

# *Kings Mountain*

NATIONAL  
MILITARY PARK

SOUTH CAROLINA







## NATIONAL MILITARY PARK

United States Department of the Interior, J. A. Krug, *Secretary*

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*Climax of a victorious rising of American frontiersmen against British and Tories in the Carolina foothills in 1780 which foreshadowed the British military defeats of 1781*

Kings Mountain, the fierce attack of American frontiersmen on October 7, 1780, against Cornwallis' scouting force under Ferguson, was an unexpected onslaught carried out in the foothills of northwestern South Carolina. This sudden uprising of the stalwart Alleghany mountaineers, for the protection of their homes and people from the threat of Tory invasion under British leadership, was relatively isolated in conception and execution from the main course of the Revolutionary War in the South.

Clearly unforeseen in the grand British plan to subjugate the South in a final effort to end the Revolution, this accidental encounter in the Southern Piedmont delayed incidentally, but did not alter materially, the movement of Britain's Southern Campaign. Kings Mountain is notable chiefly perhaps as supplying the first definite forewarning of the impending British military disasters in 1781. It was decisive to the extent that it contributed the earliest distinct element of defeat to the final major British campaign of the Revolution.

### *The Southern Campaign*

The extraordinary action at Kings Mountain occurred during one of the bleakest periods of the Revolution. A major change in British military strategy had again shifted the scene of action to the South in 1778. Faced by a discouraging campaign in the North, and assuming that the reputed Loyalist sympathies of the South would be more conducive to a victory there, the British war ministry now undertook to conquer the South.

Unimpeded by effective resistance, the British Southern Campaign swept unchecked through Georgia and part of South Carolina during 1778-79. The surrender of Gen. Benjamin Lincoln's American army at Charleston, in May 1780, greatly strengthened the British position. Soon most of South Carolina, except a few districts in the Piedmont, was overrun by British and Royalist forces directed by Lord Cornwallis. His plans for an immediate invasion of North Carolina were upset temporarily by the advance of a new American army under Gates. At Camden, on August 16, 1780, Gates suffered a disastrous defeat, again leaving South Carolina and the route northward open to the British.

### *Cornwallis Threatens the Frontier*

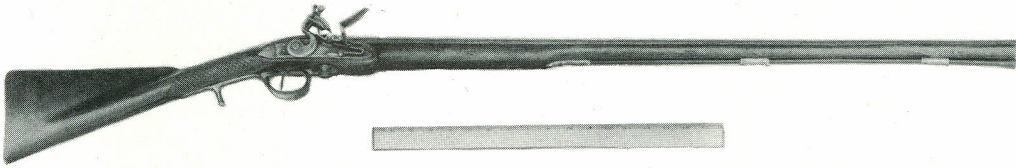
The only southern region in the path of Cornwallis' northward march remaining undisturbed by the course of the war lay in the foothills and ranges of the Alleghanies stretching through northwestern South Carolina, western North Carolina, and into the present eastern Tennessee. Here, the independent mountain yeomen, largely of Scotch-Irish descent, were occupied with establishing a new frontier and protecting their rude homes from the nearer threat of the border Indians, and had been little concerned with the war on the seaboard. But their free and comparatively peaceful existence was soon to be disturbed by a threat of direct aggression.

That threat came from Maj. Patrick Ferguson, of Cornwallis' command, who, after Camden, had been ordered to operate in the South Carolina Piedmont to suppress the Whig opposition



THE FERGUSON RIFLE

*PATRICK FERGUSON, the best shot in the British army, invented a rifle in 1716 that loaded at the breech. It was the first breech-loader carried by the troops of any country. The Provincial Regulars are believed to have used this splendid weapon at Kings Mountain. The rifle was ahead of its time and was discarded after his death. It is now rare.*



remaining there and to arouse the back-country Tories. In September 1780, he undertook a raid against Gilbert Town, a Whig outpost in the North Carolina mountains, near the present town of Rutherfordton. Fearful of such an invasion, the border leaders, Col. Isaac Shelby, of Sullivan County, and Col. John Sevier, of Washington County, North Carolina (both now in Tennessee), had hurried to the Watauga settlements and called for volunteers to defeat the British leader.

Reaching Gilbert Town early in September, Ferguson dispatched his famed invidious threat over the mountains to the backwoodsmen, warning them "that if they did not desist from their opposition to the British arms and take protection under his standard, he would march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders, and lay their country waste with fire and sword."

### *Rising of the Mountain Men*

To the freedom-loving frontier leaders the threat became a challenge which strengthened their determination to destroy the invader. Thus spurred, they assembled quickly, each in hunting garb, with knapsack, blanket, and long hunting rifle, most of them mounted, but some afoot. Meeting at Sycamore Shoals, near the present Elizabethton, Tenn., on September 26, the mountaineers began their ride southeastwardly in a swift 12-day pursuit of Ferguson, who, having

been warned meanwhile at Gilbert Town by Whig deserters, was withdrawing into South Carolina. Joining the forces of Shelby and Sevier were Joseph McDowell's men and the Virginians under Col. William Campbell, and as the expedition marched through the Catawba Valley, it was augmented by the North Carolina border fighters under Benjamin Cleveland.

At the Cowpens in upper South Carolina, the expedition, now under the command of Colonel Campbell, was joined on October 6 by further volunteers under local Whig leaders, including William Chronicle, James Williams, Edward Lacey, and James Hawthorne. Recruits brought definite word of Ferguson's whereabouts near Kings Mountain. There, in a final council of war, were selected 910 stalwart fighting men, all mounted, who immediately moved through the night upon the position of Ferguson's Provincial Corps and Tory militia 1,125 strong, now encamped atop the Kings Mountain spur.

### *Battle of Kings Mountain*

Pushing northeastwardly through the cold night rain, the expedition forded Broad River at sunrise in the continuing downpour. But by midday on October 7 the rain had ceased, and as the frontiersmen neared Kings Mountain their scouts confirmed Ferguson's position there. Quickly the mountain leaders devised a final plan of attack which was to surround the ridge

upon which Ferguson camped and gradually to close in from all sides.

After dismounting and passing through Ham-bright's Gap, some three-quarters of a mile west of Kings Mountain, the frontier detachments moved rapidly into their preassigned positions around the ridge. Seeking cover in the wooded ravines, the Whigs advanced, and Campbell and McDowell hurriedly passed through the gap at the southwestern end of the ridge, taking their positions respectively on the southeastern and eastern slopes. Sevier formed along the western slope, while Shelby took position on the north-western slope. Meanwhile, the other Whig detachments were forming along the bottom of the ravine leading around the northern and northeastern base of the ridge.

Ferguson's main camp was near the northeastern end of the ridge, but his picket line extended along the crest nearly to its southwestern end. About 3 p. m., as the Whigs began to encircle the ridge, Ferguson's pickets sounded the alarm and engaged the advancing mountaineers in a brief skirmish. Then, as they reached their positions, Campbell and Shelby almost simultaneously opened the main attack. From the crest the Tories and Provincials replied with a burst of trained volley firing. But Campbell's and Shelby's men moved steadily up the slope Indian fashion, from tree to rock, and for 10 to 15 minutes maintained their attack, while the other

Whig detachments moved into position around the ridge.

As the two Whig commands neared Ferguson's lines, the Tories charged and drove them down the slope at the point of the bayonet. Though they had no bayonets, the Whigs rallied at the foot, and the unerring marksmanship of their deadly Kentucky rifles forced their pursuers to retire. Slowly following the retreating Tories and Provincials, Campbell's and Shelby's men were again driven down the rugged incline by the Tory bayonets. Taking cover behind trees and rocks, the two Whig commands again forced the Tories to retreat toward the crest.

Much of the volley firing of the Provincials and Tories, with their muskets and a possible scattering of Ferguson breech-loading rifles, was aimed too high and passed harmlessly over the heads of the two Whig detachments, which now pushed even higher toward the crest. As the Tories began their third bayonet charge upon Campbell and Shelby, they were suddenly attacked along the northern and eastern slopes by the other Whig detachments. Moving to meet the Whig attack from these quarters, the Tories allowed Campbell and Shelby to gain and hold the southwestern summit.

Now completely surrounded, Ferguson's demoralized and rapidly decreasing force was gradually pushed toward its camp site on the northeastern end of the ridge. In this desperate situation, with attacks and counterattacks raging on all sides, the piercing note of Ferguson's silver whistle urging his forces on continued to be heard above the din of the shooting and shrill whoops of the mountaineers until he attempted to escape through Cleveland's lines near the northeastern crest. Suddenly, the British leader was struck from his horse by at least eight balls fired by the mountain sharpshooters, and expired a few minutes later. DePeyster, his second in command, attempted to rally the confused surviving Tories and Provincials, but his efforts were futile and he ordered a surrender. During the bloody one-hour engagement that raged along the heavily wooded and rocky slopes, the mountaineers, veterans of countless frontier clashes even though untrained in formal warfare, with a slight loss of 28 killed and 62 wounded, had gained a complete victory, killing or capturing Ferguson's entire force.

The Kings Mountain expedition and engagement illustrated the characteristic vigor of the untrained American frontiersman in rising to the threat of border invasion. It is memorable

*Ferguson's Grave*





primarily as an example of the personal valor and resourcefulness of the American frontier fighter, particularly the Scotch-Irish, during the Revolution. Kings Mountain was an unexpected blow to the long standing local strife between Whig and Tory, which completely unnerved and undermined the Loyalist organization in the Carolinas. Heartening to the long repressed Whigs, the engagement placed them in control of the Piedmont and contributed to the renewing of American resistance which resulted in the American victory at Yorktown in 1781.

### The Park

Located in northwestern South Carolina near the North Carolina-South Carolina line, Kings Mountain National Military Park, established by act of Congress on March 3, 1931, contains 4,012.29 acres. Near the center of the rugged park area is the historic Kings Mountain battlefield ridge on which the engagement occurred. On the battlefield ridge four monuments have been erected, notable among which are the Centennial Monument, dedicated in 1880, and the United States Government Obelisk, erected by Congress in 1909. Several markers have also been placed by patriotic organizations at historic points in the park.

### How to Reach the Park

The park is easily accessible from United States Highway No. 29, between Blacksburg, S. C., and Kings Mountain, N. C., via North Carolina Highway No. 216.

From York, S. C., or the city of Kings Mountain, N. C., the park may also be reached over North Carolina-South Carolina Highway No. 161 by way of the entrance to Kings Mountain State Park, thence over a 5-mile drive to the main parking area.

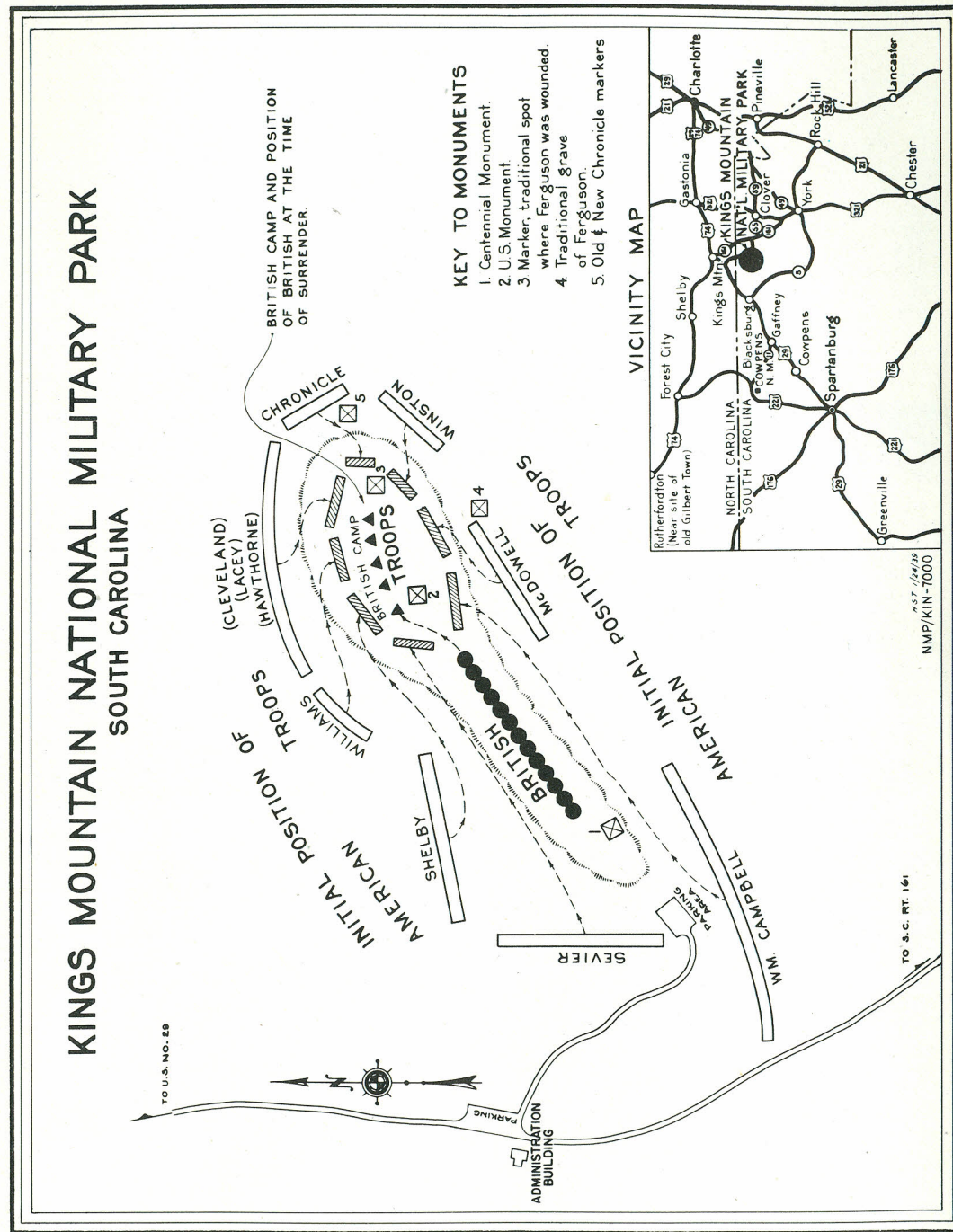
To reach the Park from United States Highway No. 29 turn south via North Carolina Highway No. 216 about 6 miles southwest of the town of Kings Mountain, N. C., or turn east on South Carolina Highway No. 293 about 5 miles northeast of Blacksburg, S. C.

From Kings Mountain, N. C., or York, S. C., the approach is via North Carolina-South Carolina Highway No. 161 to the entrance to Kings Mountain State Park, and thence along the main Park Road.

### Facilities and Administration

Literature and information concerning the area may be obtained at the park administration building, adjacent to the main park drive and parking area at the southwestern foot of the battlefield ridge. Here a small museum has been installed. From the administration building a park road climbs the southwestern slope of the ridge to the upper parking area immediately below the crest. Foot trails lead from this point along the American troop positions and over the crest to the British campsite, which are identified by narrative historical markers. Adjoining the park on the east is Kings Mountain State Park, where facilities for picnicking, swimming, and organized camping are available. Kings Mountain National Military Park is a part of the National Park System and is administered by the National Park Service of the United States Department of the Interior. Communications should be addressed to the Custodian, Kings Mountain National Military Park, Kings Creek, S. C.

Centennial Monument



Revised 1947.