



CRITICAL MOMENTS IN AMERICAN HISTORY

THE BATTLES OF KINGS MOUNTAIN AND COWPENS

**The American Revolution in the
Southern Backcountry**

MELISSA WALKER



The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens

The American South is so identified with the Civil War that people often forget that the key battles from the final years of the American Revolution were fought in Southern states. The Southern backcountry was the center of the fight for independence, but backcountry devotion to the Patriot cause was slow in coming. Decades of animosity between coastal elites and backcountry settlers who did not enjoy accurate representation in the assemblies meant a complex political and social milieu throughout this turbulent time.

The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens focuses on the battles of the Southern backcountry. With careful attention to political, social, and military history, Walker concentrates on the communities and events unacknowledged by most accounts of the Revolutionary War.

In five concise chapters bolstered by government documents, autobiographical excerpts, correspondence, and diaries, *The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens* gives students of the American Revolution an important new perspective on the role of the south in the resolution of the fighting.

For additional documents, images, and resources please visit *The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens* companion website at www.routledge.com/cw/criticalmoments.

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**This book is dedicated to my students at
Converse College—past, present, and future.**

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Series Introduction

Welcome to the Routledge *Critical Moments in American History* series. The purpose of this new series is to give students a window into the historian's craft through concise, readable books by leading scholars, who bring together the best scholarship and engaging primary sources to explore a critical moment in the American past. In discovering the principal points of the story in these books, gaining a sense of historiography, following a fresh trail of primary documents, and exploring suggested readings, students can then set out on their own journey, to debate the ideas presented, interpret primary sources, and reach their own conclusions—just like the historian.

A critical moment in history can be a range of things—a pivotal year, the pinnacle of a movement or trend, or an important event such as the passage of a piece of legislation, an election, a court decision, a battle. It can be social, cultural, political, or economic. It can be heroic or tragic. Whatever they are, such moments are by definition “game changers,” momentous changes in the pattern of the American fabric, paradigm shifts in the American experience. Many of the critical moments explored in this series are familiar; some less so.

There is no ultimate list of critical moments in American history—any group of students, historians, or other scholars may come up with a different catalog of topics. These differences of view, however, are what make history itself and the study of history so important and so fascinating. Therein can be found the utility of historical inquiry—to explore, to challenge, to understand, and to realize the legacy of the past through its influence of the present. It is the hope of this series to help students realize this intrinsic value of our past and of studying our past.

William Thomas Allison
Georgia Southern University

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Acknowledgments

The seeds for this book were sown at my interview for a teaching position at Converse College in January 1996. Joe P. Dunn, Dana Professor of History and chair of the department of history and politics, suggested that I might be interested in including field trips to nearby Revolutionary War battlefields in some of my courses. Over the next few years, I did just that. Eventually, I developed a course for our January term called *The American Revolution in the Southern Backcountry*. Each time I taught the course, my students and I tramped over the landscapes where John Sevier, Daniel Morgan, Nathanael Greene, Alexander Chesney, and hundreds more men fought in bitter cold and blazing heat. In 2007 and 2009, with my colleague Edward Woodfin, I directed a National Endowment for the Humanities Landmarks in American History and Culture workshop for school teachers on the same topic.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to learn from many of the masterful historians cited in these pages including Lawrence Babits, Marvin Cann, Walter Edgar, George Fields, Cynthia Kierner, and Michael Scoggins. The staffs at Historic Brattonsville (site of the Battle of Huck's Defeat), Kings Mountain National Military Park, Cowpens National Battlefield, and Ninety Six National Historic Site have been generous in sharing their time and their knowledge with my students and me. John Robertson led my first guided battlefield tour at Cowpens, and he continues to be a resource on every visit. I am grateful to all these fine professionals.

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enroll in my American Revolution course in future years. Thanks to Eddy Woodfin for reading portions of the manuscript, and to my husband, Chuck Reback, who not only tolerated my distraction but read the entire manuscript and saved me from many careless errors.

I dedicate this book to my students who have taught me as much about history and human nature as I have taught them.

Timeline

“National” events

Southern colonial and backcountry events

1754–63	French and Indian War	
1758–61		Cherokee War
1761–63		Struggle between South Carolina royal governor and its assembly over the extent of assembly's power.
1763	February 10—Treaty of Paris marks the official end of the French and Indian War October—Proclamation of 1763 forbids migration west of the crest of the Appalachian Mountains	
1764	Parliament enacts various Navigation and Revenue Act including Sugar Act and Currency Act	
1765	March—Stamp Act and Quartering Act passed Stamp Act protests October—Stamp Act Congress	Stamp Act Protests in southern colonies
1766	Stamp Act Repealed March—Declaratory Act	May—Word of Stamp Act's repeal reaches southern colonies
	June—Townshend Acts	
1767–68	First round of American Boycotts of British goods	South Carolina Regulator Movement Begins North Carolina Regulator Movement Begins South Carolina creates Committee of 39 to enforce boycotts March—Truce between South Carolina Regulators and Moderators
1769		South Carolina Judiciary Act Addresses Regulator demands
1770	March—Boston Massacre	South Carolina Assembly appropriates money for defense of John Wilkes South Carolina Assembly installs statue honoring William Pitt

1771		Royal government effectively ends in South Carolina though royal governor does not depart March—Battle of Alamance results in defeat of North Carolina Regulators
1773	Tea Act Tea Act protests and boycotts December—Boston Tea Party	Tea Act protests and boycotts December—South Carolina Tea is unloaded and stored for safekeeping.
1774	March–June—Passage of the Coercive (Intolerable) Acts September 5–October 26—First Continental Congress Meets October 20—First Continental Congress passes “the Association,” a prohibition on trade with Britain	North and South Carolina send delegates to First Continental Congress. In South Carolina, Committee of ninety-nine organizes Provincial Congress.
1775		Georgia organizes a Provincial Congress and ratifies the Association South Carolina organizes Committee of Safety to oversee colony’s defense April 19—Battles of Lexington and Concord May—Second Continental Congress June—Formation of Continental Army; George Washington named commander in chief June—Battle of Bunker Hill in Boston results in Patriot defeat.
		April—Committee of Safety Seizes British supply of munitions in Charles Town North and South Carolina and Georgia send delegates to Second Continental Congress. June—South Carolina Provincial Congress ratifies the Association and authorizes formation of military units under command of Committee of Safety; issues Circular Letter to the districts of the states outlining its positions on British authority. Summer—Royal government effectively ends in North Carolina and Georgia Summer—Representatives of the South Carolina Committee of Safety and North Carolina Whigs seek backcountry support July—Seizure of Port Charlotte from British September—Treaty of Ninety Six forestalls armed conflict between Whigs and Loyalists in South Carolina backcountry November Whig forces take Fort Johnson in South Carolina.
	November—Lord Dunmore’s Proclamation	November—First battle of Ninety Six. November/December—Snow Campaign
1776	January—Publication of <i>Common Sense</i> March—British evacuate Boston.	March—South Carolina adopts state constitution. April—North Carolina Provincial Congress issues Halifax Resolves authorizing delegates to Second Continental Congress to vote for independence. First state to do so. June—Whig victory—Battle of Sullivan’s Island August—news of the Declaration reaches southern colonies July–October—Cherokee campaign in South Carolina
	July—Declaration of Independence adopted September—British occupy New York City December—Washington’s forces are victorious at Battle of Trenton in New Jersey	

- 1777 January—Patriot victory at Princeton, New Jersey
- September—British victory at Battle of Brandywine in Pennsylvania
- September—British occupy the American capital at Philadelphia
- October—American victory at Saratoga in New York
- December—Washington's army enters winter quarters at Valley Forge
- 1778 February—French-American treaty of alliance signed
- June—British abandon Philadelphia and return to New York
- December—British occupy Savannah
- 1779 February—Patriot victory over Loyalist forces at Kettle Creek in Georgia
- May 11–12—First Battle of Charleston—British withdraw
- July—British burn Fairfield and Norwalk, Connecticut
- 1780 October—American attempt to recapture Savannah fails
- Winter–spring—British invade South Carolina.
- April—Governor Rutledge flees South Carolina.
- April 1—Siege of Charles Town begins
- April 14—Whig defeat—Battle of Monck's corner
- May 12—Surrender of Charles Town to British
- May 29—Battle of the Waxhaws
- June 3—Clinton revokes original terms of parole.
- June 18—British troops burn Hill's Ironworks
- June 20—Whigs rout Loyalist forces at Ramsour's Mill, North Carolina
- July—French troops arrive in Rhode Island to aid the American cause
- July 12—Whig victory at Battle of Huck's Defeat
- July 13—First battle of Cedar Springs—Whig victory
- August 16—American defeat at Battle of Camden
- August 18—Whig victory at Musgrove's Mill
- October—George Washington appoints Nathanael Greene as commander of the southern branch of the Continental Army
- 1781 October 7—Battle of Kings Mountain
- January 17—American victory at the Battle of Cowpens
- January 17—early March—The "race to the Dan"
- March 15—General Greene is defeated at Guilford Courthouse in North Carolina
- April 25—General Greene is defeated at Hobkirk's Hill in South Carolina
- May 22–June 19—General Greene lays siege to British garrison at Ninety Six; ultimately withdraws and British abandon fort.
- March—Articles of Confederation Adopted

	June 6—Whigs recapture Augusta, Georgia
	September 8—General Greene defeated at Eutaw Springs, South Carolina
	October 19—Cornwallis surrenders at Yorktown, Virginia
1782	July—British evacuate Savannah Backcountry fighting between Whigs and Loyalists continues
	November 30—British and Americans sign preliminary peace treaty
	November 14—Battle of James Island, South Carolina is last Southern engagement; British victory
	December 14—British leave Charleston
1783	September 3—Treaty of Paris formally concludes the war and recognizes American independence
	November—British troops leave New York City



Figure 1.1 The Revolutionary War in the South

CHAPTER 1

The Southern Backcountry Before the American Revolution

*The settlers who swarmed into the
backcountry before and after the Cherokee
War created a distinct society in South
Carolina, a society out of touch with
Charleston . . .*

*Robert Stansbury Lambert, South Carolina
Loyalists in the American Revolution*

*We are Free-Men—British Subjects—Not
Born Slaves—We contribute our Proportion
in all Public Taxations, and discharge our
Duty to the Public, equally with our Fellow
Provincials Ye[t] We do not participate with
them in the Rights and Benefits which they
Enjoy, tho' equally entitled to them.*

*Rev. Charles Woodmason, South Carolina
“Regulator’s Remonstrance”*

In May 1780, after a long siege, British troops under the command of General Henry Clinton captured Charles Town and roughly 5,000 Continental soldiers. A month later, Clinton’s successor as commander of the southern army, General Charles Cornwallis, wrote that the British had put “an end to all resistance in South Carolina.” It seemed that British victory, at least over the Southern colonies, was imminent. Scarcely more than a year later, Cornwallis surrendered to George Washington at

Yorktown ending the last large-scale confrontation of regular troops in the long war for American independence. The surprising reversal in British fortunes was largely the result of bitter warfare in the Carolina backcountry and two turning point battles—at Kings Mountain and Cowpens. This book is the story of that backcountry conflict and those turning point battles.¹

The American South is so identified with the Civil War that people often forget that the key battles from the final years of the American Revolution were fought in Southern states. Nearly 20 percent of total combat deaths from the entire Revolutionary War occurred in South Carolina. The Southern backcountry may have been at the center of the fight for independence, but backcountry devotion to the Patriot cause was slow in coming. For decades before the American Revolution, social, political, and religious animosities had smoldered between coastal elites who controlled the colonial governments in North and South Carolina and backcountry settlers who did not enjoy adequate representation in their colonial assemblies or legal systems sufficient for maintaining law and order. Seething conflicts between lowcountry and backcountry citizens would help shape the character of the Revolutionary War in the South. The backcountry war was more like a civil war than a war between nations; it was a fight between Americans and Americans. For example, only one soldier at the Battle of Kings Mountain was British: the Scotsman Patrick Ferguson. All the rest of the combatants—on both sides—were Americans. Throughout the war, the numbers of “redcoats” on the Southern battlefields remained relatively small. To understand this war between Americans and Americans, it is necessary to understand something about Southern colonial life before the Revolution.²

THE SOUTHERN BACKCOUNTRY

Eighteenth-century Southerners referred to the area more than fifty miles inland from the coast as the backcountry. The distinction between lowcountry and backcountry was rooted in geography. Lowcountry terrain was just that: close to sea level. Tidewater streams and swamps traversed the lowcountry’s coastal plain. By contrast, the backcountry included sand hills, piedmont, and large expanses of hardwood and pine forests. The far western reaches of the backcountry stretched into the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains.³

The Southern backcountry of South Carolina and North Carolina was colonized beginning in the 1740s by Scots-Irish, English, German, Swiss, Welsh, Moravian, and Huguenot settlers. The vast majority of backcountry

settlers entered by the “back door,” arriving not from the coast, but via the Great Philadelphia Wagon Road or the Great Indian Trading Path from Pennsylvania and Virginia. Georgia’s frontier was settled a bit later, and many of its newcomers were North and South Carolinians fleeing the violence of the Cherokee War and the Regulator Movements. Between 1763 and 1773, the provincial governments gained millions of acres from the Indians, and royal officials in Georgia and South Carolina used generous land grants to lure new settlers to the backcountry. South Carolina was also known for its relative religious tolerance. Most of the determined backcountry settlers in that colony rejected Anglican worship for one of the several dissenting Protestant sects: Presbyterian, Baptist, or Methodist. By the 1760s, about 35,000 white people lived in the South Carolina backcountry alone. Some backcountry settlers were squatters, eking out a living on land to which they did not hold title. A few engaged in lively and profitable trade with the Indians, but most were yeoman farmers and artisans who earned a living through subsistence and market-oriented production of wheat, tobacco, hemp, butter, and livestock that they sold in Charles Town, Wilmington, or Savannah. Many of these backcountry farmers had ambitions of becoming slave-owning planters. By the time of the Revolutionary War, slaves made up about one-fifth of the backcountry population.⁴

The distances that separated backcountry settlers from the lowcountry founders of the far Southern colonies generated tensions. Few roads connected the backcountry settlements to the coastal towns, and overland travel was arduous and time-consuming. It took at least a week to travel from the backcountry settlement of Ninety Six, South Carolina, to Charles Town, and two weeks from the frontier settlements at Long Canes, further west. Backcountry settlers had some contact with Charles Town where they traveled to trade, and backcountry news was sometimes featured in the Charles Town newspapers. Nonetheless, many backcountry folk lived an isolated existence in territory where most homesteads were primitive and widely scattered with few of the legal or social controls found in the more densely populated coastal regions.⁵

ANXIETY IN THE BACKCOUNTRY—THE 1750S

In the backcountry, settlers lived in an uneasy truce with native Americans. In the mid-eighteenth century, the Cherokee and Catawba Indian nations resided in the Carolina backcountry while the Creeks occupied Georgia’s frontiers. All three groups had early forged a trading partnership with the British, but tensions between white settlers and Indians persisted. A small

nation, numbering only about 1,700 in the mid-eighteenth century, the Catawba subsisted through a combination of hunting, fishing, and farming. After the arrival of the Europeans, they also engaged in a vigorous trade. A few decades of conflict with white settlers nevertheless took its toll on the small nation, and their numbers dwindled. In 1763 South Carolina's

The Cherokee Indians in the Southern Backcountry

By the time Europeans began to explore the southeastern part of North America, the Cherokee were the most powerful of the Indian tribes residing in the region. At one time, the Cherokee nation controlled at least 140,000 acres in the southeast. They combined hunting and gathering with agriculture to supply their needs. Men hunted and fished while women cultivated the land and gathered wild food. They lived in settled villages that governed themselves democratically; political power was decentralized, and villages were largely autonomous, but the nation acted in a united way for most military actions.

The Cherokees first came into contact with Europeans in 1540 when an expedition led by Spaniard Hernando de Soto passed through their territory. A second Spanish expedition led by Juan Pardo in 1567 established six forts in Cherokee country, but the Indians rose against the Spanish, killing the soldiers stationed there and burning all the forts forcing the Spanish to retreat to the coast. Only with the arrival of English settlers in the seventeenth century did the Cherokee come to have sustained contact with Europeans. First they developed trade relationships with Virginians, and after the establishment of Carolina (later divided into North and South Carolina), European trade became an integral part of the Cherokee economy.

Throughout the eighteenth century, European disease and intermittent warfare with other tribes, often on behalf of the British, took a toll on the Cherokee nation, but they remained the most powerful tribe in the southeast. The incursion of increasing numbers of white settlers chipped away at Cherokee territorial integrity as well as they were pressured to cede increasing amounts of land to whites. In 1738 and 1739, nearly half the Cherokee population died in a smallpox epidemic. With blessings from the Cherokee, the British built forts in Cherokee country to defend against other tribes and the French, including Fort Loudoun in present-day Tennessee and Fort Prince George in modern-day South Carolina. These forts would be at the epicenter of Cherokee involvement in the revolutionary ferment.

Indian agent, John Stuart, negotiated the Treaty of Augusta. Ratified by the South Carolina Assembly, the treaty granted the Catawba a reservation in the north central part of the colony. The fact that colonial officials allowed the Catawba to remain permanently in the colony indicates that whites did not see the few Catawba as a significant threat to their security or their land-hungry ambitions.⁶

The Cherokee were far more numerous than the Catawba, and they had a long history of interdependent relations with the British. In 1693, a group of Cherokee journeyed to Charles Town to sign a treaty of friendship and ask for firearms to protect themselves against other Indian nations, an event that marked the beginning of the nation's sustained contact with the British. Over time, the desire for guns and iron tools led the Cherokee to develop a vigorous trade in deerskins with the Europeans. By 1710, 50,000 deerskins a year were being exported from Charles Town, most of them the product of Cherokee hunting. The possession of firearms and iron tools enabled the Cherokee to become more productive hunters and farmers, but their increasing thirst for deerskins also caused them to encroach on other tribes' hunting territories. In the 1710s and 1720s, the Cherokee fought wars with all of the neighboring Indian nations: the Shawnee, Creeks, and Catawba. Trade continued to grow throughout the mid-eighteenth century; by 1747, the value of deerskin shipments from Charles Town equaled the combined total of shipments of indigo, beef, pork, lumber, and naval stores. A looming deer shortage escalated the friction between natives and whites and between the Cherokee and other nations.⁷

For their part, the British not only enjoyed the fruits of the deerskin trade, but they also valued the buffer that the Cherokee provided between British settlers and Indians further west. For this reason official royal policy was to maintain good relations with the powerful southeastern nation, a policy not particularly popular with backcountry settlers. John Stuart, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, saw whites as the chief threat to peace, and he pursued measures to protect the welfare of Indians and maintain their landholdings. To prevent abuse by traders, he successfully lobbied the British government to license traders, restrict the sale of rum, and fix prices for trade goods, putting him at odds with backcountry settlers.⁸

By the mid-eighteenth century, backcountry distrust of the Crown's management of Indian relations escalated even as the Cherokee suffered a precipitous population decline due to disease and inter-tribal warfare. Roughly 8,000 Cherokee warriors lived in towns scattered in the Southern mountains, where they faced increasing pressure from the hordes of white settlers moving in around them. In 1755, the secretary to the royal governor of South Carolina toured the backcountry. He reported in the