

# S.C. women proved their mettle during the trying times of 1780

**A**fter the fall of Charleston in May 1780 and the occupation of South Carolina by British troops, the Scots-Irish Whigs of the Piedmont refused to surrender. They skirmished not only with the British army but also with the Loyalist natives, the Tories.

Louise Pettus



NEARBY HISTORY

All summer and fall until the October defeat of the British at Kings Mountain, almost every able-bodied Whig was in the field, most of them under Gen. Thomas Sumter.

The women were left to raise the crops and nurse the wounded. British troops roamed the countryside seeking foodstuffs for man and beast.

Interesting stories of the daring responses of the wives and daughters have been handed down.

Dr. David Bigger told the story of Sarah Neel Johnston, whose husband, David Johnston, was away with Capt. Jacob Barnett's troops. British soldiers took the Johnston's slaves. Sarah Johnston pursued the British all the way to Charleston and retook her slaves.

How she managed this is not known, but family tradition told that she would sit up half the night guarding the slaves, with a loyal slave guarding his fellows the other half.

After traveling through swamps and "rough country," all on foot, Sarah hid the slaves in a place called Laurel Hill Cave, which is now under the waters of Lake Wylie north of Buster Boyd Bridge.

The recapturing of Sarah Johnston's slaves was not her only involvement in the war. According

to various accounts, she also rode up to the Kings Mountain battlefield immediately after the battle and found her brother and other kinfolk among the wounded. She bound their wounds and got them home.

Sarah Neel Johnston survived the war, but her husband was killed when a runaway horse threw him against a tree and broke his neck.

Bigger, one of the founders of the York County Historical Society (now the York County Genealogical and Historical Society), had another story about a band of Tories coming to the home of Matthew Wilson with the intention of hanging him. Wilson was home sick while his sons were off fighting alongside the Whigs. Bigger said Wilson's wife and children begged so hard that Wilson's life be spared that the Tories spared him and took all his horses instead.

Edith Wilson, a teen-age daughter of Matthew Wilson, was furious with the Tories. She followed them when they left and watched them tie the horses. Hungry, the men decided to go to a nearby plantation to demand dinner. While they were gone, Edith "cut the halters of the horses belonging to her father, mounted her favorite, whistled and all her father's horses followed her back home."

Anyone wanting to read of other local heroines of the Revolution should read volume III of Elizabeth Ellet's trilogy, "The Women of the American Revolution." Daniel Stinson of Chester supplied her with numerous stories of Chester women and their heroism.

The Chester District heroines included:

- Esther Walker, a highly skilled nurse.

- Mary McClure, who rode horseback through enemy lines to get to Charleston.

- Isabella Ferguson, who guarded a cave containing the community's valuables.

- Mary Johnstone, who organized the women to work the fields and provided a set of signals by which they communicated.

Stinson also told of Jane Boyd, who was burned while rescuing her husband's books set on fire by the enemy; of Jane Gaston, who successfully defied the enemy who threatened to kill her; and of Sarah McCalla, who bravely carried clothes and food to the prisoners at Camden and persuaded the British officers to release her husband.

Also, there was Mary Adair. Mary was roughly treated by the enemy but refused to influence her sons to join them. One of the sons was John Adair, who was later to become governor of Kentucky.

And there was Jane White, who lost her property but not her determination to fight despotism.

While the men were at war, the women harvested the crops.

The team of Mary, Margaret and Ellen Gill; Isabella and Margaret Kelso; Sarah Knox; Margaret, Mary and Elizabeth Mills; Mary McClure; and Nancy Brown joined to reap the grain fields of Whigs away from home in the summer of 1780.

The final picture that emerges of these Scots-Irish women of the American Revolution is one of courage and determination. The heroines were all motivated by a firm belief that, in the words of Katherine Steele, "We are in the right!"

*Donated by Pelham Lyles*  
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