

The Southern Homefront in the United States War for Independence

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the struggles ordinary Americans faced during the War for Independence. Drawing from memoirs, local news reports, and secondary sources, this thesis covers topics such as the broken communities, refugee crises, disease, and shortages caused by war in the American South. It will also describe the hardships endured by enslaved people during this period, with both sides fighting over a freedom that did not apply to them. This thesis will argue that rather than being passionate idealists willing to voluntarily sacrifice for a great cause, the bulk of the American southerners were ordinary people who made decisions for their own self-preservation and interests. Even so, their sacrifices were vital to the success of the American cause.

The Southern Homefront in the United States War for Independence

Although the American Revolution had its share of idealists dreaming for a better nation and a better world, most of the people living on the continent in the late eighteenth century were not spending their days with their thoughts in the clouds, particularly in the American South. Most people were sitting at home on their farms, trying to make a living, working hard so that they would have enough food to feed their families. Although it is true that these ordinary people probably had opinions as to how they should be governed, when it came to getting one's hands dirty fighting and dying for the ideals of a republic, it was exceedingly difficult for the Continental Congress to find enough men to enlist. It is also important to recognize that African American slaves and indigenous peoples living in the South had a very different experience in this conflict that is often neglected. By taking an honest look at life on the home front in the American South, one can see that rather than being passionate idealists willing to voluntarily sacrifice for a great cause, the bulk American southerners consisted of ordinary people who made decisions for their own self-preservation and interests. Even so, their oftentimes semi-coerced sacrifices were vital to the success of the American cause.

No Middle Ground

When studying the tensions leading up to the American Revolution, many historians point to the growing concerns over the Intolerable Acts. Yet most of these acts, such as Navigation and Sugar Acts, did not affect the average person in the southern backcountry. Extremely wealthy backcountry citizens as well as the people on the coasts profiting from the triangle trade had cause for such frustration.¹ Middle class backcountry citizens often felt that the

¹ Melissa Walker, *The Battles of Kings Mountain and Cowpens: The American Revolution in the Southern Backcountry*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 18.

coastal elites did not adequately represent them in colonial governments. For the most part, the people of the frontier governed their own affairs without caring about what went on outside of their local communities. The Stamp Act frustrated them greatly, as it was one of the first pieces of British-imposed legislation to directly affect their daily lives, but once it was repealed, life seemed to go back to normal.

The Proclamation of 1763 may have angered backcountry citizens, but this act was difficult to enforce. Many people disregarded the legislation and settled west of the Appalachian Mountains anyway. As an essayist for the *Virginia Gazette* wrote in 1773, “not even a second Chinese wall, unless guarded by a million of soldiers, could prevent the settlement of the lands on Ohio and its dependencies.”² Land speculators who could no longer legally sell land west of the mountains were infuriated, and many flocked to the Patriot cause when it became clear that there was no way around the legislation.³ However, responses amongst the farming families were mixed. Some saw the Proclamation as a blessing as they no longer had to pay anyone to settle west of the Appalachians. Some were concerned frustrated that they could not obtain a legal title for the lands they had settled. But regardless of how farmers felt about the Proclamation, they continued to disregard the legislation and settle illegally west of the mountains.⁴ Life continued on, and support for the Patriot cause in the back-country was far from unified.

While the people in the coastal regions of Charleston and Savannah protested the Townshend and Tea Acts, backcountry citizens were not all that concerned because their lives

² “A Friend to the True Interest of Britain in America,” *Virginia Gazette*, January 14, 1773, quoted in Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press), 7.

³ Holton, *Forced Founders*, 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

did not revolve around importation agreements with Great Britain. Whig leaders travelled throughout the backcountry trying to gain support the movement for independence, but struggled to find people who shared their passion.⁵ As revolutionary sentiments grew on the coast and among the wealthier backcountry slaveholders, the common people in the southern interior either remained loyal to England or tried their best to stay neutral.⁶ However, the pressure to take sides continued to build, and remaining neutral became more and more difficult as the war progressed.

In 1774, the Continental Congress passed the “Association” oath, which forced people to swear to boycott British goods.⁷ This later led to the Test Oaths in which people would swear allegiance to the Patriot cause, lest they suffer disarmament or arrest.⁸ Historian Ruma Chorpa writes that “when colonists refused or hesitated to choose rebellion, they risked physical harassment, social isolation, and legal ostracizing from local enforcement agencies, known as the Committees of Safety.”⁹ In the backcountry of South Carolina, Whigs rounded up Loyalist militia in December of 1775 and forced them to choose “between serving with the Whigs, remaining on the sidelines, or losing all their property.”¹⁰ Although neutral citizens in South Carolina could keep their lands, their weapons and means of defending themselves were often confiscated.¹¹ When the British occupied an area, they enacted similar policies, offering a very

⁵ Ibid., 32-35.

⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

⁷ Jeanne T. Heidler and David Stephen Heidler, *Daily Lives of Civilians in Wartime Early America: From the Colonial Era to the Civil War* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 35.

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ruma Chorpa, *Choosing Sides: Loyalists in Revolutionary America* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2013), 3.

¹⁰ Walker, *Kings Mountain and Cowpens*, 38.

tempting pardon anyone who would reconsider their allegiances. Those who pledged loyalty could keep their property and status in the colonies should the British win the war. War prisoners could also be released from parole if they fought in the British militia.¹² Deciding what side to support in this conflict was extremely difficult and came with enormous consequences. It was hard to stay neutral.

Because Loyalists and Patriots lived so close together, these difficult decisions ripped communities apart, and the partisan fighting often looked more like a local feud than a war for independence.¹³ The life of William Cunningham is a good example of this. Even though Cunningham's cousins were loyalists, he joined the Continental Army in 1775. However, when Cunningham was denied a promotion he had been promised, he quit, fleeing farther south to avoid retribution. Two years later, he received word that a group of Patriots militia under Captain Ritchie had murdered his disabled brother. Filled with rage, Cunningham tracked down Captain Ritchie and killed him in front of his family. He then joined the loyalist regiment, serving under his cousin Patrick. In the years that followed, Cunningham became known for leading massacres in the Southern backcountry, eventually earning the nickname, "Bloody Bill." After the war, his war crimes would make it necessary for him to spend the rest of his life in exile.¹⁴ The Cunningham's were not the only family that faced divided loyalties during the Revolutionary War. Americans in both the northern and southern colonies faced deep divisions, widespread hardships, and personal trauma during those seven years of conflict.

¹¹ Ibid., 63.

¹² Heidler, *Daily Lives*, 38.

¹³ Heidler, *Daily Lives*, 34-35; Walker, *King's Mountain and Cowpens*, 63.

¹⁴ Edward McCrady, *The History of South Carolina in the Revolution, 1780-1783*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1902), 467-476.

With each side committing brutal atrocities against the other, many southerners tried to escape the consequences of choosing sides by merely pledging allegiance to whoever was in the area. However, remaining neutral was difficult. For instance, one evening in North Carolina, Frederick Smith happened to separately come across both Whig and Loyalist militia in the same night. Both groups asked him where his allegiance was, and Smith, being neutral, had to make a guess as to who was asking. Unfortunately, he guessed wrong both times and was half-hanged (hung from a tree and cut down just before he died) by each group.¹⁵ The great divide between Patriots and Loyalists put the American people at a virtual civil war, only this time one's enemy lived next door rather than on the opposite side of the nation. Lines between combat and criminal activity were virtually erased as the war progressed. Feuds sprung up between families that had once been good friends, and neighbors in the backcountry began killing one another for the purpose of settling personal scores rather than helping win a war. Deciding which side was best for one's family was increasingly difficult as the war progressed.

The price to pay for being a Loyalist under Patriot rule was great. Historian James L. Abrahamson writes, "By methods that would horrify modern civil libertarians, Revolutionary committees and Patriot militia had almost everywhere by 1776 defeated, intimidated, and disarmed America's Tories."¹⁶ As early as 1777 the personal estates of Loyalists could be confiscated.¹⁷ Georgia is a prime example of this. In March of 1778, the Georgia House of Assembly declared 117 Loyalists guilty of treason, banished them, and took over their properties

¹⁵ E. W. Caruthers, *The Old North State*, (Philadelphia: Hayes & Zell, 1854-56), 171-172, described in Hiedler, *Daily Lives*, 39.

¹⁶ James L. Abrahamson, *The American Home Front*, (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, 1983), 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

to grow crops in support of the war. But when the British took over Savannah and Augusta the following winter, local Patriots had to stand trial and their lands were auctioned to benefit the British war efforts. When the Whigs regained control of Georgia in 1781, they promptly passed a Confiscation Act to take the estates of Loyalists unless they joined the military. 277 Loyalists stood trial for treason and were banished, their properties confiscated.¹⁸ Ironically, the Patriots who claimed to be fighting against tyranny and rights infringement were imposing a system of tyranny and rights infringement upon those who opposed their ideals. It makes sense that the British anticipated more Loyalist support as they saw themselves as liberators of their English countrymen suffering the oppression of radical Patriots.¹⁹

Plundering Armies

With thousands of men out on military campaigns, there were few left behind to farm the fields at home. The women and children remaining had to plant the seeds and harvest the crops without their husbands and fathers.²⁰ This resulted fewer acres getting plowed in the spring and a smaller harvest in the fall. Even so, most southern farmers were willing to sell their produce to the Continental Army when the opportunity arose. However, when Continental currency was stretched thin, their true level of dedication to Patriot ideals was revealed as many opted to profit from selling to the British instead.²¹ But as the war dragged on, both sides began to run low on funds and often had to resort to foraging the countryside in search of donations. There is a fine

¹⁸ Robert S. Lambert, "The Confiscation of Loyalist Property in Georgia, 1782-1786," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (January 1963): 80-83.

¹⁹ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 9.

²⁰ Raphael, *A People's History*, 143.

²¹ Heidler, *Daily Lives*, 44.

line between foraging and plundering. Washington tried his best to keep his men from forcibly taking things from civilians, but the temptation was definitely present as Continentals watched fields of provisions being sold to their enemies.²² The British were not so kind, especially when it came to the families of Patriots. A North Carolina woman named Jane McDowell describes an experience when British soldiers under the command of Captain McDowell began plundering her home in 1780. Mrs. McDowell pleaded for them to leave her alone, saying, “Is it soldier-like to plunder a helpless family and leave us with nothing? ... Have you no women and children at home?” She and the captain began to argue about the justice of it all, eventually discovering that they had the same last name and were probably distantly related! Upon realizing this, the captain stopped plundering her home.²³

Mary Frazer was not so lucky. Her husband was a well-known Patriot who fled when he heard the British were advancing into the region, leaving his wife and children behind. Frazer sent her children to hide in the woods and hid some cheeses in the garden, but did not have time to do much else before the British came and plundered her home. After getting drunk on her liquor, the soldiers removed all the food along with many valuables while her neighbors watched in silence. When their commander, Captain De West, came through, he put a stop to the rowdiness, but would not leave before checking the upstairs for valuables to add to his possession. By the time they left, the only food Mrs. Frazer had was the two cheeses she had

²² Ibid., 46-47.

²³ Henry Foote, *Sketches of North Carolina, Historical and Biographical, Illustrative of the Principles of a Portion of Her Early Settlers*, (New York: Robert Carter, 1846), 417.

thrown in the garden.²⁴ With an army (or multiple armies) in the area, local residents never knew what to expect.²⁵

Shortages

Shortages were another problem commonly faced by Americans in both the North and the South, as the British blockade made it difficult for imported goods to enter the country. Many Patriots had learned to live without goods from the British during the prewar boycotts. These boycotts often affected the whole family. People learned to do without tea at a time when this beverage was a key part of the colonial culture. These pre-war boycotts also gave women a voice in American politics for the first time, although limited in scope. Recognizing that it would be a woman's responsibility to keep the household running without British goods, fifty-one women from Edenton, North Carolina signed a petition endorsing the Nonimportation Association Resolves of 1774, saying that "it is a duty which we owe, not only to our near and dear relations and connections...but to ourselves."²⁶ Patriot women began spinning cloth both for manufacturing companies and their own households. They stopped ordering new refined goods from across the Atlantic, making do with what they had.²⁷ Once the war began, the British set up a blockade that not only prevented imports from Great Britain, but also from the rest of Europe. Patriot women who had been practicing self-sufficient home economies in the pre-war years were prepared to continue using homemade substitutes for goods now that refineries from Europe were completely cut off.

²⁴ Persifor Frazer, *General Persifor Frazer: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: n. p., 1907), 157-160.

²⁵ Heidler, *Daily Lives*, 45.

²⁶ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of NC, 1980), 41

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Some refined goods traditionally brought over from Great Britain were extremely difficult for individual households to produce, yet essential in American life and culture in the late eighteenth century. Copies of the Bible are an example of this. Sacred texts such as the Bible were central to American life, culture, and educational systems. Because of the Bible's deep influence in American daily life in the late eighteenth century, it was important to ensure that a severe shortage did not occur. In 1777, three Presbyterian ministers petitioned the Continental Congress to facilitate the domestic printing of the Scriptures. Congress looked into this request, determining that it would be easier to import Bibles from Europe. The committee requested 20,000 Bibles be imported from countries such as Holland and Scotland, but Congress adjourned before they could enact the legislation. By 1780, the Bible shortage had become a serious problem. The Continental Congress supported Robert Aitken in printing new Bibles in Philadelphia. By September 1782, Aitken had produced the first English Bible to be published in North America.²⁸ Although it is true that by this point the war was almost over, the lengths that the Continental Congress went to get the Bible printed and other refined goods manufactured in the middle of a difficult struggle for independence is interesting to note.

When necessary goods could not be produced in the colonies, families had to make due with substitutes. However, salt was one resource that was extremely difficult to substitute or harvest in eighteenth century America. Because it was relatively inexpensive to import, few had considered trying to process it in the colonies. Even before the war, the salt shortages caused by the prewar boycotts began to be a problem, to the point that the state of Virginia allowed people to import it from Britain in 1775. Because salt was essential for preserving meat (especially in

²⁸ Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 61.

the hot climates of the American South), one can imagine the problems that families faced when salt prices rose from two to thirteen shillings per bushel in 1775. Some colonists tried to make their own salt by evaporating brine from the Chesapeake Bay, but these efforts failed because the salt content of the water was lower than expected.²⁹ In early 1776, desperate farmers began arming themselves and seizing salt supplies in the Richmond area. Many feared that salt shortage panics would lead to full-scale insurgencies and distract both sides of the conflict from the larger war effort.³⁰ To keep this from happening, in December of 1776, The Virginia state legislature took over the salt industry, rationing salt out to people in need throughout the state.³¹ The fact that colonial governments would work against their foundational beliefs of free market capitalism suggests that the salt shortage truly caused a near state of emergency in the southern colonies.

Even necessities that were readily available became expensive as the war dragged on. Soldier's wages were often not adjusted to combat inflation, so many families went hungry as the local committees failed to supply them with basic needs. Ebenezer Huntington, a continental officer during the war, wrote to his father, J. A. Huntington:

Not a day passes my head, but some soldier with tears in his eyes, hands me a letter to read from his wife painting forth the distresses of his family in such strains as these 'I am without bread & cannot get any, the committee will not supply me, my children will starve, of if they do not, they must freeze, we have no wood, neither can we get any – Pray come home.'³²

²⁹ Larry G. Bowman, "The Scarcity of Salt in Virginia during the American Revolution." *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 77, no. 4 (1969): 464-468.

³⁰ Holton, *Forced Founders, 173-174*

³¹ Bowman, "Scarcity of Salt," 470.

³² Ebenezer Huntington, *Letters Written by Ebenezer Huntington during the American Revolution*, ed. G. W. F. Blanchfield (New York: n. p., 1915), 78.

Knowing that one's family was struggling at home probably made it more difficult for continental soldiers to stay and fight. A regiment of the Jersey Brigade wrote that "four month's pay of a private will not procure his wretched wife and children a single bushel of wheat"³³ With the Continental Congress in such dire financial straits, it is a wonder that enough men managed to stick it out and win the war.

Epidemics

Disease is frequently ignored when studying the Revolutionary War, but its unprecedented spread greatly affected the lives of all Americans, particularly in the South. As German traveler Johan David Schoepf wrote in 1783, "Carolina is in the spring a paradise, in the summer a hell, and in the autumn a hospital."³⁴ The swampy lowcountry climate provided the perfect breeding ground for mosquitos carrying deadly diseases such as smallpox, malaria, yellow fever and other viruses. According to historian Peter McCandless, "By the time of the Revolution, the lowcountry was reputed the unhealthiest place in British North America."³⁵ The hot, humid, and swampy climate, along with the movement of troops and refugees who lived in unsanitary conditions, facilitated the spread of disease among both civilians and the military. Living in these damp conditions without proper hygiene or supplies to keep oneself dry is a recipe for illness.

Charleston, South Carolina endured a two month siege in 1780. The poor hygiene practiced by the soldiers, along with the shortage of food and proper clothing, caused a small-

³³ William Livingston comp., *Selections from the Correspondence of the Executive of New Jersey from 1776 to 1786*, (Newark: n. p., 1848), 144.

³⁴ Johann David Schoepf, *Travels in the Condederation, 1783-1784* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1968), 172, 216-217, quoted in Peter McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering in the Southern Lowcountry*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 18.

³⁵ McCandless, *Slavery, Disease, and Suffering*, 18.

pox epidemic to spread across the region. After Great Britain captured the city, General Cornwallis moved his troops inland, hoping that the upcountry climate would prevent more of their soldiers from contracting the disease.³⁶ Unfortunately, smallpox epidemic traveled with them, impacting both the troops and civilians living in the local communities.³⁷ Smallpox was relatively common in the densely populated industrialized regions of Europe, so most people living there had developed immunities to it.³⁸ The colonists, however, being removed from their English cousins for several generations by the time of the Revolution, had not had the opportunity to develop such an immunity. In addition, the American population was largely rural, and communities were widely spread out. The mobility of soldiers and refugees living in close quarters during the war without proper sanitation caused smallpox to spread widely in both the northern and colonies. It is estimated that counting indigenous peoples, the smallpox epidemic killed 130,000 North Americans.³⁹ The rapid spread of disease not only affected the war itself as less men were able to fight, it also made it harder for crops to be planted and harvested on farms that were already shorthanded.

Slavery

No picture of daily life in the South during the American Revolution would be complete without discussing the contradictions, potentials, and fears regarding the enslaved people living there. Southern Patriots rebelling against Great Britain wanted to ensure that they did not disrupt the social structure of their own households. The problem was that in colonial days, when

³⁶ Ibid., 95.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Heidler, *Daily Lives*, 54.

³⁹ Ibid.

masters tried to teach their slaves submission, they said that power “[descended] from the king through his governors and justices down to the dominion each master wielded on his plantation.”⁴⁰ In seeking to break free from the British crown and parliament, southern patriots had disrupted this system. In the words of historian Robert Olwell, “Masters who now refused to obey their own superiors naturally worried that their slaves might be inspired to do likewise.”⁴¹ Some slaves, using the philosophy that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” would run to the British in hopes of a better life. However, although the British were fighting against Patriot slaveholders, they were not fighting against the institution of slavery itself. Great Britain profited off of the cotton, sugar, and tobacco produced by slaves in colonies throughout the New World. Out of convenience, they would use the slaves that ran to them to support the war effort. However, the British had no plans of ending the institution of slavery throughout the rebellious colonies.⁴²

Some may think that southerners would want enlist their slaves to get the manpower they needed to win the war. While free blacks enlisted with Patriot cause throughout the colonies, Southerners feared that arming their slaves to fight on the revolution would lead to an insurrection. In the words of historian Ray Raphael, “The fear of slaves on the one hand, and the military potential of mobilizing slaves on the other, gave a peculiar twist to the logic of war in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Maryland.”⁴³ While there are rare

⁴⁰ Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Lowcountry: 1740-1790*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 237.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 246, 249.

⁴³ Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence*, (New York, The New Press, 2002), 311.

examples of slaves being offered freedom for fighting in the place of their white masters, this was an exception rather than a general rule.⁴⁴

Although Patriots would not enlist slaves to fight for freedom, members of the southern aristocracy were in constant fear that the British would recruit their slaves and arm them for an insurrection. Newspapers such as the *Virginia Gazette* and the *South Carolina Gazette* frequently circulated rumors that played on these fears.⁴⁵ In 1775, the Virginia royal governor, Lord Dunmore, offered freedom for any slave who fought under the crown. Most British officers thought that arming colonial slaves was a radical proposal. In the words of Robert Olwell, “Most British army officers could not see the logic in instigating one rebellion to suppress another.”⁴⁶ Others recognized that Dunmore’s proposal was not as radical as it could have been. Before the war began, free blacks such as Thomas Jeremiah began spreading rumors in enslaved communities that the purpose of the war was to free all the slaves, regardless of whether or not they fought for the British.⁴⁷ Slave owners were relieved and thankful that Dunmore’s proposal was not as extreme as it could have been.⁴⁸ Even though Dunmore’s proposal did not offer freedom to everyone, enslaved people were eager to do what they could to help the British and earn their freedom. Within five days of the proclamation, 300 slaves escaped to Dunmore, who quickly enlisted them into his “Ethiopian Regiment.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 366-369.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 310, 312.

⁴⁶ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 256.

⁴⁷ Holton, *Forced Founders*, 153.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 158.

⁴⁹ Raphael, *A People’s History*, 324-325.

Despite their relief that Dunmore was not offering universal freedom, masters knew that their slaves would be eager to take him up on his offer if given the chance. To prevent more people from escaping, southern masters did their best to keep their slaves from hearing the news. In addition, Raphael writes that “masters kept slaves indoors at night, closely watched. They removed their boats from the shores. In some cases, they relocated their slaves inland to lessen the likelihood of runaways reaching the British.”⁵⁰ Some masters such as Henry Laurens from South Carolina held meetings with their slaves to dissuade them from running away. In a letter to his brother, Laurens said that he “admonished them to behave with great circumspection in this dangerous times [and] set before them the great risqué of exposing themselves to the treachery of pretended friends...[T]hey were sensibly affected, and promised to follow my advice and accept the offer of my Protection.”⁵¹ It is hard to discern whether the enslaved people on Laurens’s plantation actually agreed with their master, or whether they were merely responding politely to avoid punishment. Since literacy rates amongst the slaves were low, there are not many primary sources explaining how enslaved blacks actually felt about their options during this time period.

Yet the risks of escaping were great. State penalties for slaves who were caught trying to escape often included being sold in the West Indies or the West Virginia lead mines, spending the rest of their days in hard labor. Frequently, runaways made the dangerous trek only to find out that the British were running short on supplies and could not take them in.⁵² On one occasion three runaway slaves boarded a vessel in the Chesapeake Bay that they thought belonged to the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 322.

⁵¹ Henry Laurens to James Laurens, 7 June 1775, quoted in Robert Olwell, *Masters Slaves and Subjects*, 237-238.

⁵² Raphael, *A People’s History*, 328.

British, but after pledging allegiance to Lord Dunmore, they discovered that it was actually a Virginian ship. Two of the men were hanged as an example for others.⁵³ A majority of the slaves who fled to Lord Dunmore successfully in the weeks following his proclamation died a few weeks later of diseases such as smallpox, dysentery, typhus, and typhoid fever that were common in the camps.

Dunmore was not the only British official who offered refuge to escaped slaves, but most other British proclamations to slaves did not include a promise of freedom. General Henry Clinton proclaimed that “every NEGRO who shall desert the Rebel Standard [could have] full security to follow within these Lines, any Occupation which he shall think proper.”⁵⁴ Clinton was not promising freedom to the fugitives, but a change in master. Slaves who escaped to the British often found themselves doing harder labor than they had done for their colonial masters and getting less food when the rations ran short. Others caught diseases such as smallpox and were sent out of the camp to avoid infecting the soldiers.⁵⁵ The British rarely cared about the health of the blacks within their camps; they saw runaway slaves as expendable because more would run to them when they entered into new territory.⁵⁶ Some slaves were only kept as a motivation for their masters to switch sides; if a master became a loyalist, his runaway slaves could be returned.⁵⁷ Whenever the British entered into a region, the presence of troops brought about a season of fear and false hope for enslaved people living in the American South.

⁵³ Ibid., 326.

⁵⁴ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 249.

⁵⁵ Raphael, *A People's History*, 334.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 332.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 333.

For those that did not try to escape, daily life during the war was very different for enslaved people than in colonial days. Sometimes masters would flee when the British army was rumored to enter the region, leaving their slaves behind.⁵⁸ Even when the British were not around, rules on many plantations were loosened as masters and overseers were reluctant to test their authority for fear of rebellion. With so many men fighting in the continental and loyalist armies, the people left behind wondered if they had enough manpower to hold their slaves in check and keep the plantations running. South Carolina plantation agent Josiah Smith records in a letter to his supervisor George Appleby in December 1780 that after the plantation overseer had been captured by the British, there was “no white person...on the plantation to see after the Negroes,” and as a result of this, “60 acres of rice were lying rotting in the fields.”⁵⁹ Because of situations like this, many plantation owners in the area decided to not plant a crop at all the following year, hoping to persuade their slaves not to run away to the British.⁶⁰ Wealthy landowners were thankful to be able to at least keep their slaves from practicing “overt rebellion, mass desertion, or outright destruction of the plantation.”⁶¹ Some slaves used their time planting vegetable gardens for themselves rather than planting rice, sugar, or tobacco for the plantation, knowing that they could not necessarily trust their masters to feed them if supplies were running short. Yet even these crops could be subject to pillaging if a hungry army came through the area.⁶²

⁵⁸ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 260.

⁵⁹ Josiah Smith to George Appleby, 2 December 1780, quoted in Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 262.

⁶⁰ Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 262-263.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

Native American Interactions

The interactions between the white and indigenous peoples on the continent added unique tensions, fears, and struggles to the already complicated web of the American Revolution. Even before the war began, white Southerners feared that the natives would be armed by the British and attack the frontier settlements. The Native Americans had many reasons to make such an alliance worthwhile. After all, the colonists had been going farther west than the Ordinance of 1763, encroaching on their territory and using their hunting grounds.⁶³ Since the colonists had been pushing them further and further westwards, some of the younger members of tribes such as the Cherokee believed that if they could help the British win the war, their lands would be protected from further encroachment.

As the tensions with Great Britain began to develop, some believed that if the Indians could be persuaded to stay neutral, violence could be avoided. John Stuart, the South Carolina Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the late colonial era, wanted to keep the natives from joining a side. In a letter to Oconocosta, a Cherokee warrior, in 1775, he wrote, “There is a difference between the people in England and the white people in America. This is a matter that does not concern you, they will decide it between themselves.”⁶⁴ Yet it was difficult for the indigenous peoples to avoid being concerned as they watched their white neighbors practice military maneuvers in the backcountry settlements. Although there were many neutral tribes living in the South during the War for Independence such as the Choctaws, Chickasaw, and Creeks, this

⁶² Ibid., 164-266.

⁶³ Jeff Dennis, *Patriots and Indians: Shaping Identity in Eighteenth-Century South Carolina*, (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2017), 74.

⁶⁴ John Stuart to Cherokees, 30 August 1775, quoted in Dennis, *Patriots and Indians*, 75.

section will focus on the main Southern tribes that supported the British and Patriots: the Cherokee and the Catawba respectively.

Cherokee

The elders in the Cherokee tribes thought it would be best to remain neutral, even as the Iroquois, Shawnee, and other northern tribes tried to convince them to make war against the settlers. They were rightly afraid of the repercussions of such actions.⁶⁵ But when the patriot militia seized a British ammunition shipment intended to for the tribe, the more militant younger generation grew angry and frustrated. Patriots tried to appease them by sending another shipment of ammunition to the Cherokee, but this shipment was seized by Loyalists.⁶⁶ The Indians depended the ammunition and other refined goods for their hunting expenditures. If weapons and ammunition consistently failed to reach them, the Indian way of life would change significantly. In 1776, these young Cherokee warriors began raiding the Southern frontier, terrorizing families whose men had gone to defend Charleston from a British attack.⁶⁷ Unfortunately for the Cherokee, the Patriots soon repelled the attack on Charleston and returned home to the frontier, seeking revenge on what had happened to their loved ones. Because Great Britain was mostly focused on the war in the North during these early years, the Southern militia had time to dedicate to repelling Indians in the back country.

The militia's response was swift. Six thousand armed men from Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia marched against the Cherokee on the frontier. They had orders to "cut up every Indian corn-field and burn every Indian town—and that every Indian taken shall be

⁶⁵ Raphael, *A People's History*, 279.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 459.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

the slave and property of the taker; that the nation shall be extirpated, and the lands become property of the public.”⁶⁸ Andrew Pickens led a group from South Carolina. In a battle known as Ring Fight in August 1775, Pickens not only killed all the Cherokee warriors (even those who tried to surrender), he also burned their nearby village of Tamasee, killing civilians along the way.⁶⁹ Ruthless attacks such as these, in which Patriot militia refused to distinguish between Indian warriors and their civilian families, caused the Cherokee tribe to surrender in early 1777, handing over millions of acres of land. The tribe would never be the same. In the words of historian Jeff Dennis:

The 1776 invasions and the 1777 treaties that followed changed the Cherokee people forever. Hundreds of men, women and children died during the fighting. Many hundreds more perished in the famine that followed. The majority of Cherokee homes and fields suffered ruin and much of the nation’s hunting lands were stripped away. Faced with such overwhelming losses, villagers were left with little choice other than accommodation or relocation, either to abandon resistance or to abandon homelands.⁷⁰

With their crops burned and their hunting grounds confiscated, many of Cherokee lacked the food they needed to survive the coming winter. The Revolution also ripped the Cherokee family structure apart, as old men felt hurt by the younger generation’s failure to follow their advice, bringing hardship on the tribe.⁷¹

As time passed, the southern settlers began to feel pity on the Cherokee who faced poverty and starvation as a result of the raids on crops and confiscation of lands. As the war drew to a close in 1783, Andrew Pickens raised £1100 in relief funds to help the tribe recover.⁷²

⁶⁸ William Drayton to Francis Salvador, 24 July 1776, quoted in Raphael, *A People’s History*, 282.

⁶⁹ Dennis, *Patriots and Indians*, 86.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷¹ Raphael, *A People’s History*, 288-289.

However, much of this aide came too late. By the end of the American Revolution, the Cherokee population had decreased by twenty percent.⁷³ This war caused irreversible damage not only in the lives of the people who fought in it, but to the whole Cherokee society. Similar tragedies occurred the other tribes that either fought for the British or simply used the opportunity to fight against the white settlers on either side of the conflict. The widespread fear in the hearts of both Native Americans and Whites caused the bloodshed to spread to civilians as well as warriors.

Catawba

In their early history, the Catawba tribe consisted of great warriors, rivaling even the Iroquois. But with the continued encroachment of white settlers into their territory, they had succumbed to disease and been restricted to a 225 square mile reservation between North and South Carolina. Only about 500 Catawba remained by the time of the American Revolution. By this point, they were surrounded by settlers and had to drastically change their way of life. Rather than surviving by hunting, trapping, and raiding, they began to farm, rent land to white planters, and make goods such as pots and baskets to sell to their white neighbors.⁷⁴ Because of the Catawba tribe's dependence on white neighbors, they grew very concerned when they observed Patriot militia doing military drills in neighboring fields in 1775. They sent a couple of scouts to investigate, and were told by William Henry Drayton's Committee of Intelligence that the Patriots were preparing for battle because "our brothers on the other side of the water wanted to

⁷² Denis, *Patriots and Indians*, 103.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Raphael, *A People's History*, 289.

take our property from us without our consent.”⁷⁵ The Catawba, who had for over a hundred years watched their property shrink as their leaders were manipulated, probably found these words to be hypocritical. However, their options were limited. The Catawba were completely surrounded by settlers, drastically diminished in size, and dependent on trade with whites for survival. For these reasons, it made sense for the Catawba to join the Patriot cause, even though they were the only tribe to do so.⁷⁶

Rather than offering support begrudgingly, the Catawba supported the Patriots with enthusiasm. Fighting men both young and old, many of whom had not gone to war for decades, joining up with the Continental Army and helping catch runaway slaves as early as February 1776. In 1780, these men fought bravely in the battles of Rocky Mount, Hanging Rock, and Fishing Creek, but had to retreat when the British won the Battle of Camden. They fled to Virginia, taking their families with them off the reservation. When they returned in the spring of 1781, they discovered that all their livestock, crops, and supplies left behind were destroyed.⁷⁷ At the time it must have seemed as though it did not matter whether a tribe supported the British or the Continentals, their homes and livestock could still be destroyed by an enemy army.

Yet in the years immediately following the war, the Catawbas benefitted for choosing the winning side. Rather than being forced to forfeit all their land east of the Appalachian mountains like the Cherokee, they were considered friends of the Carolinas and could have their rights

⁷⁵ William E. Hemphill and Wylma Anne Wates, eds., *Extracts from the Journals of the Provincial Congresses of South Carolina, 1775-1776*, 17 June 1775, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press for the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, 1970), 56, quoted in Dennis, *Patriots and Indians*, 75.

⁷⁶ Denis, *Patriots and Indians*, 103.

⁷⁷ Raphael, *A People's History*, 290.

defended in court.⁷⁸ However, there were still people who took advantage of the fact that many Catawba Indians were illiterate, deceiving them into signing away fishing rights, land, and other benefits.⁷⁹ Even though most Carolinians deeply appreciated the Catawba for their patriotism, they continued to dwindle in size, eventually assimilating with broader American society in the early twentieth century.

Conclusion

In conclusion, American southerners probably did not hang on the words of the revolutionary ideologues or feel compelled to help the American cause with each waking moment. They had more immediate things to worry about, such as whether an army would be coming through the area, how they would make do without molasses, and whether the last foraging party left them with enough supplies to get through the winter. Slaves during this time period also had their fair share of fears, worries, and difficult decisions. Would it be worth it to run to the British? How should the plantation be run if the master is absent? The interaction between whites and indigenous peoples throughout the war brought an entirely different twist on the war effort. Indian attacks on Southern plantations resulted in massacres on native villages, destruction of crops, and forced secession of land. Even on the home front, war is messy and moral truths are hard to define.

Although many Americans went through the entire war without seeing a soldier, the British blockade still had an effect on everyone. Rather than simply clinging to the promises of the founding fathers and forming a unified alliance to the ideals of the revolution, Americans in both the North and South, were often left to fend for themselves, facing genuinely terrifying

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 292-294.

situations. These were ordinary people, men, women, and children, who were struggling to survive in a land ravaged by war and hungry armies. Every society needs the idealists, and the era of the American Revolution definitely had its fair share, but it is equally important to look at the ordinary people when analyzing events that were of such importance to the forming of America as we know it.

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