The Battle of King’s Mountain

Date: Saturday, October 07, 1780

Weather: ~22 `F, winds 13knots

Location: Near Blackburn, SC and King's Mountain, NC

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|  | Great Britain | The US Colonies |
| Belligerents | Loyalists | United States |
| Commanders | Patrick Ferguson | James Johnston |
| Casualties | Force: 1200  Killed: 290  Wounded: 163  Captured: 668 | Force: 900  Killed: 29  Wounded: 58  Captured: 0 |

**Overview:**

There never has been any uncertainty as to the actual location of the ground on which the Battle of Kings Mountain was fought, but due to the defects and limitations in early maps, the battle has frequently been described as occurring in North Carolina. Many of the early maps show "King Mountain" north of the boundary line, with none of the mountain symbols extending into South Carolina. As a result the battle was accredited to North Carolina.

In 1772 a portion of the boundary between the two Carolinas was surveyed from the Catawba River westwardly. The origin of this portion of the boundary was the center of the junction of the Catawba and the South Fork of the Catawba. From this junction the line was to run due west to the mountains and there connect with the boundary of the Cherokee Nation.

The Price and Strother map, engraved in 1808, which purports to be "The First Actual Survey of the State of North Carolina," shows the 1772 line crossing the Broad River 1¼ miles south of the east and west line through the junction of the Broad and the First Broad. This corresponds with the distance on the Gaffney quadrangle of the United States Geological Survey. By other checks of the 1772 line where it crosses streams, with the United States Geological Survey of the line, it is evident that both lines are one and the same.

**Synopsis:**

During the summer of 1780, Ferguson and his provincial corps of 150 traveled through South Carolina and into North Carolina gathering support for His Majesty's cause. While marching through the upcountry of South Carolina, the Loyalists engaged in minor skirmishes with militia regiments. Some of those small battles happened at places like Wofford's Iron Works, Musgrove's Mill, Thicketty Fort, and Cedar Spring. However in August, after the Americans lost at the Battle of Camden, the Over Mountain Men retired to their homes in western North Carolina to rest before going after Ferguson again.

**THE MARCH TO KINGS MOUNTAIN**

Meanwhile in September, Cornwallis invaded North Carolina. His final objective was to march into Virginia. To protect his troops from guerilla attack, Cornwallis ordered Ferguson to move northward into western North Carolina before joining the main British Army in Charlotte.

In late September, Ferguson camped at Gilbert Town (in present day Rutherfordton). He sent a message to Colonel Isaac Shelby, whom he considered to be the leader of the "backwater men." The message said that if Shelby and his men did not stop their opposition to the British, Ferguson would march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders and "lay the country waste with fire and sword." The Patriots would have none of it.

On September 25, Patriot leaders and Colonels Charles McDowell, John Sevier, Isaac Shelby and William Campbell gathered at Sycamore Shoals on the Watauga River (in present day Tennessee). They marched five days over the snow covered mountains to the Quaker Meadows Plantation owned by McDowell's family (near present day Morganton). There, they were joined by  more frontiersmen including those serving under Benjamin Cleveland and Joseph Winston. The troops marched toward Gilbert Town and Ferguson.

Spies told Ferguson the Patriots were on their way. Ferguson had stayed at Gilbert Town hoping to intercept another Patriot force, heading northward. Calling in reinforcements, the Scot began to march toward Charlotte to receive the protection of Cornwallis' main army. He sent an appeal to loyal North Carolinians  -- for them to save themselves from the "backwater men...a set of mongrels." Late on October 6, Ferguson received word from his spies that the Americans were close behind him. Camping at Kings Mountain, near the North Carolina border, he sent a message to Cornwallis requesting reinforcements. "Three or four hundred good soldiers," he wrote, "would finish the business. Something must be done soon." Desperately short of provisions, Ferguson sent out a foraging party of 150 men. He then organized a defense and prepared to meet the enemy.

When the Patriots realized that Ferguson was not at Gilbert Town, they became determined to pursue and fight him. The soldiers followed Ferguson, leaving their weak comrades and horses at Gilbert Town. On October 6 at Cowpens in South Carolina, the Over Mountain Men were joined by 400 South Carolinians under Colonel James Williams and others. The soldiers learned from spy Joseph Kerr that Ferguson was definitely camped about 30 miles ahead in the vicinity of Kings Mountain. Shelby was especially pleased to learn that Ferguson was quoted as saying,   that he "was on Kings Mountain, that he was king of that mountain and that God Almighty and all the Rebels of hell could not drive him from it."

The seven colonels chose Campbell as their officer of the day to carry out the plans they adopted collectively. Fearing Ferguson would escape, the colonels selected 900 of their best men to pursue the Loyalists.

The Patriots marched through the night and the next day, through pouring rain and intermittent showers. They reached Kings Mountain the next day, Saturday October 7 just after noon.

Kings Mountain is an outlying portion of the Blue Ridge Mountains. A heavily rocky and wooded area, the mountain rises 60 feet above the plain surrounding it. The campsite was supposedly an ideal place for Ferguson to camp because the mountain has a plateau at its summit. The plateau is 600 yards long and 70 feet wide at one end and 120 feet wide at the other. The Scot considered the summit too steep to be scaled.

**THE BATTLE BEGINS**

Upon arriving at Kings Mountain, the Patriot soldiers dismounted. After tying up the horses, the soldiers formed in a horseshoe around the base of the mountain behind their leaders, who remained on horseback.

Ferguson was right in believing that his would be attackers would expose themselves to musket fire if they attempted to scale the summit. But Ferguson did not realize his men could only fire if they went out into the open, exposing themselves to musket fire. Most of the Patriot troops were skilled hunters who routinely killed fast moving animals. On this day, Ferguson's men would not find escape an easy task.

The fighting began around 3 p.m. when some of Ferguson's men noticed the Patriot soldiers surrounding the mountain. After a brief skirmish, the shooting began in earnest when two of the Patriot regiments opened fire on the Loyalists simultaneously. The Loyalists fired back but the Patriots were protected by the heavily wooded area.

The regiments commanded by Colonels Isaac Shelby and William Campbell marched toward Ferguson's men but were driven back twice by Loyalist fire. But as one regiment was driven back, another would advance. Ferguson had to shift his reserves from one place to another while continuing to take heavy losses from the concealed American sharpshooters in the trees. Eventually, other Patriot troops provided enough support that Shelby and Campbell's regiments reached the summit.

During the battle, Patrick Ferguson commanded his men with the use of a silver whistle. Many Patriot fighters later recalled hearing the sound of Ferguson's whistle over the sound of the rifle fire. The whistle and the checkered hunting shirt he wore over his uniform made the Scottish commander quite noticeable on the battlefield.

After nearly an hour of fighting, Ferguson suddenly fell from his horse. One foot was hanging in his stirrup -- several, perhaps as many as eight bullets were in his body. Some accounts say he died before he hit the ground. Other accounts say that his men propped him against a tree, where he died. Ferguson was the only British soldier killed in the battle -- all others were Americans, either Loyalist or Patriot.

Ferguson's second in command then ordered that a white flag of surrender be hoisted.

Despite the call for surrender by the Loyalists, the Patriots could not immediately stop their men from shooting. Many Patriots remembered that the infamous Colonel Tarleton had mowed down Patriot troops at Waxhaw despite the fact that the troops were trying to surrender. Eventually, the fighting at Kings Mountain stopped.

In all, 225 Loyalists were killed, 163 were wounded, 716 were taken prisoner. 28 Patriots were killed and 68 were wounded. Among the Patriot dead: Colonel James Williams of South Carolina.

**BATTLE ENDS: PATRIOTS MARCH PRISONERS TO HILLSBOROUGH**

After the battle, the victorious Patriots and the captured Loyalists had to camp together. Soon it became dark and the cries of the wounded were heard and often unheeded.

The next morning, the sun came out for the first time in days. Fearing that Cornwallis would soon be upon them, many of the Patriot militia left for their homes. A contingent of Patriots took the prisoners northward to the Continental Army jurisdiction in Hillsborough.

During the journey, a number of prisoners were brutally beaten and some prisoners were hacked with swords. A number of unjust murders took place -- not the Patriots finest hour. The injustices continued a week later when a committee of Patriots appointed a jury to try some of the so-called "obnoxious" Loyalists. 36 Loyalists were found guilty of breaking open houses, burning houses and killing citizens. Nine were hanged.

**CORNWALLIS IS SHAKEN BY THE NEWS; WITHDRAWS INTO SOUTH CAROLINA**

Cornwallis was shaken when the news of Ferguson's defeat reached his headquarters. He remained in Charlotte a few days before withdrawing back into South Carolina to the British post at Winnsboro.

The British could not count on reinforcements from other South Carolina posts to help them -- the news of victory at Kings Mountain had revived Patriot hopes. The victory triggered bonfires and street dancing in cities held by the Patriots. Soon, Patriot leaders such as Thomas Sumter, Elijah Clarke and Francis "The Swamp Fox" Marion stepped up their harassment of British troops. Patriot sympathizers increased their assaults on Tory neighbors.

**COUNTDOWN TO YORKTOWN**

Cornwallis was not inactive however. He sent Tarleton and a Major Wemyss in hot pursuit of Marion and Sumter. On November 9, Sumter was fully prepared when Wemyss attempted a surprise attack on his forces at Fish Dam Ford. Wemyss and 25 of his men were captured. Sumter then moved with 240 toward the British fort at Ninety Six. Tarleton stopped his pursuit of Marion and went to Fort Ninety Six. Deciding not to face Tarleton at that time, Sumter fled northward to Blackstock's Plantation. On November 20, Tarleton attacked Sumter's forces but to no avail. Tarleton lost 100 men while the Americans only lost three. Tarleton then rejoined Cornwallis.

Meanwhile, Clinton sent General Alexander Leslie to Virginia to prepare for battle there. Leslie was to be under the direct orders of Cornwallis. Cornwallis  ordered Leslie to come to South Carolina -- he planned to resume his invasion of North Carolina as soon as Leslie arrived. Believing that Patriot leader Daniel Morgan planned to attack Fort Ninety Six, Cornwallis sent Tarleton to deal with the backwoodsman. Expecting Leslie to arrive in mid-January, Cornwallis planned to advance rapidly northward and cut off the two American armies (Nathaniel Greene's men in the South from George Washington's men in the North). He also hoped to stop the advance of Morgan's forces should they survive the expected encounter with Tarleton.

Cornwallis's hopes were dashed. Morgan's men soundly defeated Tarleton's Legion at the Battle of Cowpens on January 17. Morgan, who was ill with rheumatism and other ailments,  joined Greene's army before returning to his home in Virginia. Greene saw that Cornwallis, who had left South Carolina, was getting further away from his train of supplies and provisions. Eventually, the two forces met in the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. Technically, the British won that battle but it was a Pyrrhic victory because British losses were high. One man in four was killed, wounded or captured.

**Conclusion:**

Historians consider the Battle of Kings Mountain to be the "turning point in the South" in America's War for Independence.  The victory of Patriots over Loyalist troops destroyed the left wing of Cornwallis army.  The battle also effectively ended, at least temporarily, the British advance into North Carolina.  Lord Cornwallis was forced to retreat from Charlotte into South Carolina to wait for reinforcements.  The victory of the Overmountain Men allowed General Nathaniel Greene the opportunity to reorganize the American Army.

When British General Henry Clinton learned of his men's defeat at Kings Mountain, he is reported to have called it "the first link of a chain of evils" that he feared might lead to the collapse of the British plans to quash the Patriot rebellion.  He was right.  American forces went on to defeat the British ar Cowpens.  A little more than a year after Kings Mountain, Washington accepted Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown, Virginia.