

CORNWALLIS IN FAIRFIELD COUNTY SOUTH CAROLINA

Property  
Of  
Fairfield Genealog' Room

By

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### CORNWALLIS IN FAIRFIELD

There are several traditions concerning the origin of the name "Fairfield". Of these, the one most popular and most generally accepted attributes the name to Lord Cornwallis. The circumstances of the story are interesting and suggestive. Cornwallis had his headquarters at Winnsboro during the closing weeks of 1780 and the first fortnight of 1781. Six months before, Charleston had surrendered to the British and General Lincoln with his whole army had been taken prisoners of war. Cornwallis with 4,000 regulars had been left to subjugate the State. The King was informed that the rebellion had been crushed and that South Carolina had been brought back to its allegiance to the crown.

In August, a second continental army under General Gates had been surprised and routed at Camden. British garrisons had been stationed at strategic points with orders to enroll the Tories and to repress every sign of resistance. Many of the Whigs having lost heart took British protection. Only a handful of undaunted irreconcilables kept up the fight under their irrepressible leaders. The entire state was overrun and the British Regulars had already marched to Charlotte, North Carolina, and were waiting there for Tory reinforcements. But Ferguson with his 1,300 Tories was defeated at King's Mountain, October 7, 1780, causing Cornwallis promptly to fall back to Winnsboro. Here he looked about him and perhaps dreamt of success in 1781. He seems to have enjoyed the rolling hills and primeval forests of the district. He must have prized the fertile soil and rich resources of the region. It is here and then that he is credited with saying: "What a fair field"! The name stuck, and seventeen years later when the territory was separated from Camden, the new district was named "Fairfield".

Cornwallis was a gallant and skillful soldier, but he must have had in him something of the poet and the nature lover. His Whig enemies and conquerors have not been unwilling to preserve and hand down his appreciation of a beautiful country which he fought in vain to win and hold for his King. There were many other brave men who loved these "fair lands" between the Wateree and the Broad. White settlers had lived there only 35 years. Most of them had come from the British Isles. These people were divided about half Whigs and half Tories. One of the latter was Col. John Phillips. He had been born in Ireland, was a man of education and was a Tory from principle. He and his associates had made themselves especially obnoxious to the patriots. Though he was captured, his outraged neighbors spared his life. A few weeks later Cornwallis held a drum head court marshal to try and sentence some seventy Whigs who had violated their parole by again taking up arms. Phillips pleaded for mercy and "assured his lordship that if these men were executed a hundred of his Majesty's subjects would be hung forthwith by the indignant people in retaliation" (1). His plea was granted. Upon retirement of the British from Winnsboro, Phillips was left in command of the Tories. The next year he was taken a prisoner to Camden, tried and condemned to the gallows. The Whigs of Fairfield almost without exception united in a petition for his life and secured the commutation of his sentence to banishment.

The intercourse between Cornwallis and Colonel Phillips was entirely different from the interview between the British Commander and John Mills. This Whig gained admission to Cornwallis. "And who", said Cornwallis, "are you?" "My Lordship", replied Mills, "do not you remember ould John Mills who kept your

(1) Howe's History of Presbyterian Church, Volume I, page 502.

father's race horse in Ireland?" "Oh, is that you, John? Give us a wag of your bone, and help yourself right freely to spirits and water". John drank, but failed to grace his drink with a toast. "And have you any business with me, my old friend?" "Yes, your Lordship, I understand you have it in view to hang a good many of your dam't Whigs and I had it in mind to say til you, that that was not the way to succeed with these people. Besides, nothing is more uncertain than the fate of battle and your Lordship and your brave men may change places with the Whigs now condemned to die. My son, John, is one of the damnest Whigs in the colony and if your Lordship goes on to hang and you should fall into John's hands, he would hang up your Lordship like a dog." Johnny's speech had its possible effect, for nobody was hung, no property plundered or destroyed (1).

While Cornwallis had his army headquarters in Willsboro, he was able to get a first hand knowledge of the people of Fairfield and adjoining districts. Many of these folk were Presbyterians. Some of their ministers and ruling elders were descendants of Scotch Covenanters who had come to America for conscience sake. Many of these men were well educated. They veritabily incarnated the fine old Scotch principles of honesty, industry, piety, and above all, civil and religious liberty. At least one of their preachers is reputed to have carried not only his Bible but also his long barrellled rifle into his pulpit. These men had built their log churches in the backwoods, had often stood guard against the Indians while the congregation worshipped and now they were again doing the same thing against the marauding Tories. The

(1) Pearson's Narrative History of Fairfield County.

British are said to have considered every Presbyterian Church in the district as a center of rebellion and every Presbyterian preacher as an agent of sedition. In dealing with this situation Cornwallis one day summoned before him the Rev. William Martin, a Covenanter, who preached occasionally at the Jackson's Creek Church. "He was brought before Lord Cornwallis at Winnsboro. He stood before him erect, with his gray locks uncovered, his eyes fixed on his lordship and his countenance marked with frankness and benevolence." "You are charged", says his lordship, "with preaching rebellion from the pulpit-- you, an old man, and a minister of the gospel of peace, with advocating rebellion against your lawful sovereign, King George the III! What have you to say in your defence?" Nothing daunted he is reported to have replied: "I am happy to appear before you. For many months I have been held in chains for preaching what I believe to be the truth. As to King George, I owe him nothing but good will. I am not unacquainted with his private character. I was raised in Scotland, educated in its literary and theological schools; was settled in Ireland, where I spent the prime of my days and emigrated to this country seven years ago. As a king, he was bound to protect his subjects in the enjoyment of their rights. Protection and allegiance go together, and where the one fails, the other cannot be exacted. The Declaration of Independence is but a reiteration of what our covenanting fathers have always maintained. I am thankful you have given me liberty to speak, and will abide your pleasure, whatever it may be." (1)

By many historians the victory at King's Mountain is considered the final turning point of the Revolution. Cornwallis had good reasons for his encampment in Winnsboro. The Partisans were swarming about the Red Coats like

(1) Howe's History Presbyterian Church, Volume I, Page 500.

angry hornets. On Jan. 17, 1781, the British met another serious defeat at Cowpens. Continental reinforcements under Green were marching from Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina toward South Carolina. Cornwallis promptly prepared to leave Winnsboro and to march to meet them. But some of the Whigs of Fairfield conceived a plan to ambush and capture him. Lord Cornwallis was accustomed to take a morning and evening ride down the road. Colonel John Winn, his son Lieutenant Minor Winn, and one other Whig concealed themselves in a thicket, rifle in hand, intending to cut him off. They were discovered and apprehended by a band of Tories, and were condemned to be hung on a certain day at 12:00 o'clock. Minor Winn took the sentence greatly to heart and sent for the minister, Mr. Martin, to pray with him. He was under guard in the woods. The British soldiers had cut down some of the trees for firewood and had piled up the brush in heaps, behind which Minor kneeled in prayer, and was joined by the minister. Their exercises continued with the gallows in full view till the fatal hour. Friends stood listening for the drum and fife as the political prisoners were to be marched to the gallows. Instead of this they were marched to Lord Cornwallis's headquarters and pardoned. Minor Winn was persuaded that this was an express answer to prayer, and was subsequently often taunted in his days of frolic, with this forced repentance. (1)

Early in January, Cornwallis broke camp in Winnsboro where he had waited since October 29th. Nine months later, on October 19, 1781, he surrendered to Washington at Yorktown. American Independence had been won in spite of the pride and power of King George III.

The citizens of America can afford to be generous toward the invaders and perhaps tolerant toward the despicable and misguided Tories. But

(1) Howe's History of Presbyterian Church, Volume I, Page 501

the worthiest monument to Cornwallis in South Carolina today is in "Fairfield". His Lordship was right when he exclaimed "What a fair field". Although he was wrong in underestimating the valor and patriotism of the men and women he could not conquer.