

Gregory De Van Massey, THE BRITISH EXPEDITION TO WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA, JANUARY-NOVEMBER, 1781. (Under the direction of Dr. John A. Tilley) Department of History, East Carolina University, July 1987.

During the occupation of Wilmington, the British exerted an influence on the course of the war in North Carolina that was out of proportion to their numbers. Major James Craig, the commander of the expeditionary force, used the loyalists in the North Carolina backcountry as guerrilla fighters. The loyalists controlled several North Carolina counties during the summer and early fall of 1781 and prevented the rebel government from effectively administering the province. The purpose of this study is to show that there was more loyalist sentiment in North Carolina than historians have acknowledged. Moreover, Major Craig's utilization of the loyalists as guerrillas provides an example of the king's friends being employed in a different and effective way.

When the Earl Cornwallis invaded North Carolina in 1781, he dispatched a small force under the command of Major Craig to occupy the port town of Wilmington. He ordered Craig to secure the Cape Fear River as a supply route into the interior of the province. Craig's secondary mission was to encourage the loyalists in southeastern North Carolina. The Cape Fear, however, was an impractical supply route; the shallow river would not admit boats of large draft and the inhabitants along the river were hostile toward the British.

After the Battle of Guilford Court House, Cornwallis went to Cross Creek, expecting to find supplies shipped from Wilmington. There were no supplies there; Cornwallis had to march to Wilmington. After a brief rest, the Earl moved to Virginia. He ordered Craig to evacuate Wilmington. Craig did not comply because he had been approached by loyalists willing to serve the crown actively. The major convinced his superiors in South Carolina that the British should remain in Wilmington and utilize the loyalist resource.

During the summer of 1781 a brutal civil war raged in North Carolina. The loyalists, assisted by the British in Wilmington, had the upper hand in the struggle. Thomas Burke, the rebel governor of North Carolina, knew that order had to be restored. He planned to lead an expedition to drive the British and loyalists out of North Carolina. But Burke was captured in Hillsborough when a loyalist force under the command of David Fanning raided the town.

This triumph, however, was the beginning of the end for Craig and his loyalist allies. The rebels were even more determined now to defeat their enemies. A large militia force under the command of General Griffith Rutherford marched into southeastern North Carolina, defeated the loyalists in their stronghold at Raft Swamp, and besieged the British in Wilmington.

In mid-November, news of Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown reached the Wilmington area. Craig decided to

evacuate. On 14 November the British sailed from Wilmington. The British failed in their primary mission: to transport supplies to Cornwallis's army. But they succeeded beyond all expectations in utilizing the loyalists as a military force.

THE BRITISH
EXPEDITION TO WILMINGTON, NORTH CAROLINA,
JANUARY-NOVEMBER, 1781

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INTRODUCTION

In the latter stages of the Revolutionary War, the British concentrated their military operations in the South. After the capture of Charleston in May, 1780, they embarked on a strategy of subjugating the southern provinces with the assistance of the loyalists. The British officials in Whitehall believed that there were large numbers of loyalists in the South willing to offer effective service to the crown. The British planned to utilize the loyalists as a police force to administer areas conquered by the British army. This force would enable the redcoats to invade new territory, thereby efficiently using Britain's most precious resource: manpower.

As General Charles, Earl Cornwallis prepared to invade North Carolina in early 1781, he knew he needed to maintain communication with the water. Without cooperation from the navy, he could not supply his army. He dispatched a small detachment under the command of Major James Henry Craig to occupy the port town of Wilmington. Craig's primary mission was to maintain the supply line to Cornwallis's army via the Cape Fear River; his secondary objective was to provide support to the loyalists in southeastern North Carolina.

Historians still debate whether there were enough loyalists in North Carolina for the British to implement their strategy. Historians also question the extent of the loyalists' commitment to the mother country. Because the

British did not reestablish control in North Carolina, these questions can never be fully answered. What is known is that the loyalists predominated in the economically undeveloped backcountry. Here the rugged terrain was ideal for guerrilla warfare. Settlers in the backcountry had few economic ties to the eastern planter elite that had pushed for revolution. A large number of loyalists lived in such rolling piedmont counties as Randolph and Chatham, in the western counties of Surry, Rowan, and Anson, and in the swampy, wooded counties¹ along the Cape Fear River, such as Bladen and Cumberland.

Cornwallis failed to conquer North Carolina and he blamed the loyalists. Because the loyalists never responded in large numbers to his pleas for assistance, he concluded that in North Carolina the king's friends were a weak and ineffectual ally. But the loyalists were more active after Cornwallis's departure from North Carolina in May, 1781, than at any other time during the war. They assembled large forces, carried out raids, and controlled portions of North Carolina. The rebel government was powerless to stop them.

Why were the loyalists so active? The answer lies in Wilmington. Major Craig supplied the loyalists and provided a place of refuge. He also led his soldiers on devastating raids

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Jeffrey J. Crow, "Liberty Men and Loyalists: Disorder and Disaffection in the North Carolina Backcountry," in An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry During the American Revolution, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1985), pp. 133-135.

through southeastern North Carolina. In fact, during the occupation of Wilmington the British exerted an influence on the course of the war in North Carolina that was out of proportion to their numbers.

Nevertheless, British military operations in southeastern North Carolina have never received thorough attention from historians. The principal research on this aspect of the war is in studies concentrating on North Carolina during the Revolution. These studies integrate Major Craig's activities into a larger framework.² No study has examined the British occupation of Wilmington in depth. The most recent biography of Cornwallis only mentions Wilmington in passing; the authors cover the Earl's two-and-a-half-week stay in Wilmington in five pages.³

The need for further study of the expedition to Wilmington is obvious. Wilmington is an interesting case study; here Major Craig utilized the loyalists more effectively than British officers in other areas. In general, the British

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See, for example, Hugh F. Rankin, The North Carolina Continentals (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), pp. 320-321; Penelope Sue Smith, "Creation of an American State: Politics in North Carolina, 1765-1789" (Ph.D. dissertation, Rice University, 1980), pp. 409-411, 454-463; Samuel A'Court Ashe, History of North Carolina, vol. 1 (Greensboro, N.C.: Charles L. Van Noppen, 1925; reprint ed., Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, 1971), pp. 655-656, 663-665, 672-673, 676-684, 686-696, 699-702.

3

Franklin Wickwire and Mary Wickwire, Cornwallis: The American Adventure (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), pp. 316-321.

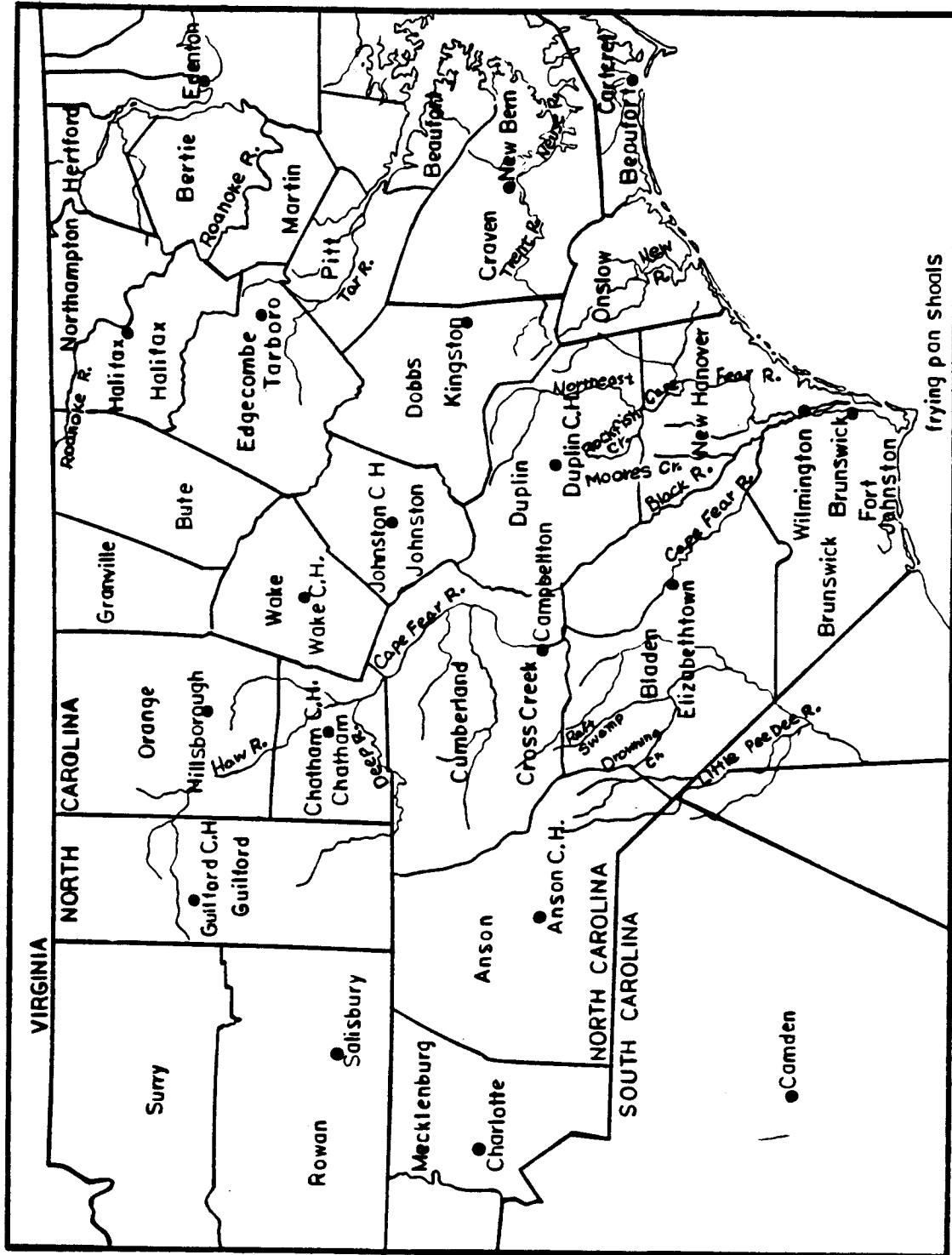
bungled in their dealings with the king's friends. Only in South Carolina, where a chain of outposts garrisoned by loyalists was established, was the British strategy implemented. The strategy could not be carried out in North Carolina because the rebels were not defeated. Craig therefore employed the loyalists as backcountry guerrilla fighters. Operating in the swamps and forests of central and southeastern North Carolina, the loyalists were an elusive foe. The rebel government simply could not raise a sufficient force to defeat the loyalists.

Why have historians neglected the British occupation of Wilmington? Probably because events in North Carolina are overshadowed by the operations in South Carolina and Virginia that brought the war to its conclusion. While Craig and the loyalists caused turmoil in North Carolina, the climactic events of the war were taking place in the two neighboring provinces. When Cornwallis abandoned North Carolina, historians deserted the province as well.

This thesis will examine the British expedition to Wilmington in 1781, emphasizing Major Craig's utilization of the loyalists as a military force. Because Craig effectively employed the king's friends as guerrillas and because his success refutes Cornwallis's claim that North Carolina was devoid of loyalists, it is a story that needs to be told. Owing to the paucity of documents concerning the actual occupation of Wilmington, this study will deal primarily with

military activities, about which documents are available. Numerous skirmishes, all of them important in the context of the backcountry war, will be recounted.

In any major war events occur that appear insignificant at first glance, but merit examination in their own right. The British expedition to Wilmington from January to November, 1781 has facets that make it worthy of study. Craig successfully utilized the loyalists as insurgents. The loyalists, in turn, endured much hardship because of their allegiance to the crown. They fought and died; their families were persecuted. And many lost their homes. Their story deserves to be told.



North Carolina circa 1775

Source: Lester J. Cappon, ed., Atlas of Early American History: The Revolutionary Era 1760-1790 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p.6.

CHAPTER ONE

Southeastern North Carolina in British Military Planning, 1775-1780

During the tense months before Lexington and Concord, the British ministry received reports from the royal governors of Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina that a large number of loyalists would actively support the crown in those provinces. These optimistic reports reinforced the administration's conviction that only a small minority of colonists were opposed to royal authority. In the following months the colonists rose in armed rebellion in Massachusetts. The Battles of Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill were fought. And the rebels besieged the British in Boston. Despite these developments, the administration held to the belief that the southern provinces contained numerous loyalists.¹

By September, 1775, plans were being made to send an expedition to North Carolina in response to Governor Josiah Martin's assurance that the South could be restored to royal authority if support were provided. Martin claimed that three thousand Scottish Highlanders could be organized in North Carolina if enough weapons were supplied. He contended, moreover, that this army would induce an additional twenty

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Paul H. Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats: A Study in British Revolutionary Policy (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1964), pp. 18-20.

thousand North Carolinians to rise in support of the crown. This force, in turn, would cow the rebels in Virginia into inaction; the result would be the subjugation of North Carolina.²

Influenced by these reports, British officials in Whitehall decided to send a naval squadron with five regiments of fresh troops across the Atlantic to the Cape Fear River. Commodore Sir Peter Parker would command the naval force; the five regiments were under the command of General Charles, Earl Cornwallis. A detachment from General William Howe's army in Boston would meet them off the North Carolina coast the following spring. The commander of this force, and the expedition's senior officer, was Major General Henry Clinton.³ The planning of the expedition was based on Martin's assessments of loyalist strength in North Carolina.⁴

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Rankin, North Carolina Continentals pp. 10, 28-29.

3

Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, p. 23; William B. Willcox, Portrait of a General: Sir Henry Clinton in the War of Independence (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), pp. 66-67; Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 80-81.

4

Scholars have debated long on the actual numerical strength of the North Carolina loyalists. Robert O. DeMond contends that "North Carolina probably contained a greater number of Loyalists in proportion to its population than did any other colony." (Robert O. DeMond, The Loyalists in North Carolina During the Revolution [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1940], p. vii.) Isaac S. Harrell, citing the small number of claims filed with the British government after the war by North Carolina loyalists, concludes that "the number of active loyalists in North Carolina probably was smaller than is generally conceded." (Isaac S. Harrell, "North Carolina Loyalists," The North Carolina Historical Review vol. III [October 1926]: 579-580.) Wallace Brown, after exhaustive

The expedition was plagued with difficulties from the outset. Parker's fleet was to sail from Cork on the first of December; the departure was delayed repeatedly by foul weather and the squadron did not leave Ireland until 12 February, 1776. In addition, the British learned that a sandbar at the mouth of the Cape Fear River prevented the passage of large vessels. This information, and Governor Martin's admission that the rebels controlled North Carolina as far as one hundred miles inland, prompted Lord George Germain, the secretary of state for the colonies, to admit to General Clinton that the expedition had little chance of reaching its objectives.⁵

Governor Martin, in the meantime, was continuing his preparations for the expedition. On 10 January, he called on the loyalists to unite. Loyalist leaders were authorized to

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(continued) research utilizing the loyalist claims from each colony, concludes that North Carolina, in comparison with the other colonies, ranked in the lower half in loyalist strength. (Wallace Brown, The King's Friends: The Composition and Motives of the American Loyalist Claimants [Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1965], p. 256.) For a criticism of the use of quantitative analysis in examining loyalist claims, see Eugene R. Fingerhut, "Uses and Abuses of the American Loyalists' Claims: a Critique of Quantitative Analysis," William and Mary Quarterly 3d ser., vol. XXV (April 1968): 249-250, 258. Fingerhut points out that the loyalists who emigrated were those who lived in areas where the British were accessible. In addition, many loyalists were unable to prove that they lost property and therefore did not file claims. Fingerhut argues that "many of those who took the British side did not emigrate, and most of the emigrants were not claimants." While DeMond's assessment of loyalist numbers in North Carolina is overly optimistic, the conclusions of Brown and Harrell underestimate their strength.

5

Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 23-25.

raise militia, confiscate rebel ammunition, and levy supplies. They were ordered to meet at Cross Creek and then march to the town of Brunswick on the Cape Fear River. It was hoped that the loyalists would reach their destination by 15 February, in time to meet the British fleet. Two British officers of Scottish birth, Lieutenant Colonel Donald McDonald and Captain Donald McLeod, had been sent to North Carolina in July, 1775 by General Thomas Gage with orders to recruit loyalists for the Royal Highland Regiment. These men were now appointed by Martin as the commanders of the loyalist forces.⁶

The combined British-loyalist operation lacked precision on both sides of the Atlantic. McDonald began the march from Cross Creek to the sea on February 18--three days after the proposed junction with the British fleet. Although Martin promised three thousand recruits, McDonald was able to gather only half that number. Moreover, the loyalists' route to the sea was blocked by a militia force under the command of Colonel James Moore.⁷

Moore skillfully maneuvered McDonald toward Moore's Creek, where militia under the command of Colonels Richard Caswell and Alexander Lillington were waiting; the rebels were entrenched and had destroyed part of the bridge that crossed the creek. At daybreak on 27 February the loyalists attacked, and in the

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Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, pp. 31-33, 35.

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Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 40.

ensuing action they were soundly defeated. Most of the loyalist army was taken prisoner, thereby ending Josiah Martin's hopes of reestablishing royal government in North Carolina.⁸

Two weeks later the detachment from Boston arrived. General Clinton was greeted with news of the disaster at Moore's Creek. Now, Clinton could do little but wait for the fleet to arrive from Cork. Clinton realized then--as he argued throughout the war--that the loyalists could not be utilized effectively unless the British established a base in the South to protect them. While he waited for Sir Peter Parker's arrival, Clinton considered moves into the Chesapeake Bay or into Georgia to establish such a base. The arrival of Parker's fleet in May, however, resulted in a decision to attack Charleston, South Carolina; the attempt to take Charleston failed and the chastened British sailed away.⁹ The next four years would be quiet in North Carolina, as military operations were centered in the northern colonies.

In 1780, the British moved their center of operations to the South. A second attempt was made on Charleston and this time General Clinton--who was now a Knight of Bath--succeeded in taking his objective. In June, Clinton returned to the British base at New York. Sir Henry left the Earl Cornwallis

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Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, pp. 42-50.

9

Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 25-26.

in command of the southern forces, with instructions to complete the pacification of South Carolina and then to extend British control into North Carolina. The pacification of the South depended largely on the utilization of the loyalists; once the British had secured rebellious areas, the loyalists would take over as a police force, allowing the redcoats to invade other regions. This strategy began to take shape, as the loyalists were organized into militia units, and a chain of posts was established in the South Carolina backcountry.¹⁰

Cornwallis received assurances of loyalist support from North Carolina, but decided to postpone an invasion of the province until early September when the harvest would be in and his troops could be provisioned. In the meantime, he urged loyalist leaders to concentrate on the harvest and gathering provisions for the impending invasion. Disregarding the Earl's instructions, over a thousand ill-equipped loyalists gathered at Ramsour's Mill near the North Carolina border, where they were routed by rebel militia under the command of General Griffith Rutherford.¹¹ Cornwallis, although disappointed by

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Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 126-128, 134; John Shy, "British Strategy for Pacifying the Southern Colonies," in The Southern Experience in the American Revolution, ed. Jeffrey J. Crow and Larry E. Tise (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 158-159.

11

Ira Gruber, "Britain's Southern Strategy," in The Revolutionary War in the South: Power, Conflict, and Leadership. Essays in honor of John Richard Alden, ed. W. Robert Higgins (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1979), p. 228; Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, p. 142; Charles, Earl Cornwallis to Sir Henry Clinton, 30 June 1780, in Benjamin F.

this disaster, continued making plans to invade North Carolina. The Earl's confidence was obvious in his report to Clinton: he was certain that North Carolina would be overcome easily, and "could be kept, with the assistance of our friends there, by as few Troops as would be wanted on the Borders of this Province, if N. Carolina should remain in the hands of our Enemies."¹² Cornwallis decided to ask the navy to assist by conducting operations on the Cape Fear River.

Clinton and Cornwallis differed on the proposed route of the invasion. Clinton's primary concern was the safety of Charleston; Cornwallis was not to invade North Carolina unless the British posts in South Carolina--especially Charleston--were secure. If, and when, an invasion of the northern province was commenced, a post should be established on the Cape Fear River to encourage the loyalists in that area and prevent the rebels from transporting supplies inland. In addition, Clinton preferred that the invasion route be a gradual movement via the Cape Fear River; this route would enable Cornwallis to maintain contact with the navy.¹³

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(continued) Stevens, ed., The Campaign in Virginia, 1781: An Exact Reprint of Six Rare Pamphlets on the Clinton-Cornwallis Controversy, vol. 1 (London: n.p., 1888), p. 224.

12

Cornwallis to Clinton, 30 June 1780, in Stevens, ed., Clinton-Cornwallis Controversy, vol. 1, p. 225.

13

Sir Henry Clinton, The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of his Campaigns, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents, ed. William B. Willcox (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), pp. 186-187, 223; Willcox, Portrait of a General, pp. 351-352.

Cornwallis, on the other hand, favored moving into the piedmont region of North Carolina. The navy, in the meantime, would cooperate by establishing "a tolerable water communication pretty high up the Country." Cornwallis realized that the rivers were important as a supply source; he did not understand, however, that the invading army needed to maintain contact with the water. The route through the piedmont prevented effective cooperation between the army and navy. The Earl contended that because of the unhealthy coastal climate, moving troops into that area "before the Month of November, would be leading them to certain destruction."¹⁴

These deliberations were interrupted by the presence of a rebel army in South Carolina. An army of Continentals and militia under the command of Major General Horatio Gates was threatening a British force led by Lieutenant Colonel Francis, Lord Rawdon. Cornwallis hurried from Charleston to reinforce Rawdon. The two armies met near Camden on 15 August in one of the most decisive battles of the war. Cornwallis won a smashing victory; of Gates's original force of four thousand

Cornwallis to Clinton, 14 July 1780, in Stevens, ed., Clinton-Cornwallis Controversy, vol. 1, pp. 232-234. Clinton disagreed with Cornwallis's contention that the danger from the unhealthy coastal region was reason enough to choose the invasion route through the piedmont. Sir Henry "would have risked sickness for the sake of cooperation from the fleet." Willcox, Portrait of a General, p. 352.

only seven hundred managed to regroup at Charlotte, North
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Carolina.

After the Battle of Camden, Cornwallis became convinced that an invasion of North Carolina was imperative. It had been hoped that the defeat of Gates would quiet the partisan warfare that ravaged the backcountry; instead, resistance continued. To Cornwallis, North Carolina was the key to holding British gains in South Carolina and Georgia. North Carolina was a haven for Gates's army. The Continentals, in the Earl's opinion, were the force behind the rebellion; if the regular army were subdued, the remainder of the populace would submit
16
as well.

Cornwallis informed Clinton that his ultimate goal was Hillsborough, where he would organize the loyalists and procure supplies from the country. The Earl's first move, in early September, would be toward Charlotte; his left wing, a force of loyalist militia and provincials under the command of Major Patrick Ferguson, was detached to the North Carolina

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Christopher Ward, The War of the Revolution, ed., John Richard Alden, vol. 2 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), pp. 722-732.

16

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 192-193.

17
 foothills. Clinton was asked to effect a diversion in the Chesapeake. Cornwallis marched toward Charlotte on 8 September; the advance was hindered by illness and the Earl did not reach his destination until 25 September. The left wing under Ferguson remained in the foothills with the mission of bringing

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Cornwallis to Clinton, 23 August 1780, in Charles Ross, ed., Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1859), pp. 57-58. Cornwallis to Clinton, 20 August 1780, in Ross, ed., Cornwallis Correspondence, pp. 58-59. Several scholars, in their narration of Cornwallis's invasion of North Carolina in 1780, have made the mistake of including the establishment of a post on the Cape Fear River in the Earl's plans. George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, in Rebels and Redcoats, state that the invasion force was composed of three wings: Cornwallis's main army in the center, Ferguson's force on the left, and a detachment on the right with orders to take Wilmington as a supply depot. (George F. Scheer and Hugh F. Rankin, Rebels and Redcoats [New York: The World Publishing Company, 1957], p. 413.) The occupation of Wilmington was not authorized until December, when the invasion of 1780 had been aborted. See below, p. 21. Rankin repeats the error in his North Carolina Continentals, adding that Major James Craig was the commander of the detachment headed to Wilmington. (Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 249.) Craig, of course, did command the expedition to Wilmington, but not until January, 1781. In September, 1780, Craig had not been transferred to the southern provinces. See below, p. 27. This error has been perpetuated by recent scholars citing Rankin as their source. (See, for example Smith, "Creation of an American State," p. 405.) Ira Gruber, in a recent study of British strategy in the South, repeats the mistake. (Gruber, "Britain's Southern Strategy," pp. 228-230.) Cornwallis, however, merely requested naval assistance on the Cape Fear River and hinted that he would utilize the rivers in the interior of North Carolina to supply his army, as he had done in South Carolina. There is no evidence, however, that the British attempted to establish a supply route prior to the 1780 invasion. (See Cornwallis's letters of 30 June, 14 July, and 6 August 1780 to Clinton, and the 20 August 1780 letter to Lord George Germain in Stevens, ed., Clinton-Cornwallis Controversy, vol. 1, pp. 221-227, 231-248; and his 23 August, and 29 August 1780 letters to Clinton, and the letter of 21 August 1780 to Germain printed in Ross, ed., Cornwallis Correspondence, vol. 1, pp. 57-59, 506-509.)

the frontier rebels to submission. Instead, the "over-mountain men" united, surprised Ferguson at his encampment on Kings Mountain, killed the major and 156 others, and captured the remaining loyalists.¹⁸

Earl Cornwallis, upon receiving news of Ferguson's demise, felt it prudent to abandon the offensive and retreat to South Carolina. His move into North Carolina had been disappointing. The loyalists had not responded to his assurances of protection; undoubtedly, they desired proof that the Earl would remain in the area and not desert them, as the British had done in the past. In addition, the army was unable to obtain supplies from the countryside. On 14 October, the army began its retreat toward Winnsboro, South Carolina. Sickness continued to plague the army; Cornwallis found himself ill with fever and was forced to relinquish command temporarily to his subordinate, Lord Rawdon.¹⁹

Meanwhile Clinton had answered Cornwallis's request for a diversion in the Chesapeake; Major General Alexander Leslie, with an army of twenty-five hundred troops, was stationed at Portsmouth, Virginia. Lord Rawdon, writing in the Earl's stead, informed Leslie of Ferguson's defeat at Kings Mountain and the main army's subsequent retreat from North Carolina.

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Cornwallis to Clinton, 29 August 1780, in Ross, ed., Cornwallis Correspondence, vol. 1, pp. 58-59; Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 147-148.

19

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 220-221; Smith Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 147-148.

Because of the evacuation, there was little chance of cooperation between Leslie and Cornwallis while the former remained in the Chesapeake. As a result, Rawdon suggested that Leslie consider operations on the Cape Fear River, providing such a move was agreeable to Sir Henry Clinton. A week later, Rawdon reiterated the request for a descent to the Cape Fear, but in much stronger terms.²⁰

By suggesting that Leslie cooperate on the Cape Fear River, Cornwallis was merely implementing a move that Clinton had suggested at the beginning of the campaign. Sir Henry, however, was not the only voice in favor of establishing a post on the Cape Fear. Colonel Robert Gray, a loyalist officer in the Cheraw militia, on two occasions had suggested operations there. Gray possessed considerable strategic acumen. In his opinion, the loyalists in his area were not turning out because the rebels from the North Carolina frontier were intimidating them. The rebels could not be subdued because they always managed to retreat to the safety of the Cape Fear region, only to return again by a different route. Gray proposed, therefore, that a force of British regulars and loyalist

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Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, p. 149; Francis, Lord Rawdon to Major General Alexander Leslie, 24 October 1780, in Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, pp. 468-469; Rawdon to Leslie, 31 October 1780, in Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, p. 470. On 2 November, Clinton also suggested a movement to the Cape Fear in support of Cornwallis. Clinton to Leslie, 2 November 1780, in Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, p. 472.

militia "should penetrate immediately into North Carolina, seize Wilmington and drive them [the rebels] beyond Cape Fear river, carrying with them arms and ammunition to give the inhabitants on the frontier who are in general well affected."²¹ Gray believed the occupation of Wilmington was important because it would encourage the loyalists. Cornwallis, on the other hand, wanted a force on the Cape Fear River to coordinate movements with his army. His brief stay in Charlotte had soured the Earl on the loyalists; he doubted the soundness of a strategy based on utilizing loyalist support.²²

Clinton was disappointed that Cornwallis had not sent a force to the Cape Fear River at the outset of the campaign. Sir Henry thought the Earl had done irreparable harm to the loyalists by entering North Carolina, encouraging them to come out in the open, and then leaving them to be persecuted by the rebels. This could have been avoided, in Clinton's opinion, by establishing a post "at Wilmington . . . to which the loyalists

21

Lieutenant Colonel Robert Gray to Cornwallis, 30 September 1780, London, Public Record Office, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/64, fols. 130-131. Microfilm copies in Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Hereinafter cited as Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11. Gray to Cornwallis, 7 October 1780, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/3, fols. 197-198.

22

Don Higginbotham, The War of American Independence (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971; reprint ed., Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), p. 367.

of that province might resort with their effects whenever they were likely to be borne down by their enemies."²³

Leslie, with instructions from Cornwallis and Clinton, began to transport his troops to the Cape Fear. Cornwallis had reached Winnsboro on 12 October; by 1 November he had recovered from his fever and resumed command of the army.²⁴ He promised Leslie that vessels would be sent from Charleston to bring supplies upriver to Cross Creek. When Leslie arrived at Cross Creek, he would be joined by the Earl. Cornwallis concluded with references to the navigability of the river:

If you find it difficult, from contrary winds, to get into Cape Fear River, the entrance of which is not easy to vessels coming from the northward by the projection of the Frying Pan Shoal, it will be very little out of your way to look into Charleston, and you will enter Cape Fear River with every assistance that can be procured from thence.²⁵

On 19 November, Cornwallis ordered Lord Rawdon to send 150 stand of arms to Charleston for repairs; afterwards, the arms would be sent to the Cape Fear for use in the upcoming expedition.²⁶ By 3 December, the Earl had changed his mind; he felt his need for reinforcements--compounded by the loss of

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Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, p. 228.

24

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 221-222, 227.

25

Cornwallis to Leslie, 12 November 1780, in Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, p. 474.

26

Cornwallis to Rawdon, 19 November 1780, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/82, fols. 67-68.

Ferguson's detachment--outweighed the proposed descent on the Cape Fear. He ordered Leslie to sail to Charleston; from there he was to proceed to Winnsboro to join the main army. Sir Henry Clinton was extremely disappointed. A post on the Cape Fear was vital if the confidence of the loyalists was to be restored. He was surprised, moreover, that part of Leslie's detachment had not been used to establish such a post.²⁷

Cornwallis now felt strong enough to begin another offensive in North Carolina. Major General Nathanael Greene had replaced Horatio Gates as commander of the southern army. Cornwallis planned to invade North Carolina again and destroy Greene's army, thereby depriving the rebels of the regular force that, in the Earl's opinion, was keeping the rebellion aflame in the southern provinces. There was a definite consensus that any move into North Carolina had to be supported by a post on the Cape Fear River. The post would serve two purposes: it would function as a supply depot for the invading British army, and it would offer protection to loyalists and, in turn, inspire them to action against the rebels of southeastern North Carolina. It was decided that in the next campaign Wilmington, a port town on the east bank of the Cape Fear River, would be occupied.²⁸

27
Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, pp. 229,
231.

28
Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 251-252.

CHAPTER TWO

The British Occupation of Wilmington, January-March, 1781

At the outset of the Revolutionary War, Wilmington was known as the fastest growing town in North Carolina. Wilmington's population was close to twelve hundred, making it the largest town in the province. The war caused people to evacuate the town; by the time the British had decided to send an expedition to Wilmington, it had been reduced to two hundred homes and one thousand residents.¹

Wilmington was shielded by hills; in fact, the town itself was built on unlevel ground. A visitor to the town in 1775 observed that "the people in town live decently, and tho' their houses are not spacious, they are in general very commodious and well furnished. This town lies low, but it is not disagreeable. There is at each end of it an ascent, which is dignified with the title of the hills; on them are some very good houses."² The residents pursued diverse occupations; there were merchants, seamen, physicians, government officials,

¹ Lawrence Lee, The Lower Cape Fear in Colonial Days (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 137; James Sprunt, Chronicles of the Cape Fear River (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards & Broughton Printing Company, 1916; reprint ed., Spartanburg, S.C.: The Reprint Company, 1973), p. 114.

² Janet Schaw, Journal of a Lady of Quality: Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the years 1774 to 1776, ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews and Charles McLean Andrews (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), pp. 155-156.

and a variety of artisans. Wilmington, in other words, was a modest but thriving town for its time.³

Wilmington had two assets, however, that made it an attractive target to the British: the town's location on the Cape Fear River gave it both strategic and logistical importance, and the area contained a high concentration of loyalists. It has been estimated that the number of politically active white men in Wilmington was between sixty and one hundred. One historian contends that over half of this number were "either loyal to the Crown or at least unsympathetic" to the rebels.⁴ Wilmington had a higher proportion of merchants than the other towns in North Carolina. These men tended to maintain their loyalty to the mother country; of forty-four merchants in the Wilmington area, over half were "definitely unsympathetic, if not openly hostile to the Revolution."⁵

After the fall of Charleston in May, 1780, the citizens of Wilmington realized that a British invasion of North Carolina was imminent. It was obvious to them--though Cornwallis was slow in catching on--that Wilmington was the key to the

3

Lee, Lower Cape Fear, p. 136; Donald R. Lennon and Ida Brooks Kellam, eds., The Wilmington Town Book, 1743-1778 (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1973), pp. xxxv-xxxvii.

4

Laura Page Frech, "Whigs and Tories on the Lower Cape Fear River in North Carolina 1774-1776" (M.A. thesis, Winthrop College, 1962), pp. 13-15.

5

Frech, "Whigs and Tories," pp. 15-18.

province. As a result, many people promptly left the town for safer areas. Since the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge more than four years earlier, Wilmington had not been threatened by the British; complacency was the result of this long period of quiet. James Iredell, the attorney general for the rebel government, visited the town after the surrender of Charleston and observed that "Wilmington is certainly no place of security, as the Enemy may take it when they please."⁶ William Hooper, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a resident of Wilmington, realized this as well. Throughout 1780, Hooper made preparations to evacuate his family but procrastinated in taking the final step.⁷ Like most of Wilmington, he was unprepared for the British advance.

The British, meanwhile, were preparing to occupy Wilmington. In late December they received a scare from intelligence reports that the French had landed a thousand troops at the Cape Fear River. Cornwallis confessed to Lord Rawdon that he was "frightened at the report of the french at Cape Fear."⁸ The occupation of Wilmington was vital to the

⁶
James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 21 May 1780, in Don Higginbotham, ed., The Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2 (Raleigh, N.C.: Division of Archives and History, 1976), p. 155.

⁷
Robert Charles Kneip, II, "William Hooper, 1742-1790: Misunderstood Patriot" (Ph.D. dissertation, Tulane University, 1980), pp. 411-414.

⁸
Cornwallis to Rawdon, 30 December 1780, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/83, fols. 97-98.

forthcoming invasion of North Carolina; a French presence in the Cape Fear would drastically reduce the redcoats' chances of success. The Earl, who had earlier been blind to Wilmington's strategic importance, was now anxious to occupy the port. He told Lieutenant Colonel Nisbet Balfour, the commander at Charleston, that he would not "march far into N. Carolina until I am satisfied about the Cape Fear business. Should the French keep that Harbour & of course prevent only Supplies to Cross Creek it will be a serious business to go into the heart of N. Carolina." ⁹ After interrogating two Highlanders who had recently arrived from Cross Creek, Lord Rawdon concluded that the reports were false. ¹⁰ Cornwallis was satisfied that it was safe to send a detachment to Wilmington. He ordered Balfour "in the strongest manner to lose no time in fitting out & sending off the Expedition to Cape Fear. I think it of the utmost consequence for our own Security & for the effect it will have on the minds of the People in N. Carolina." ¹¹

The naval complement for the combined land and sea operation to occupy Wilmington included three warships--the Blonde, Otter, and Delight. There were, in addition, three

9

Cornwallis to Lieutenant Colonel Nisbet Balfour, 1 January 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/84, fols. 1-2.

10

Rawdon to Cornwallis, 5 January 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/67, fols. 12-13.

11

Cornwallis to Balfour, 5 January 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/84, fol. 14.

galleys and an artillery transport. Captain Andrew Barkley was the naval commander. The land force numbered approximately three hundred, and consisted of six companies of the 82nd Infantry Regiment, an artillery detachment, and convalescents from Cornwallis's army. This force was supported by two brass three-pound cannons and two iron six-pounders. Battery frames were added to fortify the post at Wilmington. To supply Cornwallis once communication was established on the Cape Fear, there were three provisioning vessels, one oat ship for victuals, and several smaller craft. Major James Henry Craig¹² of the 82nd Regiment was appointed to command the expedition.

Major Craig was to prove to be a wise choice as commander of the expedition. The 32-year-old Craig began his military career at the tender age of fifteen in 1763, when he was gazetted an ensign in the 30th Regiment; he served with this regiment at Gibraltar. At the outset of the Revolutionary War, Craig was a captain in the 47th Regiment. He fought in the Battle of Bunker Hill and was severely wounded in that action. After his recovery he accompanied the 47th to Canada, and served in the 1776 campaign that ended with the repulse of the

12

Balfour to Cornwallis, 7 January 1781, Cornwallis Papers PRO 30/11/5, fols. 33-34; Balfour to Clinton, 25 January 1781, PRO 30/11/109, fols. 6-8; The 82nd Regiment had been part of General Leslie's expedition to the Chesapeake. The regiment sailed with the general to Charleston; when Leslie marched to join Cornwallis, the 82nd was left behind in Charleston to perform garrison duty. A.R. Newsome, ed., "A British Orderly Book, 1780-1781," The North Carolina Historical Review vol. IX (April 1932): 163-177.

rebels from Quebec. He served in General John Burgoyne's 1777 offensive, and was present when Ticonderoga was recaptured. Craig fought in the Battle of Freeman's Farm, where his distinguished performance resulted in his being sent home with Burgoyne's dispatches. He was rewarded with a promotion to major in the 82nd Regiment. Craig was sent from New York to Charleston with dispatches from Sir Henry Clinton; he arrived on the first of January, 1781, and was subsequently appointed to command the occupation force. An observer described Craig as "very short, broad, and muscular, a pocket Hercules, but with sharp, neat features, as if chiselled in ivory. Not popular, for he was hot, peremptory, and pompous, yet extremely beloved by those whom he allowed to live in intimacy with him; clever, generous to a fault, and a warm and unflinching friend to those whom he liked."¹³

Craig was ordered to take possession of Wilmington and establish a post there if the town was defensible. If a position at Wilmington were untenable, Craig was to station his troops at Fort Johnston on the mouth of the Cape Fear River. The principal objective of the expedition was to secure small vessels to transport supplies to Cornwallis when his army

13

Sir Leslie Stephens and Sir Sidney Lee, eds., The Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 4, (London: Oxford University Press, 1921-1922), pp. 1368-1370. Craig's arrival in Charleston is taken from James Simpson's letter to William Knox on 16 January 1781, printed in K.G. Davies, ed., Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783, vol. 20 (Dublin: Irish University Press, 1979), pp. 31-32.

reached Cross Creek.¹⁴ The British were aware that transporting supplies up the Cape Fear River would be difficult. Lieutenant Colonel Balfour admitted to Cornwallis that "the principal difficulty will be in getting sufficient small craft & boats up the river from Willmington to Cross Creek." Balfour stressed, moreover, that it was important that the Earl take possession of Cross Creek soon because there were numerous small craft there that could be used in transporting supplies.¹⁵

The expedition sailed from Charleston on 21 January and reached the Cape Fear River four days later. Unfavorable winds and the complexity of the river kept the force from reaching the predetermined landing spot twelve miles below Wilmington for the next three days.¹⁶ News of the British arrival reached Wilmington, and the townspeople suddenly realized they were unprepared for the British advance. Colonel Henry Young, the militia commander, told the rebel governor of North Carolina, Abner Nash, that "we are in great confusion here and

14

Balfour to Major James Craig, 15 January 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/109, fols. 1-2.

15

Balfour to Cornwallis, 7 January 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 33-36.

16

Captain Andrew Barkley to Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot, 12 February 1781, London, Public Record Office, Admiralty 1/486, fols. 1227-1230. Transcripts and microfilm copies in North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C. Hereinafter cited as ADM.

17
 very much in Want of Arms." The residents of Wilmington, realizing that resistance would be futile, decided to surrender. They asked Young to leave the town; he complied, taking with him fifty men. Young marched ten miles from Wilmington to Heron's Bridge on the Northeast Cape Fear River where he established a post.¹⁸ The delays that the British encountered in landing enabled the rebels to move supplies and ammunition out of Wilmington. Masters donated the service of their slaves to this effort.¹⁹

Negotiations commenced between the British and the residents of Wilmington. During the evening of the 27th, a deputation presented Major Craig with proposals to surrender the town. James Walker and John DuBois had been appointed by the townspeople to present two articles of capitulation:

Article 1: The inhabitants and others remaining there to be Prisoners of War until regularly exchanged.

17

Colonel Henry Young to Governor Abner Nash, 24 January 1781, Governors' Papers 6, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.

18

Colonel Stephen Drayton to Major General Nathanael Greene, 12 February 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M249, r175, i155, v1, p573, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Microfilm copies in East Carolina University Library, Greenville, N.C.

19

House of Commons, 13 December 1785, in Walter Clark, ed., The State Records of North Carolina, vol. 20 (Goldsboro, N.C.: State of North Carolina, 1895-1907; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1970), p. 57.

Article 2: The inhabitants to remain in town and to have their Propertys of every denomination secured to them and their Persons protected.²⁰

Craig and Barkley replied that they could not agree to the articles; instead, they insisted that the townspeople, when the British approached, "must submit to be prisoners of War at discretion or take the Consequences of resistence, in the former case every exertion will be used to prevent Plunder or Personal ill useage to any Person."²¹

The following morning, Craig's troops landed nine miles below Wilmington at Ellis Plantation, while Barkley continued upriver with the galleys. Wilmington fell without opposition. Approximately two hundred rebels marched out of the town, laid down their arms, and surrendered. The British found Wilmington protected by two batteries--one contained ten guns of twelve-pound and nine-pound size. Most of the cannon had been spiked by the defenders.²²

Craig and Barkley found the rebels had transported their supplies up the Northeast Cape Fear River in small vessels. Craig immediately set out with a detachment to retrieve the

20

"Propositions offered to the Commanding Officers of the British Navy and Troops by the Inhabitants of Wilmington," 27 January 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1231-1234.

21

"Propositions offered to the Commanding Officers of the British Navy and Troops by the Inhabitants of Wilmington," 27 January 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1231-1234.

22

Barkley to Arbuthnot, 12 February 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1227-1230.

supplies, while Barkley sent a galley and two gunboats for support. The British captured the entire flotilla, with the exception of a schooner and a sloop that had run aground; these vessels were found loaded with ammunition and were promptly burned. The six remaining vessels contained guns, ammunition, rice flour, tobacco, turpentine, and rum.²³

Many local rebels fled from the British advance. William Hooper and Alexander Maclaine left after placing their families with friends. Hooper's status as a signer of the Declaration of Independence made him a prime target for the British. In addition to being wanted for his activities as a rebel, Hooper owned saltworks outside of Wilmington that were inviting targets.²⁴ Hooper expressed his dilemma to his friend, James Iredell. "In the Agony of my Soul," he wrote, "I inform you that I am severed from my family--perhaps for ever!" Hooper continued, "I removed my family to Wilmington. Had I attempted to have carried them further I apprehended that they must still have been the subject to parties of the enemy who would have

23

Barkley to Arbuthnot, 12 February 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1227-1230; "Vessels taken up Cape Fear River by a Detachment of the Army & Gallies," 1 February 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1235-1236.

24

North Carolina's supply of salt was small throughout the war. In 1779, the residents of New Hanover County petitioned the General Assembly to send troops to guard the area saltworks because they feared that the British would send vessels into the inlets to destroy the salt supply. George Wesley Troxler, "The Homefront in Revolutionary North Carolina" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1970), pp. 61, 71-72.

been engaged in plundering without the restraint of any officers to check their depredations. In enemys country at all events I thought it best to trust them to the mercy of the principal officer who would be at Wilmington." ²⁵ Hooper and Maclaine eventually reached Halifax, where the North Carolina General Assembly was in session. Charles Johnson, a member of the Senate, saw them there and commented, "It is too true the Enemy are in possession of Wilmington and Envirens and of poor Mr. Hooper and Maclaine's families. . . . There ²⁶ situation is truly lamentable and I sincerely feel for them." As later events would prove, Hooper's voluntary exile was a wise move.

Others attempted to elude the British. Thomas Bloodworth, the local tax collector, loaded tax records, papers, and vouchers on board a vessel and sent it up the river in an effort to prevent the British from confiscating the documents. His efforts were unsuccessful, however, as Craig's troops ²⁷ captured the boat and set it on fire.

So far the expedition had run smoothly. The British had succeeded with an ease that exceeded all expectations. Still, there was no time to enjoy their success. Craig discovered the

25

William Hooper to James Iredell, 13 February 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, pp. 207-208.

26

Charles Johnson to James Iredell, 8 February 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 206.

27

House of Commons, 16 December 1789, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 21, p. 694.

presence of Colonel Henry Young's militia force at Heron's
 Bridge.²⁸ Young planned to obtain new recruits and protect the
 vessels containing provisions and ammunition that had been
 moved up the river. Information on the size of Young's force
 varied, leaving Craig undecided on what action to take. After
 much deliberation, he decided to force the militia from the
 bridge.²⁹

Craig believed that an attack on Young's position was
 risky, but necessary. He ruled out an open assault because the
 terrain of the area favored the defenders. Opposite the
 bridge, on the north side of the river, a narrow causeway ran
 through a broad, dense marsh and ended at a hill on which the
 militia was camped. The riverbank provided a strong, natural,
 defensible position for the rebels. Craig was understandably
 prudent in formulating his plans.

Major Craig left on the afternoon of 30 January with 250
 troops and two 3-pound cannon. Shortly after dusk, the
 British captured a mounted rebel sentry. After interrogating
 the prisoner, Craig decided to launch a surprise attack. The
 attackers advanced within one mile of the bridge and halted.

28

Heron's Bridge was built on the Northeast Cape
 Fear River in 1768 by Benjamin Heron. It was one of the
 first drawbridges constructed in the American colonies.
 The bridge was ten miles from Wilmington, and was part of
 the "Duplin Road" that ran from Wilmington to Duplin
 County. Lee, Lower Cape Fear, pp. 179-180.

29

Craig to Balfour, 4 February 1781, in Davies, ed.
Documents, vol. 20, p. 54.

Here they would wait until the assault began in the early morning hours.

To ensure the success of the attack, Craig detached volunteers to capture the rebel pickets. An accident, however, ended any chance for a surprise attack. A British sergeant and private encountered a mounted patrol; they had no time to hide and were forced to fire at the rebels.

The British reacted quickly. They pursued the patrol so vigorously that the rebels did not have time to raise the bridge or warn their comrades. A group of militia south of the bridge fired at the attackers, and then retreated across the river. Craig saw that the drawbridge was not raised and that the rebels had panicked. He immediately ordered pursuit; his earlier apprehension of Young's strong position ended as he sensed an opportunity to capture the vessels and prevent the militia from regrouping.

One of Craig's subordinates, a Captain Nesbit, had been shot in the leg when the skirmish began, but he nonetheless led the attack across the bridge. The skirmish ended as quickly as it had begun. Craig did not order his men to pursue the scattered militia because he "wished the men to rest in security after the fatigue of two days march and laying five nights either on their arms or on the decks of sloops and boats without covering."³⁰

Young lost three men killed, and an undetermined number of rebels were wounded. The British took only eight prisoners, because of the blackness of the night and the rebels' hasty retreat. Six British privates were wounded; Captain Nesbit had "exerted himself so much" that Craig did not notice that "he was hurt til all was over."³¹

The British found provisions and arms in the abandoned camp. They threw one iron 3-pound cannon into the river and destroyed the drawbridge. The following morning the British found the vessels. The two largest were set on fire--one had contained ammunition--and the rest were escorted to Wilmington.

Craig gave his troops a days rest. After marching five more miles and destroying "a considerable quantity of rum and stores which might have been serviceable to an enemy," the British returned to Wilmington. The major was justifiably proud of his men; he told Lieutenant Colonel Balfour that

In justice to the troops and marines under my command I cannot help mentioning that the town of Wilmington was taken possession of and an extent of country of upwards of 45 miles marched over with only one single instance of any article being touched or inhabitant injured in his property except as ordered by myself.³²

31

Craig to Balfour, 4 February 1781, in Davies, ed., Documents, vol. 20, p. 55.

32

Craig to Balfour, 4 February 1781, in Davies, ed., Documents, pp. 55-56. A contemporary observer, writing about the skirmish at Heron's Bridge, commented that Young's men "neither defended or destroyed" the bridge. "Consequently a

These successes filled the British with confidence. They granted paroles to the remaining residents in Wilmington. Captain Barkley reported that the townspeople "ardently wish once more for the Blessing of peace. And a reunion with the Mother Country."³³

The rebels reacted to the fall of Wilmington with dismay. Abner Nash, the rebel governor of North Carolina, was afraid that the British occupation of Wilmington "will distress us very much, as we are unprepared to receive them." Nash told Samuel Huntington, the president of the Continental Congress, that "the militia in the lower parts of the Country are badly off for armes, the frequent drafts of late not only of men but of armes[,] Waggans & Camp Equippage of every kind, has occasioned this scarcity[.]" The governor requested that the Congress send arms and ammunition to ease the shortage. In addition, he asked for "a company of artificers" because there was close to "5000 stand of armes . . . useless for want of some trifling repairs & have not workmen to execute so necessary a business."³⁴

32

(continued) precipitate retreat on our side took place and all our stores, arms, & ammunition fell a prey." Drayton to Greene, 12 February 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v1, p573.

33

Barkley to Arbuthnot, 12 February 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1227-1230.

34

Nash to Samuel Huntington, 2 February 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r86, i72, p119.

Nash did not exaggerate in his description of North Carolina as a province unprepared for a British invasion. During the previous four years, the rebel government had demonstrated little competence in managing domestic or military affairs. The success of the North Carolina militia at Moore's Creek caused overconfidence in the militia. As a result, the assembly preferred militia drafts over raising battalions for the Continental Army. The militia often were poorly equipped, lacked discipline, consumed supplies, and could not be depended upon to stay in the field. In addition, the office of governor was given little power to manage a province in the midst of war. In the six months before the British occupation of Wilmington, Abner Nash had become increasingly frustrated as he found his powers usurped by a Board of War that had been created by the assembly. When the assembly convened at Halifax in January 1781, Nash complained about his lack of authority; the legislature responded by abolishing the Board of War and replacing it with the less powerful Council Extraordinary.³⁵ The government of North Carolina, in other words, was disorganized and ill prepared to meet the challenge of wresting Wilmington from British control. The rebels' hopes rested, in William Hooper's opinion, on "a corrupt or what is worse an

The best accounts of the difficulties encountered by the North Carolina revolutionary government can be found in Smith, "Creation of an American State," and Rankin, North Carolina Continentals.

Idiot Assembly, an Indolent executive--Treasurers without
 money. A Military without exertion."³⁶

Despite these shortcomings, the rebel government managed to form a response to the British threat in Wilmington. On 7 February the General Assembly appointed Richard Caswell, the former governor, to the rank of major general in the militia, with the authority to call inactive Continental officers into the field. The militia in the Halifax district were ordered to meet at Tarboro and prepare to march to the relief of
 Wilmington.³⁷

Major Craig, in the meantime, was busy fortifying his post. The major was confronted with numerous problems. Because his force was so small, he did not believe it practical to establish his post in Wilmington proper. Instead, he fortified redoubts below the town. Guns were taken from the transport vessels for emplacement in the redoubts. Several Wilmington residents lost their homes, as the British tore them down and used the building materials to fortify the redoubts.
 The British impressed slaves to build the town defences.³⁸ The

36

Hooper to James Iredell, 13 February 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 209.

37

House of Commons, 7 February 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 17, pp. 678-681.

38

Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 79-80; Memorial of Marshall Samuel, London, Public Record Office, Audit Office 12/72. Transcripts in North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C. Hereinafter cited as AO.

British force, in Craig's opinion, was too small to man the redoubts adequately. To compound the manpower shortage, Barkley was planning to leave soon and take ten marines with him, leaving Craig with sixty marines, and a total force of 209 troops fit for duty, not counting the artillery and dragoons. "I pity the town," Craig told Lieutenant Colonel Balfour, "because if ever I am attacked in force I cannot prevent their burning it. I cannot help repeating--a couple of hundred men more would make me master of the country."³⁹

The British were making the inhabitants of Wilmington prisoners on parole. Craig was not disposed toward requiring an oath of allegiance, since he could not promise to protect those who signed it. "We have paroled near 200," he said, "and as they look on it as a sanction for remaining quiet which is all they desire it answers my purpose better than alarming them by requiring what I could not compel them to."⁴⁰

Meanwhile Craig was receiving help from several area loyalists. Before the British had sailed for Wilmington, he obtained a list of loyalists who were willing to provide assistance and information on the strength of the rebels.⁴¹ In addition, some loyalists in Charleston accompanied the

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Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 79-80.

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Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 79-80.

41

Memorial of Thomas Cobham, AO 12/118.

expedition to Wilmington. Now these men were forming an important part of the British defense effort.

John Ross, for example, sailed to Wilmington with the British and fought in the skirmish at Heron's Bridge. Afterwards, he was appointed prizemaster of one of the vessels captured at the rebel camp. Upon returning to Wilmington, he helped Craig's engineers construct the town's defenses; during the occupation, he served garrison duty because of the manpower

⁴² shortage. John Downie, whose plantation was located on the Northeast Cape Fear River, guided the British on their actions against the rebels and was the assistant commissary of all

⁴³ captured goods.

Perhaps no loyalist endured more in his service for Craig and the British than William McQueen. A veteran of the Moore's Creek Campaign, he was sent by Major Craig to inform the Earl Cornwallis that Wilmington was occupied by the British and that supplies for his army were stored there. McQueen made an arduous journey of two hundred miles through the North Carolina backcountry, travelling by night and hiding in the swamps and forests during the day. He was captured three times by the rebels, but made his escape each time. In the last instance, he was tried in a rebel camp as a spy and was sentenced to be

42

Memorial of John Ross, AO 13/95.

43

Memorial of John Downie, AO 13/95.

hanged. His hanging was prevented only by his successful
⁴⁴
 escape.

Unfortunately, there is a paucity of historical records concerning domestic life during the British occupation of Wilmington. Craig's military activities are well documented, but his actions as the commander of an occupied town are not available to the historian. He did gain a reputation for cruelty that has survived in local tradition. One Wilmington historian states that "there were many . . . instances of cruelty and barbarism perpetrated by Craig and his command in
⁴⁵
 and around Wilmington." Another historian writes that "few invading commanders have exercised a more despotic control in a
⁴⁶
 small town." These authors have based their conclusions on what is known of Craig's conduct as commander; what is not known is how he governed in Wilmington, how law and order were maintained, and how the people's daily business and lives progressed during the occupation. About these activities one can only speculate; and speculation has its limits. From extant accounts, however, we can reach two conclusions: how a person fared during the occupation depended on his demonstrated

44

Memorial of William McQueen, AO 13/122. McQueen's family was persecuted while he was gone. See below, p. 96.

45

Alfred Moore Waddell, A History of New Hanover County and the Lower Cape Fear Region 1723-1800 (Wilmington, N.C.: n.p., 1909), p. 185.

46

Phillips Russell, North Carolina in the Revolutionary War (Charlotte, N.C.: Heritage Printers, Inc., 1965), p. 250.

loyalty or disloyalty to the crown; and, as is the case in any occupation, people whose loyalty did not run deep either way acquiesced to British control.

Elizabeth Parker, a resident of Wilmington for seventeen years, profitted during the occupation because of her loyalty to the British. With the "assistance of some neighboring Loyalists she was . . . enabled to furnish a handsome House very genteely, and accommodated Gentlemen, with Board and Lodging."⁴⁷ Mary Boyd, on the other hand, suffered during the occupation. She was the wife of Adam Boyd, the editor of the Cape Fear Mercury, a rebel newspaper. While the British occupied Wilmington, "Mrs. Boyd was in a constant state of alarm," and depended on her slaves for "help and comfort."⁴⁸

The people who remained in Wilmington gave Craig little trouble. When the town fell to the British, John Rutledge, the rebel governor of South Carolina, reacted with disgust. Rutledge wrote, with some sarcasm, "6 of the Town's people left it, the rest received the Enemy with 3 huzzas."⁴⁹ Rutledge, although exaggerating, was not far off the mark. When the British submitted a petition requiring the inhabitants of Wilmington "to be admitted to a dependence upon Great Britain," only two men, Thomas Maclaine and John Huske, refused to sign.

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Memorial of Elizabeth Parker, AO 13/123.

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Catherine DeRosset Meares, Annals of the DeRosset Family (Columbia, S.C.: R.L. Bryan, 1906), pp. 49-50.

⁴⁹

Quoted in Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 320.

According to William Hooper, the British used "all the powers of persuasion, insult and menace" to induce the two men to comply. As a result of their defiance, Maclaine and Huske were forced to leave Wilmington with "the conscious satisfaction of retaining their freedom and independence."⁵⁰

One question posed by historians that yields no simple answer is why some North Carolinians remained loyal to the crown while others became rebels. Different sections of the population produced loyalists as well as rebels. The complexity of this issue can be seen in Wilmington. For example, though William Hooper was a staunch rebel, his brother George was sympathetic to the British. Before William left Wilmington, he rented his property and slaves to George. This artifice prevented the destruction of the property.⁵¹

While the British were finishing their fortifications, Craig received news that altered the tenor of his mission. The British under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton had suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of General Daniel Morgan's force of Continentals and militia at the Battle of Cowpens. Cornwallis had set out in pursuit of Morgan. This change in plans meant that the Earl's arrival at Cross Creek

50

Hooper to Thomas Burke, 17 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 543.

51

Carole Watterson Troxler, The Loyalist Experience in North Carolina (Raleigh, N.C.: North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1976), p. 57; Kneip, "William Hooper," pp. 424-425.

would be delayed indefinitely; Craig would have to hold
 Wilmington longer than he had anticipated.⁵²

Craig spent much of his time pondering ways to execute his mission--supplying Cornwallis at Cross Creek via the Cape Fear River. He needed small craft to transport the supplies up the river; the shallow Cape Fear did not admit vessels that drew over three feet. The flats and boats that could navigate the river were at Cross Creek. Because he lacked small vessels, Craig doubted that the supplies could reach Cornwallis. He suggested that the Earl seize the vessels assembled at Cross Creek. The British in Wilmington,⁵³ meanwhile, would attempt to construct their own vessels.

Another obstacle Craig faced was the renewed rebel presence at Heron's Bridge. The rebels had obtained new supplies and the bridge was repaired. Their commander was General Alexander Lillington, one of the victors at Moore's Creek Bridge. The rebels had already assembled between four and five hundred men. Major Craig was aware that his safety depended on preventing the rebels from gathering in force. Until Cornwallis was closer it was imperative that he scatter the enemy as quickly as they united. The major told Balfour, "I present I think every impediment to my communications with

52

Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 305-306.

53

Craig to Balfour, 18 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 85-86; Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols 305-306.

Cross Creek, as it is. I am at a loss how to accomplish it unless I can dissipate the collection in my front which while they keep on the other side of the N.E. river will be difficult."⁵⁴

Meanwhile the British needed horses. On 9 February, Captain Pitcairne, a subordinate of Craig, and a patrol of light infantry surprised an enemy detachment. Pitcairne was able to order only one volley before the mounted rebels escaped. Only thirteen of Craig's men possessed horses. The major considered, therefore, an attack against a force of rebel cavalry that was separated from the main body at Heron's Bridge and was an inviting target. While Craig pondered his idea, the stalemate continued.⁵⁵

On 18 February, Captain Barkley finally sailed away on board the Blonde. The Blonde, because of her draft, could not come close enough to Wilmington to render assistance. Barkley left the Otter, Delight, the galleys, and the gunboats to protect the provisioning and transport vessels.⁵⁶

Craig, for one, was not sorry to see Barkley leave. By this time relations between the commanding officers were strained. The cause of this personality clash is unclear. It

54

Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 79-80.

55

Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 79-80.

56

Barkley to Arbuthnot, 12 February 1781, ADM 1/486, fols. 1227-1230.

can be inferred, however, that the division of command in a combined land/sea operation was the root of the problem. The difficulties British army and naval commanders experienced working together during the war are here manifested--in a minor operation involving officers of lesser rank--by Craig and Barkley.

57

Although the reasons behind Craig's dislike for Barkley are unclear, his feelings are not. In a private letter to Balfour, the major wrote:

May I beg if you can ever turn the scale relative to his returning here, that it may be in the negative-- he & I differ so much in our sentiments that I much fear we can never carry on service together with that cordiality requisite to do it effectually. . . . Pardon me if for your private information I warn you to receive with caution every thing he tells you-- [his o[w]n interest will be his chief inducement. I had once thoughts of returning him his marines that

 57

An assessment of this problem can be found in William B. Willcox's Portrait of a General, pp. 90-91. Willcox writes that the "breakdown of co-operation between the services . . . was to some extent the product of the system. If a commander in chief had trouble in collaborating with his subordinate, two commanders in chief had more in collaborating with each other--essentially because they were two. Throughout the war the British were constantly involved in what would now be called combined operations, which are always jeopardized by a divided command. The ranking naval officer, trained in a different school from his army colleague, differs from him in the bent of his professional thinking, in his service loyalties, and in the superiors upon whose favor he depends; no matter how congenial two such colleagues may be, their background and position fix such a gulf between them that expecting them to share authority and work hand in hand is expecting a miracle."

he might have no reason for coming back but I could not part with six & twenty fine fellows.⁵⁸

Major Craig was soon preoccupied with greater problems. The stalemate between the British in Wilmington and the rebels at Heron's Bridge continued. Although the rebels outnumbered the British three to one, Craig was not fearful. The major obviously had a low opinion of the militia as a fighting force. In fact, he repeatedly tried to draw the rebels in the open by feigning fear. He hoped to disperse them as he had done⁵⁹ earlier.

On 12 February, Craig informed Balfour that he had received intelligence that Governor Nash was about to arrive at Heron's Bridge with reinforcements. He expected an attack soon because morale ran high among the militia. Craig estimated the rebels' strength at twelve hundred men, but added, "I think I can stand their attack[.] I mean to try it--but if they take post near me which I suspect & bring canon my situation will be more precarious."⁶⁰

Governor Nash's arrival with the reinforcements proved the accuracy of Craig's intelligence. He could not, however,

58

Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 81-82.

59

Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 89-90. This letter, like some others, does not contain the addressee's name, but it is obvious from the contents that it was intended for Balfour.

60

Craig to Balfour, 10 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fol. 87.

determine the number of rebels assembled at Heron's Bridge; estimates ranged between six hundred and eight hundred.

Despite being reinforced, the rebels did not move--they seemed content to watch the British and continue the waiting game.⁶¹

Lillington's unwillingness to attack Craig sparked criticism.

An observer in New Bern told James Iredell "that it may be a Trojan Seig[e] Unless some abler h[an]ds are put against it."⁶²

This delay gave Craig time to strengthen his fortifications.

An abatis was built around the redoubt, prompting the major to boast, "tho' we have been under the necessity of occupying an extent of ground far beyond the proportion to our numbers, yet I think our situation too good, to fear the whole militia force of the country were they to assemble."⁶³

Major Craig knew his troops had to hold Wilmington indefinitely. His cause was being helped by the unwillingness of the militia to face his British regulars. The rebels seemed content to remain at Heron's Bridge, ensuring that Craig did not venture from Wilmington to forage and inflict additional property damage. In spite of the futility of Craig's situation, the occupation of Wilmington was affecting the course of the war in North Carolina. The British presence

61

Craig to Balfour, 18 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 85-86.

62

Pierce Butler to James Iredell, 11 March 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 215.

63

Craig to Balfour, 18 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 85-86.

hindered the recruitment of Continental soldiers in the southeastern part of the province. Although the British were unable to send supplies to Cross Creek, they were blocking the inland passage of rebel supplies.⁶⁴

The occupation of Wilmington was spurring the loyalists of southeastern North Carolina to greater activity. As a result, it became increasingly difficult to get the rebel militia to assemble. M.L. Brown was frustrated in his attempts to obtain reinforcements for the force at Heron's Bridge. He told General Lillington that "the greatest Part of the good People, in this County, is Ingaged back against the Toryes; And Seems very Loth to go Against the British And leave their Families Exposed to a set of Villians; who Dayley threatains their Destruction--I intend seting off for Wilmington on thursday with what few I Can Raise."⁶⁵

Major Craig, perhaps irritated at the stubbornness of the rebels, decided to send out a detachment to Hood's Creek, a tributary of the Cape Fear River in Brunswick County. A rebel force of one hundred was encamped there and made a more practical target than Lillington's formidable contingent at Heron's Bridge. Craig was ill with fever, so he sent one of his subordinates, a Major Manson, with eighty men to disperse

64

Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 321.

65

M.L. Brown to General Alexander Lillington, 19 February 1781, John Alexander Lillington Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.

66
 the rebels. Manson succeeded in his objective, but Craig was forced to admit that the action "had no effect on their Main Body" at Heron's Bridge.⁶⁷

Although Lillington was making no moves, individual rebels were harassing Craig's troops and, on occasion, drawing blood. On 22 February, the Delight sent out a shore party of seven to bury a dead crewman. When the party reached land they were fired on by a group of rebels, who were hiding in the bushes. One sailor was killed and three were taken prisoner; the other three escaped back to their vessel. The Delight and Otter fired on the rebels, while more boats were sent on shore to retrieve the captured sailors. The rebels fled, leaving their prisoners behind unharmed.⁶⁸

Another incident of resistance involved the aforementioned Mary Boyd. Mrs. Boyd fled from Wilmington with her children when she could no longer endure the suffering brought on by the occupation. She sought refuge at "The Oaks," a plantation on the Northeast Cape Fear River that belonged to John Swann. The Oaks had become a refuge for several rebels, and the British decided to take action. Major Craig sent a gunboat and a barge

66

Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 305-306.

67

Craig to Cornwallis, 22 March 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/69, fols. 19-20.

68

Lieutenant's Log, H.M.S. Delight, 22 February 1781, ADM L/D/61; Lieutenant's Log, H.M.S. Otter, 22 February 1781, ADM L/0/63.

to attack the house. The occupants hid in the cellar until dark, when they fled to an adjoining plantation. Mrs. Boyd's son, Armand J. DeRosset, who was only thirteen years old, helped defend the house; he recalled later that during the fighting a John Brown "with a flag of truce went out to hold a parly; as soon as they [the British] saw him they fired at him but he escaped & got back safe to the house." The British stayed through the night and returned to Wilmington the next morning; the attack had proven inconclusive.⁶⁹

Craig's patience had ended. He sent out more raiding detachments; now their objective was the capture of prominent area rebels. First on the list was Cornelius Harnett, the leading rebel in southeastern North Carolina. Harnett, a former delegate to the Continental Congress, had fled Wilmington when the British arrived, but he stayed within striking distance--forty miles away. According to Craig, Harnett "exerted extreme influence in the country which I was well assur'd he was employ'd to the most traiterous purposes; it determin'd me to run any risk to seize him." The major "took every precaution" to ensure that Harnett would not escape; he sent out detachments of infantry, while he rode "with twenty . . . mounted men seventy five miles without halting."⁷⁰ Harnett

69

"Recollections of Dr. A.J. DeRosset, Sr.," Charles Francis Jenkins Collection, North Carolina Division of Archives and History; Meares, Annals of the DeRosset Family, p. 50.

70

Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 305-306.

learned of the danger and fled, taking with him money that had been given to him to purchase military supplies and clothing. Misfortune plagued Harnett; after he got the money to a safe place, he was stricken with gout and was forced to seek refuge at the house of Colonel John Spicer in Onslow County, which was thirty miles north of Wilmington. The British found Harnett there and, despite his condition, took him back to

Wilmington.⁷¹ Armand J. DeRosset was in town when the British arrived with their quarry; he never forgot the sight of Harnett being "brought through the town thrown across a horse like a

sack of meal."⁷² Harnett was imprisoned in a blockhouse with no roof. Exposure to the elements caused his condition to worsen and Craig granted him a parole within the boundaries of Wilmington. This act of mercy was too late; Harnett died on 28 April.⁷³

During the march to Wilmington after Harnett's capture, one of Craig's advance guards came upon a house where sixteen rebels had gathered. The rebels opened fire, but the British reacted quickly by burning the door open. Craig gave a terse

71

R.D.W. Connor, Cornelius Harnett, An Essay in North Carolina History (Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards and Broughton Printing Company, 1909), p. 196.

72

Meares, Annals of the DeRosset Family, p. 50.

73

Connor, Cornelius Harnett, p. 197.

summation of the encounter: the rebels "all fell by the bayonet, having only slightly wounded one man."⁷⁴

John Ashe, a brigadier general of the militia from New Hanover County, was treated as ruthlessly as Harnett. Ashe had hidden in the swamps when the British arrived, but he was betrayed by a servant. He was shot in the leg while attempting to escape. While in prison, Ashe contracted smallpox. Craig paroled him, but for Ashe, like Harnett, the major's leniency was not in time. Shortly after returning to his home, Ashe⁷⁵ died. The deaths of Ashe and Harnett and the massacre of the sixteen rebels served notice to the revolutionaries in southeastern North Carolina that they could expect no mercy from Craig.

Despite these successes, Craig was facing a serious obstacle at Heron's Bridge. In addition to preventing Craig from moving supplies up the Cape Fear River, Lillington's force was limiting the area where the British could forage for much needed food. Compounding the problem was Craig's obligation to the people of Wilmington--the British needed to provide for the

74

Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 305-306. This infamous incident has endured in local tradition as the "massacre of the eight-mile house." According to Griffith J. McRee, the rebels had gathered at a tavern on the road between Wilmington and New Bern to meet some local women. The rebels neglected to post a guard and were easily surprised and dispatched by the British. Griffith J. McRee, ed., Life and Correspondence of James Iredell (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1857), vol. 1, p. 531.

75

Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 321.

town's inhabitants as well. In early March, Major Craig decided to leave Wilmington with two hundred men and two 3-pound cannon on a foraging expedition; his route of march would take him to Heron's Bridge and would possibly entice Lillington to attack. The rebel militia had dwindled to fewer than four hundred, giving the British better odds.⁷⁶

Lillington was apprised of Craig's arrival and prepared an ambush. He sent Colonel Henry Young with sixty cavalry and a Colonel Brown with seventy infantry on a march that would take them around Craig and enable them to attack the British from behind. Lillington's plans failed because a Major Dennis disobeyed orders. Dennis had been ordered to take twelve light horse and post himself on the road to watch for the British arrival. Instead, he stayed with his men at a house near the rebel camp. As a result, the British surprised Dennis; one of his men was bayoneted and another drowned while attempting to cross the partially raised drawbridge. The British immediately posted themselves on a hill across the river from the rebel camp and opened fire with their field pieces. Lillington hurriedly sent orders to Colonels Young and Brown to begin their attack.⁷⁷

76

Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 305-306.

77

"A narrative of the action at the Great Bridge," Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p29. In his report, Lillington does not mention the name of the officer who disobeyed orders. Because a Major Dennis was mentioned by Lillington in a letter written after the skirmish, and the same

Craig, in the meantime, sent a flag of truce to Lillington, requesting that the rebels surrender:

Sir--as the people under your Command are all militia, whom we always rather [blurred] pity than wish to destroy--I will now acquaint you that I have taken Post here, to cut you off from all possibility of escape. in a few hours Lieut. Colonel Tarleton will be upon you with a detachment superior to yours even in Numbers--to spare your People therefore and to Preserve their farms (everyone of which whose owner is absent will be Destroyed) I am to propose to you to deliver up your Arms to me, on which Condition your People shall have full Liberty to return home unmolested, & I will take effectual measures to secure their Property from the resentment of Lieut. Colo. Tarleton's Party.⁷⁸

Lillington gave the following answer to Craig's proposal:

Were it reasonable to suppose that you were well acquainted with the strength of my Army, & be sure of Lieut. Colo. Tarlton's success in an engagement with us, I should feel the full force of the humane Terms offered my men. But while we have Arms in our hands, & are apprised of your intentions, my prospects of success are very fair. I shall not yield up this post until compeled to it by superior force when my Army shall have an opportunity of signaling their valour.⁷⁹

Craig, disappointed that Lillington had not fallen for his ploy, sent a final flag of truce, telling his rival that "my

77

(continued) officer was later court-martialed, it can be inferred that Dennis was the man whose negligence resulted in the surprise of the rebel camp. See below, pp. 57-58.

78

Craig to Lillington, 9 March 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p29.

79

Lillington to Craig, 9 March 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p30.

coming here is the effect of a preconcerted scheme & I beg you to be assured I should not have given you notice of your situation, had my so doing, been in the smallest Degree likely to have Afforded you the means of extricating yourself."⁸⁰

Lillington felt secure. He was certain that Craig's warnings about Tarleton were false; moreover, he expected Young and Brown to begin their attack at any moment.

After giving Young and Brown time to get into position, Lillington opened fire on the British camp with his field pieces. Young and Brown attacked shortly after, but were repulsed because, according to Lillington, "the infantry being badly placed, did not do that execution they ought to have done."⁸¹ The retreat was made in good order. The British remained at the bridge through the night and part of the following day; after collecting enough forage, Craig decided to return to Wilmington, since the chance of gaining an advantage over the rebels was slim. Craig retreated slowly, hoping Lillington would attack; and the rebels would have harassed the British rear, but the cavalry Lillington detached for that

80

Craig to Lillington, 9 March 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p31.

81

"A narrative of the action at the Great Bridge," Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p27.

purpose disobeyed their orders--another example of the
 82
 undependability of the militia.

The stalemate resumed. Lillington posted troops on the outskirts of Wilmington to watch the British and make sure that Craig did not venture out again. The rebel general told General Richard Caswell that "there was a Most Glorious Opportunity offered when they were at the Bridge, if we that day had the Troops that Major Dennis Carried off we Positively Should have killed & taken Craig & All his little Army--I
 83
 cannot put it out of my mind." To Major General Nathanael Greene, Lillington confided, "we are not in a situation to

82

"A narrative of the action at the Great Bridge," Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p.27; Craig to Cornwallis, 12 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 305-306. The opposing commanders-- Major Craig and General Lillington--gave divergent accounts of the skirmish in reports to their superior officers. Of the two accounts Lillington's appears to be the most reliable and therefore is the one used here. His version is supported by William Dickson, a participant in the skirmish. (See William Dickson to Robert Dickson, 30 November 1784, in James O. Carr, ed., The Dickson Letters [Raleigh, N.C.: Edwards & Broughton, Printers, 1901], pp. 13-14.) Craig, in his letter of 12 April to Cornwallis, states that the rebels suffered heavy losses in their attack. Lillington, on the other hand, contends that the British casualties were considerable, adding that "they have taken great pains to conceal their Dead." The rebel general also accused the British of atrocities, claiming that his wounded had had their throats cut by blacks who accompanied Craig. After the British left, Lillington's troops requested permission to burn Mount Blake, a plantation home that had served as Craig's headquarters. Lillington refused, but his men burned the house anyway. House of Commons, 3 December 1790, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 21, p. 829.

83

Lillington to General Richard Caswell, 20 March 1781, Richard Caswell Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.

drive [those] Troops out of Wilmington & I am affraid we shall not be able to hold this part of the State long, unless we have a timely reinforcement: The militia is not to be depended on." ⁸⁴

Lillington vented his disappointment on Dennis, charging the major with mutiny, disobeying orders, and desertion. The charges resulted in a court-martial; at the trial Major Dennis admitted that he had disobeyed orders, but denied that he was guilty of desertion or mutiny. The court, which was composed of militia officers and regular soldiers, disagreed and found Dennis guilty of desertion and disobeying orders. Dennis was dismissed from the militia and the court requested "that the Governour recommend it to the Assembly that Major Dennis may be rendered incapable of holding any Office of Honour trust or profit in the State." ⁸⁵

In Wilmington, Major Craig was dealing with old problems-- shortage of troops, the inability to get supplies to Cross Creek, and the rebel presence at Heron's Bridge. The manpower shortage was so severe that the major occasionally sent expresses to the Delight and Otter, requesting sailors to man the batteries. Craig asked Balfour for reinforcements,

84

Lillington to Greene, 21 March 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p32.

85

"Proceedings of a Genl. Court Martial held for the Tryal of Major Dennis," 24 March 1781, Revolutionary War Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.

contending that he needed six hundred men to garrison
Wilmington properly. Balfour was sympathetic but had no troops
to send.⁸⁶

On 21 March, Craig received his first dispatch from
Cornwallis, the duplicate of a letter the Earl had written on
21 February--an example of the difficulties in communicating.
The Earl, writing from Hillsborough, informed Craig that the
main army had driven Greene's Continentals into Virginia.
Cornwallis intended to call the loyalists into the field; soon
he would need to open communications with Cross Creek and
receive his supplies. He asked Craig for information on the
navigability of the Cape Fear River. The Earl's army needed
"shoes for the Infantry & saddles & Boots for the Cavalry, of
the former we require a very large supply."⁸⁷

Craig's reply did not hide the problems facing the
British. He emphasized that Lillington's force was the
"principal" difficulty; the other was the shallow river that
was impassable to boats of deep draft. Moreover, between Cross
Creek and Wilmington the current was so gentle that "Boats are
generally from twenty to twenty-five days going & returning."
In conclusion, Craig wrote, "Your Lordship will judge how
impracticable it will be to send any thing up 'till the Country

86

Lieutenant's Log, H.M.S. Delight, 8 March 1781,
ADM L/D/61; Craig to Cornwallis, 22 March 1781, Cornwallis
Papers, PRO 30/11/69, fols. 19-20.

87

Cornwallis to Craig, 21 February 1781, Cornwallis
Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fols. 7-8.

is more settled." To make matters worse, the supplies the Earl⁸⁸ needed were not in sufficient quantity in Wilmington.

This news was not encouraging, but it arrived too late to benefit the Earl. A week before Craig wrote the letter, Cornwallis had met Greene at the Battle of Guilford Court House. The British suffered heavy casualties in the battle and now needed the supplies they expected to find at Cross Creek. In fact, in the previous two months, Cornwallis had been blissfully ignorant of the difficulties Craig was encountering while trying to secure a passage up the Cape Fear River. Problems with communication became the downfall of the British. Craig's dispatches never got through. Balfour, like Craig, had tried to warn the Earl. "If you mean to communicate by Cross Creek," he wrote, "the banks of the river must be cleared, as⁸⁹ the Enemy have posts on it." But the letter was intercepted by the rebels.

88

Craig to Cornwallis, 22 March 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/69, fols. 19-20

89

Balfour to Cornwallis, [undated], Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r65, i51, v1, p713. In his memoirs, Sir Henry Clinton is extremely critical of Cornwallis because the Earl did not know that the Cape Fear River was "impracticable." He also cites a letter Balfour wrote to Lord George Germain on 24 March as evidence that Balfour was not aware that Craig could not supply Cornwallis via the Cape Fear. Balfour's letter to Germain contradicts his warning to Cornwallis in the above dispatch. But it is likely that Balfour would have been less than candid with Germain concerning the supply problem. Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, pp. 270; Balfour to Germain, 24 March 1781, in Clinton, American Rebellion, ed. Willcox, p. 502.

So far, the British occupation of Wilmington had been a failure. With the exception of the initial occupation, the first skirmish at Heron's Bridge, the skirmish at Hood's Creek, the massacre of the sixteen rebels, and the capture of Harnett and Ashe, Craig had little to brag about. The rebels had proved stubborn; despite some successes, the British were unable to remove their main obstacle--Lillington's force at Heron's Bridge. In addition, the Cape Fear River proved to be an impractical supply route because of its shallow waters and gentle current. As a result, Craig was unable to send supplies to Cross Creek. Now Cornwallis desperately needed supplies, and he was unaware that none were waiting at Cross Creek. Indeed, the prospects for British success in southeastern North Carolina appeared slim.

CHAPTER THREE

Cornwallis and Wilmington Late March - Early June, 1781

The Earl Cornwallis's invasion of North Carolina had been a disaster. His two-month duel with Nathanael Greene had culminated in the Battle of Guilford Court House which had cost the Earl one fourth of his army. It is now necessary to examine the events of those two months--a series of setbacks that finally forced Cornwallis to move his army to Wilmington.

At first the outlook was promising for Cornwallis. The British outnumbered the rebels; moreover, half of Greene's force was composed of poorly trained militia. Greene, however, seized the initiative with a daring and unorthodox move. He divided his army, entrusting half of it to Brigadier General Daniel Morgan. Cornwallis was shocked at this move, but he quickly realized that Greene's strategy was sound. If the British attacked one of the rebel forces, the way to Charleston would be open to the other. He responded by dividing his force: he sent Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton in pursuit¹ of Morgan.

Tarleton caught up with Morgan on 17 January at the Cowpens; in the battle that followed, the British were routed. And Cornwallis, who had expected a victory, now faced the

1

Unless otherwise indicated, the following account of the 1781 winter campaign is based on Ward, The War of the Revolution, ed. Alden, vol. 2, pp. 750-794.

prospect of aborting the invasion of North Carolina. Realizing that a retreat would be a blow to the morale of the loyalists--not to mention that of his own men--Cornwallis decided to pursue Morgan. On 25 January, the British reached Ramsour's Mills. Here Cornwallis made an unorthodox move of his own. He decided to destroy all the army's excess baggage, retaining only the wagons loaded with hospital stores, ammunition, and salt; four wagons to transport sick and wounded; and the provisions the men could carry on their backs. All other provisions, including the rum supply, were burned. The Earl's decision was a gamble, a bet that with their loads thus lightened his men would be able to catch the rebels² quickly.

In the meantime, Greene and Morgan had reunited. When he learned that Cornwallis had destroyed his baggage, Greene remarked, "then, he is ours!"³ Greene planned to retreat through North Carolina, drawing Cornwallis away from his supply bases. It was a risky plan, because the rebels, if caught by

2

The importance of Cornwallis's decision to discard his baggage was not lost on contemporary observers. One North Carolinian wrote that "Cornwallis, by burning his Baggage, has lost all idea of retreating, and is determined to risque everything to the fate of one Day's business in Arms. Our hopes of success are sanguine, and indeed much, I must say, all depends on the Event." Whitmell Hill to Thomas Burke, 9 February 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 533.

3

Quoted in Ward, The War of the Revolution, ed. Alden, vol. 2, p. 766.

the British, would be forced to fight in a battle that could decide the fate of the Carolinas.

Fortune favored the rebels. Greene drew Cornwallis further and further into North Carolina. The frustrated Cornwallis saw his hopes of catching the rebel army dashed when Greene escaped across the Dan River into the safety of Virginia.

Cornwallis had driven the rebels from North Carolina, but it was an empty victory. The British were far from their supply bases, and they were now paying the price for the Earl's orders to destroy all excess baggage. Cornwallis led his men to Hillsborough, where he attempted to communicate with Major Craig in Wilmington. He also hoped to rally area loyalists to the royal standard. He was unsuccessful on both counts.⁴

Meanwhile Greene returned to North Carolina. His army had been reinforced and he now outnumbered Cornwallis. The time was ripe for battle and Greene decided to offer it on ground of his own choosing. The Earl's biographers admit "that he now moved toward a battle with a foe whose strength he did not know and upon ground which he remembered only vaguely. Yet he was determined to give battle, even if on Greene's terms."⁵ On 15 March, the British attacked the rebel army at Guilford Court

4

Cornwallis to General Benedict Arnold, 21 February 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fols. 5-6.

5

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 294-295. The quoted passage is one of the few instances where the authors are critical of their subject.

House. One of the most hotly contested battles of the war ended technically with a British victory. Cornwallis drove the rebels from the field, but he lost one fourth of his army-- losses he could not replace. Greene, on the other hand, could replace his losses. The rebel general knew he had dealt a severe blow to the British army. "They [the British] have met with a defeat in a victory," he commented after the battle.⁶

Three days after the battle, Cornwallis issued a proclamation, stating that "by the compleat victory obtained over the Rebel forces on the 15th Instant, I have thought proper to issue this Proclamation to call upon all loyal subjects to stand forth and take an Active part in restoring good order & Government." He promised paroles to all rebels-- with the exception of murderers--who would surrender their arms.⁷ Considering the losses suffered by the British in the recent battle and the presence of Greene a few miles away, it is not surprising that few loyalists responded. Indeed, Cornwallis could not stay in the area to protect the loyalists. Shortly after issuing the proclamation, he marched to Cross Creek in search of supplies for his battered army. Perhaps the best summation of Cornwallis's proclamation was offered by

6

Greene to Huntington, 30 March 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p17. An excellent account of the Battle of Guilford Court House can be found in Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 292-309.

7

"A Proclamation By Charles Earl Cornwallis, Lieutenant General of His Majestys' Forces," 18 March 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 256-257.

Nathanael Greene. "His sudden retreat," Greene wrote, "must
8
render the proclamation ridiculous."

During the month before the Battle of Guilford Court House and the days after, Cornwallis had become increasingly disappointed with the failure of the loyalists to support his army. What the Earl failed to realize was that the loyalists needed assurances that the British were going to remain to protect them after they openly declared themselves. Throughout the Southern campaign, Cornwallis had never stayed long in one place; instead, he had marched his troops throughout North Carolina, trying in vain to bring the rebels to a decisive battle. The Earl never understood that he was contributing to the loyalists' disillusionment with British policy. Charles Stedman, the commissary officer for the British army, met a Quaker gentlemen who told him that "it was the general wish of the people to be reunited to Britain; but that they had been so often deceived in promises of support, and the British had so often relinquished posts, that the people were now afraid to join the British army, lest they should leave the province, in which case the resentment of the revolutioners would be exercised with more cruelty; that although the men might escape, or go with the army, yet, such was the diabolical

conduct of those people, that they would inflict the severest punishment upon their families."⁹

The army continued its slow march to Cross Creek. Its arrival at Cross Creek, however, did nothing to improve the army's morale: the expected supplies were not there. The expeditionary force at Wilmington had failed in its primary mission--to transport supplies to Cross Creek. This setback was only the latest in a campaign replete with bitter disappointments. No one felt these reversals more than Cornwallis, who described the situation as follows:

From all my information I intended to have halted at Cross Creek, as a proper place to refresh and refit the Troops, and I was much disappointed on my arrival there to find it totally impossible: Provisions were scarce, not four days forage within 20 miles, and to us the navigation of the Cape Fear River to Wilmington impracticable. For the distance by water is upwards of a hundred miles, the breadth seldom above a hundred yards, the banks high, and the inhabitants on each side generally hostile.¹⁰

Cornwallis ordered the army to march to Wilmington. This decision, which historians have criticized, had two immediate

9

Charles Stedman, The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War (Dublin: n.p., 1794), vol. 2, note on pp. 386-387.

10

Cornwallis to Germain, 18 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 254-255.

and adverse effects: Cornwallis lost the support of the loyalists and South Carolina was opened to the rebels.¹¹

Greene did not enter South Carolina without taking precautions. He ordered General Jethro Sumner to watch Cornwallis and protect against a possible attack by Major Craig. If the British attempted to return to South Carolina, Sumner was to delay them until Greene could send support. Greene asked Governor Nash to move military supplies from the coast to Hillsborough and Charlotte.¹²

The rebel general gave a different version of the support given to the British by the loyalists. The loyalists, according to Greene, aided Cornwallis while hindering the rebel efforts to bring the British to battle again. "As most of the inhabitants between Pedee and Haw River are disaffected," Greene wrote, "we found the greatest difficulty in procuring supplies and obtaining intelligence. Our reconnoitering parties were frequently shot down by the Tories, while they furnished the Enemy with plenty of everything, and doubtless gave them good intelligence. Never was an Army in greater

11

For criticisms of the Earl's march to Wilmington, see Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 153-154, and John S. Pancake, This Destructive War: The British Campaign in the Carolinas, 1780-1782 (The University of Alabama Press, 1985), p. 188. In this writer's opinion, the move to Wilmington is understandable considering the number of wounded in the army and the serious supply shortage. The critical mistake that brought on the decision to proceed to Wilmington had occurred two months earlier when Cornwallis ordered that all excess baggage be discarded.

12

Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 316.

distress than the British, they were loaded with their wounded and must have fallen a sacrifice had not the Tories given them support."¹³

Lieutenant Colonel Balfour received news of the battle at Guilford Court House and began sending medicine supplies to Wilmington. Sufficient food was already stored there; returns from late March showed that there was enough bread, flour, and rum to supply six thousand men for sixty-nine days and a supply of pork and beef that would last thirty-three days.¹⁴

Cornwallis apprised Balfour and Major Craig of his decision to march to Wilmington. He asked Craig to send vessels ahead to meet his army with a supply of flour and rum.¹⁵ The Earl told Balfour that he especially needed medicine for the wounded and clothing and accouterments for the rest of the army. He added that the supplies should be sent quickly, "for should the enemy threaten S. Carolina I must not stay here. I do not think it probable, but this war has taught me to think nothing impossible."¹⁶ That Cornwallis could

13

Greene to Huntington, 30 March 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r175, i155, v2, p17.

14

Balfour to Craig, 30 March 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 186-188; G. Townsend to Cornwallis, 14 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 215-216.

15

Cornwallis to Craig, 3 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fol. 20.

16

Cornwallis to Balfour, 5 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fols. 21-22.

believe that Greene would not enter the open door into South Carolina shows an incredible amount of naivete.

The Earl was certain that Major Craig's usefulness in Wilmington had ended. After the army had rested and was ready to return to the field, Craig would probably evacuate his post and sail to Charleston. The supply route from Wilmington to Cross Creek had proved impractical and Craig's troops were needed in South Carolina.¹⁷ Moreover, Cornwallis was hatching a plan that would take him far from North Carolina and make it needless to maintain a supply depot in the province.

On 9 April Cornwallis's army marched into Wilmington. Cornwallis presumably established his headquarters in an impressive white frame house that had been picked by Major Craig. The house had been built ten years before by John Burgwin. Burgwin, afraid of the depredations of war, fled to Europe when an British attack on Wilmington had appeared inevitable. At the time of Cornwallis's visit, the house was owned and occupied by Judge Joshua Wright. Cornwallis let Wright and his family remain in the house during his two-and-a-half-week stay.¹⁸

While his men recuperated from their recent ordeal, Cornwallis busied himself with administrative duties, which

17

Cornwallis to Balfour, 5 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fols. 21-22.

18

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 316-317; Archibald Maclaine to Burke, 30 March 1782, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, p. 571.

included writing numerous letters and dispatches. The Earl sent his aide-de-camp, Captain Broderick, to England with dispatches giving his version of the past campaign. The Delight, which had been part of the expedition to Wilmington and had remained to support Craig, transported Broderick to his destination.¹⁹

Josiah Martin, the last royal governor of North Carolina, had accompanied Cornwallis during the invasion, hoping that loyalists would be inspired by his presence and openly support the army. The rigors of the campaign had been too much for Martin; now he was waiting to return to England. Before he could depart, however, he was presented with a petition that had been signed by thirty-nine Wilmington residents, asking to be restored as British subjects.²⁰ It is not known whether any action was taken on the petition. It would be interesting to know if the petitioners were sincere in their professed loyalty or if they were opportunists, hoping to gain by casting their lot with the side in power.

Cornwallis pondered his next move. Several options were open to him. He could remain in Wilmington. He quickly

19

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, p. 317; Barkley to Captain John Inglis, 14 April 1781, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 223-224.

20

Francis Brice to Governor Josiah Martin, 21 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 241-242; "The Humble Petition & Address of Sundry Inhabitants of the Town of Wilmington to His Excellency Josiah Martin Esquire, Governor & Commander in Chief of the Province of North Carolina," 21 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 243-244.

decided against staying in the town because the approach of the hot, humid summer would expose his men to the danger of disease. A logical move would be to return to South Carolina, but he was loath to go back, having failed to subdue the rebels in North Carolina. Cornwallis also felt that the way back-- across several rivers, through a country heavily populated with rebels--was too dangerous. He failed to acknowledge, however, that he was conceding South Carolina to Greene. The latter had already marched there with his army, hoping to seize the exposed British outposts in the western part of the province. Cornwallis was also abandoning Lord Rawdon. Rawdon had remained in South Carolina to command the army there; now, he was forced to defend British gains against the invading rebels. The Earl feared for Rawdon's safety and warned him of Greene's approach. He also made arrangements to return to South Carolina if necessary. Beyond this, he did nothing: instead, he formed a plan that would change the direction of the war in the South.

21

This plan entailed a march to Virginia. Sir Henry Clinton had sent Major General William Phillips and five thousand

 21

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 318-321. The Wickwires, as usual, are supportive of Cornwallis's decision to abandon South Carolina. Other historians, however, have been almost unanimous in condemning the Earl. (See, for example, John R. Alden, The South in the Revolution, 1763-1789 [Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1957], pp. 259-261; Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 154-155.) John Shy notes that during this period "there is a marked deterioration in the lucidity and logic of his [Cornwallis's] letters." Shy, "British Strategy," p. 171.

that their Numbers are not so great as had been represented, & that their Friendship was only Passive; for we have received little Assistance from them since our Arrival in the Province, and although I gave the strongest & most publick assurances that after refitting & depositing our Sick & wounded, I should return to the Upper Country, not above two hundred have been prevailed upon to follow us, either as Provincials or militia.²⁴

Planning for the southern campaign called for the loyalists to be used to defend areas conquered by the British regulars. Cornwallis, on the other hand, blamed his failure on the loyalists because they had not responded to his call to assist the British in subjugating North Carolina. The Earl never defeated Greene; he never stayed in one area long enough to
25
organize the loyalists.

Cornwallis explained his decision to Sir Henry Clinton. The Earl knew Sir Henry would not approve of a move into Virginia, since it would jeopardize British gains in South Carolina; therefore, he did not wait for instructions from his superior. He wrote that "it is very disagreeable to me to decide upon measures so very important & of such consequence to the general conduct of the War, without an opportunity of procuring your Excellency's directions or approbation; but the delay & difficulty of conveying Letters, & the impossibility of waiting for Answers, render it indispensibly necessary. My

24

Cornwallis to Germain, 18 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 270-271.

25

Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 155-156.

present undertaking sits heavy on my mind." Then he added, almost as an afterthought, that "the Situation in which I leave South Carolina adds much to my anxiety, yet I am under the necessity of adopting this hazardous enterprize hastily, and with the appearance of precipitation."²⁶

Before his departure, Cornwallis wrote to Balfour, instructing him to send transports to Wilmington in order to carry the British army back to Charleston, should the proposed junction with Phillips prove unfeasible. Major Craig was to remain in Wilmington and maintain contact with Cornwallis during the march to Virginia.²⁷

On 25 April, Cornwallis left Wilmington with fourteen hundred troops. The sick and wounded who were unable to accompany him to Virginia were left in Wilmington with Craig. During the march, the Earl stayed in contact with Craig and Balfour.²⁸ By 30 April, the British had reached Duplin Courthouse, where Cornwallis wrote, "the die is cast." He told Balfour to render assistance to Rawdon, but not to jeopardize the safety of Charleston. In addition, Cornwallis altered his earlier instructions, by ordering Balfour to send only enough vessels to evacuate Craig's garrison, "having the other

26

Cornwallis to Clinton, 23 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/5, fols. 249-250.

27

Cornwallis to Balfour, 24 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fols. 49-50.

28

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, p. 321.

transports with provisions ready to sail, in case of my being obliged to return to Wilmington, which nothing but the most absolute necessity shall drive me to do."²⁹

Cornwallis soon changed his mind, however, and began making preparations to return to Wilmington. His troops were becoming ill. He had counted on procuring grain from the mills along his route of march, but lack of rain had left these mills empty.³⁰ He told Craig that he wanted to return to Wilmington, but was prevented from doing so because of his earlier orders to Balfour about the transports. Until enough transports had reached the Cape Fear, Cornwallis resolved to continue his march north at a slower pace. He ordered Major Craig to "manage every ration of your own Stock even if necessary curtail the Allowance--Keep some small vessels constantly going between Balfour & you. Take every means you can to correspond with me."³¹ A day later, on 4 May, he wrote, "When Transports & Provisions arrive in Cape Fear, I will return to embark. Give me early notice and communicate this to Balfour immediately."³²

29

Cornwallis to Balfour, 30 April 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/85, fols. 55-56.

30

Cornwallis to Balfour, 3 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/86, fols. 1-2.

31

Cornwallis to Craig, 3 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/86, fols. 3-4.

32

Cornwallis to Craig, 4 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/86, fols. 5-6.

By 8 May, Cornwallis was optimistic that he could form a
 junction with General Phillips.³³ Four days later, he wrote
 Craig and told the major that the army was ready to cross the
 Roanoke River. Cornwallis had received news of Lord Rawdon's
 victory over Greene at the Battle of Hobkirk's Hill and was
 convinced that "this even if the junction is not effected, will
 probably make embarkation unnecessary. You will therefore in
 concert with Balfour make preparations for your removal."³⁴ On
 13 May, Cornwallis crossed the Roanoke River and marched into
 Virginia.³⁵

The Battle of Hobkirk's Hill, although a British victory,
 was not a decisive one. For the British the situation was
 still grave in South Carolina. Major Craig was surprised that
 Cornwallis persisted in entering Virginia without at least
 detaching part of his army to reinforce Balfour and Rawdon.
 Craig thought Cornwallis was going to meet Phillips at Halifax,
 North Carolina, instead of Virginia. Therefore he was certain
 that Cornwallis would either send reinforcements--and their
 only route to South Carolina would be through Wilmington--or
 turn back and hit Greene in the rear.³⁶

33

Cornwallis to Craig, 8 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO
 30/11/86, fols. 19-20.

34

Cornwallis to Craig, 12 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers,
 PRO 30/11/86, fols. 27-28.

35

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, p. 321.

36

Craig to Balfour, 18 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO
 30/11/86, fols. 84-87.

Cornwallis's decision to carry the war to the Chesapeake was a source of anxiety to Nisbet Balfour. In vain, Balfour tried to warn Cornwallis; by abandoning South Carolina, the Earl was conceding British gains in the backcountry. Eventually the British would be pushed back to Charleston. "The situation here now becomes indeed very distressing," Balfour wrote. He added that "the giving up the country I own, I think should not if possible be determin'd upon, however I do not presume to mention this opinion, or to put in complication with any pleas made for carrying on the War to the Southward--I only cannot help regretting the leaving a country where so many exertions have been made to keep it, and establish our friends in it."³⁷

Craig also felt sympathy for the loyalists--in his case the king's friends who resided in southeastern North Carolina. While he awaited word on Cornwallis's movements, the major prepared to embark from Wilmington. Preparations were slow. Because of their deep draft the vessels were unable to get close to Wilmington. In addition, Craig was determined to allow "everybody who chooses, to come with us, to atone as much as possible for the disappointments we so frequently subject them to."³⁸ Craig understood the loyalists' principal

37

Balfour to Cornwallis, 21 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 93-99.

38

Craig to Balfour, 18 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 84-87.

grievance--repeatedly the British would come to an area and call on the loyalists to declare themselves openly, only to desert them. The sympathy for the loyalists expressed by Craig and Balfour was somehow lost on their commander, the Earl Cornwallis.

In late May, Craig finally received word that Cornwallis had crossed the Roanoke, which was the signal for the major to evacuate Wilmington, march down the Cape Fear River to the waiting transports, and return to Charleston. Craig, however, did not comply. He wrote a reply to Cornwallis, explaining why he believed Wilmington should be held. The situation in southeastern North Carolina had changed, and the major wanted to remain. He told Balfour that "this Country is in a glorious situation for cutting one anothers' throats." The loyalists were ready to rise and were waiting for Craig's orders. Craig added that "was I to give the word a fine scene would begin, however I think it cruelty without a certainty of being ready to support them--if I had that I should soon begin--I am confident if sufferd to remain here I would do much."³⁹

Why were the loyalists now ready to support the British actively when earlier they had ignored Cornwallis's pleas for assistance? First, the king's friends had not trusted the Earl. They did not believe him when he promised to protect them. Craig, on the other hand, had been in Wilmington for

four months, long enough to convince the loyalists that they had a stable base of support. Second, with Cornwallis's and Greene's departures from North Carolina, the British garrison at Wilmington was the only force of regulars remaining in the province. And Craig's principal rival, General Lillington, was no longer an obstacle. When Cornwallis marched to Virginia, Governor Nash ordered Lillington to leave Heron's Bridge and retreat to Kinston. Now southeastern North Carolina was open to Craig; he could communicate with the loyalists, giving them the upper hand in their struggle with the rebels.⁴⁰

An additional reason to stay in Wilmington, was intelligence that Craig had received, indicating that Greene was planning to leave South Carolina and turn north. The intelligence subsequently proved false; still, Craig's other reasons for remaining are compelling and should be quoted at length:

You can have no idea of the consternation which seized the Country on the arrival of the empty transports from the notion which immediately spread that we were going away[.] had I remaind as was at first suppos'd only a few weeks for the supply of Lord Cornwallis's army, my going would not have been attended with such circumstances as it will now after being here four months--Now it will add one to the many instances of the same Kind which have rais'd such a clamour against us and should Greene abandon his attempt on South Carolina which I think probable, the possession of this place will (I think) be absolutely necessary as I can almost answer for the submission of the lower part of the Country at

least. . . . whether I should ever assemble them [the loyalists] so as to employ them to any effect should armies from the other provinces enter this I cannot say but I am pretty confident even with what force I have I could encourage & support them so as to become masters of the Country & disarm the rebels. . . . I dread & most sincerely feel the being reproach'd as the cause of the miseries these poor people will be expos'd to, the moment I quit them. tho' in the present instance it will be unjustly because so far from encouraging them in rising I have done everything I could (except telling them I was to leave them) to dissuade them from it. still it was our coming here that caus'd it.⁴¹

The statement above is especially significant as it shows an understanding of the loyalists that was not common among British officers. It also demonstrates why Craig was successful with the loyalists; he was willing to utilize them as irregular troops to harass the rebels. In effect, the strategy was to beat the rebels at their own game.⁴²

To increase his chances of remaining in Wilmington, Craig proposed a plan to Balfour and Rawdon that would use the loyalist resource. The plan required, however, that the sick and wounded left behind by Cornwallis should remain in Wilmington under Craig's command. Most of these soldiers had

41

Craig to Balfour, 28 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 129-132.

42

Lindley Butler has high praise for Craig, writing that "unlike Cornwallis, who had envisioned large numbers of Loyalists in provincial units supporting the regular army, Craig understood how effective properly supported irregular partisans could be in keeping the Whig civil authorities and military forces confused, scattered, and weak." David Fanning, The Narrative of Colonel David Fanning, ed. Lindley Butler (Davidson, N.C.: Briarpatch Press, 1981), p. 6. The quote is taken from the editor's introduction.

recuperated, so Craig could march from Wilmington with three hundred men and still leave as many troops behind as he had had when he first occupied the town. The major planned to collect loyalists from the New Bern area and from Duplin Court House. Afterward, the little army would march to the area between the Northwest Cape Fear and Pee Dee Rivers, a section of North Carolina that was heavily populated with loyalists. By this time Craig hoped to have twelve hundred troops. He proposed to use this force on Greene's rear. The major had sufficient ammunition and firearms, but no bayonets. His artillery consisted of two 3-pounders. He had thirty mounted men at his disposal, but they lacked swords. Craig was aware of the importance of such a plan; he also realized his own tendency toward overconfidence. "I am apt I know to be sanguine in my projects," he wrote, "but in matters of this consequence I am on my guard against my own disposition."⁴³

Lord Rawdon and Lieutenant Colonel Balfour reviewed the plan and approved it. There was, however, one condition: Craig would have to carry out his plan without the soldiers left behind by Cornwallis. These troops were ordered to Charleston.⁴⁴

43

Craig to Balfour, 2 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 151-152.

44

Rawdon to Cornwallis, 7 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 194-199; Balfour to Cornwallis, 7 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 190-191.

Major Craig had succeeded. He would remain in Wilmington. The loss of the convalescents from Cornwallis's army was a blow, however, that could alter his plan. Still, he was determined to utilize the loyalists, even if the plan were not executed in its original form. But by staying in Wilmington--in contrast to Cornwallis's wish that he leave--Craig was taking a considerable risk. He had the approval of Rawdon and Balfour, but there was no guarantee that Cornwallis would
 45
 concur.

This decision marked the turning point in the British occupation of Wilmington. Heretofore, the primary mission of the expeditionary force had been to supply Cornwallis's invading army. A secondary objective had been to encourage the loyalists to act against the rebels. Now, Craig's only purpose in Wilmington was to utilize the loyalists militarily.

 45

As late as 17 July, Cornwallis wrote Craig, ordering him to evacuate Wilmington, but adding that the major could remain if "you have began any operations in consequence of orders or permission from Lord Rawdon or Lt. Col. Balfour, in that case you will follow their future directions." (Cornwallis to Craig, 17 July 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/88, fols. 28-29.) Later Cornwallis, in the aftermath of Yorktown, appears to have changed his mind. Craig learned of the Earl's displeasure and attempted to appease him with a conciliatory letter. "I should ever esteem it my greatest ambition," Craig wrote, "as well as Duty to pay the most implicit deference to Your Lordships directions, and that I am as incapable of deaveating in the smallest little from them as I am of hearing with indifference that Your Lordship had expressd yourself much displeas'd with me for staying so long at Willmington--I know my Lord that Colonel Balfour's letters to you as well as my own miscarried by which you would have been informed that I remaind here by his & Lord Rawdons directions." Craig to Cornwallis, 3 December 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/71, fols. 41-42.

Cornwallis had failed miserably in his dealings with the loyalists. Time would tell whether Major Craig would have more success.

CHAPTER FOUR

North Carolina at War June-July, 1781

During the summer of 1781, the loyalists of North Carolina posed their first serious threat to the rebels since the Moore's Creek campaign. With the assistance of Major Craig, the loyalists harassed the rebels, preventing the revolutionary government from administering the province effectively. This achievement is a credit to Major Craig's understanding of the loyalist mind: he succeeded where the Earl Cornwallis had failed miserably.

After Cornwallis marched to Virginia, Craig obtained permission from Lord Rawdon and Lieutenant Colonel Balfour to remain in Wilmington. The major convinced his superiors that the British presence in southeastern North Carolina would encourage the loyalists to support the crown actively. Craig was ordered, however, to return the convalescing soldiers from Cornwallis's army to Charleston. He was pleased that Rawdon and Balfour had approved his plan, but he was "doubly mortified at being at the same moment depriv'd of the means of executing it." He pleaded that the convalescents be allowed to remain because some were not well enough to resume duty. The hospital at Wilmington, Craig asserted, was capable of taking care of

these men. In the meantime, those who had recovered could be used in the proposed expedition.¹

In Craig's opinion, it was time for action. The rebels were attempting to raise twenty-seven hundred men to serve in the militia for twelve months. He was confident that, with the help of the loyalists, he could prevent the rebels from strengthening their forces. The major contended, moreover, that "a Majority of the people declaring themselves in one province may induce others to follow the example & might perhaps have the greater effect when supported by no more than the necessary number of Troops from the greater appearance it would have of being voluntary."²

While waiting for a reply from Balfour, Craig took steps to keep Cornwallis's soldiers in Wilmington. A Captain Peacock had been sent to transport the convalescents to Charleston. Craig told Peacock about the plan and requested that the captain delay the departure. Peacock agreed to wait, giving Craig more time to convince Balfour that the convalescents were needed in the expedition. Craig told Balfour that delaying the embarkation was crucial because the loss of Cornwallis's troops would affect the loyalists' morale adversely and "throw instantly the wavering into the Rebel

¹
Craig to Balfour, 12 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 238-239.

²
Craig to Balfour, 12 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 238-239.

Levies." "I cannot help," Craig wrote, "expecting that expedition is on this occasion of the utmost consequences-- everyday brings fresh accounts of the Tories being in Arms in almost every part of the Province, but they want both Arms & Ammunition and leaders--they cannot get to me to be supplied, and must fall very soon if left to themselves."³

At the end of June, Craig was still waiting for Balfour's orders. The pilot boat that had been carrying letters from Wilmington to Charleston was captured. Although he had not secured Balfour's approval, Craig decided to march from Wilmington with four hundred men, including the soldiers from Cornwallis's army. Craig intended to organize the loyalists north of Wilmington and to prevent the rebels in the area from sending reinforcements to Nathanael Greene's army in South Carolina.⁴

Since he had not received authorization to retain the convalescents, Craig sent Captain Peacock to Charleston to obtain instructions from Balfour. The major, in the meantime, would march only thirty miles from Wilmington so Cornwallis's men could be returned if necessary. In his determination to

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Craig to Balfour, 13 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 240-241.

4

Craig to Balfour, 21 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 253-254; Craig to Cornwallis, 23 July 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r65, i51, vl, p705.

utilize Cornwallis's troops, Craig was making decisions that⁵ bordered on insubordination.

When the British marched from Wilmington, Craig was not with them. He entrusted the command to his subordinate, Major Manson. Major Manson marched with two hundred troops to Rutherford's Mills, where he established and fortified a post.⁶ The British began gathering and reaping wheat and herding cattle.⁷ Area rebels were powerless. They watched Manson's movements but were unable to stop him. Alexander Lillington, who had returned to southeastern North Carolina, observed that the Wilmington area would "fall a sacrifice to the Enemy" because other parts of the province were not sending assistance. Efforts to raise the militia were hampered by the incompetence of the rebel leaders. Troops were collected from Onslow, Duplin, and Craven counties. But the units were disbanded because Colonel Waightstill Avery thought the British had returned to Wilmington. Major Manson, however, remained at Rutherford's Mills, and Lillington believed "that there is no Prospect of Driving the Enemy back into Town so that we might

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Craig to Balfour, 21 June 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 253-254.

⁶
According to two North Carolina historians, Rutherford's Mills were located on Ashe's Mill Creek, seven miles east of Burgaw. Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 676; McRee, ed., Iredell, vol. 1, note on p. 526.

⁷
William Caswell to Governor Burke, 2 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 539.

get to our homes. I cannot see with what Justice our country can blame us to make the best terms we can."⁸

Lillington's criticism of the rest of North Carolina for not sending aid was justified. Another militia officer, Colonel James Kenan, warned that unless assistance was given, the "Good people here will be under the Necessity of Giving up in order to Save their property."⁹ Major Manson's troops foraged through the countryside; at one point they reached the New River. The unpredictability of the British movements increased the rebels' anxiety. Kenan ordered a draft of militia but there was no ammunition available. "I have not one round," Kenan said. "I sent to Kingstown But got None. What to do in this I cannot tell. . . . We Cannot take the Field until we are supplied."¹⁰ Major Manson, in addition to procuring food for the British in Wilmington, was disrupting the lives of the rebels in the surrounding areas.

Meanwhile a crisis had developed that caused Craig to remain in Wilmington. A group of loyalists brought seven prisoners to Craig. The major placed the rebels on board a prison ship. Afterward, five of the loyalists were captured and taken to General William Caswell's camp. Caswell promptly

8

Lillington to Burke, 6 July 1781, in Clark ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 540-541.

9

Colonel James Kenan to Burke, 6 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 514.

10

Kenan to Burke, 9 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 520.

ordered the execution of the loyalists. Craig reacted with anger. He placed his prisoners in irons and threatened to retaliate.¹¹ Caswell's action brought sanction from the rebel side as well. One observer told Caswell that "hard will be the case if the unhappy prisoners shall fall Victims for the irregular method you are said to have pursued."¹²

Craig knew he did not have the authority to kill his prisoners in retaliation for the execution of the five loyalists. Instead, he protested directly to Governor Nash, stating that "the inhuman treatment imposed on the King's friends on every occasion and by every party of militia now in arms, obliges me to adopt some serious resolution to put, if possible, an end to it--the deliberate and wanton murders daily committed on them call, I should imagine, as much for your attention as they do for vengeance on my part. It is now my business to assure you, sir, that the former alone can prevent the latter." If nothing was done to restrain the militia, Craig would deliver his prisoners to the loyalists for execution.¹³

¹¹ Craig to Balfour, 28 May 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 129-132.

¹² Sam Ashe to General William Caswell, 28 May 1781, William Caswell Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.

¹³ Craig to Nash, 20 June 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 1023-1025.

Nash never answered Craig's threats because on 25 June the General Assembly elected Dr. Thomas Burke the new governor. Burke, a native of Ireland, had been elected to the Continental Congress in 1776. At first he was a supporter of states' rights, but political experience led him to favor a stronger central government. The new governor was a man of action, possessing a strong will and a hot temper. Burke was sure to give the rebels what they had lacked: a strong wartime leader.

One of Burke's first actions as governor was to reply to Craig's letter. He told Craig that the rebel government did not condone the executions; the governor added that the loyalists were guilty of similar offenses. If Craig insisted on avenging the dead loyalists, Burke would be forced to take "Similar measures against British Prisoners, tho all such measures are utterly repugnant to my disposition." Moreover, he warned Craig not to turn his prisoners over to the loyalists because "the Effect will be very different from what you expect, for altho we should Abhor the following of the Example of our Indian Savage Neighbors in delivering over Prisoners to be tortured . . . yet the example of a nation so polite and celebrated as Great Britain would meet with more respect, and we should probably imitate it with peculiar

advantages should our humanity be obliged to give way to public utility." Craig also was informed that all future correspondence should be addressed to Burke in his official capacity as governor. Burke was a rebellious British subject; the major, as a British officer, could not recognize him as a legal authority. Craig's attitude, in turn, was unacceptable to Burke.¹⁵ As a result of this impasse, the two men quit corresponding.

Although Burke's letter prevented Craig from carrying out the threatened reprisals, atrocities continued on both sides. Loyalists and rebels were equally guilty of acts of arbitrary violence. Craig aided the loyalists; in fact, it is doubtful that the king's friends would have been so active without the support of the British in Wilmington. And the increased violence played into Craig's hands. The breakdown in order provided evidence of the rebels' inability to govern North Carolina.

The British presence in Wilmington gave the loyalists a distinct advantage in the civil war that raged through North Carolina. With Cornwallis's departure to Virginia and Greene's invasion of South Carolina, the British garrison in Wilmington became the only regular force from either side in the province. The loyalists, knowing that they had support in Wilmington,

15

Burke to Craig, 27 June 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 1026-1029.

intensified their activity. The rebel militia, on the other hand, having no force of Continentals to rely on, suffered manpower and supply shortages.

Rebel militia leaders were frustrated by this new attitude of boldness. General Caswell's decision to execute the five loyalists probably stemmed from his foiled attempts to deal peaceably with the king's friends. Caswell offered pardons to loyalists if they would lay down their arms and swear an oath of allegiance to the rebel government. The loyalists, who were encamped in the swamps southwest of the Neuse River, responded by firing on Caswell's troops. Other measures, such as the capture of two prominent loyalist leaders, were equally unsuccessful. When Caswell's men escorted the prisoners to jail, a party of loyalists attacked, killing two militia officers and dispersing the rest of the rebels; the loyalist leaders escaped. Caswell then sent a force to find and attack the loyalists' stronghold. The loyalists, upon detecting the rebel advance, retreated to Wilmington. An exasperated Caswell remarked that "about one hundred and fifty of those artful, designing and deluded people had taken refuge in Wilmington and on their being well armed and equipt for war made a sally out into their old stronghold . . . where they made a stand."¹⁶

16

William Caswell to Burke, 10 July 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C. Caswell did not mention the name of the swamp the loyalists used or who their leaders were.

Bladen County contained a large number of loyalists who, with the encouragement of the British, were forcing the rebels into submission. Out of fifteen militia companies in the county, twelve supported Craig.¹⁷ Colonel Thomas Robeson reported that only seventy or eighty men would openly support the rebel government, while the loyalists had assembled a force almost five hundred strong. In Bladen County, the rebels were "in constant Danger of their Lives by a set of Tories and Robbers that is protected by the British." According to Robeson, the loyalists were "Carrying on a Trade to Wilmington, both by Land and Water, with the British."¹⁸

The situation worsened. By mid-July, Robeson could only raise fifty men to face a loyalist force of four hundred under the command of Hector McNeil. In addition, McNeil was expecting to double the size of his force with reinforcements from Brunswick County and the lower part of Bladen County. Many rebel sympathizers were cowed by Major Craig's proclamation that all citizens swear allegiance to the crown and prepare to enter the loyalist militia by the first of

17

Drayton to Burke, 6 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 513.

18

Colonel Thomas Robeson to the Governor, 10 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 543.

August. Those who did not comply would be treated as rebels,
 19
 and could expect no mercy from the British.

The rebels in Bladen County, outnumbered almost twenty to one, resorted to terrorism. Matthew Colvill, who had recently been appointed a militia colonel by the British, invited a group of men to his house and offered them appointments as officers if they would join the loyalists. The men responded
 20
 by killing Colvill and plundering his house.

Loyalists serving in the field left their families vulnerable to the depredations of the rebels. Lillias McLean, whose husband Daniel had joined the British in Wilmington, "was plundered of every thing belonging to her, & ordered away (in
 21
 the most deorable condition) to where her Husband was." Normand McLeod, a lieutenant in the Corps of Highlanders, was in Wilmington, where he was shocked to see his wife "in the most miserable state for Want of the Necessaries of Life, she being robb'd of every Thing, even her wearing apparell obliged

19

Robeson to Burke, 15 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 546-547; Drayton to Burke, 6 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 511.

20

Heirs of Matthew Colvill, AO 12/37; Troxler, Loyalist Experience, p. 36; James Emmett to Burke, 17 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 548-549; Robeson to Burke, 15 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 546-547; Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, pp. 682-683; William Dickson to Robert Dickson, 30 November 1784, in Carr, ed., Dickson Letters, pp. 18-19. Ashe calls the victim McLaurin Colvill, while William Dickson refers to him as Maturine. The family's claim gives the name as Matthew, which is accepted here.

21

Memorial of Lillias McLean, AO 13/121.

to leave her children to the Care of Providence and take Refuge within the British lines." ²² William McQueen, a loyalist from Anson County, reported that his wife and children were "stripped of all their Cloaths and Provision, his House and Fences set on Fire, when his Children were dying in their Mothers Arms and two of them died for want of necessary support and their Friends could not venture to bury them in the day time, for fear of losing their Lives also." ²³

At Cross Creek, a loyalist named McLeod was murdered and his wife and children were stripped of all their clothing and provisions. Those who wanted to help the family were afraid of reprisals. Moreover, the men at Cross Creek who protested had "their Lives threat'ned . . . & are obliged in Consequence to keep out of the way." ²⁴

Such outrages shocked the sensibilities of some rebels. General Stephen Drayton made an impassioned protest to Governor Burke:

I have often had occasion to see & lament the want of method in most of our public Transactions; more especially those, respecting the convicting reclaiming or punishing of Tories; & I believe firmly, that we have by our own imprudencies & irregular proceedings made more Enemies than have become so from mere inclination. . . . Civil Wars are always attended with something horrid. The bare Idea of Friend against

22

Memorial of Normand McLeod, AO 13/121.

23

Memorial of William McQueen, AO 13/121.

24

Drayton to Burke, 6 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, pp. 511-512.

Friend & nearest Relatives in armed opposition shocks human nature! But good God! Sir, let us not countenance barbarities that would disgrace the savage!²⁵

Governor Burke, an active and energetic man, was taking steps to curb the violence. Burke shrewdly realized that the side that could return order to North Carolina--whether it was the rebels or the British--would win the support of people who were weary from the ravages of war. The governor supported the vigorous enforcement of the laws against acts of "arbitrary violence" committed by loyalists and rebels. Civil officials would be punished if they did not carry out their duties. Burke hoped that vigilant law enforcement officials and a forceful judicial system would return order and stability to North Carolina.²⁶

Burke's ideas were good, but hard to implement. Robert Rowan, the justice of the peace in Cumberland County, issued a warrant to arrest a man who had committed a felony; but there was no one in the county who would make the arrest. Rowan told Governor Burke that "there is now in the County of Cumberland a set of Fellows that bid Defiance to the Civil Law, several horrid murders and robberies having been committed there lately

25

Drayton to Burke, 6 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 511.

26

A. Roger Ekirch, "Whig Authority and Public Order in Backcountry North Carolina, 1776-1783," in An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry During the American Revolution, ed. Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1985), pp. 118-119.

with impunity." Rowan concluded that if the law could not be enforced in Cumberland County, "the peaceable Inhabitants must be under the necessity of removing themselves very speedily."²⁷

The lawlessness prevailing in North Carolina was not totally the work of loyalists and rebels. Some of the disaffected were committing violent acts as an expression of their own dislike for the rebel leadership; their rebellion was not necessarily a sign of allegiance to the King. Many of these people, denied political equality in the past, now utilized the disorder of a war-torn province to express their pent-up frustrations. The impotence of the ruling authorities left these belligerents confident that their acts of violence would go unpunished.²⁸

It was imperative, therefore, that order be restored. It was time for the rebel government to take decisive action, as Burke told the General Assembly:

The pernicious license with which the people in the Southern Counties have been pillaged and persecuted, no doubt has rendered them vindictive and desperate, and we have very great reason to apprehend the greatest cruelties and devastation from their resentments. Such calamities will not be confined to the Individuals

27

Robert Rowan to the Governor, 13 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 545.

28

Ronald Hoffman, "The 'Disaffected' in the Revolutionary South," in The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism, ed. Alfred F. Young (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), pp. 311-312. It is Hoffman's conclusion that the backcountry struggle was more than just a rebel-loyalist conflict.

whose intemperate Measures have greatly increased the distress of the Country and the number of our Enemies but must fall Indiscriminately on all where the foe may prove superior. These considerations afford strong reasons for putting the state as soon as possible in a situation to support them, suppress them.²⁹

Burke knew that patience was needed. Before order could be restored, the militia had to be reorganized, supplied, and provided with strong leadership. Burke received daily reports of undisciplined soldiers, ineffectual leaders, and supply and manpower shortages.

Colonel Guilford Dudley twice ordered his regiment to march to Cross Creek; each time both officers and privates refused to obey. An irritated Dudley said that the soldiers were "determined to abide by the consequences of a disobedience to orders. I can do no more with these men. It becomes irksome and disagreeable to command."³⁰ Governor Burke feared similar mutinies by other companies because the militia were "little accustomed to obedience or any regular discipline."³¹

Manpower shortages stemmed partly from the British presence in Wilmington. Loyalists grew increasingly bold, knowing they could rely on the British for support. As a result, rebel militia drafts were not filled. In Duplin

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Burke to the General Assembly, 14 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 1042.

³⁰

Colonel Guilford Dudley to Burke, 5 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 1039.

³¹

Burke to the General Assembly, 7 July 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

County, Captain George Doherty could not raise a company because more than half of the men "have been among the Tories, or [are] so Disaffected that they will not appear." Moreover, the few that joined Doherty were poorly clothed; the captain observed that "not one among them has got A second change, & some have hardly Dudds to cover them."³²

Meanwhile the British were extending their sphere of influence through southeastern North Carolina. One observer noted that "Maj. Craig continues his ravages for thirty and forty miles up Cape Fear, with little or no opposition."³³ In addition, area loyalists were sending valuable provisions to their allies. The people who lived along the Black River sent "great quantities of beef" to the British in Wilmington.³⁴ Craig returned the favors. Captain Hector McNeil, after a skirmish in which his force suffered heavy losses, retreated to Wilmington, was reinforced with sixty loyalists, and left the next day to fight again. Governor Burke, for the time being, could do little but monitor the British movements. He ordered General John Butler to send five hundred infantry to patrol the

32

George Doherty to General Jethro Sumner, 22 June 1781, Jethro Sumner Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.

33

Sumner to Greene, 25 June 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 495.

34

J. Hawkins to Nash, 17 June 1781, Governors' Papers 6.

area between the Cape Fear and Neuse Rivers. Burke requested
 35
 daily reports detailing the enemy's maneuvers.

Major Craig's strategy of utilizing the loyalists as insurgents was working. Because of the disorder that prevailed in North Carolina, the rebel government was unable to exert its authority. At the same time, Craig was taking steps to ensure that the loyalists had energetic and forceful leaders. David Fanning, a notorious loyalist leader from Chatham County, was challenged by William Elrod, a fellow loyalist who was jealous of Fanning's preeminence. At a meeting, area loyalists chose Fanning to command their militia. Fanning, in turn, travelled to Wilmington, carrying a petition from the people requesting Major Craig's approval of their decision. Craig responded by appointing Fanning as colonel of the loyalist militia of Randolph and Chatham counties. Fanning was authorized to "assemble the militia and lead them against any parties of Rebels or others the King's enemies as often as necessary, to compel all persons whatever to join you and seize and disarm and when necessary to detain in Confinement all Rebels or others acting against his Majesties Government and to do all
 36
 other acts becomeing a Kings Officer and Good Subject."

35

William Caswell to Burke, 31 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 553; Burke to General John Butler, 26 June 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

36

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 37-39.

Perhaps none of Craig's acts caused more outrage among the rebels than his appointment of Fanning as a militia colonel. And certainly none of Craig's acts produced better results for the British.³⁷ Fanning was born in Virginia in 1755. He was living in South Carolina at the outset of the war and immediately joined the loyalists. After hazardous service in Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina, he moved to the Deep River region in Chatham County, North Carolina, in late 1780. Cornwallis's invasion of North Carolina in 1781 brought Fanning into active service again. He recruited loyalists and scouted for Cornwallis. After the Earl's departure, Fanning remained active, though he lacked a commission from the British. Now Craig had given him authority and legitimacy as a commander.³⁸

Fanning already possessed a reputation for ruthlessness. And his odd personal appearance added spice to the stories that were circulating about his exploits. A scalp disease had left him bald and he wore a silk skull cap to hide his condition.

37

Robert O. DeMond writes that "probably no friend of the government accomplished more for the British, and certainly none received less credit, either during the conflict or after its close" than Fanning. DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, p. 140. Lindley Butler, the editor of Fanning's journal, concludes "that if he had not been a Loyalist he would rank with the great Whig partisans--Francis Marion, Thomas Sumter, William R. Davie, and Andrew Pickens." Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 3. The quote is taken from the editor's introduction.

38

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 1-5; DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, pp. 141-142.

Certainly Fanning was guilty of atrocities. But he was no worse than his rebel counterparts, and there are many recorded incidents where he showed mercy to his captives.³⁹

After leaving Wilmington, Fanning returned to the Deep River and called on the loyalists to join him. He assembled 150 men, but most of them were unarmed; only fifty-three were retained and the rest were discharged. Fanning learned that prominent area rebels had gathered at Chatham Court House, where several loyalists were to be tried for refusing to fight against the British. He ordered a march, and on 17 July his troops entered the town. The rebels were taken completely by surprise. Fanning took fifty-three prisoners, among them a Continental captain, three members of the General Assembly, and all the militia officers of the county except two who were not present. All the prisoners were paroled except fourteen who

39

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 2; DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, p. 141. E.W. Caruthers, in his compilation of Revolutionary War stories and traditions, wrote about Fanning's "deeds of robbery, devastation and wanton barbarity." According to Caruthers, Fanning's "deeds of shame and cruelty were often perpetrated faster than the pen of a ready writer could record them." (E.W. Caruthers, Revolutionary Incidents and Sketches of Character, Chiefly in the "Old North State" [Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell, 1854], p. 156.) Fanning's place in history has suffered at the hands of biased chroniclers like Caruthers. Still, Fanning's later years as an exile in New Brunswick, where he antagonized local residents while serving in the Legislative Assembly and also was tried and convicted of rape, indicate that his reputation was at least partly deserved. (See Carole Watterson Troxler, "'To Git out of a Troublesome neighborhood': David Fanning in New Brunswick," The North Carolina Historical Review vol. LVI [October 1979]: 344-365.)

were considered dangerous; these men were escorted to
 40
 Wilmington.

While the party was en route to Wilmington, ten of the prisoners, led by General George Ramsey, wrote a letter to Governor Burke. They told the governor that Fanning's men "complained of the greatest cruelties, either to their persons or property." According to the loyalists, Colonel Philip Alston, an infamous rebel from Cumberland County, "a day or two ago . . . took a man on the road and put him to instant Death." The prisoners wrote that

Notwithstanding the Cruel treatment these people have received, We have been treated with the greatest Civility and with the utmost respect and politeness by our Commanding Officer, Col. Fanning, to whom we are under the greatest Obligations, and we beg leave to inform your Excellency that unless an immediate stop is put to such inhuman practices we plainly discover the whole country will be deluged in Blood, and the innocent will suffer for the guilty.⁴¹

Although the prisoners spoke favorably of their captors, they were probably coerced. Obviously, Fanning would not have allowed the letter to be written unless he approved of its contents. Moreover, a month later, after the prisoners had been released from Wilmington, James Williams, a signer of the letter, told Governor Burke: "I am told Your Excellency

40

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 43-45; DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, p. 143.

41

General George Ramsey and others to Burke, 22 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 550-551.

understood our Letters from Mr. Fall's Mill, Raft Swamp. We
⁴²
 were very unhappy there."

Fanning did not rest on his laurels, but immediately returned to action. This time Philip Alston was his target. Alston's men had killed one of Fanning's followers, Kenneth Black, and the loyalists were determined to avenge Black's death. Fanning received intelligence that Alston, with a party of twenty-five men, was at the Deep River. The rebels detected Fanning's approach and retreated to Alston's home, which was known as "the House in the Horseshoe." The attack on the house lasted three hours. Finally, after losing four men, Alston surrendered. Only three rebels finished the fight without wounds. Two of Fanning's men were killed and four were wounded. One of the dead was a British officer identified as Captain Andrews. Alston's wife begged Fanning to spare the
⁴³
 prisoners. Her request was granted.

The Cape Fear Valley was in turmoil. Over six hundred loyalists from Cumberland and Bladen Counties under the command of Colonel Duncan Ray gathered at McFall's Mill, thirty miles

42

James Williams to Burke, 22 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 572. The conclusion that the letter was written under duress is not the author's alone. E.W. Caruthers makes the same case. In this instance, Caruthers' research, including his attitude toward Fanning, is judicious and reasoned. (Caruthers, Revolutionary Incidents, pp. 165-169.) Ashe, in his history of North Carolina, writes that the prisoners faced execution, and wrote the letter to save their lives. (Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 681.)

43

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 47-49, note 79 on p. 48, note 80 on p. 49.

from Cross Creek. There was little that the outnumbered rebels could do to stop the loyalists. Therefore it is ironic that the loyalists began making overtures to the rebels. A Major Richardson, who had been a captive of the loyalists, was released after promising that he would try to persuade the rebels to negotiate a treaty.⁴⁴ It is unclear why the loyalists, in an obvious position of strength, would want a cease-fire. A plausible explanation is that the loyalists could not keep such a large force in the field for a long time; therefore, they wished to negotiate while they had the upper hand.

Colonel Robeson decided to take advantage of the opportunity. He proposed that both sides appoint three men to meet and reach an agreement. The loyalists would choose the meeting place.⁴⁵ A rebel officer commented that "the great uncertainty when we shall receive any Assistance, and the situation of the Counties, surrounded on all sides with Enemies, we thought it to the interest of the friends of the Country to endeavour by some instrument of writing to tie their

44

Captain Edward Winston to Burke, 20 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 549-550.

45

Robeson to Colonel Duncan Ray and Captain Hector McNeil, 17 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, pp. 542-543.

[the loyalists'] hands, and in some measure trust to their Honor for our safety."⁴⁶

Governor Burke did not approve the treaty because the loyalists showed no "intentions of submission, especially, as in their answer, they declare themselves British subjects and refer to the command which they may receive from Maj. Craig." If the loyalists had said that they intended to submit to the rebel government, Burke would have approved the truce. Instead, he vehemently opposed "any treaty, truce or convention which may restrain the forces of the Counties respectively from performing the requisite Militia duties, which I shall, as Commander in Chief require of them, and should any Officer or Soldier enter into any such engagement, I shall consider the same as absolutely void, and if any officer or soldier persists in observing it, I shall deem him criminal."⁴⁷ That Robeson and the others would conclude a truce before consulting the governor is indicative of the rebel government's lack of authority.

The fighting continued. The Bladen County rebels had expected the cease-fire to relieve their distress. With no hope of relief, and outnumbered five to one, their prospects were indeed bleak. The officers appealed to Governor Burke, stating that "a large party of Tories and robbers" were "daily

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Winston to Burke, 20 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 549-550.

⁴⁷

Burke to Emmet, 30 July 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

plundering, and destroying our Stock of cattle, and robbing our houses of everything they can get." In addition, Colonel Duncan Ray had reiterated Major Craig's threat that all people who did not swear allegiance to the Crown by the first of August would "have all their property destroyed and laid waste." The officers asked Burke "to assist us speedily with troops, or otherwise we shall be all broke up and be oblige to give way and leave the place, which will be greatly to the advantage of our Enemy and will still increase their number."⁴⁸

Although he sympathized with his officers' plight, Burke was unable to send relief. Sending out small detachments to help the beleaguered rebels would not alleviate the problem. Burke was convinced that "a powerful and well appointed force" was needed to defeat the loyalists. He was busy organizing a force and procuring supplies. Burke was "impatient to be in action," but he realized that North Carolina was "in so feeble and disordered a state, that many essential things remain to be done, before a competent force can take the field." In the meantime, he urged the militia officers to be patient.⁴⁹ The governor decided that a large and well-armed army was needed not only to defeat the loyalists, but also to encounter the

48

Thomas Brown and Thomas Robeson to Burke, 30 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 1043-1044.

49

Burke to Brown and Robeson, [undated], Governors' Letter Book 3.

principal cause of North Carolina's problems--the British at Wilmington.

Burke constantly received pleas for assistance; but he could do little but offer encouragement. He had to wait until his plan was fully developed and success was ensured. Meanwhile the situation worsened in the Cape Fear Valley. Six loyalists under the command of Colonel Ray stole a canoe on the Cape Fear River and transported between sixty and seventy of their comrades to the east side of the river. After all the loyalists were across, they surrounded a plantation belonging to the Sprawls family. Two rebels, Andrew Beard and a Mr. Travis, were travelling from Wake County and happened to arrive at Sprawls' plantation at the same time. The loyalists immediately shot and killed Beard; Travis, the Sprawls family, and all the plantation slaves were taken prisoner. In addition, the loyalists stole Sprawls' horses, some salt, and "his own and the buckles out of his wife's shoes." After marching a short distance along the river, the loyalists released Mr. Sprawls and the slaves.⁵⁰ News of the raid reached Cross Creek, where the rebels "embodied all in our power, which was a number much too small to pursue." They moved to the northeast side of the river; there, Colonel James Emmet reported, the rebels were "endeavouring to collect our

Men, but they appear so dispirited, that I fear our Country
 will fall without . . . timely assistance."⁵¹

Again prominent rebels appealed to Burke, and again they received a disappointing reply. The governor recommended that Colonel Emmet move all the boats in the Cape Fear to the east bank to prevent further loyalist crossings. Moreover, Emmet should have the boats guarded and place a mounted patrol on the west side of the river to monitor loyalist activity. Residents on the west bank of the river were advised to move to the other side. Beyond this little could be done until Burke had formulated his plan to drive the British and loyalists from
 North Carolina.⁵²

During the weeks of fighting, many prisoners had been taken by both sides. It was necessary to arrange for the exchange of these prisoners. Negotiations were hampered, however, because the rival leaders, Major Craig and Governor Burke, refused to communicate directly. Because Craig refused to acknowledge that Burke was the governor, and Burke had insisted that his office be respected, the two men stopped corresponding. To Craig, Burke was a rebellious British

51

Emmet to Burke, 31 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 590.

52

Burke to Emmet, 2 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3: Burke to Emmet, 3 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

subject; the major correctly recognized the royal governor,⁵³
 Josiah Martin, as the chief executive of North Carolina.

General Allen Jones discovered a way to get around this stalemate. William Hooper wanted to visit Wilmington in hopes of removing his family and salvaging his property. To ensure Hooper's safety, Jones proposed that the Wilmingtonian represent the rebel government in negotiations with the British. Rebel prisoners of war had "long languished in captivity." As a result, militia officers were reluctant to take the field because there was no cartel for the exchange of prisoners.⁵⁴

Burke was intrigued by Jones's idea. Cornwallis and Greene had recently agreed upon a cartel for the exchange of their prisoners. The governor wanted to know how the cartel would affect the prisoners held in North Carolina. He proposed William Hooper as an intermediary to arrange a prisoner exchange. Burke asked Major Craig to arrange for Hooper's safety while the negotiations were in progress.⁵⁵

Before Hooper departed, he received instructions on how to deal with Craig. Burke noted potential problems with a prisoner exchange. Of primary concern were North Carolina

53

Kniep, "William Hooper," pp. 427-428.

54

General Allen Jones to Burke, 4 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 539-540.

55

Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, p. 318; [Burke] to Craig, 9 July 1781, Governors' Papers 9.

citizens who had supported the British; the rebel government considered the loyalists to be guilty of treason. "I will employ the power wherewith I am invested to mitigate the severity of the Laws," Burke said, "and put such adherents of the enemy as are within my power in condition to be exchanged for such of our Citizens as have fallen into their hands."⁵⁶

Negotiations, however, were never commenced. Craig, having never received a copy of the cartel, refused to discuss a prisoner exchange. Instead, he invited Hooper to visit Wilmington "for the purpose of visiting your Family, and you will be pleased to rely on my Honour as the pledge for your personal safety till your return."⁵⁷

Hooper visited Wilmington with his fellow exile, Alexander Maclaine, in late July. Craig's regard for Hooper was so great that the major ignored Maclaine, "while to Mr. Hooper, he paid the most marked and respectful attention."⁵⁸ Hooper, despite the deference shown by Craig, was unable to remove his family from Wilmington.

Toward the end of July, the anxiety of rebels in southeastern North Carolina increased. The deadline that Craig had set for inhabitants to declare their allegiance to the king --the first of August--was approaching. The British rebuilt

56

[Burke] to Hooper, 10 July 1781, *Governors' Papers* 9.

57

Craig to Hooper, 20 July 1781, in Clark, ed., *State Records*, vol. 15, pp. 554-555.

58

Quoted in Kneip, "William Hooper," p. 430.

Heron's Bridge and Major Manson moved there to establish a
⁵⁹ post. General Lillington summed up the rebel's chances. "I
 am sorry to inform you Sir," he told Governor Burke, "that at
 this time when we Dayly Expect the Enemy to March Up into the
 Country, that we have Not Three Rounds a man, & I know not
⁶⁰ where to apply."

Preparations for Craig's advance continued. Colonel James
 Kenan, with a force of 330, camped at Rockfish Creek Bridge,
 which was along the route Craig was expected to take. The
 rebel outlook, in view of the supply shortages, was
 pessimistic. General William Caswell told Burke that "Should
 Major Craige move out shall raise what men I can arm, but fear
 it will be very few as Arms are very Scarce and Grain more so,
 as there is little or none between Tar River and Cape Fear."
⁶¹

Andrew Armstrong went to Wilmington under the protection
 of a white flag and gathered valuable intelligence. He found
 that "in and about Wilmington, the number of the Enemy does not
 exceed one thousand, Tories included." The British appeared
 confident. Armstrong reported that "Major Craig and his
 officers seem to consider themselves in perfect security. I am

59

Kenan to Burke, 15 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State
 Records, vol. 15, p. 535; Lillington to Burke, 24 July 1781, in
 Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 569.

60

Lillington to Burke, 24 July 1781, in Clark, ed., State
 Records, vol. 15, p. 569.

61

William Caswell to Burke, 31 July 1781, in Clark, ed.,
State Records, vol. 22, p. 553.

informed that every Sunday, he and a few of them ride ten or twelve miles down upon the Sound."⁶²

Major Craig was ready to act, but he was handicapped by an old problem: the impending evacuation of the soldiers from Cornwallis's army. He had delayed their departure for two months. Now vessels were to arrive soon to carry off the troops. Craig had enough loyalist support; what he needed were more British regulars.⁶³ Unfortunately for Craig, the war was entering a crucial phase in South Carolina and Virginia. His pleas for additional troops would go unheeded.

Because of the imminent departure of Cornwallis's soldiers, Craig abandoned any hope of assembling a combined British-loyalist force to move against Greene's rear. Balfour promised to send reinforcements if he could spare any men from South Carolina.⁶⁴ Craig told Balfour that the rebel militia "levies go on very slow and they have not a grain of ammunition. the only thing that distresses me now is lest you should not be able to send me any Men." What bothered Craig

62

Andrew Armstrong to Burke, 30 July 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

63

Craig to Cornwallis, 23 July 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r65, i51, v1, p705. This letter was intercepted.

64

Craig to Cornwallis, 23 July 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r65, i51, v1, p705; Craig to [Balfour], 30 July 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 338-339. Although the addressee's name is not on the letter, it is obvious from the contents that it was intended for Balfour.

most was losing Cornwallis's troops. In a blunt statement to Balfour, that hints at the major's rebelliousness, Craig said, "I have made bustle enough to prevent his getting Men from this Port."⁶⁵ Craig's disenchantment is understandable. Although he was utilizing the loyalists effectively, he was disappointed because he could not do more. Craig could see, as few British officers had seen, how effective the loyalists were as guerrilla fighters. Now he was being deprived of the manpower necessary to extend his operations further into North Carolina, and even into South Carolina.⁶⁶ Still, Craig planned to leave Wilmington at the beginning of August to carry out his threats on the rebels.

On the first of August, Craig marched from Wilmington with 250 British regulars and 80 loyalists.⁶⁷ The major had stipulated that all inhabitants "must petition in form, for the privilege" of being labeled British subjects. Those who did not petition would "be considered in a state of rebellion and their estates are to be seized upon and themselves put on board a Prison Ship."⁶⁸ These were not idle threats. Craig intended

⁶⁵

Craig to [Balfour], 30 July 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 338-339.

⁶⁶

It is unclear when the soldiers from Cornwallis's army left Wilmington.

⁶⁷

Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 686.

⁶⁸

Armstrong to Burke, 30 July 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

to support his words with force. And the rebels were unprepared to stop his advance.

CHAPTER FIVE

The British Ascendancy 1 August - 11 September, 1781

The first of August had arrived. Major Craig's grace period was over; it was time for the British to march into the countryside and punish the recalcitrant inhabitants who would not swear allegiance to the crown. The rebels had prepared much for this day. Still, the undisciplined rebel militia were no match for the efficient British regulars. Governor Burke recognized this problem and ordered his militia officers to avoid direct engagements with the British. The militia were ordered to watch Craig's movements and engage British detachments only when the rebels had superior numbers and held a stronger position. Rebel encampments should be protected by chevaux-de-frise to prevent surprise attacks by the British cavalry.¹

Despite these precautions, the first rebel detachment in Craig's path, Colonel James Kenan's force of 330 at the Rockfish Creek Bridge, was surprised and routed. In fact, Kenan was defeated because he disobeyed Burke's orders-- another example of a militia officer being as undependable as the troops in his command.

On 2 August, Craig's force reached Rockfish Creek, a small stream forming the border between New Hanover and Duplin

1

Burke to Kenan, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

Counties. Kenan, though he had every reason to expect Craig's arrival, did not become aware of the British presence until the redcoats were three miles away. Notwithstanding Governor Burke's orders, the colonel decided to make a stand. Craig sent his cavalry down the stream to hit the rebels' flank. The British crossed the creek undetected and came upon Kenan's pickets. Instead of falling back to inform the main rebel body of the flanking maneuver, the pickets fled, allowing the British cavalry to come within a half mile of the camp before they were detected. The cavalry attacked the rebel flank, while the rest of Craig's force assaulted the bridge head-on. Kenan's troops fired on the attackers, but the rebel's ammunition was soon exhausted. They immediately fled; the British light horse followed, capturing twenty of the fleet-footed rebels. Thus the so-called Battle of Rockfish Creek was little more than a skirmish.² It demonstrated that, when

2

Kenan to Burke, 2 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 593; Burke to Caswell, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Burke to Greene, 9 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Howard H. Peckham, ed., The Toll of Independence: Engagements & Battle Casualties of the American Revolution (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 89. A rebel militia officer named Captain Harget, though not a participant in the skirmish, contended that the rebels did not fire on the British, "unless it was the Sentry at the Bridge." (Captain Harget to Colonel Waightstill Avery, 4 August 1781, Waightstill Avery Papers, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.) William Dickson fought in the battle and later recalled that "I narrowly escaped being taken or cut down by the dragoons." Dickson estimated that Kenan's force totalled 600, including 200 militia from Bladen County under the command of Colonel Thomas Brown. (William Dickson to Robert Dickson, 30 November 1784, in Carr, ed., Dickson Letters, p. 17.) Later,

fighting on equal terms, the rebel militia were no match for the disciplined British regulars.

Governor Burke was angry and dismayed that his orders had been disobeyed. He concluded that Kenan's defeat "was owing to the want of due precaution and the imprudence of attempting a stand under the several disadvantages of inferior numbers, want of cavalry and uncovered flanks, not to mention the want of discipline."³ The governor vented his rage on Kenan. "In consequence of this indiscreet officer," Burke wrote, "the country is now uncovered." A large militia force had been dispersed; it was possible that this defeat would hinder the drafting of Continental and militia troops, as well as Burke's plan to raise a large force to attack the British and the loyalists. The damage was done. The rebels' only hope was that the British would return to Wilmington. With that in mind, Burke ordered General William Caswell to harass the British rear. He ordered the militia in front of Craig to "retreat and avoid all action, except with parties greatly inferior to them, and no where will it be of any use to make a

2

(continued) however, Dickson revised his figures, stating that Kenan had 400 men at Rockfish Creek. (See A.R. Newsome, ed., "Twelve North Carolina Counties, 1810-1811," The North Carolina Historical Review vol. V [October 1926]: 436.) Kenan's return of 330 men is accepted here.

3

Burke to Lillington, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

stand against them in force." ⁴ In effect, Burke was conceding southeastern North Carolina to Craig's ravages. The British were headed to New Bern, formerly the royal capital of North Carolina, and the rebels could do nothing to stop them. A frustrated Burke complained to General Nathanael Greene about "the little regard paid to my orders." The defeat at Rockfish Creek demonstrated "how very deficient we are in military sagacity and diligence." ⁵ Faced with a formidable opponent, rebel militia officers should have followed the directives of Governor Burke. But, as the exasperated chief executive acknowledged, the ill-managed and disorganized rebel militia were unable, or unwilling, to heed explicit orders.

Compounding Burke's problems were the actions of the loyalists in Bladen, Cumberland, and Anson Counties. These operations had been planned to coincide with Craig's march from Wilmington. The loyalists, under the command of Colonels Hector McNeil and Duncan Ray, had assembled at Drowning Creek, where they gathered livestock and forced all able-bodied inhabitants to join them. Armed "with good British muskets and

4

Burke to William Caswell, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3. Stephen Drayton, upon hearing of the skirmish at Rockfish Creek, also was highly critical of Kenan's performance, writing that "no excuse can be made for an officer that allows himself to be surprised by an Enemy whom he had every reason to expect momentarily." Drayton to Burke, 8 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

5

Burke to Greene, 9 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

powder and lead and cartridge paper,"⁶ the loyalists "frequently way laid the Roads, made prisoners of passengers, and robbed their waggons and carts of the salt and other necessaries." Samuel Spencer, an Anson County rebel, recognized the source of the problem. "It seems in vain for our People to attempt to quell those Tories," he wrote, "so long as they can retire to the neighborhood of the British at Wilmington whenever they are pushed."⁷

Burke agreed. But his efforts to organize a counteroffensive to drive the British and loyalists from North Carolina were thwarted constantly. The inefficiencies that had plagued the rebel government throughout the war continued to do so during Burke's administration. For instance, the governor was required to consult his council before issuing certain orders to the militia. Burke, however, despite several appeals, was unable to get his council together for a meeting. Moreover, while the governor acknowledged that a large force, serving a long tour of duty, was needed to operate against the British, Continental and militia officers were unable to raise⁸ enough troops to carry out operations. Burke conceded that owing to "the great derangement and weakness of the Country,"

⁶
Thomas Wade to Burke, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

⁷
Samuel Spencer to Burke, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

⁸
Smith, "Creation of an American State," pp. 456-457.

his plans could "not be effected without some lapse of time."⁹
 In the meantime, he encouraged his distressed officers in the
 Drowning Creek area to attack the loyalists "when you can with
 prudence . . . remembering always that we carry on war like
 civilized people."¹⁰

These problems were obvious to General Greene in South
 Carolina. He therefore decided to attack the British at
 Wilmington. Greene ordered Lieutenant Colonel Henry "Light
 Horse Harry" Lee and his Legion, Captain Robert Kirkwood's
 Delaware Regiment and Captain Levin Handy's Maryland
 Continentals, to prepare for an expedition to relieve
 Wilmington. Lee dispatched one of his subordinates, a Captain
 Rudolph, with some infantry to reconnoiter the defences at
 Wilmington. Rudolph's reconnaissance was successful; he found
 there were sufficient small boats and canoes to transport
 the infantry across the Cape Fear River, while the horses could
 swim across. The garrison at Wilmington, Rudolph observed, was
 too small to man the extensive works guarding the town. The
 rebels decided that a quick surprise attack would carry the
 town. Before the operation began, however, word was received
 that the French West Indies fleet probably would arrive off the
 coast that autumn. Greene, surmising that the French presence

⁹
 Burke to Lillington, 6 August 1781, Governors' Letter
 Book 3.

¹⁰
 Burke to Wade, 12 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book
 3.

would force the British to evacuate Wilmington, cancelled the attack. Also, John Rutledge, the rebel governor of South Carolina, had opposed the expedition, hoping Greene's entire force could remain in his province.¹¹

Although he had cancelled his own operations against the British at Wilmington, Greene supported Governor Burke's plan to rid North Carolina of the loyalist-redcoat threat. Greene's comments summarize the situation in North Carolina and outline the steps necessary to restore order to the province. He wrote Governor Burke:

I perfectly agree with you in opinion that the best way of silencing the Tories is by routing the Enemy from Wilmington; for while they have footing there the Tories will receive such encouragement as to keep their hopes and expectations alive; and their incursions will be continued. Nor will it be in your power to crush them with all the force you can raise, as they act in small Parties, and appear in so many different shapes, and have so many hiding places and secret springs of intelligence that you may wear out an Army, and still be unable to subdue them. Strike at the root of the evil by removing the British. . . . I have long had it in contemplation to attempt something against Wilmington; but my force and situation has put it out of my power. I shall be happy to aid you in advice or in any other way which may serve to give success to your plan. And it will afford me more pleasure to see the place reduced by an effort of the State than in any other way as it will more effectually damp the hopes of the Enemy, and increase the importance of the natural strength of the Country than any other mode.¹²

11

Henry Lee, Memoirs of the War in the Southern Department of the United States, ed. Robert E. Lee (New York: University Publishing Company, 1870), pp. 446-448.

12

Greene to Burke, 12 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 605.

Burke continued his preparations. Because the rebels lacked strong military leaders, the governor resolved to command the proposed expedition himself. He also decided that his presence was necessary to facilitate planning. Therefore, he would move whenever it was necessary to oversee preparations personally.¹³ Burke suffered a setback, however, on 13 August; while going to church his horses ran off, wrecking the carriage and throwing him to the ground. The governor sustained several bruises on his body and cuts on his face, forcing him to cancel a trip to Halifax.¹⁴

Meanwhile Major Craig drew closer to New Bern. The British remained in Duplin County for over a week, burning and plundering rebel plantations, destroying crops, stealing slaves, and enlisting loyalists to fight for the crown. Men over fifty years old were required to take an oath of allegiance to the king; all others were compelled to take up their arms and join the British on the march to New Bern.¹⁵ The number of loyalists with Craig increased to four hundred. Nathan Bryan told a story that could have been repeated by many rebels: "The British Army . . . called on me and took off all my negroes and horses and robbed my house of our clothing. Their

13

Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," p. 102.

14

James Read to General Allen Jones, 13 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

15

William Caswell to Burke, 20 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 568.

malice was principally against my family as we were the principal sufferers. We lost 60 prime slaves." ¹⁶ One Duplin County resident accused the British of "committing depredations and Enticeing Negroes to Desert their Masters and go with them." ¹⁷ Although the rebels suspected that Craig intended to arm the slaves to fight against their former masters, there is no evidence that the major was able to effect such a plan. ¹⁸ If Craig had utilized the slaves it would have been an effective psychological weapon against the rebels.

General William Caswell, with 160 cavalry, monitored the British movements, while General Lillington, with a force of 600, was encamped south of Kinston. On 15 August, Major Craig detached 300 of his infantry and 50 light horse to surprise Lillington. Caswell, however, attacked the British light horse; the British returned the charge, and the rebels, lacking swords, retreated. A Captain Gordon, the loyalist commander of the light horse, was killed during the action. Caswell's attack delayed the British advance, giving Lillington time to retreat. ¹⁹

¹⁶

Colonel Nathan Bryan to Burke, 6 September 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, pp. 634-635.

¹⁷

Newsome, ed., "North Carolina Counties," p. 437.

¹⁸

See William Caswell to Burke, 4 September 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 593.

¹⁹

William Caswell to Burke, 17 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 564.

Despite Governor Burke's orders to avoid a "general action," Lillington appeared determined to make a stand. Lillington had lost his plantation to the British; the old veteran undoubtedly wanted revenge and another encounter with his old adversary, Craig.²⁰ Lillington halted at Webber's Bridge, which crossed the Trent River and was on the route to New Bern. The rebels dismantled part of the bridge and placed a guard there to wait for the British. Craig halted a short distance from the bridge and sent a party to reconnoiter the area. The rebels opened fire, killing three of the British and wounding five.²¹

While these delaying actions were taking place, the town of New Bern prepared for the British arrival. Artillery was placed at the governor's palace; a group of sailors from New England were in the town and, being trained in the use of artillery, were called on to man the guns. In addition, galleys and a floating battery in the Trent River were positioned to fire on the shore. Ammunition had been impressed from the town merchants. Along the British route of march, several ambushes had been placed, so the redcoats would face a constant stream of fire when they entered the town. Colonel Waightstill Avery, the officer in charge of the

20

William Caswell to Burke, 17 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 564; Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 688.

21

Lillington to Burke, 19 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 560.

defense, was sanguine. He told Lillington that "the Enemy cut off from the expected Command of the Harbour cannaded and repulsed in Front, attacked vigorously in the Rear Must be pannic Struck and discouraged--whether they will be induced to surrender immediately or to make an obstinate defence is not material to us [.] I think further than this that if they do fight hard--Our Militia will now be convinced that they can contend with an conquer such men."²²

Few shared Avery's overconfidence. Richard Cogdell, the treasurer of the New Bern district, resolved to remain in the town, but took the precaution of moving his papers to a place of safety.²³ Samuel Chapman, a New Bern native serving with General Jethro Sumner's Continental brigade, asked for leave to return home "to endeavour to Save what little property I have."²⁴

Governor Burke was a realist. He knew it would be futile for the militia to defend New Bern; the best he could hope for was to minimize the damage that would result from a British occupation. Because of the ammunition shortage, he ordered

22

Avery to Lillington, 17 August 1781, Thomas Addison Emmet Collection, New York Public Library, New York, New York. Transcripts in the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N.C.

23

House of Commons, 26 April 1783, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 19, p. 157.

24

Samuel Chapman to Sumner, 11 August 1781, Jethro Sumner Papers.

that all lead be removed from the governor's palace.²⁵ The
governor also realized that the capture of New Bern would be
more of a moral than a strategic loss, especially since the
British lacked the manpower to occupy the town permanently.²⁶
"But even should they get possession of Newbern," Burke told
William Caswell, "you are not to consider it as fatal."²⁷

On the afternoon of Sunday, 19 August, the combined
British-loyalist force marched into New Bern. Lillington, in
pursuance of Governor Burke's orders, retreated, leaving the
field to Major Craig. Despite Waightstill Avery's careful
preparations, there was little resistance within the town.²⁸
In fact, "Some Gentlemen of Character received the British" and
"with much seeming satisfaction and pleasure welcomed them."²⁹
A few prominent rebels remained in the town and apparently
escaped any injury. One man, however, did not. Dr. Alexander
Gaston, a member of the Committee of Safety, was eating

25

Burke to Colonel Long, 20 August 1781, Governors'
Letter Book 3.

26

Alonzo Thomas Dill, Jr., "Eighteenth Century New Bern.
A History of the Town and Craven County, 1700-1800. Part VII,
New Bern During the Revolution," The North Carolina Historical
Review vol. XXIII (July 1946): 357.

27

Burke to William Caswell, 20 August 1781, Governors'
Letter Book 3.

28

J. Tillman to Burke, 25 August 1781, Thomas Burke
Papers, Southern Historical Collection, The University of North
Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.; Ashe, North Carolina, vol.
1, p. 688; Dill, "Eighteenth Century New Bern," p. 357.

29

William Caswell to Burke, 4 September 1781, in Clark,
ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 593.

breakfast when an advance party of loyalists rode into town. The surprised doctor fled to the wharf, got into a canoe, and began rowing hurriedly across the Trent River to his plantation. Captain John Cox, the loyalist commander, took aim and calmly shot Gaston down while the doctor's horrified wife watched.³⁰

Craig remained in New Bern for two days. The British concentrated on the town's waterfront. Several ships were burned, while the rigging of those remaining was destroyed. The British also destroyed over three thousand bushels of salt, and a large quantity of rum and sugar.³¹ The loss of salt was a particularly severe blow to the rebels. On 21 August, the British left New Bern. When the rebel forces re-entered the

30

The author was unable to find any contemporary accounts of Gaston's death. James Iredell, when giving details of the attack on New Bern to his wife, mentioned several prominent rebels who remained in the town but Gaston's name was not among them. (James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 28 August 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 281.) (For secondary accounts of Gaston's death, see Joseph Herman Schauinger, "William Gaston: Southern Statesman," The North Carolina Historical Review vol. XVIII [April 1941]: 100; Dill, "Eighteenth Century New Bern," p. 358; Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 688.) A biographical sketch of Gaston, written for inclusion in Samuel A. Ashe's compilation of biographies of famous North Carolinians, states that Gaston was eating breakfast with John Green when the loyalists approached; the two men attempted to escape together and both were wounded. Green, however, recovered from his wounds. According to this account, Gaston's wife and his son, the future Judge William Gaston, were in the boat and the boy was "baptized in patriotism in the blood of his Patriot Father." (Sketch of Alexander Gaston by Marshall DeLancey Haywood, Charles Leonard Van Noppen Papers, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham, N.C.)

31

Robert Bignall to Burke, 25 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; The Royal Gazette (Charleston), 8 September 1781.

town, they found that an "active and violent" loyalist, Joseph Gleaton, had been left behind. Gleaton found some liquor while looting and became "so intoxicated as to be left on their encamping ground the day the Enemy left."³²

After leaving New Bern, the British moved westward, leaving desolation in their wake. Their numbers continued to grow; in Dobbs County "Three Companies out of Seven have to a man joined them," William Caswell reported. Caswell sent detachments to establish posts at two locations--at Webber's Bridge on the Trent River and at Bryant's Mill on the Neuse River, seventeen miles above New Bern. Still, Caswell knew the militia was no match for Craig's force. "I am very fearful," he told Governor Burke, "without Assistance from Continental Troops, that this Part of the Country will be entirely lost, and if no assistance comes shortly I am sensible that the Good People here will fall a Sacrifice to British Tyranny."³³ Many inhabitants were evacuating the area and Caswell was afraid his men would follow suit. Moreover, General Lillington, exhausted from the rigors of the campaign, was leaving camp.

It appeared that Caswell's wish for Continentals would be granted. General Anthony Wayne and his Pennsylvania

32

William Caswell to Burke, 30 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

33

William Caswell to Burke, 20 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 569.

Continental were being sent to reinforce Greene in South Carolina. Wayne was an old friend of Burke's and the governor hoped to utilize the Continentals, during their march across North Carolina, to defeat Craig.³⁴ Burke ordered Caswell to draw the British "as much as possible up into the Country, and collect your force in large bodies so as to make an object for them, provoke them by constant skirmishes, but always take care to secure a retreat and to avoid an action."³⁵ Moreover, Wayne's arrival provided an opportunity to crush the disaffected along the Deep River and Drowning Creek. General John Butler, the commander of the Hillsborough District, was ordered to embody his militia and march to Ramsey's Mill on the Deep River. Governor Burke wanted most of Butler's troops to be mounted so "they can march with more rapidity." He told Butler to "assure your men that they shall be well supported."³⁶

The British continued their march and closed in on the rebel force at William Bryant's Mill. Colonel William Graham was encamped there with 150 militia. General Caswell had detached a party of light horse to guard Graham's right flank,

34

Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," p. 100.

35

Burke to William Caswell, 24 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

36

James Read to General John Butler, 24 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3. The author of the letter, who was Burke's aide-de-camp, has been identified elsewhere as John Reid. Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," p. 105.

but on their trip to the mill, the rebels found "some Liquor & most of them got intoxicated." As a result, the British slipped up on Graham's right side and surprised the camp.³⁷ Major Craig sent a hundred cavalry around the mill to cut off a rebel retreat. Graham, after discovering that his right flank had been overrun, ordered a retreat, which was made in good order. At this point William Bryant intervened and saved the day for the rebels; he led Graham's force into a swamp bordering his mill. The British refused to follow and camped that night at the mill.³⁸

After burning Bryant's house and barn, the British marched along the Neuse River and torched the homes of William Herritage, William Cox, and Longfield Cox. An observer noted that the British carried off all of Longfield Cox's "negroes and horses and . . . treated his wife and children in the most cruel manner, as they have done many others." Craig advanced toward Kinston, while William Caswell pursued with two hundred light horse.³⁹ When the redcoats had left the area, Bryant, Herritage, and the Coxes formed a party and sought revenge; they burned the houses of British sympathizers who lived

37

William Caswell to Burke, 27 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 626.

38

Robert Bignall to Burke, 25 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; William Caswell to Burke, 27 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 627; Peckham, ed., Toll of Independence, p. 89.

39

Bignall to Burke, 25 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

nearby. "I am exceedingly sorry for the event & Dread the consequences," Caswell said. "Have given them orders to stop it, but fear I cannot put an end to it[.]"⁴⁰ Governor Burke tried to dissuade Bryant and the others from further acts of retaliation. All loyalist property that was destroyed, Burke insisted, was "so much taken from the common stock."⁴¹ This property could be better used by giving it to rebels as compensation for their losses.

The rebels rested their hopes on Wayne's arrival. These hopes were illusory, for it is doubtful that Wayne's superiors would have allowed him to divert his troops from South Carolina to assist Burke against Craig and his loyalist allies.⁴² This fact was lost on Burke as he lobbied strongly for permission to utilize Wayne's Continentals. North Carolina, Burke contended, was unable to send assistance to rebel armies fighting in neighboring provinces because all available resources were being used to fight Craig and the loyalists. With the addition of Wayne's troops, the governor wrote General Greene, "we may by one decisive blow destroy the power of the Enemy in this State and all their future hopes by an entire extirpation of

40

William Caswell to Burke, 27 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 627.

41

Burke to William Caswell, 30 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

42

Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," p. 100.

the disaffected."⁴³ Burke admitted that the rebel government was "entirely unprepared to act against regulars and it would require some time to put the State in condition for such operations even were we undisturbed, but the continual alarms in which the people are kept by the numerous bodies of disaffected who everywhere attack our settlements, prevent our making any arrangements or preparations and occasions our being entirely lost to the common cause."⁴⁴ Other rebel leaders were equally optimistic that Wayne could do the job. James Iredell, whose duties as a judge required much travelling, assured his wife that there was no danger because "Gen. Wayne's march will make us perfectly safe."⁴⁵ "I think," Iredell said, "there is great reason to believe Craig will never return."⁴⁶

Major Craig, too, heard rumors of Wayne's imminent arrival. Craig knew his force of regulars and loyalists were no match for Wayne's eleven hundred Pennsylvania Continentals. He turned his little army around and headed toward the mouth of the Neuse River intending to destroy the salt works there. Apparently, he soon decided there was not sufficient time to

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Burke to Greene, 31 August 1781, *Governors' Letter Book* 3.

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Burke to Marquis de Lafayette, 30 August 1781, *Governors' Letter Book* 3.

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James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 29 August 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., *Papers of James Iredell*, vol. 2, p. 284.

⁴⁶

James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, [25 August 1781], in Higginbotham, ed., *Papers of James Iredell*, vol. 2, p. 277.

assault the salt works; the threat of an attack from Wayne
 could not be disregarded.⁴⁷

By 2 September, the British had reached Heron's Bridge. Craig left a detachment there to guard against attacks; the rest of the army marched to Wilmington. The British casualties during the month-long campaign were fifteen dead or captured and about the same number wounded. Craig returned to
 Wilmington with five hundred captured slaves.⁴⁸

At first glance Craig's campaign appears to have been successful. The destruction of the salt at New Bern deprived the rebels of a precious resource. In addition, rebels and their adherents were terrorized by the brutality of Craig's troops. Once again, the impotence of the rebel government had been demonstrated. But Craig's victory was fleeting. As soon as his force left an area, rebels came out of hiding and sought vengeance on loyalists who had aided the redcoats. The rebels confiscated the property of these loyalists. William Caswell estimated that "500 or 1000 Head of Cattle & 200 or 300 sheep" could be obtained from the loyalists who had joined Craig

47

Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 689; Bignall to Burke, 25 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; William Caswell to Burke, 27 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 627. Craig's decision to spare the salt works is inferred from a later letter in which he mentions the destruction of salt in New Bern and expresses a desire to attack works between Beaufort and New River. Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

48

William Caswell to Burke, 4 September 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 593; Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 689.

during his march.⁴⁹ With Governor Burke's permission, he sent
 out parties to bring the livestock to Kinston.⁵⁰

In Duplin County, where Craig's force had been particularly destructive, the loyalists were subject to severe retaliations. William Dickson later recalled that "Craig having again returned to Wilmington," the rebels "resumed their courage and determined to be revenged on the Loyalists, our neighbors, or hazard all." The rebels assembled eighty light horse and rode to an area where the loyalists had gathered. Revenge was swift; the rebels pursued the loyalists, "cut many of them to pieces, took several and put them instantly to death."⁵¹

Throughout the war the British had marched into areas, called on the loyalists for support, and then left, leaving the king's friends unprotected from vengeful rebels. Earlier, Craig had been critical of this practice; now he was equally guilty of offering false hope to loyalists and then deserting them. Loyalists who had come out into the open during Craig's march were now exposed. And there was no British force to protect them. In abandoning his previously sound policy toward the loyalists, it appears, Craig allowed desire for military

49

William Caswell to Burke, 27 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 627.

50

William Caswell to Burke, 4 September 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 632.

51

William Dickson to Robert Dickson, 30 November 1784, in Carr, ed., Dickson Letters, p. 18.

honor to override good judgment; or, as Nathanael Greene stated succinctly, Craig's march was "calculated to increase his own glory, more than improve his master's interest."⁵²

During Craig's march through eastern North Carolina, the loyalists in the Deep River and Drowning Creek areas continued their operations, thereby adding to the prevailing disorder. David Fanning was again threatening the settlers along the Deep River. General John Butler sent a force after Fanning, but the rebel militia officers were afraid to attack the notorious loyalist and returned home with their troops. Area inhabitants who supported the rebel government felt that they were being forgotten; many residents resolved to leave, convinced that there was nothing they could do to save their homes from Fanning's marauding band.⁵³

Early in the morning of 14 August, Colonels Duncan Ray and Hector McNeil, with about five hundred loyalists, entered the town of Campbellton, catching the residents by surprise. After raiding the town, they moved to nearby Cross Creek. James Emmet was at his plantation about a mile away when he heard the approach of twenty mounted loyalists. Emmet escaped into a swamp. After stealing Emmet's horses, the loyalists left. Upon receiving news that Ray and McNeil were conducting raids

52

Greene to Burke, 25 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

53

John Ramsey to Burke, 15 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 562-563; Butler to Burke, 24 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 575.

on the westside of the Cape Fear, Emmet crossed over to the eastside. He remained in hiding for two days; then, hearing a rumor that Fanning was approaching with a hundred men to join forces with McNeil, Emmet recrossed the Cape Fear. He met McNeil's force and was captured. The loyalists netted fifty prisoners in their raid on Campbellton and Cross Creek; many inhabitants along the Cape Fear fled to avoid capture.⁵⁴

At the same time Fanning raided the settlements north of the Cape Fear, taking prisoners and stealing arms and horses. One observer sarcastically noted that "what is somewhat strange, altho' the General Complaint is that there is no Arms to oppose them, they seldom fail of finding Arms in every House they go to."⁵⁵ Fanning turned south, and marched along the Cape Fear into Bladen County. Prominent rebels felt Fanning's wrath; he burned the plantations belonging to Thomas and Peter Robeson. Fanning then marched to Wilmington, deposited twenty prisoners, resupplied his force with ammunition, and returned to action.⁵⁶

On 20 August, Fanning reached Elizabethtown in Bladen County, where Colonel John Slingsby, with a force of four

54

Emmet to Burke, 19 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, pp. 566-567; Ramsey to Burke, 21 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 570; Hardy Sanders to Burke, 16 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 610.

55

Armstrong to Burke, 20 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 568.

56

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 51.

hundred loyalists, had established a post. Slingsby had numerous rebel prisoners in his custody. Before leaving, Fanning warned Slingsby that it was dangerous to keep the prisoners there. Slingsby was in danger, but not because of his prisoners. Colonel Thomas Brown had assembled 150 Bladen County militia and was headed toward Elizabethtown. Just before daybreak on 27 August, Brown attacked. The loyalists were taken by surprise and routed. Slingsby, vainly trying to rally his force, was mortally wounded, and eighteen of his troops were killed, wounded, or captured. The rebels captured a large quantity of provisions and ammunition. This defeat was a serious setback to the loyalists. For the rebels the victory was a much-needed morale booster.

57

Fanning, upon hearing of the attack, dispatched ninety men to aid Slingsby. They were too late. Fanning then received word of another loyalist party in distress. Colonel Thomas Wade and 450 rebels were closing in on Hector McNeil's small party of seventy loyalists. The rebels were obviously making

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Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 52. Fanning mistakenly believed that Slingsby's prisoners had routed the loyalists with the use of concealed weapons. (DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, pp. 144-145; William Dickson to Robert Dickson, 30 November 1784, in Carr, ed., Dickson Letters, p. 19.) The exact date of the Battle of Elizabethtown is not known, but 27 August is commonly accepted as the date. It is said that during their flight many loyalists fell into a deep ravine, which was known afterward as "Tories' Hole." Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 690.

concerted efforts to rid Bladen County of the loyalist
 58
 menace.

In this instance, relief came in time; Fanning arrived with 155 men. He learned that Wade was crossing Betti's Bridge over Drowning Creek. Fanning immediately marched the three miles to the bridge and prepared to give battle. Although outnumbered, Fanning more than compensated with his excellent leadership. He spread his force to give the appearance of having greater numbers and to prevent the rebels from turning his flanks. The loyalists attacked, and after an hour and a half of fighting the rebels retreated. Wade lost twenty-three killed and fifty captured. Fanning's losses were slight--one dead and four wounded. This victory, occurring less than a week after Slingsby's debacle, was ample evidence that the
 59
 backcountry war was not over.

Meanwhile Governor Burke continued preparations for the expedition against the British and the loyalists. Recent events had reinforced his opinion that it was futile to act "with a temporary force, and of the expedience of preparing a force which can be kept embodied until the business is

58

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 52.

59

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 53. Several writers state that Fanning ordered McNeil to march around Wade's force to cut off a retreat across Betti's Bridge. If this order had been obeyed, Wade's entire force would have been trapped and destroyed. (Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 693; DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, p. 145.) Fanning, however, does not mention such an order.

completely finished."⁶⁰ Before he could complete his plans, however, Burke was faced with a new problem. In late August, he was informed that Cornwallis, beset by rebel forces in southeastern Virginia, probably would turn and retreat into North Carolina. For the time being, the expedition against Craig would have to be shelved.⁶¹

Expecting Cornwallis to cross the Roanoke River, Burke ordered every pass to be blocked with an abatis. Militia were assembled and ordered to guard the Roanoke, the Tar, the Neuse, and the Dan rivers. Burke ordered William Caswell to watch Craig and prevent the major and his loyalist allies from helping Cornwallis. On 5 September, Burke was informed that the French fleet under the Comte de Grasse had arrived at Hampton Roads. Cornwallis was trapped. Burke also learned that Anthony Wayne would remain in Virginia; the rebels needed all available troops for the siege at Yorktown.⁶² Ironically, the climactic events of the war deprived both Burke and Craig of badly needed reinforcements. The two antagonists would have to fight it out with their own resources.

⁶⁰ Burke to Butler, 29 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

⁶¹ Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," p. 103.

⁶² Burke to Greene, 3 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 3 September 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 287; General Anthony Wayne to Burke, 3 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," pp. 103-104.

Although he was disappointed that Wayne had been detained in Virginia, Burke remained optimistic that two or three thousand militia could operate successfully against Craig. He ordered his commanders to raise troops for three months service. Burke would not tolerate the poor performance the undisciplined militia had given in the past. "I will admit of no Troops merely in character of Volunteers," Burke said, "that is, such as stay as long as they please, obey what orders they please and retire when they please. With such men nothing can be undertaken." Should an insufficient number of men respond,⁶³ the officers were authorized to begin drafts.

William Caswell, because of the British presence in Wilmington, had difficulty raising troops in the southern counties.⁶⁴ Moreover, the troops had lost confidence in their officers; "and when that happens," Caswell told Burke, "Your Excellency well knows with what diffidence the men turn out."⁶⁵

Burke was aware that most of the force would be drawn from the western districts. As a result, he decided to travel to Hillsborough to personally direct operations.⁶⁶ James Iredell

⁶³ Burke to William Caswell, 5 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

⁶⁴ William Caswell to Burke, 11 September 1781, Thomas Burke Papers.

⁶⁵ William Caswell to Burke, 4 September 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 632.

⁶⁶ Burke to the General Assembly, 16 April 1782, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, p. 11.

planned to go with the governor. Iredell was confident that Burke's expedition would be successful. "The reign of the Tories I believe will be soon over," Iredell told his wife. In fact, he had no apprehensions about the journey. "We have little reason . . . to be afraid of any attempts from" the loyalists, he concluded.⁶⁷ When Burke left for Hillsborough on 7 September, Iredell was not with the governor; the jurist⁶⁸ contracted "ague and fever" and was unable to travel.

The governor anticipated an arduous campaign; he insisted that the troops bring intrenching tools to camp. A sizable cavalry contingent was needed because mobility was essential to the success of the expedition. Burke ordered his quartermaster, Nicholas Long, to find out if some cannon sunk at Edenton could be salvaged and used as field pieces.⁶⁹ The governor assured North Carolinians that they would be reimbursed for any goods impressed for use in the expedition: "The people are to consider whatever they furnish as lent, and it shall be restored again if not lost or destroyed, and in that case it shall be paid for, and as one good effort now made,

67

James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 3 September 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 288.

68

James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 11 September 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 291.

69

Burke to Colonel Locke, 10 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Burke to General Gregory, 5 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Burke to Colonel Long, 7 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

will gain us peace and tranquility nothing must be left
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 undone."

A vital element of Burke's strategy was his decision to offer pardons to repentant loyalists. Earlier in the summer, he had mentioned the possibility of giving loyalists "an
⁷¹
 opportunity of returning and then to shut the Gate forever." Now he was implementing the idea, hoping that it would reduce the loyalist ranks. In Hillsborough on 10 September, Burke issued a proclamation, ordering the disaffected to report to their county or district's rebel militia headquarters. All penitnant loyalists would be granted full pardons except "the Heads and Leader[s] of Parties," and British prisoners who had refused to be exchanged; these people would be subject to judicial proceedings. The governor concluded that "all who shall neglect or refuse to comply with the terms of this Proclamation, shall be considered as Enemies, and treated with all the rigor of Martial Law, that their families and connections shall be immediately sent into the Enemies Lines, & all their property confiscated."
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 Burke sent the proclamation to William Caswell, instructing him to make three to four hundred copies for distribution. He ordered Colonel William

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Burke to Colonel William Moore, 10 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

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Burke to William Caswell, 30 August 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

⁷²

"Proclamation of Governor Burke," 10 September 1781, Governors' Papers 8.

Moore of Caswell County to erect a standard and establish a
 guard to receive surrendering loyalists.⁷³

It was time to launch the offensive. Burke ordered his militia commanders to march to selected locations. The militia of Orange, Caswell, and Chatham counties were to rendezvous at Ramsey's Mill on Deep River and combine forces with General John Butler. All county militia from the Salisbury District were ordered to the eastside of the Yadkin River to await further instructions. The militia of Guilford County were given special orders; they were instructed to march into Randolph County--a loyalist stronghold--and establish a
 post.⁷⁴

Preoccupied with his preparations, Burke neglected his own safety. A large party of loyalists under the command of David Fanning had gathered near Hillsborough. Fanning and Hector McNeil, with loyalists from Chatham, Randolph, Cumberland, and
 Bladen counties, had amassed a force of twelve hundred men.⁷⁵ Burke, after analyzing his intelligence, was convinced that the loyalists intended to attack General Butler's small force on the south side of the Haw River; "they intend some stroke," the

73

Burke to William Caswell, 11 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Burke to Moore, 9 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

74

Burke to Colonel Peasley, 10 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3; Burke to Colonel Locke, 10 September 1781, Governors' Letter Book 3.

75

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 54.

governor warned Butler, "and I am fully persuaded that it is
against you."⁷⁶ Burke, however, was wrong. Fanning had no
intention of attacking Butler; he was after more important
prey. Fanning's object was the rebel governor of North
Carolina, Thomas Burke.

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Burke to Butler, 10 September 1781, Governors' Letter
Book 2

CHAPTER SIX

Triumph and Defeat 12 September - 14 November, 1781

On the morning of Wednesday, 12 September, David Fanning moved toward Hillsborough with between six hundred and seven hundred men.¹ A dark and foggy night concealed the approach of the loyalist army. Because Fanning was passing through an area inhabited by either loyalist supporters or people apathetic to both sides, and the rebel patrols guarding the roads to Hillsborough neglected their duty, the army reached the town without opposition.²

¹ Fanning's account states that there were twelve hundred men under his command. (Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 54.) After extensive research, however, Algie I. Newlin has concluded that between six hundred and seven hundred loyalists accompanied Fanning to Hillsborough. Newlin conjectures that Fanning picked the best troops out of the larger force for the raid on Hillsborough. (Algie I. Newlin, The Battle of Lindley's Mill [Burlington, N.C.: The Alamance Historical Association, 1975], p. 4.)

² Burke to the General Assembly, 16 April 1782, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, p. 12. Burke later contended that Fanning had intended to attack General John Butler's force on the Haw River, and only decided to raid Hillsborough after learning that the governor was there with little protection. Fanning, however, insisted that he let his subordinates think that Butler was the objective. The loyalist colonel had always intended to capture Burke; Butler's force was merely a diversion. Fanning states, moreover, that he had discussed the idea of capturing Governor Burke with Major Craig earlier in the summer. (Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 54-55.) Fanning's account is probably accurate. Craig believed that "our war depends in a great measure on seizing the most violent men & those of most influence--this has ever been a capital point with me." The major's capture of Cornelius Harnett and John Ashe reflects this policy. And certainly Burke was the most influential rebel in North Carolina. Craig admitted as much: "he is by far the man of the greatest Abilities & one

Shortly after sunrise, the loyalists entered the unsuspecting town. The surprised rebels offered little resistance. Scattered gunfire came from several houses but only one loyalist was wounded.³ Fanning's force soon concentrated its efforts on Governor Burke's house. Burke, with his aide-de-camp, John Reid, his secretary, John Huske, and a Continental orderly sergeant, put up a stubborn defense. Escape was impossible; the governor knew he was fighting a losing battle but he refused to surrender because "the savage manners and appearance of the men made me expect nothing but massacre." Burke and his companions were "armed only with our swords and pistols," but they "sustained for some time a close and hot fire." Finally, Reid left the house and returned with "a gentleman in the uniform of a British Officer." The man assured Burke that the rebels would be treated fairly. The governor surrendered his sword, but was immediately endangered by loyalists seeking revenge. Some Scottish Highlanders, who had formerly been imprisoned by Burke, remembered that the

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(continued) of the most violent in this Province." Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398. In fact, Burke received a warning in mid-August that Fanning was planning to capture him. Sanders to Burke, 16 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 610.

3

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 55.

governor had treated them "with humanity."⁴ Their intervention saved Burke's life.

Fanning's daring raid netted two hundred prisoners; in addition to Burke, the loyalists took the governor's council and several Continental officers and soldiers. Fifteen rebels were killed and twenty were wounded. The loyalists remained in town until early in the afternoon. They went to the town jail and freed thirty loyalists, including one who was scheduled to be hanged at noon that day. Fanning's troops became disorderly; they found a large supply of whiskey and began looting the town. Finally, the officers got their men under control and left the town with the prisoners. Their destination was Wilmington.⁵

Robert Mebone, a colonel in the rebel militia, escaped during the confusion and rode to General Butler's camp. Butler knew that Fanning would take the quickest route to Wilmington. Eighteen miles from Hillsborough the road to Wilmington crossed Cane Creek and then turned south. Butler hurriedly marched between three and four hundred troops to this point. A large plateau near Lindley's Mill provided an ideal location for an

⁴ Burke to the General Assembly, 16 April 1782, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, p. 13.

⁵ Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 55; Newlin, Battle of Lindley's Mill, p. 8; James Iredell to Hannah Iredell, 16 September 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, pp. 294-295. Robert O. DeMond states that the Hillsborough raid "was without doubt the most brilliant exploit of any group of Loyalists in any state throughout the Revolution." Demond, Loyalists in North Carolina, p. 147.

ambush. Butler deployed part of his force at the plateau and waited for the loyalists.⁶

The loyalists, by delaying their departure from Hillsborough, had played into Butler's hands. Colonel Hector McNeil neglected to post an advance guard. As a result, as the loyalists approached Cane Creek early in the morning on 13 September, they moved right into Butler's trap. Fanning, upon hearing of McNeil's carelessness, left his position and moved to the front of the column. As Fanning began questioning McNeil, shots rang out. McNeil was killed instantly and the loyalists were thrown into confusion. Fanning reacted quickly and rallied the troops. His primary concern was the prisoners. A large portion of Butler's force then attacked the loyalist rear where the prisoners were under guard; the ambush from the plateau had been merely a diversion. Fanning moved his troops back to meet this threat. The prisoners were moved to a small assembly building near the battlefield. Burke and the other captives were under the threat of death should they attempt an escape. The attackers failed to free the prisoners and retreated to the plateau, where they joined the rest of the rebel force.⁷

⁶ Newlin, Battle of Lindley's Mill, pp. 5-7; Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 364.

⁷ Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 55; Newlin, Battle of Lindley's Mill, pp. 9-12.

Fanning launched a counterattack. A group under the command of Colonel Archibald McDougald executed a flanking maneuver and attacked the rebel ambush party on one end of the plateau while Fanning led an assault on the remaining rebels. Fanning's placement of his troops kept his army between Butler and the prisoners. After four hours of heavy fighting, the rebels retreated. At the close of the action, Fanning was shot in the left arm; he lost so much blood that he had to be removed from his horse. Butler lost twenty-four men killed, ninety wounded, and ten taken prisoner. Fanning's losses were also heavy; he lost twenty-seven dead and ninety wounded, and sixty of these were hurt so severely that they had to be left on the field. Among these was the commanding officer; after relinquishing command to McDougald, Major John Rains, and Lieutenant Colonel Archibald McKay, Fanning was hidden in the woods. A guard of three men was left behind to protect him. In the Battle of Lindley's Mill, at least one-fifth of those involved were killed or wounded--for a Revolutionary War battle, a high percentage.

The loyalists continued toward Wilmington. Butler, after resting his army briefly, renewed the pursuit. Wilmington lay 160 miles away, so there was a chance that the prisoners still

Newlin, Battle of Lindley's Mill, pp. 13-20; Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 55-56. Major Craig praised the loyalists, stating that they showed "a degree of spirit in our cause that has never been shown in any other part of America." Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

could be saved. During the journey, the loyalists offered paroles to the prisoners. If Burke accepted he would have to promise not to engage in military or political matters. The governor did not trust his captors and refused; he was still hopeful that his party would be rescued. The Continental officers, in a display of loyalty, also refused. On the way to Wilmington, Burke and his companions suffered "the different extremes of hunger, thirst and fatigue." To avoid the pursuing rebels, the loyalists "traversed by long and rapid marches, vast pathless tracks of intermingled Sand and Swamp very thinly inhabited and which ought not to be inhabited at all." At McFall's Mill on Raft Swamp, they met Colonel Duncan Ray, who assumed custody of the prisoners.

Tired of waiting in Wilmington, Major Craig decided to march out to meet the loyalists. The major was not sure where to find them and "only guessed at their route from my knowledge of their usual method of conducting themselves." On 23 September, Craig met Ray at Livingston's Creek on the Northwest Cape Fear River. Craig was just in time because Butler was in

⁹
Newlin, Battle of Lindley's Mill, p. 23; Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," pp. 100-101; Burke to the General Assembly, 16 April 1782, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, p. 13.

¹⁰
Burke to [?], 17 October 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 651.

¹¹
Newlin, Battle of Lindley's Mill, p. 23.

¹²
Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

hot pursuit. That the rebels would follow through parts of North Carolina dominated by the loyalists shows a tremendous amount of daring. Approximately fifty rebel light horse approached the loyalist camp. Craig, thinking he was dealing with local militia, sent his cavalry and sixty infantry to attack the rebels. The British pursued the rebels for two to three miles; then they came upon two hundred rebels who were strongly posted. Craig ordered his troops to withdraw. Butler moved his troops to Brown Marsh in Bladen County where he waited for the loyalist militia to return from their rendezvous with the British. Craig, realizing now that he was dealing with a large rebel force and being apprised of Butler's intention to surprise the loyalists, sent Major Manson with 150 redcoats to escort Duncan Ray's troops back to Bladen County. Manson launched a furious night assault on Butler; the rebels were routed and retreated, leaving behind twenty dead and twenty-five prisoners. An undetermined number of rebel wounded escaped into the night. Manson's losses, on the other hand, were extremely light; one redcoat and two loyalists were killed and four British were wounded.

Burke was transferred to Craig's custody. The governor and his companions were escorted to Wilmington and confined in the town limits. Burke later recalled:

The British Officers behaved with frank politeness to us and Major Craig treated me with particular respect, in short, we had great reason to rejoice in our exchange of situation, and for the first time after our capture, felt ourselves out of danger of personal violence, with which we had been often threatened, through the savage, ungovernable fury of those people in whose possession we were. Such was the respect paid to me and so easy was my treatment that I began to expect that my confinement would be that of a prisoner of war on the most liberal footing.¹⁴

Burke, however, was disappointed. The day after the arrival at Wilmington, a British officer presented the governor with a letter from Major Craig. Burke was to be isolated in a house until Craig received instructions from his superior officers on the conditions of the governor's imprisonment. The governor could be held either as a prisoner of war or as a state prisoner. As a prisoner of war, Burke could expect lenient treatment and eventually would be exchanged for a British officer. But if the British held him as a state prisoner he would be treated harshly as a treasonous subject. In the meantime, Burke was allowed access to one room in the house and could not communicate with anyone but a sergeant ordered to watch him and a guard sent to prevent his escape. Craig visited Burke that evening and expressed regret that he could not furnish better lodgings. He did make one small¹⁵ concession: John Reid would be allowed access to Burke.

14

Burke to [?], 17 October 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 651.

15

Burke to [?], 17 October 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, pp. 651, 652.

Burke chafed under the conditions of his imprisonment. "My traverses," he said, "however devious, were in no danger of interruption by furniture and I was likely to have time and subject enough for meditation." With Reid's help, Burke was able to furnish his Spartan quarters; a William Campbell supplied a bed, some furniture, a servant, and some money to ease the governor's confinement. Still, isolated from the outside world and watched closely by the British, Burke became increasingly disillusioned as he reflected on his situation. He wrote "that tho' I have some firmness, I have also much sensibility of Spirit, that tho' the one enables me to bear, yet the other obliges me to feel my situation, and with peculiar poignancy, that restraint which prevents me from employing such talents as nature has given me, be they what they may, for the bringing to a complete and happy issue, the cause in which our country is engaged. . . . I cannot lose sight of what I was, nor cease to compare it with what I now am."¹⁶

At first the rebels were dismayed at Burke's capture. Archibald Maclaine told James Iredell that losing Burke "may give a fatal turn to our affairs."¹⁷ One rebel "truelly deplored" the loss of Burke "at this critical and momentous

¹⁶ Burke to [?], 17 October 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, pp. 652-653.

¹⁷ Maclaine to James Iredell, 21 September 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 297.

18
Time." General Greene, upon hearing the news, ordered
General Jethro Sumner to return to North Carolina "as soon as
possible as I fear all things will get into confusion from this
untoward event."¹⁹

Under the provisions of the rebels' constitution,
Alexander Martin, the Speaker of the Senate, became acting
governor.²⁰ Martin immediately took steps to secure Burke's
release. He wrote Major Craig and requested that Burke be
released on parole until a prisoner exchange could be arranged.
In addition, he protested against the ill treatment Burke had
endured during the march from Hillsborough to Wilmington.
Martin contended that Burke "met with many personal insults on
his capture . . . such a being drove through water up to his
neck, to be compelled to walk on foot when horses could easily
have been procured."²¹

Craig refused to release Burke. He insisted that Burke
was a state prisoner, not a prisoner of war; therefore, unless
Craig heard otherwise from his superiors, the governor would be
held indefinitely. As for the complaints about Burke's
treatment, Craig replied that considering the persecutions the

18

Jasper Charlton to James Iredell, [21 September 1781],
in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2., p. 298.

19

Greene to Sumner, 25 September 1781, Jethro Sumner
Papers.

20

Smith, "Creation of an American State," p. 463.

21

Alexander Martin to Craig, 22 September 1781, in The
Royal Gazette, (Charleston). 27 October 1781.

loyalists had endured during the war it was surprising that the governor had been treated so well. "I must acknowledge, he underwent great fatigue and hardship," Craig said, "but they are to be attributed to the nature of their march, his refusing to give his parole; and it must be remembered, that he underwent none but what his captors shared with him."²² Martin was angered by Craig's reply, especially at the major's determination to make Burke a state prisoner; he accused Craig of "recriminating Facts not true."²³

The major finally decided to send Burke and the Continental officers taken by Fanning to Charleston. Martin had wanted Craig at least to parole the Continentals in accordance to the cartel arranged by Cornwallis and Greene. Craig again refused to honor the cartel; he believed that paroling prisoners would hurt his efforts to subdue the rebels. Craig contended that "if according to the cartel I am oblig'd to send them home on parole the trouble & hazard of seizing them is thrown away--for if they ever pay so much attention to their paroles as not to take arms (which is not often the case) it is a folly to suppose that by intelligence, Advice & Influence they do not do infinitely more mischief than in arms especially as the very circumstance of their being on parole

22

Craig to Martin, 29 September 1781, in The Royal Gazette, (Charleston), 27 October 1781.

23

Martin to [Greene], 17 November 1781, Miscellaneous Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History,

affords them the most convenient opportunities--this I have most particulary experienced here." After Burke departed, Craig sent word to his superiors in Charleston, pleading that the governor not be exchanged. According to Craig, Burke was "capable of doing infinite mischief in these parts where I assure you the turn for torryeism or Rebellion is pretty near on a parr. . . . His being exchanged is a matter of infinite consequence to the kind of war carrying on here & I must most strenuously request to put an absolute negative if possible but at all events to delay it as long as possible."²⁴ Craig's request was granted. Burke, despite the efforts of Martin and others, remained a prisoner.

David Fanning had expected the capture of Governor Burke to be a crushing blow to the rebels, leading to the breakdown of all resistance to the British and loyalists in North Carolina. But Fanning, like other loyalists, underestimated the extent of the rebels' commitment to their cause. The loss of Burke did not break the rebels' resolve; it only made them more determined to drive Craig and his loyalist allies out of North Carolina.²⁵ The rebels, daily hearing news of Cornwallis's predicament at Yorktown and Greene's successes in

24

Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

25

Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, pp. 9, 16. These thoughts are expressed in the editor's introduction.

South Carolina, had good reason to believe that the war was coming to an end.

Alexander Martin was ready to take drastic measures against the loyalists. He proposed that the families of loyalists who were in the field be driven from their homes and forced to seek refuge within the British lines. At the same time Burke's plan to send an expedition against Craig was not forgotten. General Griffith Rutherford, who had been captured at the Battle of Camden, returned from his imprisonment eager for action. A militia officer with a reputation for cruelty, Rutherford called out the militia of the Salisbury district. He assembled eleven hundred troops and, in early October, set out for southeastern North Carolina. On reaching Campbellton,²⁶ he united forces with General Butler. It was imperative that the British-loyalist threat be quelled. Colonel William R. Davie, the commissary general for the rebel government, clearly summarized the situation: "The presence of the enemy at Wilmington, the frequent insurrections and the imbecility of our Government have embarrassed all public business."²⁷

On 15 October, Rutherford marched to Raft Swamp, the loyalist stronghold. He learned that about six hundred

26

Martin to the Councillors of State, 5 October 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 19, p. 871; Ekirch, "Whig Authority," p. 115; Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, pp. 699-700.

27

William R. Davie to Greene, 12 November 1781, William Richardson Davie Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill, N.C.

loyalists under the command of Colonels Ray and McDougald were camped at McFall's Mill. The rebels reached McFall's Mill too late; the loyalists had broken camp and fled. Rutherford, after interrogating two prisoners, decided to pursue the loyalists, who had scattered in different directions on hearing of the approach of the large rebel force. After tracking the loyalists for three or four miles, Rutherford came upon their rear. Rutherford ordered an attack; the loyalists fired one volley and then fled over a causeway that was two hundred yards wide. The rebels followed on horseback. A disorganized fight commenced on the causeway. Many loyalists dismounted, jumped off the causeway into a ditch, and fled into the swamp where the rebels could not follow. Soon the causeway was so crowded with riderless horses that the rebels could advance no further. At this point some rebels dismounted and began pushing the horses off the causeway. This delay allowed 150 loyalists to regroup in a field at the other end of the causeway. When the causeway was clear of horses, the rebels again attacked; the loyalists opened fire, but, their ammunition being soon exhausted, they had to retreat. Rutherford had won a complete victory. The loyalists lost sixteen killed and fifty wounded. Afterward, the loyalists "never . . . offered resistance in

force, until near Wilmington, where they expected support from
the British."²⁸

On the next day, the rebels continued their march through the Raft Swamp. Forage was scarce, so a party was sent to a plantation in search of supplies. As the rebels came into the open, shots were fired from the plantation. One rebel was killed and the rest fled back to the main army. Rutherford sent his cavalry against the plantation; the loyalists fired²⁹ one volley, evacuated the house, and escaped into the swamp.

Rutherford now resolved to drive all the loyalists out of their sanctuary in Raft Swamp. He divided his force and sent them through the swamp searching for loyalist detachments. No loyalists, however, were found; they had scattered. Raft Swamp had been cleared and the loyalists had been severely³⁰ weakened.

The rebels' next objective was the British garrison at Wilmington. Rutherford divided his force, sending Colonel Robert Smith with a hundred cavalry and two hundred infantry to cut off the British supply lines on the southwest side of the Cape Fear. Rutherford took the main army, and camped north of

28

"General Joseph Graham's Narrative of the Revolutionary War in North Carolina in 1780 and 1781," in William Henry Hoyt, ed., The Papers of Archibald D. Murphey (Raleigh, N.C.: E.M. Uzzell & Co., State Printers, 1914), vol. 2, pp. 300-302.

29

"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphey Papers, vol. 2, pp. 302-303.

30

"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphey Papers, vol. 2, pp. 303-304.

Wilmington across the river from Heron's Bridge. Two miles from Wilmington, on the opposite side of the Cape Fear River, Major Craig had stationed fifty redcoats in a brick house. Smith cautiously approached the house; during the march through Raft Swamp they had enjoyed great success against the loyalists, but the rebels maintained a healthy respect for the British regulars. They reached the house at daybreak. Two redcoats came out unarmed to collect firewood and were promptly captured.³¹

Smith interrogated the prisoners and discovered that one hundred loyalists were camped at Moore's plantation a mile away. He sent Major Joseph Graham to attack the loyalist camp. As Graham's troops advanced toward the camp they encountered the commander of the loyalist force, who was on his way to meet with the British at the brick house. He immediately rode back to his camp to warn his troops. The rebels followed and reached the plantation before the loyalists could form a line of defense. Graham deployed his men behind a fence surrounding the plantation; the rebels opened fire and the loyalists scattered. Graham ordered his cavalry to pursue but most of the loyalists escaped into the surrounding marsh. The

31

"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphy Papers, vol. 2, pp. 304-306.

loyalists lost twelve killed and thirty wounded, while the
rebels suffered no casualties.³²

Graham returned to the brick house, where a stalemate had developed. The house was protected with an abatis and the doors and windows were barricaded with wooden beams. Moreover, the British position commanded the Cape Fear River so they could be supplied and reinforced from Wilmington. Smith prudently decided against an attack. His soldiers, however, were disappointed that an assault had not been ordered. Major Graham recalled that "the brick house was the constant subject of conversation with the lower grades of officers and men. No remonstrances respecting the risk could satisfy them, and as an evidence of the state of discipline, and the force of public opinion, the officers were compelled, contrary to their better judgment, to gratify them."³³

The rebels assembled in the woods surrounding the house. A flag was sent to the British with a message requesting that they surrender in ten minutes. The reply was negative: "I disregard your orders, I don't surrender." Covered by the woods, the rebels opened fire; the British returned the fire from the second floor of the house. Because both sides were well protected, neither suffered from the encounter. One rebel

32

"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphy Papers, vol. 2, pp. 306-307.

33

"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphy Papers, vol. 2, p. 307.

was killed. Realizing that it was futile to assault the house
without artillery, Smith ordered a retreat.³⁴

Outnumbered three to one, Craig had to remain in
Wilmington. He maintained his post at Heron's Bridge despite
the presence of Rutherford's force across the river. The
transports were on hand to evacuate the Wilmington garrison, if
necessary. With an escape route open, Craig prepared to
withstand a siege; the British could hold out as long as
Rutherford's army lacked artillery.³⁵

Conditions in the besieged town were grim. Provisions
were scarce; the British had only a two-week supply of flour.
Craig acknowledged that the town inhabitants were suffering.³⁶
Indeed, the situation had been bad for some time. During the
summer, one man stated that "every article to be sold in
Wilmington is at least three Times as high, for hard money, as
usual."³⁷ The British could not feed the large number of
prisoners in Wilmington. Thomas Burke, during his confinement,
noted that his fellow prisoners "by the want of the necessaries
of Life in a rigorous confinement call for the assistance and

³⁴
"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphy Papers, vol.
2, p. 307.

³⁵
Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis
Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

³⁶
Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis
Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

³⁷
Williams to Burke, 22 August 1781, in Clark, ed., State
Records, vol. 15, p. 654.

attention of their country at least if I may judge from such as I see daily passing by my window to the spring for water, who might well be taken for skeletons, did they not retain life enough to make them appear too ghastly and some languid unanimated motion that shows they have some small remains of strength." ³⁸ Sickness and death were the natural results of hunger. Archibald Maclaine regretted leaving his family behind in Wilmington. He told James Iredell that "I have lost my only surviving son in Wilmington, and considering the situation of my daughter, may justly say that I am bereft of all my children." Maclaine lamented his "never-to-be recovered losses." ³⁹ The British suffered as well. In late October, Major Craig was "oblig'd to give a more unfavourable report of the healthiness of our men than I have hitherto done --we have had more sickness here & lost more men within this month past than during the whole time of our being here before." ⁴⁰

Perhaps it was the supply shortage that compelled Craig to make a controversial decision. He ordered the expulsion of all women and children who were rebel sympathizers. The women were allowed "to carry with them nothing but their wearing apparel,"

38

Burke to [?], 17 October 1781, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, p. 654.

39

Maclaine to James Iredell, 21 September 1781, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 297.

40

Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

leaving the rest of their possessions behind in Wilmington. Anne Hooper, the wife of William Hooper, and her son, Tom, were extremely ill. Craig gave her only a few hours to depart and would not allow her to leave by carriage or horse. William Hooper described his family's departure:

In this melancholy situation, Mr. James Walker offered a boat and Mr. William Campbell's hands to row it up as high as Mr. Swann's on the North-east. The ladies were seated in the boat, and passed through the painful scene of bidding adieu to their few friends, who were not permitted to accompany them, when Craig, who had not yet filled up the measure of cruelty allotted for these distressed women, forbade the boat to proceed. Again they came on shore--no house to shelter them, of their own--few that were hardy enough to receive them into theirs. They stood in the sun for several hours, when my daughter, overcome with the heat, called out, "Mamma, let us go home." Mrs. Hooper, whose firmness never forsook her in the severest moment of trial, answered--"My dear, we have no home." Betsy could not support it. She burst into tears. Several British officers publicly abused Craig's conduct, and said that such cruelty would disgrace a savage. Craig again shifted like the weathercock, and ordered the boat to go on, but would not suffer any gentleman to attend them, although James Walker requested it. A boy of about ten years old was sent up as their escort.⁴¹

Most of the women found shelter near Wilmington; others, like Anne Hooper, made it to Rutherford's army. Rutherford provided two wagons for the Hooper family and a guard to

41

Hooper to James Iredell, 17 February 1782, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, pp. 327-329.

escort them to Hillsborough. Craig's conduct in this affair
⁴²
 shows him at his worst.

In Virginia, a more important siege was in progress. A combined French-rebel force had trapped Cornwallis's army at Yorktown. Isolated in Wilmington, Major Craig could not learn how Cornwallis was faring. But the major knew that the outcome of the war was in the balance. Craig said that "it is certainly a very important & I may add awful moment--the fate
⁴³
 of the war hangs on it." What Craig did not know was that the siege was over. On 19 October Cornwallis had surrendered. News of the British capitulation, however, did not reach the Wilmington area until mid-November.

After the siege of Yorktown, General George Washington wanted to utilize the French navy against one of two objectives: Charleston or Wilmington. Washington planned to send reinforcements to Greene in South Carolina. He proposed that the Comte de Grasse transport the reinforcements to Wilmington where they could be used to "carry the post in question with very little Difficulty--and would wrest from the Enemy, a point of support, in No. Carolina, which is attended with the most dangerous consequences to us, and liberate

⁴²
 Hooper to Iredell, 17 February 1782, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, pp. 327-329.

⁴³
 Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

another State."⁴⁴ At first Admiral de Grasse agreed to transport two thousand troops to relieve Wilmington. Later he changed his mind. Because of a prior commitment to return to the West Indies, de Grasse refused to go to Wilmington.⁴⁵ The task of defeating Craig was left to General Rutherford.

The British remained bottled up in Wilmington. David Fanning had recovered from his wound and resumed operations. Craig sent word to Fanning, requesting that the loyalist colonel "take the opportunity of Rutherford being down here to lay waste the Country from whence his men came which will dissipate his Army in a moment." The major, however, doubted that Fanning would get the message "as our communication is exceedingly difficult."⁴⁶

Craig did not dare attack Rutherford. He feared the rebels' superiority in cavalry. Attacking Rutherford would leave Wilmington wide open to the rebel cavalry. The major could not forget how he had constantly begged for reinforcements: "had I the 4 or 500 men more I have so long wishd for I would hope to give this Province a blow they would

44

General George Washington to Comte de Grasse, 20 October 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r171, i152, v10, p323.

45

Comte de Grasse to Washington, [undated], Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r171, i152, v10, p325; Comte de Grasse to Lafayette, 26 October 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r171, i152, v10, p327.

46

Craig to [Balfour?], 22 October 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 391-398.

not easily recover." Compounding his problems was the shortage of provisions. The entire garrison was allowed only two thirds of its daily ration of flour. In addition, only twenty horses remained in Wilmington. The rest had been put on an island in the Cape Fear River because they consumed too much grain. Craig reported that the rebels' "intention is to secure to themselves the honour of receiving us Prisoners when hunger obliges us to capitulate. . . . We are not without our little humour when we have 1500 men so near us."⁴⁷

The rebels increased their strength with the addition of two cannon from Halifax. It was dangerous for Craig to maintain the detachment at Heron's Bridge. He recalled his troops. They burned the bridge and returned to Wilmington. Rutherford's troops swam across the Northeast Cape Fear and drew closer to the British garrison.⁴⁸

In mid-November, "Light Horse Harry" Lee arrived from Virginia with news of Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown. On hearing this news, Rutherford's men celebrated by firing their guns.⁴⁹ Major Craig heard the noise from the rebel camp and surmised that Cornwallis had surrendered. Hemmed in by

47

Craig to [Balfour?], 6 November 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 401-402.

48

Craig to [Balfour?], 6 November 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 401-402; James Jones, Declaration for Pension, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 135.

49

"Graham's Narrative," in Hoyt, ed., Murphy Papers, vol. 2, p. 310.

Rutherford and unable to communicate with the loyalists, the major prudently decided to evacuate Wilmington. He knew that he was abandoning the loyalists in the interior of North Carolina. But in reality there was little he could do to help them. He could not send them supplies, nor could they reach Wilmington while Rutherford barred the way. There was no compelling reason to remain in the town. The British troops were sick and hungry; they were in no condition for a prolonged siege or an attack on Rutherford's force. The rebel soldiers at Yorktown were now free to move to other areas. Rutherford would receive reinforcements. Additional troops, coupled with the recently acquired cannon, would only strengthen Rutherford's vastly superior force. Craig's position was untenable. There also was the danger of an attack from the sea. During the ten and a half months in Wilmington, there had been constant rumors of French fleets approaching the Cape Fear River. Now it was likely that those rumors would become reality. It was imperative that the British leave while an escape route was available.

Besides his British regulars, Craig wanted to give all the loyalist refugees in town a chance to leave. The evacuation was hurried and disorganized. One loyalist, Rigdon Price, later recalled that "by the hurry and confusion of this

evacuation, I lost most of my Baggage & Effects." John Mackay, a Wilmington grocer, "was possessed of Goods & Effects of considerable value, part of which he was obliged to leave on the wharfs, & what he put on board the Transports was Plundered & destroyed by the Soldiers, Sailors or Negroes, on the passage."⁵¹ Arthur Benning, a New Hanover County loyalist, left behind considerable property: a salt works, a herd of cattle, and six thousand acres of farmland. Benning and his wife and children left Wilmington "without anything, but their Wearing Apparel."⁵² One rebel summed up the feelings of the militia: "we thought it very good luck that by their vacating the town we were released from the danger of fighting."⁵³

On 14 November, the British boarded their transports and set sail for Charleston.⁵⁴ Craig took with him approximately one thousand loyalist provincials and militia. When the rebels

51

Claim of Rigdon Price, AO 13/117.

52

Claim of Arthur Benning, AO 13/117.

53

James Martin, Declaration for Pension, 17 October 1832, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 22, p. 149.

54

Arthur St. Clair to Thomas McKean, 26 November 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r179, i161, p529. Most secondary accounts give 18 November as the date of the evacuation. (See, for example, Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 702; Smith, "Creation of an American State," p. 466.) St. Clair, in the above letter gives 14 November as the date. Hugh F. Rankin agrees that 14 November was the date of the evacuation. Rankin, North Carolina Continentals, p. 367.

entered Wilmington, they could still see the sails of the
British ships moving slowly down the river.⁵⁵

55

Troxler, Loyalist Experience, p. 56; Waddell, New Hanover County, p. 190.

CONCLUSION

After the evacuation of Wilmington, Craig was sent to occupy St. John's Island, near Charleston. At low tide the inlet that separated the island from the mainland was passable by infantry. Two detachments under the command of "Light Horse Harry" Lee and Lieutenant Colonel John Laurens prepared to cross the inlet and surprise the British. The first column made it across safely, but the second got lost and did not arrive in time to cross. With the tide rising, Lee and Laurens were forced to return to the mainland; further attempts on the island were abandoned. A disheartened Lee lamented, "thus was marred the execution of an enterprise surpassed by none throughout our war in grandeur of design."¹ Craig had eluded Lee again.

Craig's subsequent career was illustrious. He was promoted to major general in 1794 and saw service in South Africa, India, and Italy. Appointed governor general of Canada in 1807, he held that post until 1811. One North Carolina historian has even attributed Craig's appointment as governor general to the British government's pleasure with his conduct during the occupation of Wilmington. On 12 January, 1812,

¹

Lee, Memoirs, pp. 524-534.

Craig died, eleven days after he had been promoted to full
general.²

Thomas Burke met a tragic end. After his transfer to Charleston, the British paroled him and sent him to James Island, ostensibly to wait for a prisoner exchange. Among his neighbors were a group of loyalist refugees from North Carolina who were understandably resentful toward the governor. Burke received threats. A sniper fired on a group standing with Burke at his dwelling; one man at the governor's side was killed and another wounded. Believing with reason that his life was in danger, Burke requested that he be moved to a safer location. The British ignored his plea. The governor soon learned the reason for this neglect: Major Craig had requested that Burke be held hostage to insure the safety of David Fanning, should the loyalist leader be captured. Burke believed that the British had failed to observe the conditions of his parole. He decided to escape, and succeeded on 16 January, 1782. He made his way to North Carolina where he resumed his position as governor. Violation of parole, however, was a serious offense. Continental officers and rebel politicians censured Burke for his escape. Embittered by his treatment as a prisoner and the reaction to his escape, Burke refused to seek a second term as governor and left office on

2

Stephens and Lee, ed., Dictionary of National Biography, vol. 4, pp. 1368-1370; Russell, North Carolina in the Revolutionary War, p. 250.

26 April, 1782. He never recovered emotionally from his ordeal and died in November, 1783.³

The British exodus from Wilmington did not end the suffering of the townspeople. General Rutherford's troops entered the town and began looting and plundering. They broke into William Hooper's home and damaged his property. The salt left behind by the British was loaded on wagons for transport to the west, where the precious commodity was needed.⁴

The rebel government, in retaliation for Craig's edict that had banned the wives and children of rebels from Wilmington, decided to expel loyalist women and children from North Carolina. Anne Hooper and twenty other women from Wilmington protested against this move, contending that the rebel government was lowering itself to Craig's level of cruelty. After they left Wilmington, the rebel women found friends who provided food and shelter. The loyalist women and children, on the other hand, had no recourse. Hooper and the others remembered that even the loyalists in Wilmington opposed Craig's order "and with all their power strove to mitigate our sufferings." They concluded that "to Major Craig, and him

³ Watterson, "The Ordeal of Governor Burke," pp. 107-117; Burke to the General Assembly, 16 April 1782, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, pp. 13-19.

⁴ Ashe, North Carolina, vol. 1, p. 703; William Hooper to James Iredell, 17 February 1782, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 328.

alone is to be imputed the inhuman edicts, for even the British soldiers were shocked at it."⁵

Without British assistance the loyalist cause was hopeless. David Fanning continued his raids, but by May, 1782, realizing that further resistance was futile, he left North Carolina and found shelter in Charleston.⁶ Loyalists were now exposed to the wrath of vengeful rebels. Archibald McKay was a hundred miles from Wilmington when he learned of the British evacuation. "Travelling in the Night, & secreting himself in swamps all day," he reached Charleston and safety after an arduous journey of two hundred miles.⁷

Wilmington recovered slowly from the effects of the British occupation. In April, 1782 the town held an election to choose a representative to fill Wilmington's seat in the North Carolina House of Commons. Only twenty-five voters participated, whereas two years earlier eighty-three men had voted. Apparently the town still suffered from a population shortage caused when many inhabitants left the area during the British occupation.⁸

⁵ Anne Hooper, Sarah Nash, Mary Nash, and others to Martin and the Council, [Undated], in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 16, pp. 467-469.

⁶ DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, pp. 148-152.

⁷ Memorial of Archibald McKay, AO 13/122.

⁸ William Hooper to James Iredell, 8 April 1782, in Higginbotham, ed., Papers of James Iredell, vol. 2, p. 336, note 2 on p. 337; Poll Book of Wilmington, 1780, in Clark, ed., State Records, vol. 15, pp. 237-238.

Was the British expedition to Wilmington successful? Did the British accomplish their objectives? The answer is no and yes. The primary mission of the expeditionary force was to supply Cornwallis's army via the Cape Fear River. Here the British failed miserably. The secondary objective was to encourage the loyalists to act against the rebels. Here the British succeeded beyond all expectations. Contemporary rebel observers were aware of the importance of the garrison at Wilmington--more so, in fact, than were the British. Robert R. Livingston, the secretary of foreign affairs for the Continental Congress, believed that Wilmington was an "extremely important" post to the British, "not only as it checked the trade of that State, but as it directly communicated with the disaffected Counties. For it must be confessed that though in other parts of the Continent, they had only well wishers, in North Carolina they had active ⁹ partisans." To Benjamin Franklin, Livingston confided that Wilmington "perhaps is the most important post of communication with the disaffected people of the Country, of any they have ever held in America. The Tories of North Carolina possessed a boldness and Spirit which was not found elsewhere, and upon ¹⁰ occasion appeared openly in Arms."

9

Robert R. Livingston to John Jay, 13 December 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r105, i79, v1, p334.

10

Livingston to Benjamin Franklin, 16 December 1781, Papers of the Continental Congress, M247, r105, i79, v1, p338.

Livingston refutes Cornwallis's assertion that the loyalists in North Carolina were a small minority, weak, and of little service to the redcoats. Several historians have mistakenly assumed that Cornwallis's failure to obtain loyalist support in 1780 and 1781 indicates that North Carolina contained a small number of loyalists, most of them intimidated by the rebels.¹¹ Other scholars have taken more extreme positions. Wallace Brown, in his quantitative analysis of the loyalists' claims, has contended that after the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge "the Loyalists were never again a serious threat."¹² Although Isaac S. Harrell admitted that there was fighting in North Carolina and opposition to the rebel government throughout the war, he concluded that "at no time after 1776 was there any general movement to support the British."¹³ But the loyalists, assisted by Major Craig, assembled sizable armies and forced the rebels into submission in several North Carolina counties during the summer and early fall of 1781. Obviously there were more loyalists in North Carolina than Cornwallis believed. And they were more active than historians have admitted.

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. See, for example, Gruber, "Britain's Southern Strategy," p. 230; Wickwire and Wickwire, Cornwallis, pp. 219-221, 249-250, 284-285, 314-316, note 4 on p. 436; Ekirch, "Whig Authority," p. 109.

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Brown, King's Friends, p. 196.

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Harrell, "North Carolina Loyalists," p. 590.

Historians disagree over the extent of the loyalists' commitment to their cause. Some argue that loyalties were not strong on either side.¹⁴ Others, citing the savage fighting between rebels and loyalists, have described the backcountry struggle as a "civil war."¹⁵ A. Roger Ekirch contends that that label "aptly suggests the ferocity of the contest, but it exaggerates the extent to which most backcountry residents were committed to one side or the other. Despite the region's sizable population, both sides faced severe shortages of manpower."¹⁶ On the latter point he is correct. But to support his point Ekirch cites Cornwallis's inability to attract loyalists in 1780 and 1781. This thesis has shown why the British could not raise loyalist support during the Earl's campaigns in North Carolina: Cornwallis did not remain in one area long enough; Nathanael Greene's army was a threat.

Certainly, in some instances, individuals wavered in their loyalty when it appeared that the opposition was getting the upper hand. Major Craig noted that several loyalists joined General Rutherford's army during the final days of the occupation.¹⁷ But assuming that in general loyalties did not

¹⁴ Pancake, This Destructive War, p. 243; Ekirch, "Whig Authority," p. 110.

¹⁵ DeMond, Loyalists in North Carolina, p. 139; Troxler, Loyalist Experience, p. 22.

¹⁶ Ekirch, "Whig Authority," p. 109.

¹⁷ Craig to [Balfour?], 6 November 1781, Cornwallis Papers, PRO 30/11/6, fols. 401-402.

run deep either way is an oversimplification of a complex issue. Many loyalists like William McQueen endured privations and lost family members because of their allegiance to the crown. People do not willingly suffer hardship unless they are strongly committed to a cause. The rebels demonstrated attachment to their cause as well. The fierce fighting at the Battle of Lindley's Mill is an example of men on both sides being willing to die for their beliefs. Moreover, the successful Hillsborough raid did not cause a decline in the rebel's resolve to fight, as David Fanning had hoped. Instead, the rebels' determination to win the backcountry war increased. It is obvious that loyalties on both sides ran deeper than historians have conjectured.

Why was Major Craig successful in utilizing the loyalists while Cornwallis failed in his dealings with the king's friends? How did Craig tip the scales in favor of the loyalists during the summer of 1781? The key to Cornwallis's failure lies in his misinterpretation of the British strategy regarding the loyalists. He expected the North Carolina loyalists to assist him in subjugating the province. The British, however, had not planned to utilize the loyalists as an offensive force. As Paul H. Smith explains: "the whole rationale of the campaign was for Loyalists to be organized primarily as a defensive force whenever the regular army had gained control of a desired area. Only then could the loyal

militia be expected to play a useful and realistic role."¹⁸

Because Cornwallis never destroyed Greene's army, the loyalists could not be used in accordance with British planning. But the Earl still insisted on calling on the loyalists to assist him against the rebels. The loyalists already had experienced the disappointment of responding to the royal standard, only to be deserted and exposed to rebel retaliations. Small wonder that in 1781 they did not heed Cornwallis's call.

The British had to occupy Wilmington for a considerable time. As their stay lengthened, the loyalists became increasingly confident that they had a stable base of support in Wilmington. The king's friends were now more willing to take up arms in support of the crown. Craig recognized this new attitude of boldness and decided to utilize the loyalists as a military force. His dealings with the loyalists made Craig sympathetic to their plight. He understood that it was foolish for the British army to be constantly on the move and still expect loyalist support. Once the army moved to another area the loyalists were left unprotected. The only way the loyalists could be effectively utilized, he reasoned, was for the British to occupy and maintain bases from which the king's friends could receive protection and supplies. In fact, Sir Henry Clinton argued this point throughout the war. The

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Smith, Loyalists and Redcoats, pp. 156-157.

British success in Wilmington demonstrates the validity of
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Clinton's argument.

Craig was successful primarily because after the departures of Cornwallis to Virginia and Greene to South Carolina, the British garrison at Wilmington was the only force of regulars remaining in the province. The loyalists now had the upper hand; support from the British gave the king's friends a distinct advantage over the rebels in the backcountry war. The loyalists no longer had to worry about Greene's Continentals. The rebels, on the other hand, had no force of Continentals to rely on. The rebel militia were undisciplined, ill-equipped, in many instances commanded by incompetent officers, and, in the absence of assistance from Continentals, unable to contend with either the redcoats or loyalists. "With Cornwallis's departure from the state," Robert M. Calhoon writes, "the government of North Carolina proved too exhausted to suppress further loyalist guerrilla activity. Ironically, the North Carolina loyalists became an effective insurgent force only during the British occupation of Wilmington from
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January to November 1781."

While the loyalists engaged successfully in guerrilla warfare in North Carolina, we cannot say without further study

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Willcox, Portrait of a General, pp. 83, 493-494.

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Robert McCluer Calhoon, The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), p. 498.

that the king's friends could have been similarly utilized in other provinces. Each province was unique, both geographically and in the make-up of political loyalties. The North Carolina backcountry, with its swamps and woods, provided an ideal environment for guerrilla warfare, just as similar terrain in South Carolina was conducive to the partisan activities of Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter.

Moreover, one cannot say that additional crown troops would have turned the tide in North Carolina. Craig achieved great success with a small garrison. Still, had the major received the reinforcements he continually requested, Nathanael Greene undoubtedly would have sent a detachment of Continentals to recapture Wilmington.

This thesis shows that there was more loyalist sentiment in North Carolina than Cornwallis and historians have acknowledged. In North Carolina, the loyalists displayed more vigor than their counterparts in other provinces. And Major Craig provides an example of how the loyalists could have been used differently--as independent guerrillas supported by a British base. Lindley Butler concludes that "if the British had been able to adjust their Southern strategy and properly support the success of Craig and Fanning in the Cape Fear Valley, the outcome in North Carolina might have been different."²¹

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Fanning, Narrative, ed. Butler, p. 16. The quote is taken from the editor's introduction.

Unfortunately for the British, Cornwallis already had conceded North Carolina when he marched into Virginia in May, 1781. Preoccupied with the decisive events in Virginia and South Carolina, the British were unable to determine the significance of Craig's operations in North Carolina. Craig and the loyalists achieved success only after Cornwallis's departure. By that time it was too late to alter the outcome of the war.

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