The Battle of Alamance

(THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION)

By

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tors were concentrating their forces on the Salisbury road some distance from the Alamance river, immediately raised camp and started to the attack.

Governor Tryon had a well-officered army with which to attack the Regulators, who were not organized for warfare. They had no military organization, no officers, cavalry nor artillery. They were familiar with the rifle and were men of undaunted courage, beyond that they had none of the qualifications of soldiers. The Regulators, numbering about 1000 men, one-half of whom had rifles, were encamped on the Salisbury road about five miles west of the British camp and near where the battle was fought.

1771—May 15

In this situation nothing could save the governor but a bold and expeditious stroke; for to hesitate longer waiting for General Waddell's reinforcements would mean certain and ignominious defeat. On the night of May 15, his orders were that one-third of his army was to remain under arms for the whole night, the cavalry was to keep its mounts saddled and a guard of ten videtts were posted a half mile towards the Regulator's camp and to be relieved every two hours. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, page 58.)

1771—May 16

On Thursday morning, May 16, 1771, Tryon's army, flying the British flag, as per orders issued the evening before, was marching at day break, but without the beat of drums, hoping to creep upon the Regulators unawares. The governor, mounted upon a handsome white charger, led his army which marched in military formation. When nearing the Regulators—who were alert and watching for the enemy — he halted and sent his aide-de-camp, Philemon Hawkins (Williamson's History of North Carolina, vol. 2, page 148), with a proclamation issued the evening before, declaring the Regulators as outlaws, and demanding that they lay down their arms and surrender themselves and their leaders to the leniency of the government. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, page 642.) The governor's aide was told: "Go tell Billy Tryon that we will fight for our principles." The opposing forces were now marching towards each other, and, as Robert Thompson, an unarmed non-combatant who had been to plead with Tryon in behalf of the Regulators, started to return, the aide delivered the message from the Regulators, which so irritated the governor that in an unguarded moment he snatched a rifle from a soldier and personally shot and killed Robert Thompson. He instantly perceived his folly and returned his aide with a white flag. The bearer of the white flag had only proceeded a few steps when the Regulators began firing with deadly aim. The flag fell, but whether the aide was killed is not known. The governor was enraged, and rising in his stirrups, he cried out, "Fire, fire, fire on them or fire on me." "Fire and be damned," cried out a Regulator, and the battle began.

The followers of the British flag obeyed the command of General Tryon and opened fire on the Americans (Regulators). At the beginning the British seemed to be getting the worst of the situation. (Caruthers' Life of Caldwell, page 185.) The Regulators were fighting from behind trees, rocks or any object which gave any protection; while Governor Tryon's forces were firing in platoons. His

men in the open field made splendid targets for the Regulator sharp shooters. It is said that James Pugh lay behind a rock with three companions to load for him and picked off 15 of Tryon's artillerymen.

Captain Montgomery, an officer of a company of mountain boys, presumably from Surry county, was the principal commander of the Regulators during the engagement, if anyone should be known by that title. He led a charge against Tryon's artillery, routed the gunners and captured two small brass cannon, one of which used to be used on "Fourth of July celebrations" in Burlington. Unfortunately, a few years ago this cannon was exploded by a heavy charge of powder. Soon after the capture of the two cannon, a Regulator's bullet whizzed through Governor Tryon's hat, whereupon the governor sent out another white flag towards the enemy, which fell from the hand of the aide, who also fell with a Regulator's bullet in his brain. (Footes' History of North Carolina, page 61.)

After some hesitation the governor again rallied his men and with redoubled volleys closed in upon the Regulators, whose ammunition was getting low, as they had only about as many bullets as they were accustomed to carry on a day's squirrel hunting. (Some Neglected History of North Carolina, page 232.) Later the Regulators were forced to retreat when their ammunition was exhausted, and about a dozen or more of their number were captured as prisoners by Tryon's army.

Gideon Wright, one of the men who fought under Tryon, in his report to the Moravians (Moravian records at Winston-Salem, N. C.), says, "Many of the wounded Regulators left on the battlefield suffered an ignominious death at the hands of the governor, who ordered the battlefield set on fire and in consequence the wounded who couldn't crawl out of danger were literally roasted to death." Williamson in his History of North Carolina says, "The engagement lasted about three hours. The Regulators losses, killed and wounded, were between 70 and 80 men." Martin in his history says, "The king's loss was about 100 men killed and wounded." According to a statement in Williamson history (vol. 2, page 276) which was probably taken from official sources, Tryon's loss was much greater than reported. "Immediately after the battle Tryon hanged as traitors several of the captured Regulators, the balance, about 30, he dragged around as "scarecrows" through the Regulators' country—on his march of devastation—pillaging with torch and sword, disarming the inhabitants, burning their buildings and laying waste all growing crops, in addition to levying contributions of beef and flour for his army.

Thus ended the battle of Alamance. It was here that the first blood was shed in resistance to the exactions of English rulers and oppression by the British rule; here it was that the first patriots defied an army flying the British flag and gave up their blood for the founding of American liberty and independence. From the blood shed on the battlefield of Alamance, from the very grass which covers the graves of the heroic dead, sprang the glorious flower of freedom which now flourishes and blossoms in all its magnificent splendor throughout this great American republic.

The battle of Alamance and not the battle of Lexington, as is usually taught, was the first battle

of the American Revolution. For the sake of comparison we will call to mind the little skirmish which took place on Lexington green on the morning of April 19, 1775, nearly five years after the battle of Alamance.

The American militia under Captain Parker's command, numbered about 70 men. The British, led by Major Pitcairn, outnumbered the Americans. The British officer galloped up and shouted to the Americans, "Disperse, ye rebels." They showed fight and he ordered his men to fire; and the engagement was on. The skirmish lasted thirty minutes, with loss to the Americans of four killed and seven wounded, while the British loss was one man killed, three men and a horse wounded.

Compare the utterances and the deeds of the men at Alamance with those of the men at Lexington. They at Lexington instructed their representatives to demand radical and lasting redress for grievances. On the village green at Lexington free-born Americans swore to combat manfully for their birthright and inheritance of liberty. On the greensward at Alamance the Regulators, counting themselves free-born, gave full proof of their resolve to know and enjoy the liberty which they had inherited, and they did it four years before it was dreamed of at Lexington.

Word chimes with word, deed harmonizes with deed, the same spirit of freedom, ready to die for liberty, breathes in both. The Revolution of the Regulators was a war against the oppression of the British government. J. B. Lossing in his history, "Our Country," vol. 2, page 691, says, "The battle of Alamance was the first battle in the war of independence and the first blood shed for liberty and independence was on the banks of the Alamance."

If any fact in the history of the United States is well attested, it is that the fire which flashed forth at the battle of Alamance was not quenched in the ashes of defeat. The ground on which the Regulators fought at the battle of Alamance was the altar of freedom. The embers left burning on the battlefield at Alamance united in a flame of patriotic ferver, which four years later united with the fires at Lexington and Bunker Hill and swept away, forever, the entire remnant of British power, when Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.

We have proven that the war of the Regulators was a revolution and the beginning of, and the Revolutionary war the ending of, one and the same war against oppression by Great Britain; and that for the establishment of our free and glorious republic, Washington and his coadjutors must share honors with the Regulators.

CHAPTER II

Aftermath Of Battle Of Alamance

Among the 24 prisoners, taken immediately after the battle, was James Few, who was summarily hanged the next morning; Martin's history says "without trial" and according to Williamson, the historian, "without the sentence of a court martial." This was a wanton act of the governor and commanding general, cold blooded cruelty and fiendish malice. Few was engaged to be married to a comely young woman whom, according to Caruthers History of Caldwell, Edmund Fanning had seduced.

Another prisoner was Captain Messer, an influential citizen of his community, having been active in the cause of the Regulators. He was captured along with Few, Pugh, Matear and others and was to have been hanged along with Few, but owing to a very affecting incident, was reserved for the fiendish execution at Hillsboro. Captain Messer's wife having heard during the night of her husband's capture, and that he was to be hanged the following morning, hurried with her son Robert, aged 14, the oldest of the children, to the battleground to plead with the governor for Captain Messer's life. She reached the place of execution just after the lifeless body of James Few had been cut down from the hangman's noose. On bended knee she implored Governor Tryon to spare the life of her husband, who curtly pushed her aside. She prostrated herself upon the ground at the governor's feet, pled, begged and prayed him to spare her husband's life; tears were streaming down her sorrowful face, her heart was breaking, she was convulsed in anguish; her son Robert was weeping over his mother's anguish, trying to comfort her in her dire distress, while the details were being carried out; the hangman was placing the noose around Messer's neck. At this moment Robert sprang from the ground and walking over to the governor said, in pleading anguish:

"Governor Tryon, sir," bravely implored the boy, "hang me and let my father live."

"Who told you to say that?" demanded the governor.

"Nobody, sir," pleadingly implored the boy.

"Why do you make such a request?" asked the governor.

"Because, sir," beseechingly implored the boy, "if you hang my father my mother will die and the children will perish."

This earnest request of Robert was made with such sincere simplicity and earnestness that it touched even the stony heart of the haughty, supercilious governor, who promised the boy, "Your father shall not die today."

Here the notorious Fanning, satellite of the governor, intervened and addressed the governor as follows:

"May it please your excellency to grant Captain Messer a pardon on condition that he bring into

your camp that instigator of the Regulators, the man who has been the leader in this uprising against the king and your excellency, Herman Hu band." The governor thought well of the suggestion and said to the hangman:

"Remove the noose from Captain Messer"; then addressing himself to Messer, said: "Captain Messer, if you will apprehend and bring into my camp He man Husband, you may have your freedom." Messer then said:

"Governor Tryon, your excellency, I will find him and bring him back." Governor Tryon replied, "I will hold your wife and son as hostages until you return."

Arrangements were soon made, and Captain Messer set out on his search for Herman Husband, whom he overtook in Virginia, but was unable to bring back for want of more assistance. Messer returned to Tryon's camp and reported his failure. Tryon then released Mrs. Messer and her son Robert and sent them home; and put Captain Messer in chains and dragged him, with the other prisoners, on a tour of pillage and devastation through the Jersey and Moravian settlements, and executed him and the other prisoners at Hillsboro. Before leaving Camp Alamance battle ground, Governor Tryon ordered a court of oyer and terminer to meet at Hillsboro and adjourn from day to day until his arrival with the prisoners.

SCENE: Alamance battle ground, the day after the battle, Tryon's army in camp, tents in regular streets; artillery drawn up in formation, soldiers in company formation and at attention. Governor Tryon and officers seated in camp chairs under a small grove of oak trees; a large tree nearby with the hangman's noose dangling in the air, from which the body of James Few had just been removed, Few's lifeless body lying on the ground covered with an army blanket. Captain Messer, prisoner in chains, and under guard, standing nearby, suddenly his wife appears with her son Robert; Mrs. Messer prostrates herself, groveling on the ground at the feet of the governor, supplicating the life of her husband.

May 19, 1771, Governor Tryon broke camp at Alamance, and took up a line of march advancing towards the plantations of the leading Regulators, burning their buildings and confiscating all foodstuffs for man and beast. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, pages 651, 652.) His destination was Herman Husband's plantation. Enroute he stopped at the farm of James Hunter, general of the Regulators. He burned all of Hunter's buildings and confiscated all of his property. He went into camp that night, May 21, 1771, on Herman Husband's plantation, at Sandy creek, on Deep river, and rendezvoused there for a whole week. Husband was a prosperous farmer, living in a comfortable residence, with substantial barns, granaries and outbuildings. His farm of 600 acres was in a high state of cultivation. Upon his immense wheat fields of more than 50 acres the golden grain was ready for the reapers; 100 acres in corn, just tasseled out, and the clover meadows covering broad acres were ready for the scythe. Tryon's soldiers, 1017 in number, turned their horses, several hundred in number, out to graze upon the farm and meadows. A contemporaneous writer says, "The army, after a week's stay,

left the place without a spear of grass or stalk of corn or any herbage growing above the ground," and without a fence standing. Tryon's orders were to "burn all buildings and destroy every improvement on the property." (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, page 848; S N H of N. C., page 234.) He ordered forays in all directions from the camp at Sandy creek; on May 23 his army fell upon Dixon's mills and Lindley's mills and forcibly confiscated nine loads of flour and other provisions for his army.

May 28, 1771, Tryon broke camp at Sandy creek, crossed Deep river at Buffalo ford and intrenched himself on Huwara heights, a favorable location by reason of the craggy cliffs. While here he ordered Colonel Fanning to get together a picked detachment and to proceed to the Jersey settlements to capture Capt. Benjamin Merrill. Fanning at once started on his march to the Jersey settlements and apprehended Captain Merrill west of his home, on the Yadkin river, and captured him June 1, 1771, and shackled him with chains. He retraced his march to join Governor Tryon, who in the meantime had broke camp on the Huwara heights and taken up a line of march towards the Jersey settlements.

On his line of march through the Regulators' country, he burned all property, pillaging with fire and sword; levying contributions of beef and flour, insulting the suspected, holding court martial, which took cognizance of civil as well as military offenses. On June 2, 1771, he crossed Abbott's creek and pitched his camp on Capt. Benjamin Merrill's plantation. Merrill's plantation was in a prosperous state of cultivation, like that of Husband's, but when Tryon left it all food stuffs for man and beast had been ruthlessly confiscated.

In the immediate neighborhood of the camp stood the residence of Capt. Benjamin Merrill which Tryon occupied as his headquarters. On entering the threshold, he asked for Mrs. Merrill and said, "Mrs. Merrill, I ask your permission for rooms and accommodations for myself and staff. We will be here only overnight." Mrs. Merrill replied with gracious hospitality—though it was hard to do so with the knowledge of his treatment of her husband. "Sir, you may make yourself at home in our humble place. I have one request to make, that you do not burn our buildings when you leave." The governor assured her that she should have every courtesy, saying, "I regret the necessity of having your husband arrested, and I promise you that your buildings shall not be burned." Mrs. Merrill then called and presented her family of eight children, the eldest a boy, Benjamin, Jr., aged 16 years, a daughter Mary, aged 14, and a visitor, Miss Catherine Sherrill of Sherrill's Ford.

Mr. Merrill had taken special pride with his lawns and gardens, and owned an extensive apiary. Early that evening all the horses of the army had been turned out to graze, each animal having a bell tied around his neck to aid in finding any that might stray off. A foraging foray from Tryon's army was attempting to steal honey that night, and in the darkness, around midnight, several bee hives were overturned, which maddened the bees and they began forthwith to sting both man and beast. Pandemonium broke loose, the horses ran pell mell at full gallop around the place and throughout the

camp, ringing several hundred discordant bells, the sound of which made a raucous hullabaloo. The sentinels, guards and pickets fired off their pieces and there was a cry, "stand to your arms," which rang throughout the entire camp. Governor Tryon was suddenly awakened and a sentinel reported to him, "Sir, your excellency, all the Regulators in the world have surrounded the camp." Tryon, no doubt, thought so for the moment; however, the cause of the disturbance was soon ascertained and quiet restored. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 19, page 849; S N H of N. C., page 240.)

SCENE: Midnight, June 1, 1771, brilliant moonlight, a prosperous looking home, spacious, well kept grounds, beautiful gardens with hardy perennials in their glory, nearby a large apiary with about 100 bee colonies; a foraging foray from Tryon's army invades the apiary to steal honey; by accident a hive is overturned and the bees begin to sting the soldiers who, in their haste to get away, overturn a score of the hives—the maddened bees then swarm all over the place, stinging men and horses. Pandemonium breaks loose, several hundred bells ringing, sentinels and guards firing off their pieces, etc.

Tryon's army broke camp at Abbott's creek at 6 a. m. on the morning of June 2, 1771, and continued the line of march of devastation towards the Moravian settlements, pillaging with fire and sword. He went into camp at Reedy creek on the evening of June 3, there to await the arrival of General Waddell's forces, which joined him on June 4, the king's birthday. But Tryon decided to postpone a celebration until they arrived at the Moravian settlements at Salem.

The next day Governor Tryon and General Waddell took up a line of march towards the Moravian settlements which they reached two days later. Throughout his march of devastation all property of the Regulators was forfeited or destroyed. At Tryon's various camps his soldiers brought in to take the oath of allegiance to the king more than 9600 persons. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, pages 692, 693.) Tryon and Waddell and their troops lay in camp at Salem town for several days. With them were many prisoners, chained together, which the governor had dragged through the country from the Alamance battle ground, that the sight of them might overawe the inhabitants of the districts through which he marched.

On June 6, Tryon celebrated the king's birthday and his success at the battle of Alamance with a grand military review, with royal pomp, by drilling his army for several hours, repeating the maneuvers of the battle of Alamance. Volley after volley was fired, until the houses of the town shook and trembled. At 12 o'clock a royal salute of 21 guns was fired. General Waddell, at the head of the column, rose in his stirrups and loudly proclaimed, "God save the king." The Moravian band furnished the music and several martial airs were rendered. The rejoicings were loudly voiced with three resounding cheers. A bystander is accredited with saying, "It is a question which rose higher in the air, the soldiers hats or their voices." The united forces of Governor Tryon and General Waddell numbered more than 3000 men, including officers. With such a military display the

vain Tryon was puffed up in all his glory. The celebration ended at 2 o'clock, p. m., and the soldiers marched back to their barracks. (Clewel's History of Wachovia, pages 114, 115.)

On June 8, 1771, after the celebration of the king's birthday and his success at the battle of Alamance, Governor Tryon ordered General Waddell, with a force of 600 men and seven pieces of artillery, to invade the counties of Rowan and Mecklenburg, there to enforce submission of insurgents and suspects as had not surrendered and force them to take the oath of allegiance. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, page 674.)

Governor Tryon broke camp at Salem and took up a line of march in the direction of Hillsboro, passing through various settlements in Rockingham and Guilford counties. He arrived at Guilford courthouse on June 9, and while there issued his famous outlawing proclamation. He stayed over there for two days, levying contributions of beef and flour, and destroying buildings, fences and other property of the Regulators.

"After his return from the western tour, 60 head of cattle, as I have been informed, were collected from the plantations around his camp in Guilford county, and were driven from that place, under charge of John Gilbert, to Tryon's camp on the Eno at Hillsboro. The cattle were taken from Regulators' farms around Greensboro, and it is probable that similar contributions were demanded along the route to Hillsboro, for the support of Tryon's army, while his excellency was engaged in burning buildings of the Regulators and destroying their crops and hanging traitors." (Caruthers' Life of Caldwell, page 160.)

Tryon arrived in Hillsboro on June 14, 1771, passed through the town, crossed the Eno river and went into camp on a bluff overlooking the town and river—the same site he occupied on his march against the Regulators, just prior to the battle of Alamance. He immediately had convened the special court of oyer and terminer for the trial of the prisoners which he had dragged through the Regulators' country for the past 30 days. This court was presided over by Chief Justice Martin Howard and Associate Justices Maurice Moore and Richard Henderson. (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, page 650.)

The next morning, June 15, Governor Tryon ordered the chief justice to convene the court and to expedite the trial of the prisoners. The chief and associate justices, all appointees of Tryon, had been ordered to hold this court and meet and adjourn from day to day until he arrived with the prisoners. The jury had been carefully selected, being pro-Tryon; Tryon's attorney general was prosecuting attorney. The jury was impaneled on Saturday, June 15, and the prisoners arraigned. Sunday the 16th no court was held.

On June 17, court convened with Chief Justice Martin Howard presiding and the two associate justices in attendance. This was a Tryon court, presided over by Tryon's henchmen, with Tryon jurors in the box. The trial was held under a temporary act of the General Assembly which was for 12 months' duration, ratified on January 15, 1771. It was a special riot act, making it unlawful for more than 10 persons to meet together at any time or place. This act was largely promulgated by Tryon and his attorney general so that under its provisions he could charge the

Regulators with high treason instead of riot. The offenses of the prisoners were derived from public and private impositions; and they were, in reality, the followers and not the leaders in the crime with which they were charged. Never were prisoners more entitled to the leniency of the law than were these men whom Tryon had dragged in chains around the western settlements for 30 days. The governor shamefully exerted every influence of his nature, and remember he was practically a dictator, against the lives of these wretched prisoners. During the trial Monday morning, June 17, the governor learned that the justices had granted one day for two of the prisoners to produce witnesses, who actually established their innocence. The governor was so enraged that he sent his aide-de-camp to the justices and attorney general with a peremptory message, "I am very much dissatisfied with your activity in the trial of these prisoners, and I propose to represent you unfavorably in England if you do not proceed with more spirit and dispatch." (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, pages 719, 726; S N H of N. C., page 81.) Had Tryon's influence dominated the whole court, all testimony of the prisoners would have been excluded and the poor wretches, to a man, would have been executed.

The prisoners were all indicted for high treason, found guilty and condemned to death on June 19, 1771. On six of them, James, Pugh, Benjamin Merrill, Robert Matear, Captain Messer and two others, names unknown, the sentence was pronounced. The other six, Forrester Mercer, James Stewart, Herman Cox, James Emerson, William Brown and James Copeland, were respited until the king's pleasure could be learned. (C R and S. R. of N. C., vol. 9, pages 36, 37, 274, 311.) Chief Justice Martin Howard pronounced the sentence as follows:

"That the prisoners should be carried to the place from whence they came; that they should be drawn from thence to the place of execution and be hanged by the neck; that they should be cut down while yet alive; that their bowels should be taken out and burned before their faces; that their heads should be cut off and that their bodies should be divided into four parts, which were to be placed at the Lord have mecy upon your souls." (C R and S R of N. C., vol. 8, page 643; S N H of N. C., page the disposal of the king, and may 244.)

History does not record whether the execution was carried out in all its horrible details as provided for by English law for the execution of prisoners guilty of high treason or not, but does one, for one instant, doubt that the blood thirsty Tryon would let an opportunity pass to make the execution as horrifying as he possibly could to the poor miserable wretches, and thereby lose his first opportunity to carry into effect his newly created act, wherein riot was made high treason.

A general who would set fire to the woods on a battle field, covered with dead and wounded. and literally roast to death the wounded, as Tryon did at the battle of Alamance, would not hesitate very long in carrying out to the letter of the law a sentence governing the execution of prisoners indicted for high treason.

According to the Reverend Doctor Caruthers in his "Life of Doctor Caldwell," pages 160, 161, "On the day of the execution Governor