

ABSTRACT

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Why Neighbor Fought Neighbor: A Study of Western North Carolina's Internal Conflict During the Revolutionary and Civil Wars.

(Under the Direction of Dr. John Inscoe)

During the Revolutionary War, western North Carolina maintained one of the highest loyalist populations of any region in the thirteen colonies. Nearly one hundred years later, this same region contained widespread unionist sentiment during the Civil War. In a region just tame enough to settle yet too wild to firmly control, the ruling class chose repression to maintain their grip on the region. In both centuries, conditions were ripe for internal conflict, but for different reasons. Eventually, in both conflicts neighbor executed neighbor and western North Carolina populations descended into anarchy. In Wilkes County during the Revolutionary War, Benjamin Cleveland personified the western ruling class, their overall impact on the outcome of the American Revolution, and Cleveland's story represents a good starting point for comparison.

By comparing and contrasting these two internal conflicts, I hope to more fully expose the societal parallels that led to total breakdown, and to detect what impacts, if any, that the first struggle had on the second.

INDEX WORDS: Internal War, Revolutionary War, Civil War, Loyalist, Unionist, Ruling Class, Western North Carolina, Repression

WHY NEIGHBOR FOUGHT NEIGHBOR: A STUDY OF WESTERN NORTH
CAROLINA'S INTERNAL CONFLICTS DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY AND CIVIL
WARS

by

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Two brothers drag a suspected Tory horse thief up the dirt path leading to their home. The house sits on a bend in the Yadkin River in what is now Wilkes County, North Carolina. Their father is not there but they find their mother sitting coolly on the front porch enjoying a long smoke from her corn-cob pipe. In the absence of their father, the two brothers turn to their mom, asking her what is to be done with this particular Tory marauder. With little fanfare, the lady of the Cleveland house tells her two boys that the captive must be hung. Immediately, succinctly the man is taken away, a noose tied around his neck and within the hour the brothers have the prisoner dangling from a tree.¹ No trial, no appeals, but rather an afternoon spent on Roundabout farm during the Revolutionary War.

Eighty-eight years later, during the Civil War, a few riflemen practice their marksmanship from a makeshift fort that looks out over the countryside. This fort sits a short distance up the Yadkin River from Roundabout farm. The men feel they get the best practice if they fire at an object that is small and

¹ Betty Linney Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley In the American Revolution: Benjamin Cleveland, Symbol of Continuity (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1971) p. 86

far away. Their target this morning becomes a young boy climbing a fence near the river. The boy's mother is working in the fields nearby when she hears the cracking reports of the rifles fire from up on the hill. After a few moments, the mother looks up to see her son blown from off the fence rail. The target practice ends the life of a young child. This is more-or-less the norm for the group of men in the fort. A previous target practice had ended the life of a young woman as she sat next to her husband in a wagon. The couple was crossing the river at Holman's Ford, nearly a mile away from the makeshift fort, when the bandits picked her off. This type of senseless violence was indicative of the "reign of terror" spread by the Fort Hamby Gang over large tracts of western North Carolina at the end of the Civil War.²

In the American Revolutionary War and the American Civil War, Wilkes County, North Carolina experienced some of the worst violence and lawlessness of anywhere in the country. In both wars, neighbor killed neighbor, society nearly broke down, and violence was widespread. This violence can largely be attributed to the high number of Loyalists living in Wilkes County during the Revolution and high number of Unionists living there during the Civil War. However, in both conflicts it is

² William R. Trotter, Bushwhackers! The Civil War in North Carolina (Vol. II The Mountains) (Greensboro, NC: Signal Research 1988.) p 305

hard to determine what exactly constituted a "loyalist" or a "unionist." The different motives and actions of people living in Wilkes varied as much as the random violence various circumstances produced. What one can say is that in both wars there were "similarities in the nature of resistance" and patterns that precipitated both conflicts. The resulting violence should not be oversimplified into agrarian or lower-class rebelliousness but viewed in terms of what one historian has called the "social arrangements and forces that produced such similar phenomena."³

The violence of these two internal wars resulted from a variety of factors. Commonalities and differences exist. As Harry Eckstein hypothesized, the potential for violence in an area can be expressed as the number of positive forces promoting internal war divided by the forces working against internal war. According to Eckstein, these positive forces include the "inefficacy of elites, disorienting social processes, subversion, and the facilities available to potential insurgents," while the negative forces include "the facilities of incumbents, effective repression, adjustive concessions and diversionary mechanisms."⁴ Through an analysis of Wilkes County before and during both wars, it becomes apparent that the area

³ Joan R. Gundersen. "The Social Order and Violent Disorder: An Analysis of North Carolina in the Revolution and the Civil War" *Journal of Southern History* (August 1986.) p 374

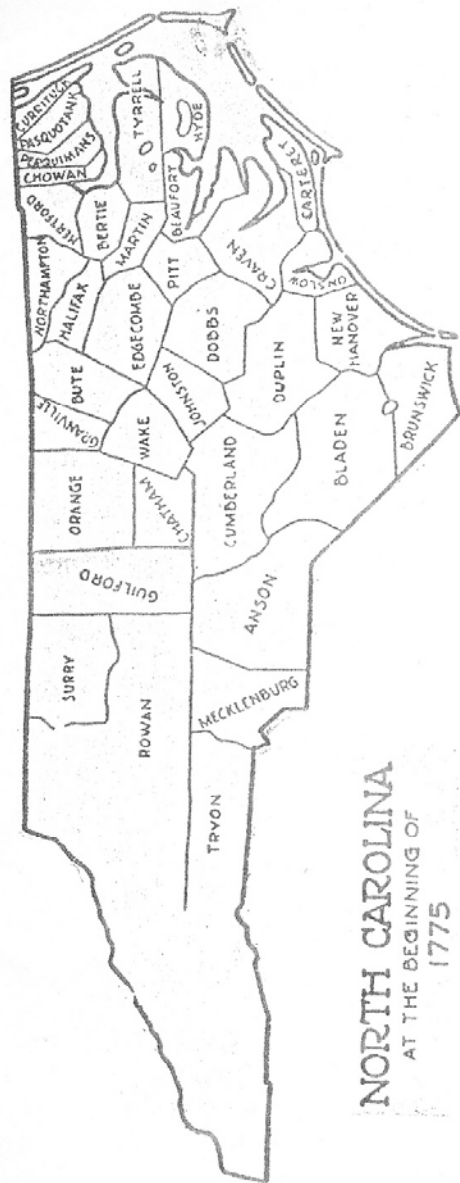
⁴ Harry Eckstein, "On the Etiology of internal Wars," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History*, IV (No. 2, 1965), 133-63

fostered incredibly high potentials for internal violence. In the end, the forces at work in the land of Wilkes created a near perfect storm of violence in both wars. The result of this violence was paramount. In each war, the course of internal conflict in western North Carolina reflected the outcome of the war. This violence also altered the socioeconomic conditions that fostered the violence.

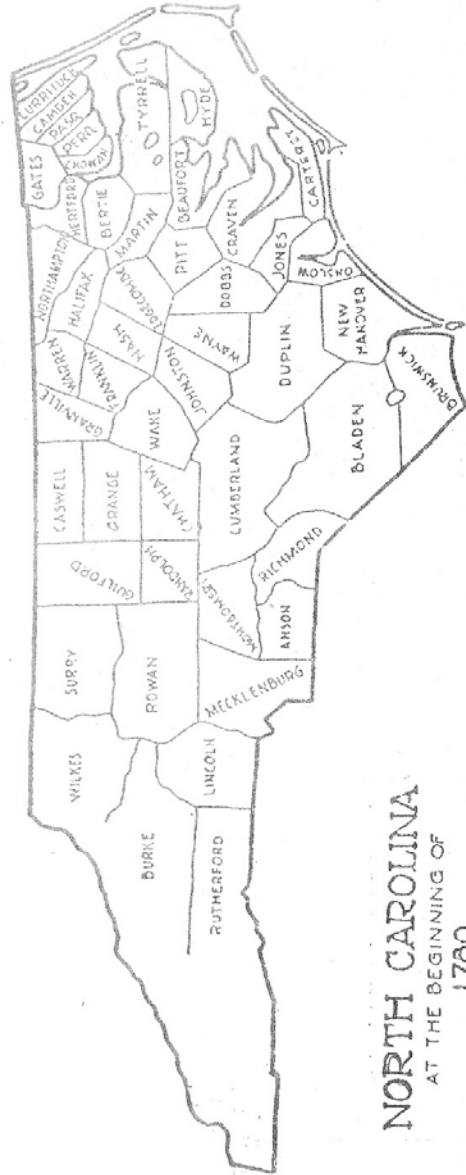
It should also be clarified that Wilkes County was born during the Revolution, formed in 1777 by act of North Carolina's Revolutionary government. The act creating the county became effective on February 15, 1778. Wilkes was formed from parts of western Surry County and the frontier. The revolutionary assembly named the county after the English politician John Wilkes, who supported the colonists' struggle for Independence. The assembly also designated the Mulberry Fields area as the location for the county seat. In later years, parts of Wilkes County would be incorporated into Ashe, Burke, Caldwell, Iredell and Watauga counties. Wilkes was sparsely populated by frontiersmen, their families, and bands of Indians. With no significant towns or large communities during the Revolutionary era, Wilkes was on the fringe of European civilization on the American continent.

The first Europeans to settle the area were of various backgrounds. Most were English who migrated from other colonies

such as Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Others came from Scotland, Ireland, or Germany to form a heterogeneous group of inhabitants. With them they brought various forms of religion including Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists and Methodists. Many were religious dissidents. This created an atmosphere of religious sectarianism, yet all worked together to survive on the frontier and defend against the constant Indian threat. Most came for the prospect of cheap, fertile land. They lived in small wood cabins and few owned slaves. Small subsistent farming was the life for nearly all who lived there.



NORTH CAROLINA
AT THE BEGINNING OF
1775



NORTH CAROLINA
AT THE BEGINNING OF
1780

Figure 1.

Map of North Carolina Counties, 1775 and 1780. From D.L. Corbitt, Formation of North Carolina Counties 1663-1943 (Raleigh: State Department Archives and History 1950) 283-294.

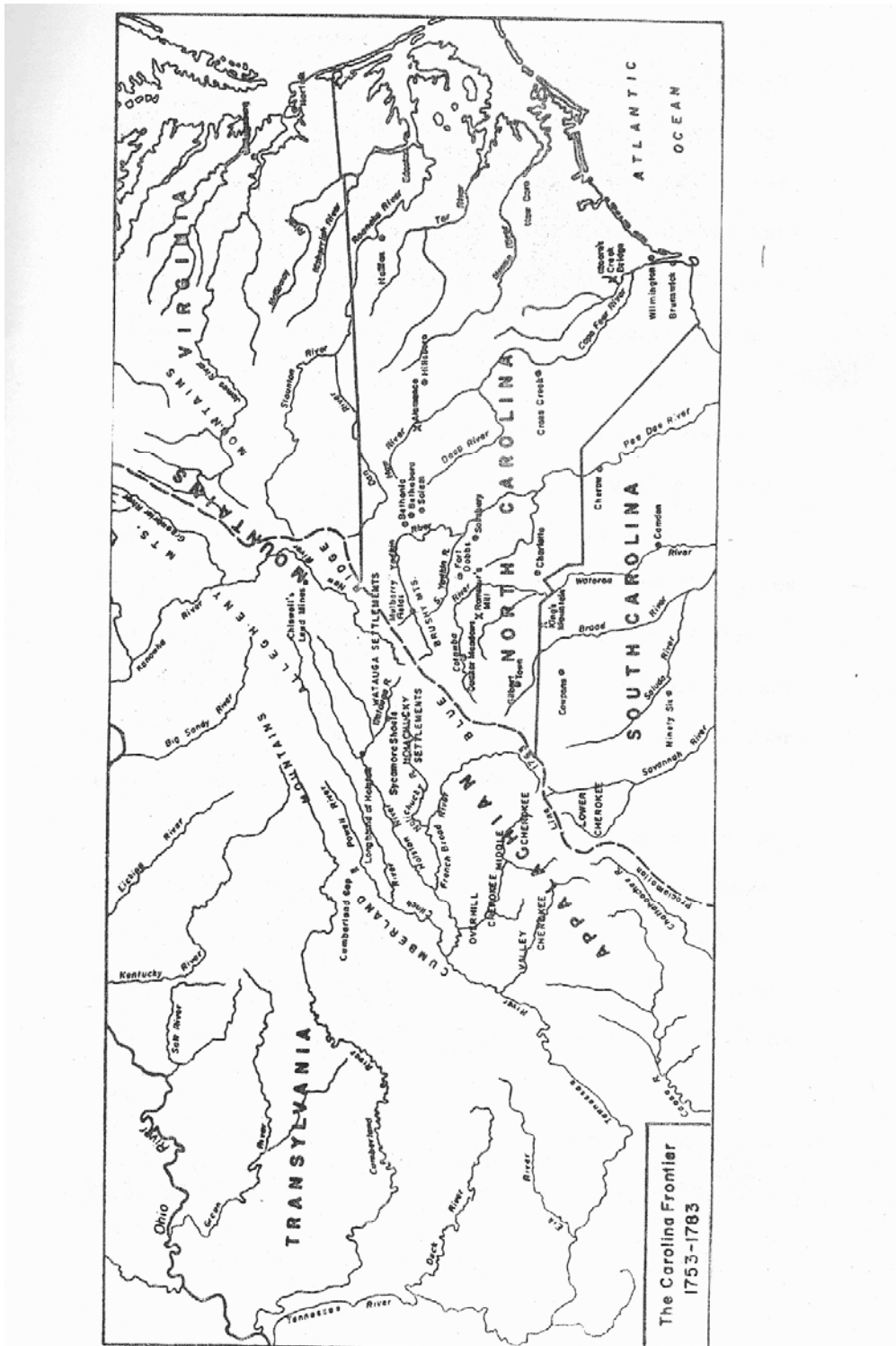


Figure 2.
 Map of Revolutionary era frontier. The dark line indicates the furthest settlement westward. Mulberry Fields sits just to the East of the line.

CHAPTER 2
THE REVOLUTION

Precarious Preconditions

During the Revolutionary War, multiple factors affected what Eckstein called the inefficacy of elites.⁵ Leading up to the Revolution, a number of factors predisposed the population to oppose the Revolutionary movement. The provincial government of North Carolina was run by an aristocracy of landed gentry and wealthy merchants in the east. This aristocracy of mainly American born men controlled the assemblies, determined representation and taxation, and appointed county officials. Through these means the eastern aristocracy controlled the frontier, although ultimately they answered to a royal Governor appointed by the King.

In the backcountry the amount of land ownership determined wealth, status, and power. Men gained large tracts of land and hence became part of the frontier gentry in two ways. Affluent planters from the east bought land or men rose from the ranks of pioneer. These pioneers arrived in the backcountry before the speculators, when it was still populated by bands of Cherokee. The key prerequisite for entering the frontier gentry from the

⁵ Eckstein, "On the Etiology of internal Wars"

rank of pioneer was the "establishment of a reputation as an Indian fighter."⁶ The aristocracy in the east appointed country officials based on such a reputation and with county office came the opportunity to acquire more land, enhancing one's power and prestige even further.

In 1769 at the age of thirty-one, Benjamin Cleveland came from Virginia and settled near Mulberry Fields in what was then still Surry County. Mulberry Fields were tracts of land that had been cleared by the Cherokee in decades passed. At the time, the nearest settlements were Salem, about fifty miles to the West, and Salisbury, approximately sixty-five miles to the South. Cleveland traded furs with merchants in both settlements. In 1772 he proved his prowess in fighting the natives. Following the advice of Daniel Boone, Cleveland journeyed into the Kentucky Wilderness through the Cumberland Gap, where he was robbed by a band of Cherokee. After returning home to regroup, Cleveland pursued the Indians and came across Chief Big Bear who told him where to find his assailants. Cleveland bravely confronted these Indians and escaped with his life, horse and an established reputation as an Indian fighter.⁷

In turn, Cleveland soon found himself at the head of Wilkes County local government appointed by the assembly in New Bern.

⁶Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 25

⁷Ibid P. 28

Before the Revolution, court records show the large amount of control that local government and officials had over frontier society. These judges of the county court many times became multiple office holders. Like Cleveland, they held various self-appointed positions such as justice of the peace, sheriff, clerk of court, register, or constable. Their power compared to that which the quarter sessions court in England had enjoyed for several centuries. The county court had various functions including fixing commodity prices, dealing with orphans, and the public moral good. These officials commanded communal activities such as road building, where much of the population was required to work, in a system quite similar to the French Corvee. More or less county officials such as Benjamin Cleveland dealt with nearly every aspect of life in the county.⁸

Cleveland presided as a justice for the court for seven years, before, during, and after the Revolution. He became part of a complex situation in which the aristocracy in the east taxed and regulated the daily lives of underrepresented westerners through appointed county officials.⁹ The Virginia backcountry gentry was more successful than the North Carolina backcountry gentry in its ability to represent the interest of the western counties in the politics of the colony and better

⁸Ibid. P. 126, 44, 118

⁹Ibid. P. 23

serve the legal needs of its western constituency and as a result, faced far less violent opposition from local Tories during the war.¹⁰ For example in northeastern North Carolina the ratio of representatives to constituents was about 1 to 150 as compared to about 1 to 1,500 in the west. Also, the courts met infrequently. This is why on August 6, 1775 it was worthy of a Salem journal entry to note: "today there was a trial here before the two Justices, James Van der Merk and Gideon Wright" to solve a feud over an apple orchard between Philip Schause and Heinrich Schor.¹¹ The court justices also served their own interests: "the commissioner for Surry Country had privately selected the site for the new Court House . . . This place adjoins Mr. Buhler's land, on which they planned to lay out a town, and therefore tried to get it into their hands".¹² It is hard to dispute the fact that local officials in and around Wilkes County were as "feckless, venal, and larcenous a lot as existed anywhere in America."¹³ This explains why many Wilkes County residents felt the same resentment against their own county officers as they felt towards imperial officials.¹⁴

¹⁰ Emory G. Evans. "Trouble in the Backcountry: Disaffection in Southwest Virginia during the American Revolution". Taken from a collection of essays edited by Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert. An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution. (University Press of Virginia, 1985)

¹¹ Diary of a Salem Congregation. August 21, 1775. Taken from Records of the Moravians in North Carolina. Edited by Adelaide L Fries, M.A. Volume II 1752-1775

¹² Ibid. August 6th 1775

¹³ Evans. "Trouble in the Backcountry" P. 13

¹⁴ A. Roger Ekirch. "Whig Authority and Public Order in Backcountry North Carolina, 1776-1783." Taken from a collection of essays edited by Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert. An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution. (University Press of Virginia, 1985)

The failure of the frontier gentry and colony as a whole to build a respectable tradition of political leadership created problems for an landed gentry who would later seek support in the Revolutionary movement. Unlike Whig leaders in Virginia, men such as Cleveland did not demonstrate in tangible ways that it was in the interests of the backcountry settlers to give their support to the Revolutionary cause.¹⁵

These abuses and consequent problems were firmly established by the time of Cleveland's arrival. In 1771 a rebellion broke out in the western piedmont of the colony against such appointed officials. This rebellion, called the Regulator movement, was defeated at the Battle of Alamance. When the Revolution approached however, the eastern landed gentry (who had been taxing the west without representation) would appeal to these same backcountry men to fight against the king for taxation without representation.

In 1771, after the Regulator movement had been quelled, the King appointed Josiah Martin royal governor of North Carolina. A supporter and appointee of imperial authority, Governor Martin believed that local and provincial authorities had committed serious abuses of power. Corruption ranging from embezzlement to extortionate court fees remained commonplace in

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 7

western North Carolina counties. To combat the problem, Gov. Martin introduced policies designed to restructure the landed gentry's provincial government. Most yeomen of the Wilkes area celebrated his positions. In Salem, the populace was so excited for the governor's visit in August 1775 that they ushered him into town with trombones.¹⁶ However, the governor's policies effectively alienated provincial leaders and the appointed county officials from royal authority. One cannot underestimate the important impact a royal attempt to usurp or remodel the entire county court structure had on the Revolution. The landed gentry turned on the governor and on British authority in response to such measures.

It follows that the frontier gentry were not random participants in the American Revolution, as history has often portrayed them, but instigators of revolution. Men such as Cleveland had a real interest in maintaining their positions of influence that had been established before the war and viewed independence from British authority as the means to do so.¹⁷ His positions on public matters in Wilkes Country were nearly always determined in light of his economic interests¹⁸. As the Revolution approached and Whig ideas proposing separation from English rule flowed in from New England, the frontier gentry saw

¹⁶ Diary of a Salem Congregation. August 10th, 1775

¹⁷ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 4

¹⁸ Ibid. P. 128

an opportunity to retake their power from royal assaults on it by men such as Gov. Martin. Cleveland's home lay within the Salisbury Military District (one of six in North Carolina). In September 1775, Cleveland declined a position as Ensign in the Second Regiment of the North Carolina Continental forces and instead chose to lead a band of Surry County Militia. The transition from county court to Revolutionary Safety Committee was "swift and decisive."¹⁹

Despite the quick actions of the county officials and North Carolina's provincial government, a majority of those residing in the Wilkes area wanted to avoid conflict. The delegates from the area elected to attend the provincial assembly, James Clan and a Mr. Lanier, were given instructions "not to mix in the matter of the Bostonians." Soon after the residents were upset to find that "they have unseated all Magistrates and put Select Men [Whigs] in their places." Surry residents were also threatened to declare their loyalties: if they held with the king or with Boston.²⁰ This explains why no one took notice of the day of fasting and prayer appointed by the Congress in Philadelphia. Thinking back on the Regulator Rebellion, yeomen remembered the destabilizing effects of the violence more than its revolutionary ideals. Indeed as one resident, Bishop Graff,

¹⁹ Ibid. P. 58

²⁰ Diary of a Salem Congregation 1775. Bishop Graff. March 25 and June 27 1775. Fries 876-877

commented, "It has made people afraid of hurting themselves again, for the burned child dreads the fire." He did not want the rest of the state to "draw us into their net."²¹ Graff also foreshadowed what was to come when he commented on the arrest and imprisonment of two lawyers in Salisbury who supported the king: "it is said they mean to do likewise with others of the same views, but they may find opposition, for the party that is loyal to King George may be stronger than they think."²²

A variety of other factors influenced the stance of Wilkes County residents to the Revolution. The Stamp Act Crisis of 1765, which had enflamed populations in New England and on the North Carolina coast, was viewed largely as an urban affair. Any tax of this sort had little or no effect on the subsistent and isolated yeomen of Wilkes County. Nor did Wilkes County, or backcountry populations as a whole, care about the Tea Act which so angered women to the east. On October 25th 1774, fifty-one women in Edenton, North Carolina declared they would no longer drink East India tea and had their own version of the Boston Tea Party.²³ They also viewed the King's settlement Proclamation of 1763 with little resentment; more important to frontiersmen was actual Cherokee temperament. In general the issues which tended to ignite much of the revolutionary fervor were lost on the men

²¹ Graff. July 26th, 1775

²² Graffe. July 31st, 1775

²³ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 134-5

and women of Wilkes County. The population remained largely subsistent, isolated, and out of the international or large provincial markets. This independent lifestyle removed them from centers of commercial and social intercourse and "thus the hierarchal constraints of society."⁹

Whig Violence And The Response

In August 1775, Surry County elected a group of Liberty Men to the Provincial Congress and created its first Committee of Safety. This group met five times, with Benjamin Cleveland in charge of the proceedings. The group quickly announced support for the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and stifled the loyalists by censuring any anti-Whig literature.²⁴ The Safety committee commandeered ammunition and took charge of the local military establishment. By November 1775, the committee had jurisdiction over all matters previously dealt with by the County Court. In Salem some court officials who remained neutral were stripped of power. On August 28th a Mr. Bonn (who had refused to declare his Whig allegiance) was "virtually suspended from office." In September many resented the Whig congress at Hillsborough for making "various laws, as they call them, among others that 1000 men should be enlisted in the Country."²⁵

²⁴ Ibid. P. 140

²⁵ Graff. August 28th and Sept 15th, 1775

Whig ascendancy had been achieved through swift and aggressive action and the organization of a potential loyalist majority had been prevented by the actions of the Safety Committee. The political stance of the frontier gentry, by men such as Benjamin Cleveland, using their positions in the county power structure was the most decisive factor determining backcountry's role during the American Revolution.²⁶

Those remaining neutral, those with loyalist sympathies or those with complaints against the aristocratic provincial government were too numerous to be completely silenced. Almost as soon as the Safety Committees were established, a Colonel Armstrong scattered a group of armed loyalists in the Mulberry Fields area who were attempting to recruit more loyalist followers. As the war got under way, backcountry settlers resented the turmoil and consequent instability and hardships the move for independence created.²⁷ The war affected those of all class standings but especially injured small-time producers who traded in basic commodities such as grain and dairy, but still needed other necessities such as salt. "On account of the present disturbances . . . people have not money" and "the chief business was the price of butter." As early as November 1775, Bishop Gaffe predicted the internal strife to come: "It looks as

²⁶Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 60-1

²⁷ Jeffrey J. Crow. "Liberty Men and Loyalists: Disorder and Disaffection in the North Carolina Backcountry." Taken from a collection of essays edited by Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, and Peter J. Albert. An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry during the American Revolution. (University Press of Virginia, 1985) P. 15

though the unrest of the country would become civil war."²⁸ In response to this resistance and to maintain social discipline, the Revolutionary regime enacted harsher punishments for disobedience which was increasingly associated with treason.²⁹

On February 27 1776, the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge took place outside of Wilmington. This battle between Whigs and Tories resulted in a victory for the Whig faction. First, the battle persuaded the North Carolina Provincial Assembly to empower delegates to declare for independence. It gave Whigs confidence in defeating a British-led force. More importantly, it ended the option of indifference and created starkly contrasting attitudes toward the Revolution.³⁰ The Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge also condemned Tories or more accurately non-Whigs to the role of a harassed minority. Despite this change in dynamics, there were enough Tories to fight a guerilla war and acts of violence begot more violence.³¹ Hence Tory risings and Patriot retaliations became the "most significant features" of what became the first "civil war" on the Upper Yadkin.³²

In May 1776, the North Carolina Provincial Assembly passed the Confiscation Act, which said that any loyalist goods,

²⁸ Gaffe. May 22, Nov 26, 1775

²⁹ Crow. "Liberty Men and Loyalists." 17

³⁰ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 75

³¹ Ibid. 75

³² Ibid P. 78

chattel, land, weapons, and other property could be confiscated by Congress. Later, in April 1777, what was now the North Carolina Provincial Congress defined treason, stating that people living in North Carolina owed allegiance to the state. Captain Cleveland and his militia took what supplies they needed from neutrals, such as the Moravians in Salem, charging them to the "public account."³³ Inspired by the Whig success at Moore's Creek, Cleveland scoured the countryside looking for Loyalist marauders, many of which he summarily hung.³⁴ Cleveland justified his suppression via his position as chairman of the Surry County Committee of Safety and Captain of the Militia. Loyalism in turn sprouted from a unique set of economic, political, and social conditions that resulted in westerners ignoring, accommodating themselves to, or resisting the overbearing demands of a Revolutionary government that was defined by upper class interests. The resistance of the yeomen class who preferred stable neutrality and disliked central authority (imposed by the crown or a provincial aristocracy) could be forestalled for only so long.³⁵ Such abuses and suppression surely fueled Loyalist sympathies in the region, and yet backcountry hostilities did not reach their full potential until 1780.

³³ Diary of a Salem Congregation.

³⁴ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 76

³⁵ Crow. "Liberty Men and Loyalists" P. 7

In May 1780, Charleston fell to the British and Lord Cornwallis advanced toward North Carolina. Violence abruptly escalated in the backcountry, including the newly established Wilkes County. War escalation, Whig pressure and the British presence ignited a ferocious internal war that defied political or ideological categorization. What was previously disaffection evolved into what Jeffery Crow has called "retributive loyalism."³⁶ Both sides committed brutal assassinations, tortured prisoners, abused civilians, and freely engaged in plundering.

The term civil war, as applied to the area between 1780 and 1783, captures the violence of this internal conflict, but it "exaggerates the extent to which most backcountry residents were committed to one side of the other."³⁷ Most likely a majority of Wilkes County settlers did not fully attach themselves to either side but responded to the conditions of the war itself. Though they agreed with the ideals of independence, these settlers found themselves more aligned with North Carolina's fugitive royal governor and opposed to the efforts of the Whigs. As one Wilkes County neighbor noted, local Whig's "barbarous and unjust treatment has driven many to the Tories who would gladly have

³⁶ Ibid P. 8

³⁷ Ronald Hoffman, Thad W. Tate, Peter J. Albert., An Uncivil War: The Southern Backcountry During the American Revolution (University Press of Virginia, 1985)

remained peaceful."³⁸ Many sought to exploit the tumultuous situation on a desolate frontier, but the main segment of the population desired any semblance of stability, no matter who happened to be in control.³⁹ Both sides realized that establishing order would give substantial legitimacy to their cause. This fact determined a large part of Whig policy in the latter war years.

Despite state leaders' lackluster support for the harsh measures displayed by men such as Cleveland, the violence continued as patriot militia appeared oblivious to established legal procedure. It became nearly impossible to discern true Loyalists from lawless backcountry men who merely used their positions in the Loyalist Militia to pillage and plunder.⁴⁰ The Tories that Colonel Cleveland pursued and fought were mostly of the lower echelon, whose names do not appear in lists of Loyalists of North Carolina or on the lists of people whose property was confiscated by the Provincial Congress.⁴¹ Hence, choosing sides became more or less an opportunistic crapshoot, depending on who ultimately became the victors. Consequently, "nowhere else did the war show its true nature as a civil war more plainly."⁴² Revisiting some of the examples of violence

³⁸ Diary of a Salem Congregation. October 19th 1780.

³⁹ Ekirch. "Whig Authority and Public Order" P. 3

⁴⁰ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 82

⁴¹ Ibid. P. 87

⁴² Ibid. P. 75

demonstrates the degree to which the divide between the two groups had grown. The problems that at first divided the two groups tended to become blurred as the internal conflict's violence mounted.⁴³

Cleveland's experiences illustrate this point quite well. In one situation Cleveland captured two notorious Tory horse thieves and he ordered the first hung. Cleveland gave the other prisoner the option of cutting his own ear off and leaving the country forever or being hanged. The prisoner promptly asked for a knife, severed his ear, and was never seen again.⁴⁴

Cleveland ensured others became part of the violence too. He prompted the more humanitarian Colonel Campbell to watch as his men hung a loyalist prisoner named Zachariah Gross.⁴⁵

Cleveland suffered personally as well. Loyalists burned his crops, destroyed his buildings and killed his livestock.

Cleveland's overseer at his Roundabout farm, John Doss, was murdered by a prominent Tory, Bill Harrison. Harrison raided Roundabout regularly but during the final raid in late 1781 Harrison took John Doss to a hillside, sat him on a log, tied a vine around his neck and strangled him to death.⁴⁶ Cleveland's scouts promptly tracked down Harrison, who tried to reason with Cleveland but was quickly dragged to the same hillside and hung

⁴³ Ibid. P. 79

⁴⁴ Ibid P. 80

⁴⁵ Ibid P. 81

⁴⁶ Ibid P. 83

by the same vine. In another instance, a local Tory leader named William Riddle led a band of loyalists who captured Cleveland in an ambush. As Riddle and his men escorted their prized prisoner back to the British outpost in Virginia, they walked along a stream bed to deter the tracking attempts of Cleveland's men. However, in Hansel and Gretel-like fashion, Cleveland turned up stones and broke tree branches along the way. Colonel Cleveland's brother, Robert, and a group of Whig militia tracked them down, rescued their leader, and captured his captors within forty-eight hours. Cleveland, one morning shortly thereafter, hung Captain Riddle in the presence of his wife.⁴⁷ These are a few examples of the personal violence associated with internal war. In Wilkes County the Revolution was not fought between patriot forces and British Redcoats on the battlefield but was fought between Americans in or near each other's homes."⁴⁸

This pattern held true during the Battle of Kings Mountain which occurred on October 7, 1780. Kings Mountain was one of the most important Revolutionary War battles of the southern campaign and one in which Cleveland and the frontier gentry played a key organizational role. On September 30, 1780, his Wilkes militia joined the Overmountain Men at Quaker Meadows in Burke County to create a force of approximately 1,300 men. Over

⁴⁷ Ibid. Pgs. 85-86

⁴⁸ Ibid. P. 89

the next week this force moved south towards Kings Mountain, which sits on the border of North Carolina and South Carolina. They faced the British Major Patrick Ferguson, one of the best professional Redcoats. However, Ferguson was one of the only true British natives present at the battle; most were Americans, many of whom were backcountry riflemen and militiamen, cousins and uncles of the Whig militiamen whom they fought.⁴⁹ The backcountry men of both sides gave each other "Indian Play," firing accurately from behind trees and bushes. At battle's end, the results were horrendous and the skilled shot of experienced backcountry hunters became apparent. This was evident in that an unusual number of the killed were found to have been met their demise via shots to the head. Many of the dead were found with one eye open and the other shut, gunned down as they themselves took aim. Surprisingly, it was a detriment to Ferguson's men having the high ground. Most of their musket balls were aimed too high, flying over the heads of the advancing Whig militia.⁵⁰ 157 loyalists died, 163 were left to die, and 698 loyalists were taken prisoner. Of the Whig militia, 28 died and 62 were wounded. Ferguson was killed in the battle and Cleveland

⁴⁹ Ibid P. 108

⁵⁰ Ibid P. 109

received his white horse for performing bravely and leading by example.⁵¹

The British defeat, or more accurately loyalists' defeat, at the Battle of Kings Mountain was significant in a number of ways. First the battle offset the increasing internal violence in Wilkes County brought on by Lord Cornwallis's approach to North Carolina. After Kings Mountain, the Whig odds in the crapshoot of civil war increased dramatically and fewer in Wilkes County were willing to put their livelihoods on the line against them. It was effectively the climax of the civil war between Tories and Whigs in North Carolina as the Tory spirit was crushed beyond recovery. British Commander Henry Clinton acknowledged the battle's importance in his memoirs, stating: "It so encouraged the spirit of rebellion in both Carolinas that it never could be afterwards humbled . . . It unhappily proved the first link in a chain of evils that followed each other in regular succession until they at last ended in the total loss of America."⁵² Accordingly, the crucial struggle between loyalists and Whig factions in places such as Wilkes County and other parts of western North Carolina effectively might have determined the outcome of the war or at the very least the Southern campaign.

⁵¹ Ibid P. 103

⁵² Clinton, Sir Henry. The American Rebellion: Sir Henry Clinton's Narrative of His Campaign, 1775-1782, with an Appendix of Original Documents. Edited by William B. Willcos. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954.

Whig Triumph and Resolution

After the Battle of Kings Mountain, a military court martial in Salem condemned to death thirty-six of the defeated Loyalists. Nine were hung on the spot, which prompted a reaction from commanding officers on both sides. Lord Cornwallis had allowed the same extreme measures against patriot soldiers under such commanders as Colonel David Fanning of the Loyal Militia and Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton of the British Army. Despite this, Cornwallis expressed his shock by the hangings. General Horatio Gates proclaimed "no person ought to be executed but after legal conviction and by order of the Superior Civil and Military Authority . . . but I must confess my astonishment at Lord Cornwallis' finding fault with a cruelty he and his officers are continually practicing."⁵³ The remaining majority of the King's Mountain prisoners gained their freedom by enlisting in the Continental Army for six months. Being forced to switch sides was common in both wars.

So what motivated Whig leaders such as Colonel Benjamin Cleveland to take such extreme measures? An ardent dedication to Whig and democratic ideals appears unlikely. Evidence indicates that self-preservation and upward societal mobility were among the key factors motivating the Whig leaders (and loyalist alike) of Wilkes County. The reaction to their usurpations and

⁵³ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P.105

violence, coupled with the aspirations of other potential backcountry gentry, created a spawning ground for internal and localized violence. In a setting in which power was extremely localized, positions so precarious, autonomy so characteristic, and stability so threatened, many took extreme actions.

For example, Gideon Wright and John Armstrong were both citizens of Wilkes County (western Surry) rising in prominence before the war. These two men battled for tracks of land, county office, and the corresponding local power each entailed. In the beginning, Wright was the more successful of the two. In February 1773 Wright's daughter, Sally, was invited to Salem from Mulberry Fields to stay for a few weeks with a Mr. and Mrs. Reuter.⁵⁴ As the Revolution approached, John Armstrong took a Whig stance and sat on the Committee of Safety with Cleveland. Following suit Gideon Wright cast his lot with the loyalists and sided with the King. Wright's name was conspicuously absent from the county's next court roster.⁵⁵ By 1780 many men of who had previously held positions of local prominence such as Gideon Wright were branded as bandits and plunderers by Whig leaders.⁵⁶ Ultimately, Wright fell victim to the violence. In November 1780 (shortly after Kings Mountain) one Salem resident noted that "Wright was shot in his own home; very likely he had

⁵⁴ Salem Diary 1773, Feb 28

⁵⁵ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 49

⁵⁶ Crow. "Liberty Men and Loyalists". P 17

intended to give himself up, as many are doing at present" but of more concern were the "many highwaymen about, who steal and even murder."⁵⁷

These local power struggles stemmed in large part from the precarious nature of socio-economic status before the war in which according to historian Joan Gundersen "conditions had allowed functioning patterns of lower-class autonomy and upper-class control to operate simultaneously."⁵⁸ Though men such as Cleveland achieved a high status locally, eastern elites dwarfed his wealth and possessions. Also the number of "middle class" settlers was quite striking in the frontier region of Wilkes.⁵⁹ In western North Carolina counties approximately 70 percent of households owned their own land and a great majority of those had between 100 and 400 acres. In counties such as Wilkes residents supported themselves with relative ease in a land-plentiful but labor-scarce economy. The result, as Gundersen describes it, was a "relatively fluid and unstratified economic order."⁶⁰ Nearly any citizen was a potential threat to power because it was an environment, described by historian William Evans, in which: "claims by political candidates to traditional deference were far less secure and in which the inclination of

⁵⁷ Diary of Salem 1780 Nov 1st and 27th. Fries Pg. 1575

⁵⁸ Gundersen. "The Social Order and Violent Disorder" P. 375

⁵⁹ Evans. "Trouble in the Backcountry" P. 4

⁶⁰ Gundersen. "The Social Order and Violent Disorder" P. 376

an independent and mobile citizenry to give deference was far more grudging at the very outset."⁶¹ The resulting status questions and competition played out during the war.

Even though the population enjoyed open access to inexpensive land, the agrarian lifestyle did not allow them to accumulate the capital necessary to participate in the market economy that was established to the East. By the Civil War, western North Carolina had become more integrated into outside economies, but in the eighteenth century "expansive subsistence agriculture" ruled the day.⁶² This lifestyle allowed for an independent existence, but as Evans described, "only good fortune-or the avoidance of misfortune-separated the great mass of middleing farmers from a return to dependence."⁶³ Without surplus capital, frontiersmen knew that illness, fire, or any other serious disruption could easily destroy the basis of their independence, a great reason to oppose any sort of war and vehemently defend what little they had managed to attain.

In 1778 North Carolina's Whig government opened a land office and as those in Salem noted: "Many persons around us [Wilkes County] who wished to be considered as belonging to the better class, planned to take advantage of the opportunity . . . A person who had not sworn allegiance to the country dared not

⁶¹ Evans, Trouble in the Backcountry P. 10

⁶² Ibid. P. 6

⁶³ Ibid. P. 8

enter land, not even on which he lived . . . some availed themselves and turned the rightful owner out of house and home, and he had no redress."⁶⁴ Whig land policy surely enflamed loyalists' sympathies.

Similarly, it is no surprise that Lieutenant Anthony Allaire (part of Ferguson's Corps of Volunteers) claimed that the court martial jury after Kings Mountain was nothing more than a "mock jury". Allaire pointed out that the Whig leaders' primary interest was not in British officers but in militia prisoners "who had the most influence in the country."⁶⁵ In a way, the Revolution became a convenient way for some Whig supporters to eliminate their local competition. This purging would become especially pertinent or advantageous to frontier gentry whose position was not nearly as solidified as those on the coast. "During this year the populace, and those who had risen to some prominence among them, became increasingly more arrogant."⁶⁶

However, Colonel Cleveland's peers did not always approve of his harsh methods. In one instance, after Lemuel Jones and William Coyle were summarily ordered to be hung, Cleveland himself was indicted for murder in the Superior Court at Salisbury. The provincial governor eventually pardoned

⁶⁴ Bagge Manuscript. Taken from the collection made by Traugott Bagge during the Revolution. Fries Pg. 1205

⁶⁵ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 105

⁶⁶ Bagge Manuscript 1778. Fries Pg. 1210

Cleveland after a Senate resolution barely passed to spare his conviction in October 1779. This violent and unapproved purging may explain why Colonel Cleveland lost his beloved Roundabout farm a few years after war's end in a deed dispute.⁶⁷ The fact that no higher power helped Cleveland maintain possession of his land might be seen as an expression of the more formidable elite's disapproval of his unconventional path to ascendancy, which nearly cost them the affections of many in western North Carolina.

The historical idea that the American Revolution was a unified movement of patriots has distorted our appreciation for the strength and resilience of the Tories. In Wilkes County and other western North Carolina counties, a Tory faction was harshly suppressed and finally defeated. "The frontier traditionally thought to promote a democratic spirit and condition" wrote Waugh, "produced little in the way of innovation."⁶⁸ The gentry with its relatively precarious hold on power maintained its dominance over local affairs.⁶⁹ The county court system in western North Carolina weathered the Revolution little changed. The new state Constitution still allowed a form of government in which Cleveland and his counterparts could

⁶⁷ Waugh, The Upper Yadkin Valley in the American Revolution P. 82

⁶⁸ Ibid. P. 130

⁶⁹ Ibid. P. 130

maintain local control.⁷⁰ There was not a provision for popular election of the local justices and though plural officeholding was banned, local officials continued to appoint themselves to multiple offices.⁷¹ As a number of historians of the Revolution have argued, the "essential continuity of the governing classes before, during, and after the American Revolution" illustrates the tendency "to preserve rather than alter American social and political structure during the Revolutionary era."⁷²

In this light, Whigs such as Cleveland influenced the Revolutionary War in three distinct ways. First, aggressive Whig policies at the start of the war (taking over the local military establishment) ensured Whig control over a potential loyalist stronghold. Second, the violent actions of Whig militia led by men such as Cleveland spurred disorder, disaffection, and resistance in the backcountry. Finally, this disorder resulted in North Carolina's political elite having a better opportunity to establish its authority among westerners. By attempting to preserve a semblance of order in the midst of war, Whigs achieved unprecedented popular acceptance when peace finally came. In this way Benjamin Cleveland helped win the Revolution through aggressive actions and engagements that influenced the course of the southern campaign.

⁷⁰ Ibid. P. 115

⁷¹ Ibid. P. 117

⁷² Ibid. Pgs. 3-4

However, some of these actions simultaneously produced detrimental effects on the Whig effort by enflaming loyalist sympathies and inducing widespread disorder. Ironically, as Roger Ekirch has argued, Whig policies made towards the end of the war in response to the disorder caused by earlier Whig policies "probably spurred popular allegiance to state authority once hostilities ended."⁷³ Therefore, because legitimacy for the revolutionary cause lay in achieving stability in the midst of Whig prompted endemic conflict, Whig leaders to the east condemned and distanced themselves from men such as Benjamin Cleveland. In a roundabout way, Cleveland and his cohorts helped the Whigs win both the war and the affections and loyalties of the populace when the war came to an end.

⁷³ Ekirch. "Whig Authority" P 5



Figure 3.
Tory punished during the Revolution. Lynching almost certainly
derives from the arbitrary punishment of Tories during the
Revolution.



Figure 4.

The Tory Oak. The oak tree Pictured above was the sight of many Tory hangings during the Revolution. The tree, nicknamed the "Tory Oak" or "Cleveland Oak", stood at Mulberry Fields (later Wilkesboro at the County Courthouse) and finally fell in 1989.

CHAPTER 3
THE NEXT CIVIL WAR

An Established But Close Elite

In the years between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, many conditions changed, while others remained the same. To understand unionist sentiment during the Civil War, one must first become aware of the foundations for both sides of the struggle before the War. Contrary to popular notions, Union sentiments did not arise from a widespread Appalachian aversion to slavery. In general, the localized violence and internal warfare in places such as Wilkes Country were spawned by different approaches to the preservation of the institution. Slavery influenced different economic interests ranging from those of the slaveholding elites to the non-slaveholding yeomen. Western North Carolina's experiences also preconditioned the area for the Civil War to come.

In the years after America achieved independence, western North Carolina flourished. Starting with the legitimacy bestowed upon them at the Revolution's end, the elite secured their place at the top. Through the antebellum period, not only did the elite become leaders on a local level; some also gained influence on a state and even national level. The mountain

counties' elite, as elsewhere in the South, consisted mainly of slaveholders. However, the mountain elite maintained even more local control than their coastal or Deep South counterparts. Compared to the fluid nature of pre-Revolutionary North Carolina society, these "mountain masters" created powerful and secure positions from which they controlled society, the economy, and the politics of their communities and their region. The extensive correspondence between families, such as the Gwyns and Lenoirs illustrate this point as it relates to Wilkes County. The mountain gentry was a strikingly intertwined group who gained their status from having long ties to the area.⁷⁴ Many families settled in the area well before the American Revolution and participated in that War itself.

By means of intermarriage, this elite used family ties to fortify their dominance in both the region and state. This pattern occurred elsewhere in North Carolina and the South as a whole. However, in western North Carolina the kinship ties between influential slaveholding families remained unusually strong.⁷⁵ In Wilkes County, prominent citizens such as Samuel Finly Patterson and Calvin Cowles married to ensure they had distinguished in-laws, thereby enhancing their own stature.

⁷⁴ John C. Inscoe. Mountain Masters: Slavery and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989.) P. 116

⁷⁵ Ibid. P. 117

These kinship links served not only to enhance connections within the region but forged ties with leaders elsewhere in North Carolina. Indeed governors such as Zebulon Vance had deep roots in the mountains of North Carolina. Men such as Calvin Cowles were well informed about developments outside of Wilkesboro and made sure that his networks across the state and South were informed about the developments in Wilkes County. The importance here lies, according to Inscoe in "the extent to which western North Carolina's elite saw itself as very much within the mainstream of southern planter culture and values, sharing fully in the assumption of social superiority so basic to both."⁷⁶ This was in sharp contrast to the frontier gentry of Cleveland's times. Family ties were not the only way North Carolina elite maintained power.

Economic prowess was another basis for the hegemonic power the elite established over the region. Different from the relatively equal distribution of land and wealth of the Revolutionary period, by the time of the Civil War western North Carolina's elite had concentrated much of the region's land and wealth. In 1860 a tenth of the region's population held more than one-third of the landed wealth. Even among actual slaveholders the distribution remained minimal. A miniscule 2.7 percent of western North Carolina's slaveholders controlled

⁷⁶ Ibid. P. 121

approximately 20 percent of all the regions slave's, land, and personal wealth. Consequently, in western North Carolina the elite's grasp on the economy equaled that maintained by their counterparts through the rest of the South. This differed from the western elite's position before the Revolution War. During that time period the economic circumstances of western North Carolina's elite differed sharply with their more established and wealthy counterparts in the East. It is important to remember, that though the power and wealth of the Western elite compared quite well with their counterparts in eastern North Carolina, the largest slaveholders in the west never constituted an actual planter class. In the west slaveholders did not live on immense plantations like those in the lowlands. As a result, western North Carolinian society was "far more integrated socially and economically" across class lines compared to the South as a whole.⁷⁷ The nature of backwoods business and corresponding mutual necessity fostered congenial relationships between slave-owners and the rest of mountain society.

Though Jacksonianism gave rise to participatory politics during the 1830's, the elite knew that "affluence translated directly into political power" and deferential politics continued to ensure its role in government and politics.⁷⁸ A

⁷⁷ Ibid. P. 121, 123, 130, 131

⁷⁸ Ibid. P. 123

large majority of officials elected from the most western counties were also the most substantial slaveholders. Surprisingly, western North Carolina sent a larger percentage of slaveholders to the state legislature compared to the rest of the state. In 1860, 87.1 percent of the region's ninety-two representatives owned slaves. On average, these representatives owned more slaves than the other slaveholders in the North Carolina legislature. In fact, Inscocoe claims "No southern state was represented by a group with as large a percentage of slaveholders as were the mountain counties of North Carolina."⁷⁹

This is not to say the elites did not take an active interest in the majority of their non-slaveholding constituencies. The elite in western North Carolina remained knowledgeable about the rest of society and used this knowledge to manipulate the lower classes in accordance with their own desires.⁸⁰ As "democratic oligarchs", elites conceded to the changing widespread political culture. The nascent ideals of the Revolution found realization during the Jacksonian Era and western North Carolina's elite paid heed or at least lipservice to these ideals. Mirroring the Sans-Culottes of the French Revolution, segments of western North Carolina's slaveholders made concerted efforts to appear as men of the people. In many

⁷⁹ Ibid. P.125

⁸⁰ Ibid. P. 123

instances, these elite adopted the habits and dress of the yeoman, establishing a precedent that is still around today. In other instances the elite tried to illustrate to the yeomen the interest both groups shared. For example, many yeomen resented the corvee-like law which required citizens to work on country road projects each year (still around from the Revolutionary era). Elites working alongside the yeoman convinced workers that this forced labor was not for the benefit of slaveholders only, but that the road construction was in their own best interest as well.⁸¹ In many respects this was true, as the economic success of everyone in the region, though increasingly disproportionate, was increasingly tied together.

Converging Interests Yet Different Paths

During the period before the Revolutionary War, western North Carolina was under represented in state politics and government. During the Revolution this fostered deep resentment among the western yeoman towards their county leaders and the unresponsive eastern elite who had appointed them. Conversely, during the antebellum period, elites maintained close contact with their constituents and the causes they championed in politics took on more regional than class tones.⁸² The elites used the power bestowed on them by their constituents to

⁸¹ Gordon B. McKinney. Zeb Vance: North Carolina's Civil War Governor and Gilded Age Political Leader. (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 2004) Chapter 8

⁸² Inscoc. Mountain Masters, P. 129

stimulate trade, encourage tourism, influence internal improvements, and attract business development. All these measures improved the lives of a majority of western North Carolina's populace, along the entire spectrum of economic and social status.

Consequently, the yeoman majority produced little evidence indicating resentment of the mountain elite. Unlike the Revolutionary period, leading up to the Civil War a large amount of political campaigning was conducted in the west. Mountain residents were fully aware of state and national politics and the efforts being put forth by their leaders. Elites of the west fought for western interest against the east on such issues as suffrage, taxation, and internal improvement. In this way the elite put regional concerns before class interest and demonstrated a "loyalty to place that surely served to defuse any potential resentment."⁸³ It also resulted in a heightened sense of regional identity as many western yeomen became familiar with the vulnerabilities associated with minorities in governmental despotism. To many yeomen, this loyalty to place became increasingly important as the Civil war approached. The transition from besieged westerner to threatened Southerner would come naturally.

⁸³ Ibid. P. 127, 130

The primary concerns of this threatened minority centered on economics. The struggle against the eastern part of the state and eventual failure of governmental efforts such as the building of a railroad reflected mountain residents' commercial orientation. This commercial orientation proved vital in westerners preconditioning to their identity of a regional minority. As western North Carolinians turned their attentions to other parts of the South, they soon found themselves intertwined with the economies of the South as a whole. Though federal tariffs and trade policies affected western North Carolina in relatively miniscule ways, mountain yeoman, in the decade before the war, became increasingly familiar with the impact of northern aggression and interference. Economic ties with South Carolina and Georgia created the basis for a southern identity and created an interest in the future of the Southern region.

These "dual identities" as both westerner and southerner help capture the mindset of mountain men before the Civil War. It follows that these mountaineers viewed secession from the union in terms of how it would affect the South in its entirety and not only how it would influence their communities.⁸⁴ By the eve of the Civil War nearly any alienation that western North Carolinians felt as being part of an "eastern-oriented state"

⁸⁴ Ibid. P. 176, 209, 210

was replaced by the more "immediate threat" posed by perceived northern aggression.⁸⁵

On May 20, 1861 North Carolina succeeded from the Union. A majority of western citizens approved, but the majorities' views were not extreme either. More frequently mountain residents maintained an ambiguous attitude, waiting to see what would be more advantageous. What westerners viewed as advantageous to the Southern region (and consequently themselves) varied widely. Slaveholders and non-slaveholders seem to have been divided equally on the secession issue. Many elite slaveholders remained unionists while others supported secession. Slaveholders on both sides of the issue used the threat to slavery's future as vital to their arguments. Despite the fact most western North Carolinians did not own slaves, as Inscoe has argued, "the institution's presence in their midst was enough to make its fate the most tangible aspect of the secession debate" and therefore both unionists and secessionists used the fear of slavery's end to argue their point.⁸⁶ Playing on regional identities both sides, especially mountain unionists, framed their arguments as a devotion to regional and state interests more than any loyalty to the nation.

⁸⁵ Ibid. P. 256

⁸⁶ Ibid. P. 256

Before the Civil War, the societal and economic configurations of western North Carolina created a situation in which mountain residents of both classes shared identities as both westerners and southerners based on the close congenial relationships predominant in mountain communities between elite and yeoman. These identities were also shared on the basis of mutual economic interests. Critical to elite power (and the corresponding western yeoman concerns represented through these elite) was the institution of slavery. Therefore elite and yeoman alike found reason to be concerned about the institution's future: it was not as "slaveholders, but rather as commercial lynchpins in the economic well-being of their region, that these mountain masters gained the hegemonic control."⁸⁷ However, elite slaveholders and yeoman alike were divided on which path, secession or Union, would be the safest course for the ship of slavery. Would staying in the Union and under the protections of the Constitution constitute this course, or becoming independent from Northern influence serve slavery best? The mountain residents of North Carolina were singular in their objective, but divided in their paths to achieve this goal.

Confederate Failures And Diverging Interests

It was this split that originally divided the loyalties of western North Carolinians, and fostered the ever-changing

⁸⁷ Ibid. P. 263

concept of Unionism during the war.⁸⁸ Similar to the Revolution, the western populace followed the paths of their leaders. In the beginning, leaders leaned heavily towards the Confederate side. In Wilkesboro, James Gwyn commented on the superficial nature of allegiances and influences that community leaders had on these allegiances. "A void in a local Union leadership was crucial in their failure to buck the tide of the much more dynamic and united secessionist front"⁸⁹ much like the assertive and aggressive Whigs stemmed the tide in 1776. However, there was not a total void in Union leadership in Wilkes County as Gwyn described.

Just as Tories found themselves after the Battle of Moore's Creek, during the initial stages of the Civil War anti-secessionists found themselves a "beleaguered minority" in the wake of secessionist fervor. Correspondingly, the unionist movement took on a familiar subversive character. Those who continued to advocate unionism soon found themselves "almost completely gagged"⁹⁰. This is strikingly reminiscent of efforts to stop counterpropaganda during the Revolutionary War by the Safety Committees. As the war got underway, local pressures mounted on individuals who did not support the Confederacy. A

⁸⁸ John C. Inscoe and Gordon B. McKinney. The Heart of Confederate Appalachia: Western North Carolina in the Civil War (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London,) 2000. P. 84

⁸⁹ Ibid. P. 86

⁹⁰ Ibid. P. 85

unionist stance, as had a loyalist's stance, presented a real threat to life and property.

Though the debates over secession were not argued in class terms, the realities of war created tensions between the region's elite and non-elite populace.⁹¹ Unionism increased as Confederate policy and localized efforts to enforce this policy increased the oppression and hardships on mountain communities. At this juncture Southern Unionism started to take on a class consciousness; one of the main reasons for this shift was the Confederate draft.⁹² On April 16, 1862 the Confederate Congress passed the first conscription law in American history. This law allowed those who could afford it or those with slaves to exempt the service requirement. The backlash conscription evoked became especially pronounced in Appalachia and western North Carolina.

Few mountain residents benefited from these types of exemptions and the class bias of such exemptions was not lost on them. Many viewed the conscription law as the product of crooked politicians and inconsiderate slaveholders, who thanks to yeomen votes were one-and-the-same. The law quickly spawned personal animosity and local divisions. The correlation between conscription and desertion soon became apparent. Desertion was increasingly common among those from the mountains. These

⁹¹ Ibid. P. 91

⁹² Ibid. P. 111

deserters filled the brushy mountains along with the disaffected and created formidable groups of outlyers and outlaws. Confederate officials became increasingly aware of this phenomenon. Governor Vance begged Secretary of War James Alexander Seddon to order all the conscripts of the Blue Ridge to report for home service instead of field service. In this way Vance reasoned "much good can be done, and men got into service who might otherwise become outlaws."⁹³ However Seddon did not honor this request. Consequently, by late 1863 home front hardships created by the war and Confederate policy resulted in widespread disaffection and the rise of bushwhackers.

Wilkes was the most unionist of North Carolina's mountain counties. A staggering 97 percent of residents opposed a convention for a secession referendum. As a result, Wilkes County garnered a reputation among Union fugitives and Confederate deserters as being a "particularly sought after refuge."⁹⁴ This distinction brought in some the Civil War's worst riff-raff and created a volatile situation. In 1864 a Union prison escapee found himself in Wilkes and was struck by how many in the Confederate Home Guard maintained sentiments for the Union. Its members did not want to fight on the battlefield

⁹³ Letter from Zebulon Vance to James Seddon Oct 1st 1863. Taken from The Papers of Zebulon Baird Vance Volume 2, 1863. Edited by Joe A. Mobley. Raleigh Division of Archives and History North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources 1995

⁹⁴ Inscoc and McKinney. The Heart of Confederate Appalachia P. 93

so they performed home guard duty in place of other service.⁹⁵ The result was a situation in which the Confederate home guard, composed largely of more-or-less unionists, was supposed to combat dissent and disorder. If anything, this produced a breeding ground for lawlessness or at the very least an ineffective home guard.

Other factors compounded this problem, ultimately resulting in the high degree of internal violence that marked the Civil War in Wilkes. First, regular troops were reluctant to confront guerrilla activity and were not effective when they did so. Consequently putting down local violence fell on these Home Guard units who were unmotivated from the beginning. Then the Massacre at Shelton Laurel occurred. In this instance Confederate soldiers harassed and tortured the women of the Shelton Laurel mountain community and executed fifteen men. These fifteen unarmed victims ranged in age from sixty-five to twelve years old. Thirteen of the men were related. Though Shelton Laurel was not in the vicinity of Wilkes County, it was in an area populated by supporters of both sides. To those in Wilkes the event signaled the new terms on which this internal war would be fought and confirmed that the Confederate army was not welcomed. In Wilkes and Yadkin County unionism ballooned, attracting more militant disaffected who committed depredation

⁹⁵ Ibid. P. 99

on persons and property. Both counties had as many as 500 marauders each consisting of local unionist, Confederate and Union deserters, and escaped Union prisoners of war. They looted the countryside to provide for themselves and (in the case of locals) their families.⁹⁶ So many in the Wilkes area understood their plight and supported them appropriately.

In these counties, locals continued to conceal and provide for these anti-Confederate peoples of all sorts. The Trap Hill and Mulberry areas of Wilkes County were particularly assertive in their union sympathies and were infamous as a particular treacherous enclave of disaffection. Trap Hill, a small rural community protected by Stone Mountain, was home to John Quincy Adams Bryan one of the most radical Unionists in the state.⁹⁷ In May 1863, some local women even rejoiced at the news of Stonewall Jackson's death. Julia Gwyn informed her uncle: "they have a regular union company up at Trap Hill" and "march under an old dirt United States rag!"⁹⁸ That same month, Bryan formed a quasi military force by combining deserters and conscript evaders with other unionists of Wilkes County. The Wilkes home guard could not match Bryan's force. In August 1863, residents raised the Union flag at the country seat in Wilkesboro.

⁹⁶ Ibid. P. 129, 120, 126

⁹⁷ Ibid. P. 126

⁹⁸ Thomas Felix Hickerson. Echoes of Happy Valley: Letters and Diaries, Family Life in the South, Civil War History. (University of North Carolina, 1962)

Due to actions like Bryan's, Robert E. Lee was forced to send Governor Vance two of his North Carolina regiments. In a letter to the Secretary of War, Vance asked for "concurrence in a plan we desire to adopt here for the arrest of deserters and recreant conscripts."⁹⁹ The 21st and 56th Regiments and a cavalry group made their way to western North Carolina. Vance appointed Gen. Rober F. Hoke commander of this group and instructed him to "proceed to Wilkes and adjoining counties in this State and use every effort to capture . . . and break up & disperse any organized bands of lawless men."¹⁰⁰ The plan backfired. Hoke never captured Bryan's Trap Hill band and engendered more resentment while he was there. Hoke's troops impressed women's property and means of subsistence, leaving some to starve and others simply dismayed. Hoke arrested around 3,000 people in the northwest corner of the state, 500 of which came from Wilkes County. However, the two-month purge was in vain as the gains were quite temporary. Calvin Cowles of Wilkesboro demanded the troops leave or get their sustenance elsewhere; otherwise he believed the community would go hungry. Similar to Cleveland's Revolutionary militia, during the Civil War, regular troops failed to maintain order, as they stole supplies from the very people they were there to defend.¹⁰¹ However, it should be noted

⁹⁹ Mobley. Papers of Vance II. January 15th 1863. P. 290

¹⁰⁰ Mobley. Papers of Vance II. September 7th 1863. P. 267

¹⁰¹ Inscoe and McKinney. The Heart of Confederate Appalachia Pgs. 127-128, 137

that during the Revolution, no regular continental troops ever entered western North Carolina. This may have been a decisive factor in giving Whigs the ability to gain credibility and legitimacy by separating themselves from the Revolution's violence. Cleveland's localized actions during the Revolution can stand in contrast to similar Confederate actions that came from the top.

Continuing into October 1863 Wilkes County remained a concern to Confederate officials. Vance in a letter to Seddon commented that the "mountains are full of tories and deserters who are burning and destroying almost at pleasure."¹⁰² General Hoke attempted to defend his actions; he described to the governor his surprise at the extent to which the "tory" problem had grown. Accurately, sensing the governor's disapproval, Hoke continued "this duty is a hard one and these fellows are hard to catch . . . I should judge that you are not at all pleased with what I have done."¹⁰³ Hoke wrote Dr. R. F. Hackett in December, 1863 telling him he had been informed "the greatest outrages have been committed upon the citizens of Wilkes County by certain men and officers of the 56th" and that he will have "all damages paid for."¹⁰⁴ The concern over Wilkes County and the fact that such a cross-section of Confederate leadership knew of the

¹⁰² Mobley. Papers of Vance II. Vance to Seddon Oct 1st 1863

¹⁰³ Mobley. Papers of Vance II. Letter from Hoke to Vance from Wilkesboro Oct 2nd 1863

¹⁰⁴ Hickerson. Echoes of Happy Valley P. 103-104

area demonstrates the proportions to which the disorder had grown, and the increasing inability of the Confederate government to deal with the problem.

The continued violence in the Wilkes county area not only produced military contest but brought political battles to the area as well; as late as 1864, politicians debated in Wilkesboro. On February 22, 1864 Wilkesboro saw a debate between Zebulon B. Vance and William Woods Holden for the North Carolina governor's race. In Wilkes a movement in support of a Peace Convention (led by men such as Calvin Cowles) had grown strong and was catching on throughout the state. In a strategy to carefully distance himself from Jefferson Davis, the extreme secessionists, and the impositions made by them, Vance quoted his own letters of admonishment to Confederate officials. Vance even ventured into the lion's den at Trap Hill, arguing for a "vigorous war" in order to reach peace, instead of the Peace Convention Movement proposed by Holden (Cowle's father-in-law). When the election results came in, Wilkes was one of only three counties in the state that Holden carried.¹⁰⁵

By the end of 1864, the line between guerrilla and regular military actions appeared indistinguishable. In Wilkes, pro-southern and pro-union forces fought numerous skirmishes. In his condemnation of "unrestrained soldiery" and cold, blooded

¹⁰⁵ McKinney. Zeb Vance Pg 224-225

murder in the western region of the state, Governor Zebulon Vance failed to distinguish between Confederate or Union forces. He concluded that both sides' behavior merited condemnation.¹⁰⁶

In the end, the definition of a Unionist in western North Carolina shifted over time and depended on individual circumstance. After the Civil War, the Southern Claims Commission records demonstrated that most union stances were motivated more through opportunism than idealism; a statement that could describe loyalist stances during the Revolution as well. Many self-professed Unionists maintained that stance only when it might benefit them personally. Even becoming a Union soldier did not necessarily make someone an ideological Unionist. Ulterior motives such as anger, revenge, disaffection or many times sheer desperation played important roles in determining one's actions, but not necessarily one's ideological beliefs. Degrees of allegiance were different in communities, neighborhoods, and even families. The fact that many hid their true loyalties from spouses or even children illustrates unionism's "surreptitious" nature.¹⁰⁷ As the war dragged on, unionism developed in response to the Confederacies war and policies. In this way it was a retributive unionism. Love of the Union or disapproval of slavery was not indigenous to

¹⁰⁶ Inscoc and McKinney. The Heart of Confederate Appalachia P. 137

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. P. 87, 97

Appalachia. Rather a dedication to personal autonomy and survival dictated the attitudes of western North Carolinians.

Furthermore, the Civil War reactivated the class differences that were submerged before the war. The policies of the Confederate government showed many yeomen that though the elites may have had shared interests with the lower class, they were not willing to sacrifice mutually in defending these interests. The Confederate government, run by the slaveholding elite, exacted the greatest hardships on their constituents least able to make the concessions demanded.

In turn, for the first time the issue of slavery became a class issue. Before this, evidence indicates that western North Carolinians supported a "Herrenvolk democracy". In this democracy, dedicated to white supremacy, white yeoman diffused hostilities they may have held toward elites by remembering their positions as that above the mudsills of society. In a convoluted way poor yeoman whites supported the institution of slavery because it ensured their perpetual superiority over at least one group of people, an assurance that would dissipate with the loss of the institution. However, with the advent of such offensive Confederate policies, many yeomen became increasingly aware of whose interests they truly served. Before the yeomen population supported slavery because it served as the basis of wealth for those who represented their interests. Each

group was utilitarian to the other. As the war continued and the planter class struggled to protect slavery but no longer represented the interests of the yeomen, these yeomen concluded they no longer needed the planter class or their system of slavery to survive and flourish. Now they could more clearly distinguish between the future of slavery and their own futures'. Their loyalties shifted accordingly.

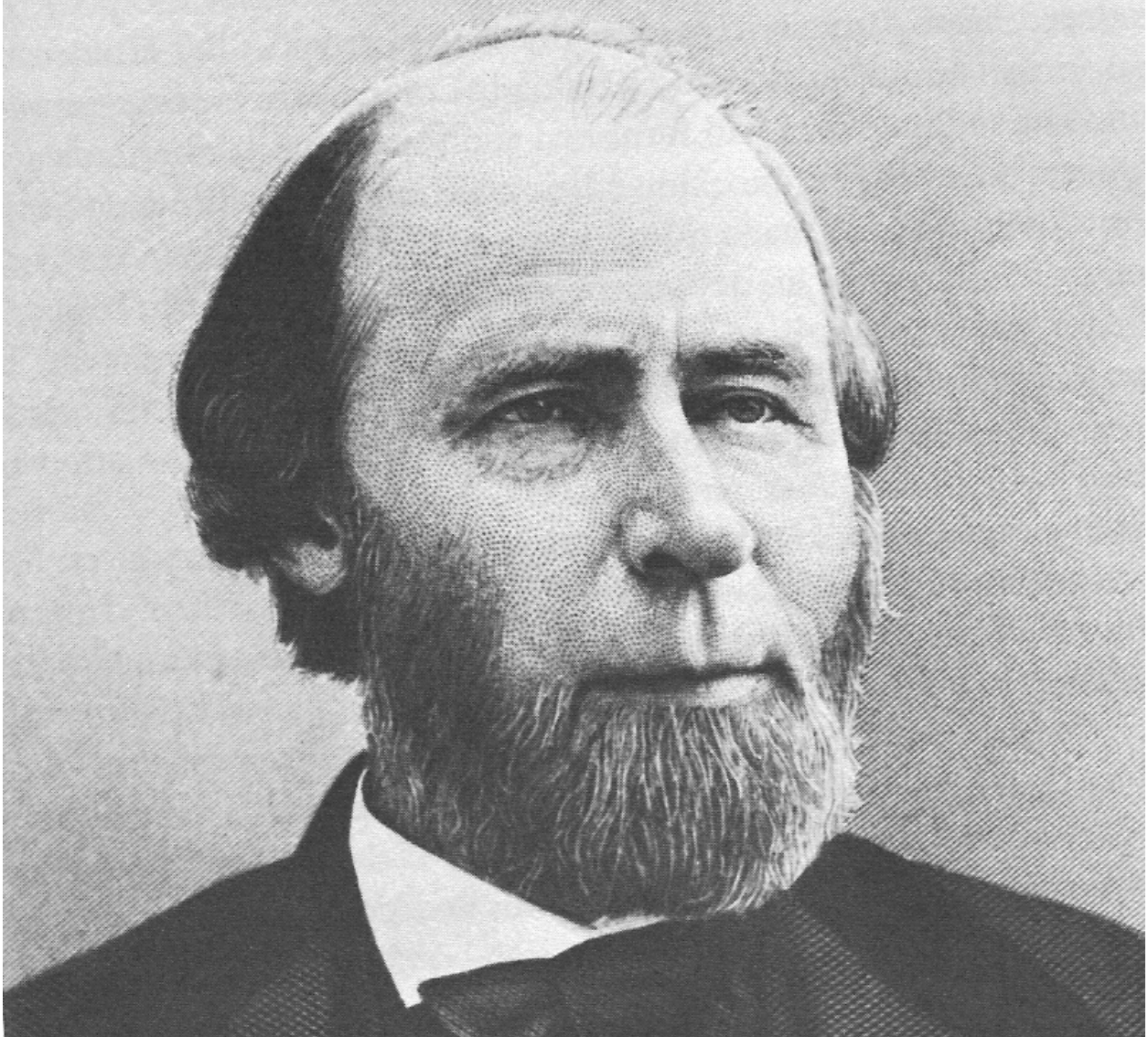


Figure 5.

William W. Holden, candidate for North Carolina governor in 1864. Holden ran against Zebulon B. Vance and supported a North Carolina Peace Convention. Holden maintained ties with Unionist sympathizer and son-in-law, Calvin Cowles, of Wilkesboro throughout the war. Holden carried Wilkes County in the 1864 election. Wilkes was one of only three counties Holden carried.

CHAPTER 4 OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The preconditions for internal warfare in 1776 varied from the preconditions in 1861. However, the subsequent societal breakdowns and conflicts in western North Carolina were similar. At the beginning of the Revolution, socioeconomic status was relatively fluid and insecure for the elites. The lower class resented these local elites in their failure to provide respectable government and for their connections with the power structures in the East. Consequently when war erupted, many hesitated to follow the often more offensive provincial government into war with the British.

Conversely, in the years leading up to the Civil War, elites secured their positions at the top of the social, economic, and political hierarchies. Secure in their positions, these mountain masters used their entrenched connections with the East to gain favor among their yeoman neighbors. Often putting their own interests aside, the slaveholding elite served the needs of their yeoman constituents and western interests as a whole. As a result, the elite gained the confidence of their lower status neighbors and convinced them of their own interest in the preservation of slavery (the ultimate source of wealth

and power that allowed the elites to serve western interest). However, as war approached, the secure elites became divided themselves about how best to preserve the institution and their constituents became divided as well.

Overall the preservation of stability represented the single biggest factor determining loyalties in both wars. During the Revolution, the already precarious yeoman lifestyle could not be disturbed without dire consequence. It follows that during the Revolution, men cast their lot with the side they believed was more likely to protect their fragile lifestyle. This meant following the Whigs after the Battle at Moore's Creek or the British as Cornwallis approached North Carolina. Likewise, at the start of the Civil War, western residents chose sides depending on which one they believed was the most likely to protect their continued economic and commercial development through the protection of slavery. For nearly a century, yeomen of Wilkes Country lived relatively isolated and independent lives. These men and women survived precariously yet comfortably through subsistence and minimal trade. It follows that this population resented any dynamic change that might threaten their fragile existence, whether in the Revolutionary or Civil War.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Ekirch. Whig Authority. P 13

The second key similarity is that the actions of the incumbents (the group in control at the start of each war) led to the internal violence of each war. It was the actions and policies of Whig militia, and Confederate soldiers and home guard that threatened the stability of the region and livelihoods of those who resided there. These actions, coupled with Whig and Confederate policy, (such as the Whig land offices or Confederate conscription) brought on strong retributive actions in the form of anti-Whig and Anti-Confederate violence.

Finally, the inability and ultimate failure of the Confederate government to regain stability, compared with the successes of the Whig government, indicated the different fates of Whig and Confederate factions. The secure hegemonic societal conditions established by the Revolution's internal violence and its subsequent suppression was ultimately challenged and nearly destroyed as a result of the violence and destabilization created by the region's next internal war. While the violence of the Revolution contributed to a tightening of elite control, the violence of the Civil War served to continue the process of democratization and erosion of reverence for the elite. The men and women of Wilkes County were central to the creation of this violence in both wars.

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