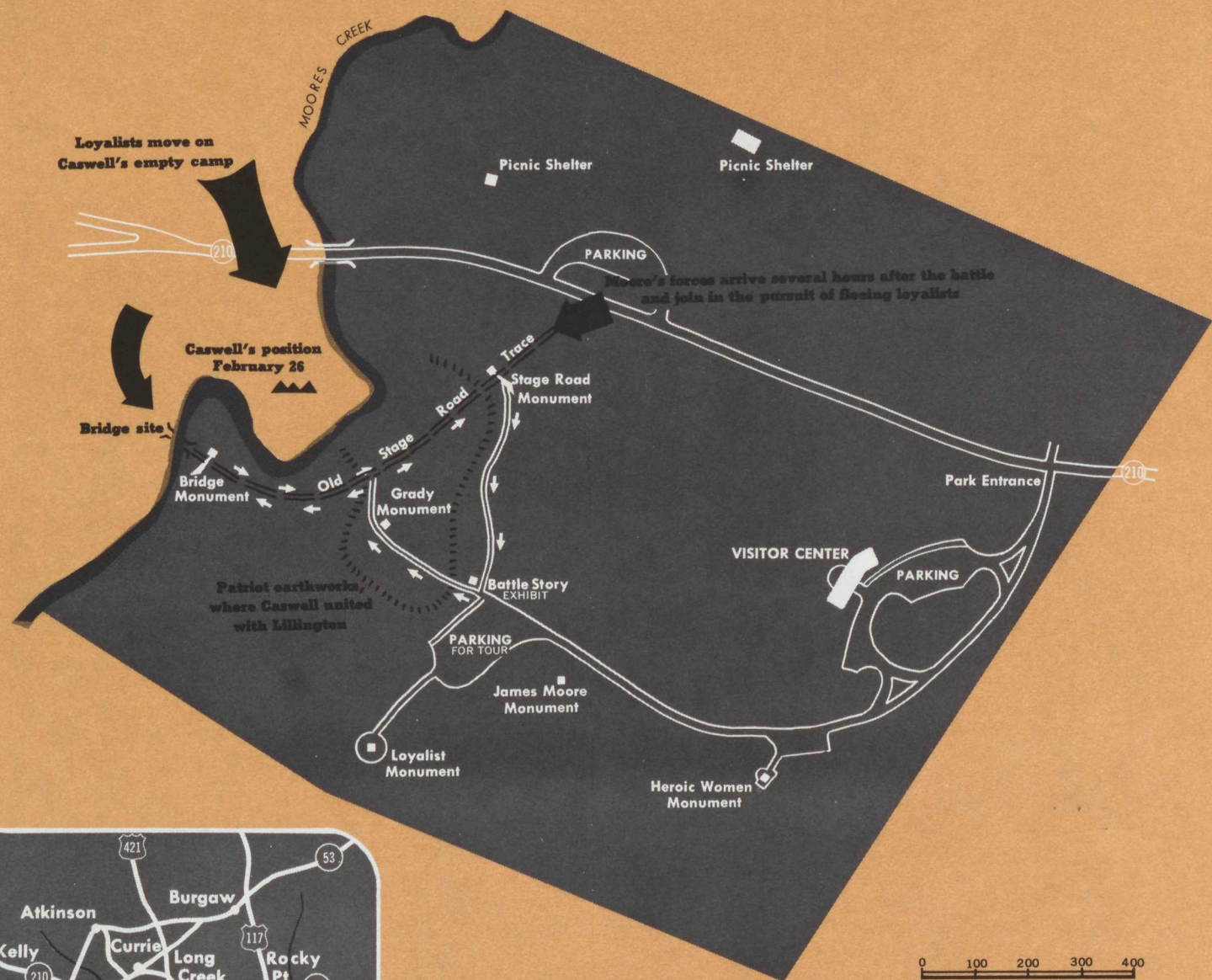


# THE BATTLE OF MOORES CREEK BRIDGE

February 27, 1776



"This morning, the North Carolina minute men and militia under the command of Brigadier-General James Moore, had an engagement with the Tories, at Widow Moore's Creek bridge. At the break of day, an alarm gun was fired, immediately after which, scarcely leaving the Americans a moment to prepare, the Tory army, with Captain McCloud [Donald McLeod] at their head, made their attack on Colonels Caswell and Lillington, posted near the bridge, and finding a small entrenchment vacant, concluded that the Americans had abandoned their post. With this supposition, they advanced in a most furious manner over the bridge. Colonel Caswell had very wisely ordered the planks to be taken up, so that in passing they met with many difficulties. On reaching a point within thirty paces of the breast-works, they were received with a very heavy fire, which did great execution. Captains McCloud [McLeod] and [Farquard] Campbell were instantly killed, the former having nine bullets and twenty-four swan shot through and into his body. The insurgents retreated with the greatest precipitation, leaving behind them some of their wagons, etc. They cut their horses out of the wagons and mounted three upon a horse. Many of them fell into the creek and were drowned. Tom Rutherford ran like a lusty fellow;—both he and Felix Keenan were in arms against the Carolinians, and they by this time are prisoners, as is Lieutenant-Colonel [James] Cotton, who ran at the first fire. The battle lasted three minutes. Twenty-eight of the Tories, besides the two captains, are killed or mortally wounded, and between twenty and thirty taken prisoners, among whom is his Excellency General Donald McDonald. This, we think, will effectually put a stop to Toryism in North Carolina."

A contemporary account of the battle from Frank Moore's *Diary of the American Revolution*, quoting the *New York Packet*, March 28, 1776, and the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, March 23, 1776.

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# MOORES CREEK

National Military Park • North Carolina

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

Moore's Creek National Military Park is about 20 miles northwest of Wilmington, N.C., and can be reached via U.S. 421 and N.C. 210.

The park is open daily except Christmas Day. We suggest that you begin your visit at the visitor center, a short distance from the park entrance. Exhibits there describe the battle. Battlefield tours start from this point. Guide services are available for educational and other groups if advance arrangements are made with the superintendent.

## ADMINISTRATION

MOORES CREEK NATIONAL MILITARY PARK, established in 1926 and containing 50 acres, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of the people.

A superintendent, whose address is Currie, N.C. 28435, is in immediate charge of the park.

## AMERICA'S NATURAL RESOURCES

Created in 1849, the Department of the Interior—America's Department of Natural Resources—is concerned with the management, conservation, and development of the Nation's water, wildlife, mineral, forest, and park and recreational resources. It also has major responsibilities for Indian and territorial affairs.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department works to assure that nonrenewable resources are developed and used wisely, that park and recreational resources are conserved for the future, and that renewable resources make their full contribution to the progress, prosperity, and security of the United States—now and in the future.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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### *The Lexington And Concord Of The South*

On February 27, 1776, patriots and loyalists of North Carolina clashed at Moores Creek Bridge in one of the decisive actions of the opening phases of the American Revolution. Here patriot militia under Cols. Richard Caswell and Alexander Lillington threw back a larger loyalist force on their way to rendezvous with a British expeditionary squadron on the coast. Small as the battle was, it had a crucial importance. The victory helped prevent a full-scale invasion of the South, drove North Carolina on April 12, 1776, to instruct its delegation to the Continental Congress to vote for independence—the first colony to so act—and supplied a needed stimulus for the country as a whole in the movement toward sundering the ties with Britain.

#### PRELUDE TO REVOLT

When the break with Britain loomed in the early 1770's, divided public opinion had left North Carolina ill-prepared for war. The legislature, popularly elected, opposed the royal Governor, Josiah Martin, almost to a man. Yet many in the colony who disliked parliamentary taxation and royal authority over provincial affairs still found the thought of fighting the mother country abhorrent. By 1775 North Carolinians had generally split into two groups: patriots, probably half the people, who were willing to fight England for independence; and loyalists, primarily the Crown's officials, wealthy merchants, planters, and others of a conservative cast who opposed redressing grievances by war. This last party included a large number of Highland Scots, newly come to North Carolina after aban-

doning the lost cause of the Stuarts, and some of the Regulators defeated at Alamance in 1771.

#### FIRST MOVES TOWARD WAR

The news of the fighting at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, received in North Carolina a month later, quickened the movement toward independence there. As the patriots organized provisional government and pushed military preparations, Martin abandoned New Bern, the royal capital, and fled to Fort Johnston on the Cape Fear River, arriving there on June 2, 1775. Within 6 weeks, militia forced him to flee again, this time offshore to the British warship, *Cruizer*, as the fort burned behind him.

In exile Martin laid plans for the British conquest of North Carolina. First, he would raise in that colony an army of 10,000 men, two-thirds of them Highlanders and Regulators with strong loyalist feelings. Next, this army would rendezvous on the coast with a powerful expeditionary force under Lord Cornwallis, Sir Henry Clinton, and Sir Peter Parker. These forces were to concentrate at Brunswick by February 15, 1776. Together they would re-establish royal authority in North and South Carolina, striking wherever rebellion reared its head. Martin convinced his superiors in London and Gen. Thomas Gage in Boston that this host could easily restore order. The British Ministry approved the plan and dispatched orders to the several commanders.

Governor Martin now set about recruiting his army. On January 10, 1776, he called upon all loyal subjects to unite to put down a "most daring, horrid and unnatural rebellion." Six months earlier General Gage had sent Lt. Col. Donald MacDonald and Capt. Donald McLeod to North Carolina to recruit a Highland battalion. Martin now appointed MacDonald a brigadier general and McLeod a lieutenant colonel in the militia, directing them and others to enlist men.

To all Highlanders who pledged service to the Crown the British Government promised 200 acres of land, can-

cellation of land fees, and 20 years' tax exemption. These terms, and Martin's efforts among other groups, brought in large numbers of recruits. The call went out for loyalists to assemble under MacDonald near Cross Creek (Fayetteville) and then march to the coast. When the force finally organized about February 15, there were about 700 Highlanders, 700 other loyalists, and 130 Regulators—altogether nearly 1,600 men.

Meantime, the patriots had not been idle. While Martin tossed at sea, they began to mobilize their forces. Since Martin was technically out of the colony, the patriots set up a Provincial Council to govern in his stead. Upon the recommendation of the Continental Congress, two regiments of the Continental Line had already been raised, as well as several battalions of minutemen and militia.

At the first news that the loyalists were assembling at Cross Creek, patriots began gathering their forces. In Wilmington they threw up breastworks and prepared for fighting; in New Bern authorities mustered the district's militia under Col. Richard Caswell and ordered it to join with other militia in countering the loyalist uprising. Col. James Moore, the senior officer and the first to take the field, was in command.

The loyalists' plan was to advance along the southwest side of the Cape Fear River to the coast, provision the British troops arriving by sea, and then join them in conquering the colony. On February 20 MacDonald began his movement toward the coast. Blocked by Moore at Rockfish Creek, he marched eastward in the general direction of Caswell's force, crossed the Cape Fear River, and proceeded toward the Black River Road, a route into Wilmington along which he expected little opposition. Outmaneuvered by MacDonald's march tactics, Caswell withdrew from defending Corbett's Ferry on the Black River to "take possession of the Bridge upon Widow Moore's Creek," some 20 miles above Wilmington and a place the loyalists must cross on their way to the coast. Moore, after sending Col. Alexander Lillington to join Caswell, fell

back toward Wilmington, hoping to fall on MacDonald's rear as Caswell obstructed him in front.

#### THE ENGAGEMENT AT MOORES CREEK

When Lillington arrived at the bridge on the 25th, he quickly saw the position's defensive advantages. The creek, a dark, sluggish stream about 50 feet wide and nearly 5 feet deep, wound through swampy terrain and could be crossed in the vicinity only over this narrow timber bridge. To dominate the crossing Lillington threw up a low earthwork on a slight rise overlooking the bridge and approach. Joining Lillington the next day, Caswell sent his men across the bridge to throw up embankments there.

So by the evening of February 26 the bulk of the patriot forces, under the immediate command of Caswell, straddled Moores Creek Bridge. Lillington, with 200 men, waited on the east side of the creek, and Caswell, with 800 men, dug in on the west. MacDonald's loyalists, 1,600 strong but with arms for only half that many, camped 6 miles away.

MacDonald had lost the race to the bridge. The loyalists now had to decide whether to avoid fighting once more or to cut through their opponents. At a council of war their younger leaders carried the debate, and eventually all agreed that the enemy should be attacked. An element in the decision was the report by a scout that Caswell's position lay on their side of the river and thus was vulnerable.

At 1 a.m. on the 27th the loyalists marched to the attack, with a party of 75 picked broadswordsmen under Capt. John Campbell in the lead. By now MacDonald had fallen ill, and Lt. Col. Donald McLeod was in command. The going was slow, for the route lay through thickets and swampy ground.

During the night Caswell had abandoned camp and withdrawn across the creek, where he threw up a breastwork and posted artillery to cover the bridge. But once on the other bank, Caswell's men removed the floor and greased the girders. In darkness they now waited for the advancing Scots.

An hour before dawn the loyalists hit Caswell's deserted trenches and found only the fires burning low. Moving on to a nearby woods, McLeod regrouped his troops, as a rallying cry, "King George and Broad Swords," passed along the line. There they waited for daybreak. Suddenly a burst of rifle fire sounded near the bridge. Though it was not yet light, McLeod could wait no longer. Three cheers rang out—the signal for attack—and the loyalists rushed the partly demolished bridge with claymores out and bagpipes skirling. As the Highlanders of McLeod and Campbell stormed over, they were met by a withering musket and artillery fire. Many fell into the water. Nearly all the small advance party were cut down, and the whole force soon retreated. It was all over in 3 minutes. Pursuit turned the victory into a rout. The patriots lost only one man.

Within 2 weeks Moore's forces had captured most of the loyalist leaders, about 850 troops, and 1,500 muskets, 350 guns and shot bags, 150 swords and dirks, 2 medicine chests, and about \$75,000 in gold. The leaders were imprisoned or banished from the colony; the troops were paroled to their homes.

Though the battle was small, the implications were great. For the patriots the victory ended the uprising of the clans, discouraged the growth of loyalist sentiment in North and South Carolina, and spurred revolutionary sentiment throughout the colonies. More immediately, the victory thwarted the intended invasion of North Carolina. The British force moved on to Sullivan's Island off Charleston, S.C., where militia repulsed Sir Peter Parker's naval attack 4 months later, ending British hopes of squashing rebellion in the South for 4 years. "Had the South been conquered in the first half of 1776," the historian Edward Channing has concluded, "it is entirely conceivable that rebellion would never have turned into revolution. . . . At Moores Creek and Sullivan's Island the Carolinians turned aside the one combination of circumstances that might have made British conquest possible."