

Moore's Creek



National Military Park, North Carolina

At Moores Creek Bridge, in a brief but violent clash in the early morning darkness of February 27, 1776, North Carolina patriots defeated a larger loyalist force of Scots and Crown sympathizers on its way to rendezvous with a British expeditionary squadron on the coast. Small as the battle was, it had a crucial importance. The victory ended forever royal authority in the colony, helped forestall a full-scale invasion of the South, and encouraged North Carolina on April 12, 1776, to instruct its delegation to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia to vote for independence—the first colony to so act.

As the economic controversy with Great Britain gave way to political rebellion in the mid-1770's, North Carolina was left a badly divided colony. The legislature, popularly elected, opposed the royal Governor, Josiah Martin, almost to a man. "Government here is as absolutely prostrate as impotent," he warned his superiors in London, "and nothing but the shadow of it is left." And he predicted that "unless effectual measures such as British Spirit may dictate are speedily taken, there will not long remain a trace of Britain'[s] dominion over the colonies." 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 mid-1775 North Carolinians had generally split into two groups: patriots, probably half the people, who were willing to fight Britain for independence; and loyalists, primarily the Crown's officials, wealthy merchants, planters, and others of a conservative cast who opposed redressing their grievances by war. This last party included a large number of Highland Scots, who in recent decades had immigrated in sizable numbers to North Carolina, 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, further weakened royal authority. Unable to stem the tide of revolution in the colony, Martin abandoned New Bern, the capital, and fled to Fort Johnston on the Cape Fear River, arriving there on June 2, 1775. Within 6 weeks, North Carolina 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 the Carolinas, striking wherever rebellion showed itself. 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 loyalist militia, and directed them and others to enlist men.

To all Highlanders who pledged service to the Crown the British Government promised 200 acres of land, cancellation of land fees, and 20 years' tax exemption. These terms, and Martin's efforts among other groups, brought in recruits, though not nearly as many as had been expected. The call went out for loyalists to

assemble under MacDonald near Cross Creek (Fayetteville) and then march to the coast. When the force was organized on February 15, there were about 1,600 men present: Highlanders, other loyalists, and some 130 Regulators.

Meanwhile, 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 in August and September 1775 set up a Provincial Council to govern in his stead. Upon the recommendation of the Continental Congress, two regiments of the Continental Line were raised, and 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 of the 1st North Carolina Continentals 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 the rear of MacDonald's column 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 35 feet wide and nearly 10 feet deep, wound through swampy terrain and could be crossed in the vicinity only over this narrow 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 150 men waited on the east side of the creek, and Caswell with 850 men dug in on the west. MacDonald's loyalists, 1,600 strong but with arms for less than 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 set out on their march to the attack, with a party of 75 picked broadswordsmen under Capt. John Campbell in the lead. By now MacDonald had fallen ill, and Donald McLeod was in command. The going was slow, for the route lay through thickets and swampy ground.

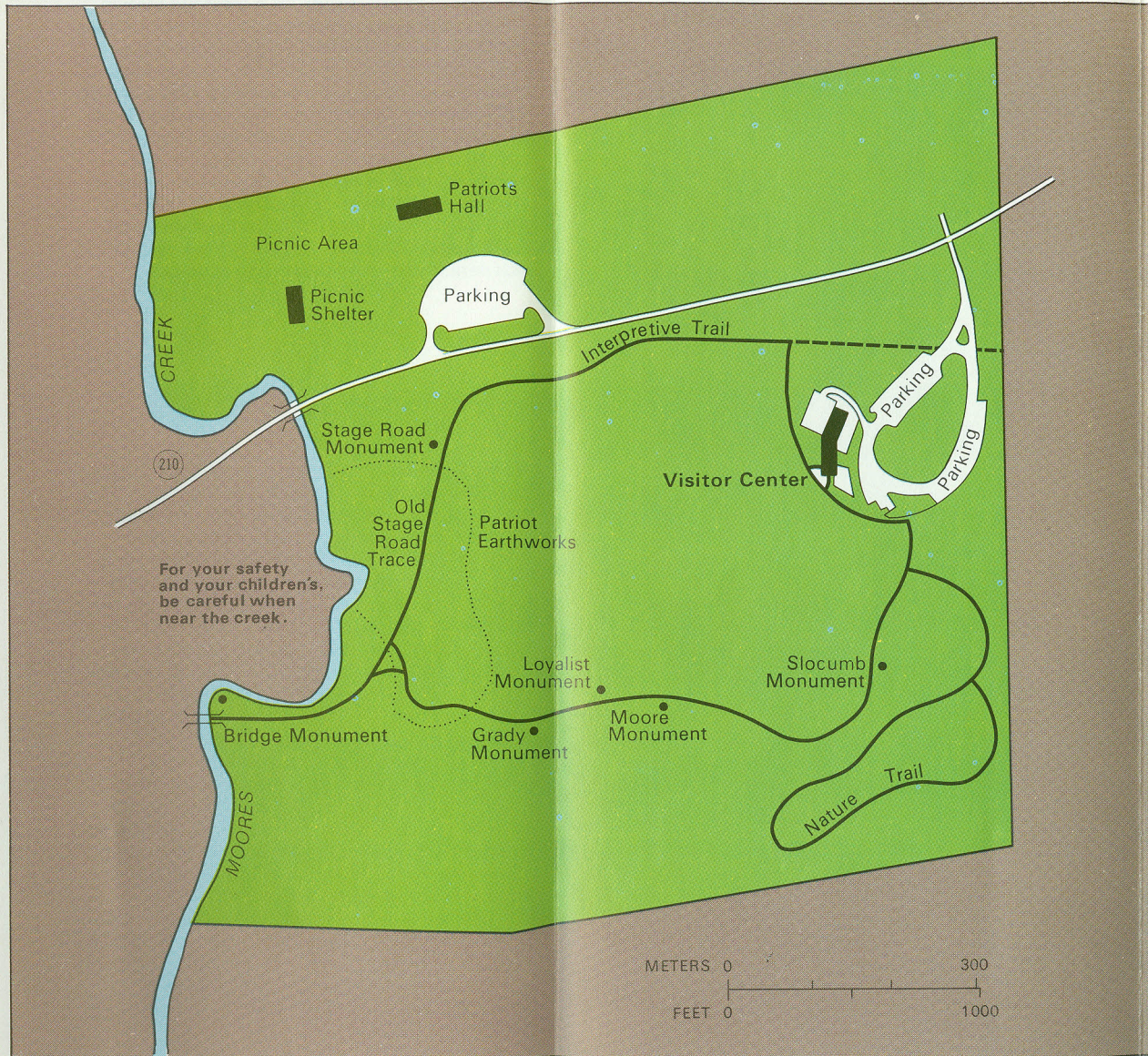
During the night Caswell had abandoned camp and withdrawn across the creek, where he threw up a breastwork and posted artillery to cover the bridge. But once on the other bank, Caswell's men removed the floor and greased the girders. In darkness they now waited for the advancing Scots.

An hour before dawn the loyalists hit Caswell's deserted trenches and found only the fires burn-

ing low. Moving on to 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 broadswords 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 a few minutes. Pursuit turned the victory into a rout. The patriots lost only one man.

Within weeks the patriots had captured "all suspected persons" and disarmed "all Highlanders and Regulators that were . . . in the late battle." The spoils included 1500 rifles, 350 guns, 150 swords, and £15,000 in gold. Some 850 common soldiers and most of the loyalist leaders were captured. The leaders were imprisoned or banished from the colony; the soldiers were paroled to their homes.

Though the battle was small, the implications were great. The victory demonstrated the surprising patriot strength in the countryside at large, discouraged the growth of loyalist sentiment in the Carolinas, 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 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."



Report of the Patriot Commander

Col. Richard Caswell to the revolutionary Provincial Congress of North Carolina

Camp at Long Creek, February 29, 1776

I have the pleasure to acquaint you that we had an engagement with the Tories at Widow Moore's Creek Bridge, on the 27th current. Our army was about one thousand strong, consisting of the Newbern battalion of minutemen, the militia from Craven, Johnston, Dobbs, and Wake, and a detachment of the Wilmington battalion of minute-men, which we found encamped at Moore's Creek the night before the battle, under the command of Colonel Lillington. . . .

The number killed and mortally wounded, from the best accounts I was able to collect, was about thirty: most of them were shot on passing the bridge. Several had fallen into the water, some of whom, I am pretty certain, had not risen yesterday evening when I left the camp. . . .

The Tories were totally put to the rout, and will certainly disperse. Colonel Moore arrived at our camp a few hours after the engagement was over. His troops came up that evening, and are now encamped on the ground where the battle was fought: and Colonel Martin is at or near Cross Creek, with a large body of men. Those, I presume, will be sufficient effectually to put a stop to any attempt to embody again. . . . Our officers and men behaved with the spirit and intrepidity becoming freemen contending for their dearest privileges.

From Henry B. Dawson, "Battles of the United States by Sea and Land."

About Your Visit

Moores 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 here describe the background of the conflict. Walking tours of the battlefield 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 is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 69, Currie, NC 28435, is in immediate charge of the park.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
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