

Amid Hostilities and Destruction

North Carolina Women and Their Impact on the American Revolution

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The War for American Independence affected North Carolina women with the war's brutality and hardship, and the disruption of their lives. During the years of 1780-1781, the British and American armies foraged for supplies on small farms, involved women in producing goods for the armies, and destroyed homes and livestock to prevent their enemy from using these supplies. However, many women were not passive participants during the war. The British and American armies entered North Carolina in January 1781 and for several months the state was in constant warfare with opposing armies, and Loyalist and Whig militias fighting across the state. There were some women in North Carolina, amid these hostilities and destruction, who displayed strength of character and perseverance in the face of constant terror and disruption. Many of these women actively engaged in the protection of their families, goods, and homes with determination and courage as revealed by primary source documentation. They petitioned the state legislature, during the war and within the first decade after the war, for involvement in their concerns which demonstrates the understanding of the political system and its workings. Many North Carolina women impacted the outcome of the Revolutionary War by using their knowledge and skills to directly interact with the armies and this direct interaction impacted how women viewed themselves after the war.

North Carolina women during the late 18th century were thrust into warfare by circumstances outside of their control. However, many of these women chose to participate in the war in roles that were sometimes dangerous and others used different ways to protect their families and property. Women performed many roles during the American Revolution including acting as spies, producing clothing for the American Army and nursing the wounded. Many of these roles placed women in dangerous circumstances where they continued to perform their duties without regard to their own personal safety. Some women traveled with the armies and

were in constant danger from the proximity of warfare. Even women who chose to stay on their farms and continued to milk their cows, tend their fields, and raise their children did not escape the war, they were always conscious of the possibility of losing their homes to marauding soldiers.

Conditions in North Carolina Prior to the Arrival of the British and American Armies

Women in North Carolina in the late 18th century survived during some of the most turbulent fighting between British supporters called Tories and Patriots called Whigs prior to the arrival of the military armies. This constant warfare between neighbors had already left many North Carolina women without adequate provisions for their families and the devastation of their homes. However, the increased hostilities had impacted women's active participation in the war in North Carolina because they were constantly surrounded by partisan fighting. The ability of these women to provide for their families amid such constant disruption demonstrates the different means they utilized in attempting to protect home and hearth from ruin. These 18th century women influenced the war and its outcome by supplying armies with necessary provisions in the midst of chaos and destruction.

Prior to the military activities between the British and American armies in 1781, North Carolina had already seen bloodshed and destruction. American General Nathanael Greene took command of the American Army in December 1780 in Mecklenburg County near present day Charlotte. As he rode through North Carolina on his way to his new command he wrote "The whole country is in danger of being laid waste by the Whigs and Torrys (sic), who pursue each

other with as much relentless fury as beasts of prey.”¹ North Carolina had a large population of Tory sympathizers who favored British rule. These men and women supported the British and were determined to eradicate Whig or Patriot sympathizers in their midst. These feelings were reciprocated by the Whigs against Tories throughout the state. These hostilities between neighbors created a civil war in North Carolina that did not abate until after the Revolutionary War had ended and the removal of thousands of British supporters. Greene, in the same letter, described the murder of residents as they traveled along the roads leading to the main towns. He wrote “People between this and the Santee are frequently murdered as they ride along the road, and also between this and Cross Creek, Guilford Courthouse, and Hillsborough in which extend of Country great numbers of tories (sic) are way laying the roads.”² This letter illustrates the amount of terror women in North Carolina faced during this time. However, this did not stop women from continuing to support either army and protect their families to the best of their abilities.

Once Nathanael Greene took command of the American Army he began to issue orders for supplies to be furnished to the armies and patriotic women stepped forward to help by providing soldiers with necessary uniforms. He sent a letter to Captain Marbury requesting North Carolina women be hired to make shirts, “You will engage the women of the country to make them, and, if you cannot do better, they must be paid in salt.”³ Salt was in short supply during the war and much needed on farms in the backcountry of North Carolina. Colonial

¹ Nathanael Greene, *The Papers of Nathanael Greene, Vol. VII 26 December 1780-29 March 1781*, ed. Richard Showman (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 9. This letter, dated 28 December 1780, was written to Samuel Huntington, President of the Continental Congress.

² Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 9. Greene also states that many residents are being murdered by Cherokee Indians in the “frontier of N. Carolina.”

³ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 133-134. Letter dated 13 December 1780, Captain Marbury was stationed in Salisbury working for the Quarter Master. One month later he sent another Letter to Capt. Marbury also requesting women be hired for making shirts.

women supported the war by making “homespun” and sewing uniforms for the Patriot armies all across the colonies. These women viewed the domestic chores of weaving and spinning as performing a valuable patriotic duty. Walter S. Blumenthal in his book *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution* describes patriotic women and their domestic duties “Women helped make musket balls of their pewter dishes and molten pellets of the leaden statues of Royal (King) George. They spun and wove cloth for themselves and the men in the ranks. They took over the farm work, from planting to harvest, made the grain into bread, and carried supplies to the troops.”⁴ North Carolina women began to make uniforms and provide other supplies for the American army by using their own production capabilities, which was limited during the war. This illustrates the importance some women placed on the patriotic cause by using their limited resources in clothing and supplying the armies.

The war affected how women could provide supplies to the army which also affected how they supported their families. North Carolina was a very poor colony and many of these colonists did not have excess material goods or excess money. Mary Beth Norton describes the situation in the backcountry of the South as, “a prolonged guerilla war, coupled with sporadic nonpartisan plundering and the wanderings of the British army through North Carolina and Virginia in 1780-1781, left much of the South devastated.”⁵ This included the economic status of many widows and women throughout the state. This was the situation in North Carolina during the Revolutionary War and this devastation impacted how North Carolina women responded to the war. Martha McGee Bell, a Patriot woman and the richest widow in Randolph County wrote the state legislature January 28, 1781 about the depreciated value of currency and its impact on

⁴ Walter Hart Blumenthal, *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: George S. MacManus, 1952), 57

⁵ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1980), 208.

her children. She was concerned about her children's financial security in collecting debts owed to their father. Bell wrote "I would Sincearly (sic) Pray that your Honours (sic) would Make Some Provision for all Such Orphans and that Equity & Justice might be done in Regard of the Collection of former debts due."⁶ Martha Bell, like other colonial women, was concerned with her children and home during the Revolution and women like her used the right of petition to express these patriotic concerns.

Many of these petitions of North Carolina women addressed the time period of 1781 and the active war in North Carolina. In January 1781, the British army lost the Battle of Cowpens in South Carolina and started their march into North Carolina. American General Greene had proceeded on his way to Virginia and British General Cornwallis was determined to capture Greene's army before he could get to supplies and new troops in Virginia. These armies caused destruction across North Carolina which women had to survive and protect their families while their lives were in disarray. General Greene wrote to his wife Catharine about one soldier and the effect the war had on women in the Carolinas. He wrote "A Captain who is now with me and who has just got his family from near the Lines of the Enemy had his Sister murdered a few days since, and seven of her children wounded, the oldest not twelve years of age."⁷ The possibility of violence and death due to the constant warfare between the armies led colonial women to understand how their lives were directly affected by the war and how they could help with the Revolution in unique ways. The different ways 18th century women coped with warfare illustrates how they used their skills and patriotic or loyalist zeal to cope with such a turbulent life.

⁶ Cynthia A. Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution, 1776-1800* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 29-30

⁷ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 102. This letter was dated 12 January 1781, shortly before the battle of Cowpens.

Women and the Protection of Their Families

The protection of North Carolina families fell to women in the absence of their men. The desire to maintain their homes and protect their children was a primary motivation in many actions taken by women. As the armies entered North Carolina, the war came directly to the homes of rural communities. General Greene wrote of the countryside of North Carolina in December 1780, “Indeed a great Part of this Country is already laid Waste & in the utmost Danger of becoming a desert.”⁸ Women, who were left on the farms to tend to the crops and animals, were now faced with the marauding and pillaging parties of both armies. Many of the petitions filed by women after the war address the issue of supplies given to the American army during this time period. However, many of the women had little choice when soldiers appeared at their doorstep demanding food, animals, and any goods in the home. American Colonel Otho Holland Williams wrote to Major Mazarett at Guilford Courthouse in February 1781, “He (Major Mazarett) is authorized to press the horses he needs, and to take any corn he finds.”⁹ The seizure of horses, food, and supplies by the armies affected the lives of women living in isolated, rural areas. However, some women did not provide all of their goods quietly or without subterfuge. Eli Caruthers wrote of his mother’s daring when confronted with a large scavenging party on her farm. He declared “when a large party of men on horseback came up-seized all the provisions at

⁸ Greene, 1 *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 7. This letter was written to General Robert Howe discussing the difficulty in procuring supplies for the American Army in North Carolina.

⁹ Otho Holland Williams, *The Papers of Otho Holland Williams, 1744-1839*, The Maryland Historical Records Survey Project (Manuscript Department: Maryland Historical Society, November 1940) <http://www.mdhs.org/findingaid/otho-holland-williams-papers-1744-1839-ms-908>. (accessed February 14, 2012) This letter was written February 2, 1781 to Major Mazurett who was in Guilford County supervising the placement of ammunition and supplies at Guilford Courthouse. The American army had depots throughout the state for storing military supplies.

the house, my mother went in the afternoon three miles to an off place, where the principal part of our stock was, got some milk and made it into curd which the family ate.”¹⁰ This illustrates the absolute necessity of women in protecting their families while submitting to the presumed authority of the armies. Women hoarded their belongings, food, and animals to continue to provide for their families while the armies received support as well. If all of the supplies had been at the farm, Mrs. Caruthers would not have been able to support her children and continue running the farm. Women, like Mrs. Caruthers, impacted the war by providing goods for the British and American armies, however they also understood the importance of protecting themselves and their families.

Many women, like Mrs. Caruthers, were left to fend for themselves while their husbands were fighting in the war either as Tories or Whigs. North Carolina was sparsely populated in the interior where the armies first entered the state around present day Mecklenburg County.¹¹ There were few large towns and most inhabitants were subsisting on small farms only able to support themselves. As the armies marched further into North Carolina, the pillaging of local farms and the harassment of the women left on these farms became common place. General Cornwallis understood the importance of gathering supplies from these local farms without submitting to violence. The British army would not garner support from local women if the armies continued to take all of their supplies. Unfortunately, such action became the common occurrence throughout the state during the war. Women were forced to come up with alternative

¹⁰ Eli Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents and Sketches of Character, Chiefly in the Old North State* (Philadelphia, Hayes and Zell, 1856), 297. According to Caruthers, this incident occurred in March 1781 when the armies were in the vicinity shortly before or after the Battle at Guilford Courthouse.

¹¹ According to the Cecil E. Haworth in his book *Deep River Friends: A Valiant People* (Greensboro: NC Friends Historical Society, 1985), 1; North Carolina had approximately “40,000 families living between Salisbury and Hillsborough and 350,000 inhabitants in the entire state.”

modes of protecting their property and homes from each army, especially when directly in the army's path.

During February 1781, the armies continued marching into the interior of North Carolina and the interactions between women and each army became more hostile. Some women were actively taking sides in these altercations and sometimes they were placed in the middle of the fight. Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton, one of Cornwallis' Infantry commanders, wrote in February 1781, "The power and position of his enemy rendered all the country beyond the pickets hostile to the British cause, which had no friends or partizans (sic) at this period except those within the extent of the royal camp."¹² Local inhabitants, including women were taking sides in the war, with many choosing to side with the American army. One woman who chose sides early in the war but was forced to engage in close contact with the British Army was Martha Bell. Her story illustrates how women protected their families, chose to view themselves as patriots and interacted with armies camping on their doorsteps.

Martha Bell, Patriot and Spy

Some women were involved directly with the outcome of the war and provided services essential for the fight for Independence. Martha Bell was one woman who understood how important she could become in the fight for American independence. She had personal interactions with both the American and British armies and provided support for the American cause for Independence. Martha MacFarlane McGee Bell was born in 1735 and lived in

¹² Banastre Tarleton, *Campaigns of 1780-1781 in Southern America: South Carolina Heritage Series, No. 11* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967), 170.

Randolph County. She was quite wealthy already when she married William Bell in 1779.¹³ She became active politically when she petitioned the state legislature in January 1781 to offer a provision for orphan children to protect them from their father's debts. She was directly tied to the war effort by her position as a mill owner. In December 1780 Colonel Benjamin Ford wrote to Nathanael Greene "There are 4,000 pounds of salted beef at Bell's Mill in Randolph County."¹⁴ According to this military correspondence, Bell's Mill was used by the Patriot Army for storing supplies. Mills were often utilized by both armies because of their function in processing grain for animals and soldiers. Eli Caruthers wrote of Bell's character that "Mrs. Bell was much esteemed by those who knew her. She had a tender feeling for the sick and afflicted, administered to their wants, and, by her medical skill and attention, relieved many without fee or reward. After the death of her first husband, she carried on the whole of his business."¹⁵ Her life became further tied to the war for Independence when Lord Cornwallis ordered his troops after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse to rest at her mill for two days in March 1781.¹⁶ Martha Bell was a devoted Whig; however, she was also a midwife and nurse who tended to the British wounded soldiers to the best of her ability. Her nursing knowledge helped her to remain on good terms with the British while they stayed on her property. The 4,000 pounds of salted beef stored

¹³ Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 29-30.

¹⁴ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 13. This report also shows that "corn was stored at Guilford Courthouse" as previously mentioned by Major Mazarett. These commissioners wrote "Guilford and Randolph Counties are almost exhausted of Beef and other supplies." This illustrates the lack of food, supplies, and goods in North Carolina during the war.

¹⁵ Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 310. Eli Caruthers lived in Guilford County during the 18th and 19th centuries and interviewed many North Carolina residents starting in the 1820s about the American Revolution. This letter was written in 1854 by Colonel Gray of Randolph County who knew Martha Bell before her death in 1820.

¹⁶ K. G. Davies, *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783 Vol. XVIII* (Shannon, Irish University Press, 1972), 112-113. Letter transcribed from Lord Cornwallis in Wilmington to Lord George Germain. He wrote on April 18, 1781 "I marched from Guilford on the morning of the 18th of March, and next day arrived at Bell's Mill, where I gave the Troops two days rest and procured a small supply of provisions." Cornwallis also wrote a letter dated 10 April 1781 to Sir Henry Clinton asserting he went to Bell's Mill "where the greatest number of our friends were supposed to reside." Pgs. 107-108.

at her property by the American army in December 1780 are not mentioned by the British so either the American army had removed the food previously or she was able to hide these supplies from the British.¹⁷

One of the stories about Bell was her request to Lord Cornwallis not to destroy her home. Caruthers describes Cornwallis' promise to Bell "On arriving at Bell's Mill, Cornwallis took possession of her house, and kindly promised Mrs. Bell that she and her property should be protected, and no general or extensive depredations were committed."¹⁸ This gave Bell safety and protection while her enemy encamped at her home. Randolph County had been the site of extensive warfare between Loyalists and Whigs prior to the British Army arrival and Bell would have wanted to have protection from her neighbor's wrath in case they wanted to retaliate against her for helping the British. Martha Bell would have been no different from other women living amid such destruction. The protection of their homes and property would have been foremost in their minds and they would have done whatever they needed to keep home and hearth intact, including in this case cooperating with the enemy.

However, Martha Bell's story becomes more elaborate with her legendary occupation as a spy for Light Horse Harry Lee. Women spies were not unusual in Revolutionary America. Shortly after the arrival of General Greene to Mecklenburg in December 1780, he sent a letter to Colonel John Marshall in which he "suggests sending trustworthy women to take provisions into Camden daily and gather intelligence. (He) wants to know every movement of the Enemy and their Situation as often as possible."¹⁹ He also requested one month later to General Daniel Morgan "Trust not to common guards; but endeavor, if possible, to have spies continually

¹⁷ Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 305. There are many legends regarding Martha Bell. Caruthers interviewed those inhabitants of Randolph County who knew Mrs. Bell and retold stories of her actions against the British that she either told or her family told to their neighbors.

¹⁸ Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents* 175.

¹⁹ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 26.

hanging round the Enemy's camp, and post persons not likely to be much suspected."²⁰

Greene's request for female spies illustrates the army's reliance on information received from women who were the least likely to be suspected. However, an altercation between Rachel Craighead Caldwell, wife of David Caldwell of Guilford County provides an entirely different reaction of the British toward a Patriot woman. When she asked for protection, the British soldier responded "She could expect no favors, for women were as great rebels as the men."²¹

Women who performed duties as spies for the American Army were not without some protection due to their sex; however, these women apparently understood their roles and the dangers they invoked if discovered.

Bell, after the British left her home, went to see Cornwallis on a pretext of discussing some destruction of her property by the British soldiers with the encouragement of Lieutenant Colonel Lee. This story was told during Mrs. Bell's lifetime and retold to Eli Caruthers when he interviewed her neighbors. He stated that "The object, was to ascertain, as far as possible, the condition of the British army, and especially whether they were receiving any considerable accessions of Tories."²² These possible actions of Bell were not the only instances of women seeking to provide information to the American army in the Carolinas. John Buchanan, in his book *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* describes an incident in South Carolina with a woman named Jane Thomas who rode sixty miles to warn her

²⁰ Greene, , *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 42.

²¹ Lincoln Diamant, *Revolutionary Women in the War for American Independence: A One-Volume Revised Edition of Elizabeth Ellet's 1848 Landmark Series* (Westport: Praegar, 1998), 153.

²² Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 325. Caruthers states there is no absolute evidence why Bell engaged as a spy for the American Army. He does state that she went at the request of Lt. Col. Light Horse Harry Lee or she volunteered to bring him the information. He claims the story was "so uniform and so well sustained, that there can be no doubt of the fact."

son of an impending British attack after overhearing a conversation between two Tory women.²³ These heroic women risked their lives to provide the American army with valuable information regarding troop movements, recruitment of Tory sympathizers, and other valuable information to help the American cause.

Carol Berkin describes how women were able to gather intelligence information from the armies, “As spies and saboteurs, some women used their femininity as a disguise to gather intelligence and convey sensitive information.”²⁴ Martha Bell was no different from other women who understood their sex protected them from accusation and suspicions on many occasions. Men viewed women and their roles in certain spheres and men did not want women to step outside of these perceived boundaries. However, women did challenge the perceptions of men, especially widows who did not have a man who controlled their actions. As widows, these women controlled their property and were able to attain certain degrees of freedom by altering some perceived notions of behavior to act as spies for the armies. The actions of Martha Bell and Jane Thomas illustrate how backcountry Carolina women decided to take actions beyond their perceived feminine restrictions to help with the cause of Independence. These 18th century women affected the outcome of the war by providing information to the armies, acting as spies, and asserting their preference for the American or British cause.

Interacting with the Armies

The interactions between women in North Carolina during the months of February and March 1781 and the British and American armies reveal how women reacted to the war and the

²³ John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 112.

²⁴ Carol Berkin, *First Generations: Women in Colonial America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 189.

duties they performed in providing support for the armies as they marched further into the interior of North Carolina. Some women became unwilling participants when the war was savagely thrust upon them. Many inhabitants of the Carolinas attempted to flee their homes but were unfortunately not quick enough to escape the violence of war. A skirmish between British and American soldiers at Torrent's Tavern, owned and operated by the Widow Torrent, illustrates the precarious situation many women faced when attempting to flee from the approaching armies. Many women and children attempting to flee from harm were on the roads leading toward Torrent's Tavern with their belongings piled onto wagons. According to the pension application of Joseph Graham, one of the militiamen present "The British made great destruction of the property in the wagons...ripped up beds and strewed the feathers, until the lane was covered with them."²⁵ These women present at this small skirmish were seeking to protect their families from harm, but unfortunately, they were became directly involved in the war. They likely understood the mortal dangers they faced and attempted to seek what shelter they could manage to save themselves and their children from bullets fired by British and American soldiers. These women were not actively pursuing roles as spies like Martha Bell, however their direct interactions with the war and their attempts to escape its destruction provide insight into the dangers women faced when attempting to protect their families.

Some women chose to stay in their homes to protect what little belongings they possessed from marauding soldiers. With the armies marching through North Carolina, many women faced soldiers from both sides forcibly taking their property, animals, and what little possessions they owned for use by the armies. Continental Congressman Thomas Burke from Hillsborough wrote to John Laurens of South Carolina "The Commissioners are authorized and required, if

²⁵ Lawrence E. Babits and Joshua B. Howard, *Long, Obstinate, and Bloody: The Battle of Guilford Courthouse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 23-24

necessary, to take, for public use, one half of all the provisions which can be found in the State above what may be necessary for the support of the inhabitants.”²⁶ Since many of the men were gone fighting the war, these provisions were taken from homes and farms maintained by women. These women invented ways to protect their property from confiscation. However, they were required to give assistance to either army when soldiers arrived at their homes.

Women banded together for protection as well as for production capabilities and sharing of essential supplies. Greene requested women sew shirts for the American army and stated he would pay them in salt.²⁷ Salt was a valuable commodity to colonial Americans because it was the way they preserved their meat and it was used in animal feed. As mentioned previously, 4,000 pounds of salted meat was stored at Martha Bell home by the American army. The value of salt for North Carolina women was far greater than specie or currency especially since wartime inflation had made currency nearly worthless. Carol Berkin reiterates the necessity of salt to colonial families “The most serious threat was the absence of a salt supply, since colonial families relied on salt to preserve meat over the winter.”²⁸ The American army was able to provide civilians with salt in payment for any supplies delivered to the army.

One of the essential supplies provided from the production capabilities of women was the sewing of uniforms and clothing for the American troops. Historian Cynthia Kierner provides insight into the increased production of homespun in colonial homes in North Carolina. She explains that “In eastern North Carolina, wartime shortages led many families to set up looms in their homes, where women, according to one observer, made cotton and woolen clothes to dress

²⁶ Edmund C. Burnett, *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, Vol. January 1, 1780 to February 28, 1780* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1931), 501.

²⁷ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 133-134.

²⁸ Berkin, *First Generations*, 181.

(their) entire family.”²⁹ Weaving and spinning became occupations for women during wartime to provide the troops with the clothing and also to provide their families with clothing when British goods were unavailable. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, in her book *The Age of Homespun*, supports the importance of spinning and cooperation between women in Revolutionary America “In the spinning meetings, however, they (women) showed both a capacity for organization and a desire to make a difference in the world.”³⁰ Spinning thread and weaving cloth became, according to historian Ray Raphael, a way for women “to demonstrate that women would become patriots.”³¹ Many women sought ways to support the Revolutionary War and the patriotic cause by using their skills to provide supplies for the armies.

North Carolina Women as Camp Followers

However, some women became more directly involved with the military by becoming camp followers. The impact of women who provided essential support to the armies as camp followers is important in understanding the hardships women endured while providing necessary assistance to the men fighting the war. Many of these women were seeking protection from the pillaging soldiers and the destruction of their homes or trying to stay with their husbands. Without anywhere else to go, they joined either the British or American army and followed these armies throughout North Carolina seeking food, protection, and performing certain duties within the camps. They were called camp followers and performed essential roles within each camp that helped support the army and increase its efficiency. Berkin describes the various duties of

²⁹ Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 9.

³⁰ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 181.

³¹ Ray Raphael, *A People's History of the American Revolution: How Common People Shaped the Fight for Independence* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 136.

the camp follower: “women in the camps could be enlisted as nurses, cooks, launderers, and food foragers—a menial labor force skilled in domestic arts and also willing to take on the unpleasant duty of stripping the enemy dead for useful items.”³² The British brought many of their women camp followers with them when they crossed the ocean. These women were the wives of some of the soldiers; however, new recruits soon joined these women from all across the colonies. Loyal British subjects and women seeking protection joined the ranks of the camp followers across North Carolina. Lord Cornwallis had very strict guidelines pertaining to these women in his corps. He wrote in his order book from January–March 1781 several entries pertaining to women camp followers. One of these entries is quite explicit, “women to attend all Roll-calls in the rear of the companies...any and every one found absent to be immediately whipped and drummed out of the brigade.”³³ These women not only performed dangerous and grueling tasks, but were subjected to the same punishments as men when absent from duty. Their sex did not protect them from the harshness of the war.

Many women saw army life as a way to provide safety and security traveling along with the armies rather than staying on their farms without protection. Mary Beth Norton describes that “the war left women alone with the responsibilities of home, farm or shop, and family in circumstances that were daunting.”³⁴ It is little wonder that many women when faced with these additional responsibilities and without male protection sought security with the advancing armies as they worked their way through North Carolina. Many North Carolina women joined with the British and American armies simply for protection while others had different reasons for seeking life in an army camp. Blumenthal describes some of these newly recruited American women

³² Berkin, *First Generations*, 186.

³³ Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 426. Caruthers at the end of his book provides transcribed orders issued from Lord Cornwallis during the Southern Campaign.

³⁴ Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Ithaca: Cornell University press, 1980), 181.

into the British camps as “petticoat stragglers from the town, giddied by the uniforms and drawn to the unfettered life of the open.”³⁵ These North Carolina women who joined with the British army as camp followers were not described in glowing terms by the Whig women who they had contact with during the march of the armies.

Whigs in North Carolina viewed British camp followers as “not better than harpies.”³⁶ William Dickson, who became a prominent politician in North Carolina after the war, further describes the reactions by his fellow Whigs to these British women “who followed the army in the character of officer’s and soldier’s wives. They were generally considered by the inhabitants to be more insolent than the soldiers. They were generally mounted on the best horses and side saddles, dressed in the finest and best clothes.”³⁷ However, Cornwallis issued an order dated January 28, 1781 declaring “No woman or negro (can) possess a horse.”³⁸ The Whig assertions of British camp follower’s riding on horses in the backcountry seem to be exaggerated, however historian Carol Berkin also describes “loyalist women could be seen...dressed in clothing stolen from patriot homes and riding sidesaddle on stolen horses.”³⁹ It appears that some women were able to procure horses when riding through the countryside, however at times of battle these horses were likely taken for use of the cavalry in the war.

African American women were included with the British camp followers and Carol Berkin describes the presence of black women among the looters following behind the British

³⁵ Walter Hart Blumenthal, *Women Camp Followers of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: George S. MacManus Co., 1952), 22. He further describes the American Army recruited women camp followers much later than the British due to the “lack of slum-class as mostly supplied the women of the European armies.” 23.

³⁶ William Dickson, “Letter written November 30, 1784,” *The Dickson Letters* (Raleigh, Edwards & Broughton, 1901), *William Dickson Papers*, North Carolina State Archives, Letter describes looting loyalist women.

³⁷ Dickson, “Letter dated November 30, 1784,” *The Dickson Letters*.

³⁸ Lord General Charles Cornwallis, “Order Book of Lord Cornwallis, order dated 28 January 1781,” Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 394.

³⁹ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America’s Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 36.

army in North Carolina.⁴⁰ These women were likely escaped slaves from across the colonies who joined with the British hoping for eventual freedom. The British had declared freedom for slaves if they joined with the British army and eventually some slaves were able to leave with the British and the Loyalists at the end of the war and resettle in Nova Scotia and elsewhere. However, not all slaves escaped to the British. In March 1781, Martha Thompson filed a petition with the state legislature claiming that Patriot militia Colonel John Hinton had stolen several of her slaves and she demanded their return.⁴¹ The presence of the British and the disruption everyday life allowed some slaves to escape while placing others, like Thompson's slaves, in precarious situations. Martha Thompson demanded the return of her slaves showing her awareness of her property rights however, the disruption caused by the war could place many African American women within the vicinity of the British. African American women became part of the British camp and participated in the war procuring supplies for the British army. These women, along with regular camp followers helped support the armies and provide essential duties such as washing, food preparation, and nursing for soldiers.

However, there were some women with the armies that performed different services as stated in their pension requests. Mary Moore traveled with her husband, Continental Sergeant Stephen Moore, into South Carolina as a camp follower. She states in her petition dated December 29, 1786, "your petitioner hath during the late War performed many signal services well known to many of the members of this assembly to the Cause of the United States of

⁴⁰ Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers*, 36.

⁴¹ Hugh Williamson, Chairman, *The State Records of North Carolina: Published Under the Supervision of the Trustees of the Public Libraries, by Order of the General Assembly, Vol. XVI 1782-1784*, "Petition of Martha Thompson dated 23 March 1781. Martha Thompson claimed that Patriot militia Col. Hinton went to John Strother in Orange County where the negroes were located at the time. Col. Hinton claimed that Amos Thompson, Martha's husband with other armed men had stolen these slaves from him. He went to Strother's home and retook his slaves. Col. Hinton was a militia commander in Wake County. (Photographic Collection, Division of Archives and History Photograph Collection, Photographs Received in 1994).

American in Saving many Hundred Thousand pounds at Gates's (sic) Def(ea)t.”⁴² Mary Moore initially filed a petition on behalf of her deceased husband, however she submitted another petition detailing her exploits while a member of the American army camp. Women understood their roles in the war and desired monetary compensation for these services after the war ended. North Carolina women sought compensation for the services they provided during the war, since they risked their lives, along with men, performing dangerous duties.

North Carolina Women and Nursing

One of the most dangerous and essential duties performed by women was the nursing of the wounded soldiers in hospitals and in their homes. The importance of nursing to the war effort and the services provided by women in North Carolina illustrate the impact women had on the welfare of wounded soldiers and the health of the armies. Nursing was considered the province of women and many women administered to dying and wounded men in their homes, in tents scattered throughout the state, and in hospitals in towns such as Salisbury. Without women's tender care to wounded soldiers, many men would have died from their wounds. Nursing was an active profession for women but it placed women in the most danger from disease spread by blood and unwashed bodies. There were no antibiotics available to treat these wounded soldiers or inoculations to prevent the rapid spread of diseases such as smallpox (except for small amounts of smallpox inoculations given to some Continental Army soldiers). Walter Hart Blumenthal describes the roles of British women serving as nurses in the American Revolution, “Among the British troops in the American War for Independence care of the sick

⁴² Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 181-182. The commission rejected her petition. Her original petition is located in the Photographic Collection, Division of Archives and History Photograph Collection, North Carolina State Archives, “Legislative Petition of Mary Moore, Fayetteville, NC 1786.”

and wounded was the crudest. Women camp followers nursed their men (husbands, or otherwise), or groups of such women were ordered to serve at improvised so-called field hospitals.”⁴³ Camp followers with the American army provided the same support for their troops but the care of wounded soldiers often involved placement at homes of isolated rural women.

If men were lucky they would be cared for at hospitals located throughout the state. Doctor James Browne pleaded with General Greene in January 1781 for provisions allocated to build hospitals in Salisbury and Hillsborough. He requested “the quartermasters to either be empowered to impress houses or that large, high pitched and airy logged houses by immediately built...be allowed to appoint and pay a matron for every 100 sick men and to hire and pay nurses to attend, cook, and wash for the sick.”⁴⁴ According to the *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, no response from General Greene has been found. However, Historian Linda Kerber reveals that “four nurses cared for over 100 sick at the general hospital at Hillsborough, North Carolina.”⁴⁵ Nursing was an acceptable occupation for women across North Carolina, and across the rest of the colonies, and women continued to perform these duties despite the hardships and proximity to disease. Smallpox was a recurring problem during the Revolutionary War and women tending to the sick and wounded were highly susceptible to contracting this disease. Colonel James Phillips wrote from Salisbury in January 1781 that “smallpox has broken out among the prisoners of war in this place.”⁴⁶ This soon became an epidemic which spread quickly to the civilian population in the town. The presence of this horrible disease placed many women in danger while attending to the wounded soldiers across the colonies.

⁴³ Blumenthal, *Women Camp Followers*, 21.

⁴⁴ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 26.

⁴⁵ Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 61.

⁴⁶ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 93. Col. Phillips wanted to inoculate the soldiers and the citizens of Salisbury however, Gen. Greene declined the request.

Battle of Guilford Courthouse and the Pacifist Communities

Many women were thrust into the role of caretakers for wounded soldiers during intense fighting in North Carolina. The largest battle of the southern campaign was fought in central North Carolina at the Guilford Courthouse in March 1781. Thousands of soldiers convened in this small community and waged a battle lasting over two hours with hundreds of dead and dying soldiers lying across one thousand acres of land heavily forested. The local women surrounding this battlefield were thrust into the war and provided care for hundreds of wounded soldiers. These women directly impacted the war due to their tender care of hurt soldiers and the food and supplies they gave to many of these men. In the surrounding communities were pacifist groups such as Quakers and Moravians, whose members took no part in the fighting of the war, however they were pivotal in supporting both armies with supplies and tending to the wounded after the battle.

Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton wrote in March 1781 after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse that, “The former (severely wounded), to the amount of seventy, with several Americans who were in the same situation, were lodged, under the protection of a flag of truce, in New Garden meeting house, and other adjacent buildings.”⁴⁷ New Garden was a small Quaker settlement approximately four miles from the battle. The book titled *The Battle of New Garden* by Algie I. Newlin describes the situation among the Quakers after the armies left: “Caring for the wounded in the homes was done at great risk to members of families, for some of the wounded men

⁴⁷ Tarleton, *Campaigns of 1780-1781*, 278.

brought the dreaded plague of smallpox with them.”⁴⁸ Regardless of the risk involved these Quaker women, whose religious views abhorred bloodshed and violence, continued to provide care and support to the wounded soldiers in their care regardless of their nationality.

Quakers had come from England because of religious persecutions in that country. The Quaker women were unusual among many colonial women because they had a voice within their church and community due to the Quaker belief in all people, including women, being equal citizens. Quaker women had their own church meetings where they decided marriages and membership in their Meetings. Mary Beth Norton describes the function of the women’s meeting “Within the Society of Friends, females had a formally structured role revolving around women’s meetings, which were run by and for their members, and which paralleled similar gatherings composed of men.”⁴⁹ There were several women around New Garden whose lives were directly impacted by the war. Martha Hunt was a young mother living with her husband and small children around New Garden Meeting House. After the battle of Guilford Courthouse, British soldiers confiscated the rest of her animals and food supply leaving the young woman and her family “almost destitute.”⁵⁰ Quakers were pacifists and did not believe in war, however due to their proximity to the fighting they were thrust into the war on a directly personal level.

Women went in search of their loved ones on the battlefield days after the Battle at Guilford Courthouse in March 1781. Searching for wounded family members on battlefields was common practice among women during the Revolutionary War. Historians Lawrence Babits and Joshua Howard wrote “All night long, men and women crossed back and forth over

⁴⁸ Algie I. Newlin, *The Battle of New Garden* (Greensboro: North Carolina Friends Historical Society, 1977), 54.

⁴⁹ Norton, *Liberty’s Daughters*, 127. Carol Berkin, in her book *First Generations: Women in Colonial America*, further describes the roles of women in the larger Quaker communities “The women’s meetings had no authority to debate the larger public issues, but they were far from ceremonial or social auxiliaries. Quaker founders had intended the women’s meetings to serve as a training ground for Quaker wives and children.” 92.

⁵⁰ Newlin, *The Battle of New Garden*, 77. Martha Hunt married in 1777 and at the time of the battle she had two small children in 1781. She died in 1788 during the birth of her 6th child in 10 years.

the field attempting to separate the living from the dead.”⁵¹ Women aided complete strangers and even British soldiers in their homes in surrounding areas around the courthouse. Martha Polk Brevard was one such woman who administered to the sick and wounded as a midwife after the battle. Midwives and nurses were in great demand during wartime. Brevard is described as “gathering clothing, medicines, and provisions and traveling long journeys, encountering dangers as well as hardships, to minister to those who so sorely needed her succor.”⁵² The lives of women who nursed wounded soldiers in their homes or traveled in their local communities tending to other women as midwives illustrate how significant women were to the outcome of the war. Many soldiers would have died from their wounds without the care and support of colonial North Carolina women. After the Battle of Guilford Courthouse, women were an essential component in the saving of lives of many wounded from the battle because these wounded soldiers were cared for by local women who lived surrounding the battlefield. These women and their proximity to the Guilford Courthouse battlefield provided medical care to wounded soldiers who could have possibly died before reaching a hospital in towns such as Salisbury.

Cornwallis stated after the Battle of Guilford Courthouse in March 1781 that “the houses in a circle of six to eight miles round us are full of wounded.”⁵³ Every home within eight miles of the battlefield was full of the wounded from the battle and women were the primary caregivers. Other communities in the surrounding area were also caring for wounded soldiers from both armies. Cornwallis had stayed at Salem in present day Winston-Salem on his way to

⁵¹ Babits and Howard, *Long, Obstinate, and Bloody*, 172. Local women would find their loved ones, remove the wounded family member from the battlefield and take him back to their homes for nursing or remove the body and reburial at their home cemetery. Many men simply walked from the battlefield and went to friends or neighbors for recuperation.

⁵² Diamant, *Revolutionary Women in the War for American Independence*, 150. Diamant states that her home was burned by the British because “she had too many sons in the rebel army.”

⁵³ Davies, *Documents of the American Revolution Vol XVIII*, 92.

Guilford Courthouse. Salem was comprised of Moravians, from the modern area around the Czech Republic, who were pacifist German-speaking people. These people had moved to the Piedmont area of North Carolina in the mid-18th century and these communities were still rather small with only around one hundred adults living in each town. Tarleton described Salem and the “mild and hospitable disposition of the inhabitants, being assisted by the well-cultivated and fruitful plantations in their possession, afforded abundant and seasonable supplies to the King’s troops during their passage through this district.”⁵⁴ Salem, Bethabara, and Bethania were small, isolated communities but apparently thriving with foodstuffs and other supplies, according to Tarleton, that was thrust into the war by British and American troops.

These Moravian citizens wrote to General Greene in February 1781 claiming, “They have built a storehouse and horse sheds for the army’s use and have emptied and turned over large and small houses for a hospital and for quartering troops.”⁵⁵ They also unwillingly provided support for the British troops, according to the *History of Wachovia*, “The ladies of the town were required to spend the entire night in baking and cooking for the soldiers. All their poultry taken; cattle killed and perhaps only half consumed, the remained lying untouched.”⁵⁶ The Quaker and Moravian actions in early 1781 illustrate how pervasive the war had become and how it affected the lives of pacifist women and their communities in North Carolina. These women living in these small, peaceful villages were not spared the war’s destruction. However, they provided food, tended to wounded soldiers, and assisted the armies in whatever capacity they could muster.

⁵⁴ Tarleton, *Campaigns of 1780-1781*, 228.

⁵⁵ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 260. They describe their settlement as “in its infancy with barely 100 adults.”

⁵⁶ John Henry Clewel, *History of Wachovia in North Carolina* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1902), 166.

These women were not spies or following along with the troops as camp followers; however, their participation in the war was just as valuable and impacted the morale and health of the fighting soldiers. These American and British soldiers were provided food and nursing which increased their strength and provided rest amid the chaos of war. Regardless of women's personal opinions on the war, when wounded soldiers lay on the battlefield at Guilford Courthouse, women in central North Carolina, including Quakers and Moravians, remained loyal to their religious beliefs while providing support and care for those soldiers in need of their help on either side. Other women left their homes, traveled along roads previously part of the battlefield, and spent hours looking for wounded soldiers personally known to some of these women. These soldiers were their husbands, sons, and family members. These women surrounding the battlefield became directly involved in the life and death struggle of many soldiers and this involvement increased the women's understanding of their role in the war.

North Carolina Women and Revolutionary War Petitions

The impact of women on the war is revealed in the many petitions filed during and after the war by women expressing their disgruntlement at colonial law and their attempts in seeking compensation for services and supplies given to the armies. Some women took definite sides in the war. They either became devout Tories supporting the British crown or patriotic women willing to provide whatever was needed to the American army. Martha Bell, was a patriotic woman who used her Whig allegiance to spy on Cornwallis and the British and to preserve her property through outward cooperation. There were other women who sided with either the British or Americans in more overt ways and they verbalized their allegiances through letters and

petitions. Elizabeth Steele, the sister of Patriot soldier Captain John Steele wrote of the occupation of Salisbury by Tories “You have had your time and now comes ours. We have been surrounded by Tory insurrections. South Carolina and Georgia are in the enemies hands; our army is advancing near Cheraw.”⁵⁷ The language used by Ms. Steele in describing the army as “ours” and the British as “enemies” illustrates how patriotic women viewed the war and Britain. The use of the possessive pronoun solidifies the impact of the war on women and how they viewed themselves. Ms. Steele asserts her support for independence by claiming a connection with the American army and the revolutionary cause. She firmly believes in the American fight for independence and in her letter she describes herself as “supporting our cause.”⁵⁸ This language illustrates how important the fight for independence was to some North Carolina women and their willingness to engage in patriotic rhetoric and support for American independence.

Some women did more than write of their support of the American Independence; they filed petitions detailing how they directly impacted the war by providing supplies to the American army or spying on the British. Carol Berkin claims “Women’s applications for military pensions, and the many petitions received from women by local, state, and national governments requesting compensation for requisitioned property or relief from poverty suggest that women were deeply conscious of the services given and sacrifice made to the creation of an independent nation.”⁵⁹ North Carolina women filed petitions with the state legislature for

⁵⁷ Elizabeth Steele, “Letter to her brother Captain John Steele dated 13 July 1780,” *John Steele Papers*, North Carolina State Archives, serving in the Continental Army in the North. These are the children of the legendary Elizabeth Steele, who according to legend, gave money to General Greene when he came through Salisbury. There is no documented proof of this story. However, the family were fervent Whigs who supported the American cause.

⁵⁸ Steele, 13 July 1780.

⁵⁹ Berkin, *First Generations*, 188-189

various different reasons, however they all sought compensation for their losses to help support their families after the devastation of the war.

For example, Elizabeth Forbes, the widow of a Captain of the Guilford Militia at Guilford Courthouse filed a petition for widow's benefits in May 1782. She was allowed "25 barrels of corn out of the specific tax for the county of Guilford for the year 1781, and the like quantity out of the tax for 1782 to enable her to support a numerous and distressed family."⁶⁰ Eli Caruthers wrote down a story related to him by Elizabeth Forbes. When a British soldier attempted to take her horse for army use, she raised her hoe over her head and said "if he touched the horse she would split his head with the hoe."⁶¹ This action of Forbes is supported by Holly A. Mayer in her book *Belonging to the Army*, where she argues that "Women in farming families sometimes labored in the fields, and women on the frontier occasionally took up a weapon to defend life and property from marauders."⁶² Elizabeth Forbes left her home and marched to Guilford Courthouse Battlefield looking for her husband. She found him, took him home, but he died several days later. The petitions filed by women, like Forbes, were necessary for women to gain supplies and money to provide for their families. However, these petitions also gave them a sense of acknowledgement for their sacrifices and increased their participation in American democracy and liberty.

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Forbes (Forbis), "Elizabeth Forbes Petition dated May 1782," *The State Records of North Carolina: Published Under the Supervision of the Trustees of the Public Libraries, by Order of the General Assembly Vol. XIX, 1782-1784*, ed. Walter Clark (Goldsboro, Nash Bros., Book and Job Printers, 1899), 98.

⁶¹ Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 269-270. Caruthers relates that Ms. Forbes was quite old when he interviewed her, however she appeared "cheerful and warm-hearted."

⁶² Holly A. Mayer, *Belonging to the Army: Camp Followers and Community During the American Revolution* (Columbia: South Carolina University Press, 1996), 144. Eli Caruthers told a similar story about Martha Bell and her attacking one of Edmund Fanning's Tories while attempting to steal her horse. According to legend she pulled a gun on the unsuspecting man and marched him back to her plantation to put him under arrest. Caruthers, *Revolutionary Incidents*, 313-314.

Most women who filed petitions for widow's benefits after the war were requesting compensation for the loss of their husbands and monetary support. These women were destitute without some form of support either by the work of their husbands or widow's benefits authorized by the state. These women, though not actively spying or supplying the troops like Martha Bell or declaring their love of American independence like Elizabeth Steele, were still impacting the war and its aftermath. The widow of Alexander Martin wrote her petition in 1781 declaring "The widow and orphan deprived of the real value of their property, under the colour (sic) of our tender Laws, by mercenary Guardians and Executors, with tears look up to you for Justice and redress."⁶³ These widows, neither zealous supporters of the American independence or direct participants in the war, responded to the outcome of the war and a desire to participate in the democratic system. As Kierner explains, "every woman who petitioned the legislature claimed membership in a community beyond her household."⁶⁴ Some women filed petitions for more than their rights to widow's benefits. These women asserted their direct participation in the war effort and desired compensation for their sacrifices.

Many petitions written by women emphasize the sufferings of women left alone on their farms. These women chose to remain on their farms struggling to survive with constant pillaging bands of soldiers taking all of their possessions. Mary Davidson, whose husband was a Patriot militia General who led the Yadkin Valley militia, wrote her petition in February 1781 to the state legislature. She claimed she provided supplies to the American army at least twice during the war. She elaborated on her present condition by claiming "it may be supported that a helpless woman with seven small Children-without one Slave, without furniture, for she was

⁶³ Walter Clark, *The State Records of North Carolina: Published Under the Supervision of the Trustees of the Public Libraries, by Order of the General Assembly* (Goldsboro: Nash Bros., Book and Job Printers, 1899), 297.

⁶⁴ Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, XXV.

plundered, without money must have suffered extreme misery.”⁶⁵ Mary Davidson was not the only woman to complain about the plundering of her home or to file petitions to seek some compensation for replacing their lost goods. Caruthers described a woman named Mrs. McClaine who lamented “there was nothing more in or about it (her mill), as she thought, to be plundered.”⁶⁶ However, some women chose to fight back when plundered by the enemy. Mary Morgan, sister-in-law to Elizabeth Forbes did not file a petition requesting compensation for supplies. She decided to get her own compensation. According to Caruthers, when the British entered her home, she went to an officer’s horse, took his valise and hid it in the bushes. Once the British left, she opened the valise to find more costly clothing inside than the total value of her property stolen by the British.⁶⁷ Women sought to protect their property by secreting away their goods to other locations like Mrs. Caruthers, or stealing British goods like Mrs. Morgan. However, the majority sought legal means through the state legislature by requesting monetary compensation for supplies lost during the war.

One of the most prolific petitioners and the most adamant in requesting compensation for her sacrifices was Janet Spurgin of Rowan County. Her continual appeals to the state of North Carolina for compensation are unique among women petitioners. She filed three appeals from 1785-1791. The first of these petitions was on the behalf of her late husband. However, her husband was not a Patriot; he was a Tory who left his wife in North Carolina and his property was confiscated by the state. She wrote in 1785 that she “hopes that as her husband is politically

⁶⁵ Mary Davidson, “Petition for Mary Davidson dated 1 February 1781;” and Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 88.

⁶⁶ Caruthers, *A Sketch in the Life of the Rev. David Caldwell, D.D.* (Greensborough: Swaim and Sherwood, 1842), 207.

⁶⁷ Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 270-273. Mrs. Morgan is described by Caruthers as declaring “that the women in this part of the country would then have shouldered their muskets and fought, if it had not been for impropriety.” Women in the backcountry of North Carolina would have had a weapon to use for hunting to supply food for their families and the skill to shoot a musket. Their husbands or sons took weapons for the war, however women may have a weapon on the farm as well.

dead & has no expectation of his return to assist in the Maintenance of herself & eight Small children” she can maintain her property.⁶⁸ After waiting for a positive reply from the state legislature, she filed a second petition on November 11, 1788. This petition was harsher in its language and she laments on her present condition “to make wife and Small Children entirely miserable on account of the Husbands and fathers transgressions.”⁶⁹ She describes the property seized by the marauding armies and requested compensation for these items. Her third petition is by far the most ardent in her desire to receive compensation for her sacrifices, not her husbands.

This third petition illustrates how North Carolina women began to see themselves and their sacrifices during the war and their desire to receive compensation for their efforts just like men. She starts her last petition “that during the late war She fur(ni)shed the regular Troops and Militia of this state with Provisions and Forriage, some part of which, the officers that took it gave her certificates for.”⁷⁰ After years of trying to regain some of her property seized because her husband was a Loyalist, she attempted to claim that she is entitled to compensation based on her supplying the American troops. She further expands on her support of the American cause by claiming it was a “misfortune to be married to a man who was Enemical to the revolution it was an evil that was not in her power to remedy (sic)-and as She has always behaved herself as a good Citizen and well attached to the government She thinks it extreamly (sic) hard to be deprived of the Common rights of other citizens.”⁷¹ Some women during the Revolution began to see themselves as part of the ideal of liberty and democracy. They saw themselves as citizens

⁶⁸ Janet Spurgin, “Petition of Janet Spurgin dated 3 December 1785,” Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 177-179 Spurgin is referring to the Confiscation act of 1779 which asserts that property belonging to those who fight for British will be seized by the state.

⁶⁹ Janet Spurgin, “Petition of Janet Spurgin dated 11 November 1788,” Kierner, *Southern Woman in Revolution*, 179-180.

⁷⁰ Janet Spurgin, “Petition of Janet Spurgin dated 28 November 1791,” Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 180-181.

⁷¹ Spurgin, “Petition of Janet Spurgin dated 28 November 1791,” 180-181

of the country with rights protected by law. All of her petitions were denied and she eventually left North Carolina, possibly to move to Nova Scotia with her absentee husband.

Janet Spurgin was not the only woman in North Carolina to distance herself from her Tory husband. Caruthers describes another woman named Mary Spurgen, no relation to Janet Spurgin, who lived close to Guilford Courthouse. She was a devoted Whig while her husband was away serving as a Tory militia Colonel. Mary Spurgen made up her own mind on political matters and, according to Caruthers, when General Greene asked if she knew someone who could serve as a spy to go to the British camp and provide information on the British troop movements, she replied “yes, he could put confidence in her son John.”⁷² Mary Spurgen provided help to General Greene as a devoted Whig. Other North Carolina women sought out General Greene for other reasons. One woman named Fanny Courtney petitioned General Greene for the return of her husband who was taken prisoner by the British. Her husband had been taken from Hillsborough by the British and she requested General Greene “use his influence to get Courtney released by exchange or any other way his superior knowledge may point out.”⁷³ Petitions were being used for several reasons by women during the war to assert their legal rights and patriotic devotion in North Carolina.

In March 1781, several North Carolina women sought release of their husbands from the British by requesting General Greene to intervene on their behalf. *The Papers of Nathanael Greene* dated March 3, 1781 includes a copy of this request. This request states “Nathanael Greene assures her (Mrs. William O’Neal) that she can procure a parole for William O’Neale & Harden Pirkins, prisoners of the British, he will grant the same indulgence to Michael and John

⁷² Caruthers, *Interesting Revolutionary Incidents*, 41.

⁷³ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 362.

Holt, who are prisoners with the American army.”⁷⁴ Women used whatever influence they had to procure for the protection of their husbands and property. When British troops confiscated supplies from the Mendenhall Plantation located in Jamestown, Mrs. Mendenhall requested the return of the family cow. According to Peter R. Johnson, in his book *The Poorest of the Thirteen* Mrs. Judith Mendenhall “seeing the British confiscating her flour and cattle, persuaded the officer in charge to return her only milk cow.”⁷⁵ North Carolina women did what was necessary to protect themselves and their families from ruin due to the devastation of the war and this involvement directly impacted women’s feelings toward the war and their increased acknowledgement of their own participation through petitions.

Sarah Rousevall was a devoted Whig who assumed the responsibilities of her husband once he was captured by Tories. Rousevall petitioned the state legislature on December 11, 1786 outlining her duties during the war when she assumed her husband’s job of Tax Collector in Rowan County. She asserted that “your memorialist & her son proceeded to make the Collection of Taxes for that year to the utmost of their power.”⁷⁶ She submitted a claim for 8,000 pounds and the state legislature eventually granted her request. The war elevated women’s status in North Carolina by allowing them to seek compensation for duties performed during the war and increasing their sense of citizenship. However, Historian Ray Raphael declares “As much as men wanted women to become patriots, they did not expect any transgressions of traditional boundaries or demands for additional rights.”⁷⁷ North Carolina women achieved some autonomy during the war while their husbands were away fighting though they were still limited in absolute

⁷⁴ Greene, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 383. This request was addressed from Captain Nathaniel Pendleton to Mrs. William O’Neal dated 3 March 1781 from Headquarters Buffalo Creek, N.C.

⁷⁵ Peter R. Johnston, *Poorest of the Thirteen: North Carolina and the Southern Department in the American Revolution* (Haverford: Infinity Publishing Co., 2001), 260.

⁷⁶ Sarah Rousevall, “Petition of Sarah Rousevall dated 11 December 1786,” Kierner, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 37-38.

⁷⁷ Raphael, *People’s History*, 138.

control over their own lives. However, the increased awareness of their own participation in the war elevated their sense of involvement outside of their homes and within their communities.

North Carolina Women and Citizenship

Women became politically active during the war by expressing their right to petition and citizenship along with men. Historian Ray Raphael states that “Because women performed on the home front while men went off to fight, because men asked for and received women’s support, women felt personally strengthened by the wartime experience.”⁷⁸ This is illustrated by petitions filed by Orange and Guilford County residents in December 1786. Citizens of these counties were requesting the return of their property which was confiscated under the 1779 Confiscation Act. This Act was passed by the North Carolina General Assembly and provided details “for confiscating the property of all such persons as are inimical (hostile or unfriendly) to this or the United States.”⁷⁹ This act gave the Revolutionary War North Carolina government the authorization to seize the property of many absentee loyalists and remove their families from the state. The petition signed by Orange and Guilford residents includes two women named Jane Patton and Mary Albrind.⁸⁰ These women were not the only women in North Carolina to sign petitions asserting their citizenship during and after the war. A petition signed by citizens in Salisbury included several women who desired to express their frustration about pillaging British

⁷⁸ Raphael, *People’s History*, 144.

⁷⁹ Documenting the American South: Colonial and State Records of North Carolina. *Acts of the North Carolina General Assembly, 1779, North Carolina General Assembly October 18, 1779-November 10, 1779, Volume 24*, Pages 262-313, UNC University Library, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr24-0007#p24-303>, created 2004 (accessed 15 March 2012).

⁸⁰ Orange and Guilford County Residents, “Petition from Orange and Guilford Residents, 20 December 1787,” General Assembly Record Group, Session Records, Session of November 1786-January 1787: Joint Standing Committees, Joint Select Committees, State Archives of North Carolina GASR Nov 1786-Jan 1787, Box 2.

armies through their town.⁸¹ Women signing petitions as citizens of the state illustrates how important the war was on women's ideas about themselves and their roles in their new society. Women throughout 18th century America, and especially during the War for Independence, became more vocal in their communities and more politically active as the war progressed.

North Carolina Whig women even chose to petition the state legislature to help protect Tory women from expulsion from the state in 1782. As previously stated, many Whig women disliked the British camp followers with the British army. However, Whig women were willing to band together and protect Tory women from the injustices of the state legislature. These Tory women were elite or upper society women, not women who were classified as poor. These Whig women wrote "that we have been informed that orders have issued from your honorable board that the wives and children of absentees should depart the state with a small part of their property in forty eight hours after notice given them."⁸² These Patriotic women chose legal means to help revoke the order to remove these Tory families. These Whig women were also attempting to demonstrate their Patriotic support while engaging in political action to protect their neighbors. This petition further illustrates how closely aligned women were after the war and the hope that women could be protected from ruination. The women who signed this petition included "the wives of some of the most prominent patriots of the Cape Fear region."⁸³ These women asserted their rights as citizens and desired mercy from the state legislature. They declared the Tory men

⁸¹ Salisbury Residents, "Petition from the town of Salisbury, 23 April 1782." General Assembly Record Group, Session Records, Session of April-May 1782: Joint Standing Committees, Joint Select Committees, State Archives of North Carolina GASR Apr-May 1782, Box 1. The women who signed this petition were Sarah Felphs, Winnett Dany, Janet Wood, and Ann Donehu.

⁸² Anne Hooper, Sarah Nash, Mary Nash, and Others to his Excellency Gov. Alex Martin and the Members of the Honorable Council, *The State Records of North Carolina: Published Under the Supervision of the Trustees of the Public Libraries by Order of the General Assembly*, ed. Walter Clark (Goldsboro: Nash Bros., Book and Job Printers, 1899), 297.

⁸³ Kerber, *Southern Women in Revolution*, 52. Anne Hooper was the wife of William Hooper, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

were “estranged from us in political opinions, have left wives and children much endeared to us.”⁸⁴ This language is similar to the language used by Janet Spurgin in her many petitions attempting to distance herself from her Tory husband. These women sought protection for their neighbors by expressing their political opinions to the state legislature and some women obviously held political views that were different from their husbands.

The Removal of Tories in North Carolina

Most Tory women did not have the desire to remain in North Carolina among hostile Whig neighbors or they were forced to relinquish their property due to the Confiscation Acts passed in North Carolina by the state legislature. As early as 1777, Mary Lewellin wrote the state legislature to request mercy for her husband who “before his entering into this detested conspiracy...your disconsolate Petitioner and her Children will not only have to combat shame, and Disgrace, but also the keenest poverty.”⁸⁵ In 1802, Mary Wright of Wilmington wrote the state legislature requesting land be returned to her that was sold to a Tory who left with the British army.⁸⁶ As the war progressed, many Tories found living in North Carolina to be inhospitable. Most of these North Carolina women, who supported the British, left the state and made their way to Charleston, South Carolina which was still in control of the British and boarded ships bound for St. Augustine, Florida.

⁸⁴ Anne Hooper, Sarah Nash, Mary Nash, and Others to his Excellency Gov. Alex Martin and the Members of the Honorable Council, *The State Records of North Carolina: Published Under the Supervision of the Trustees of the Public Libraries by Order of the General Assembly*, 297.

⁸⁵ Mary Lewellin, “Petition of Mary Lewellin dated 1777,” Kierner: *Southern Women in Revolution*, 22-23. Mary Lewellin was a Tory who judged the Revolution as a conspiracy against the English crown.

⁸⁶ Mary Wright, “Petition of Mary Wright dated 23 April 1802,” *General Assembly State Records, Session Records, Session of April-May 1782: Joint Papers, Committee Papers Apr-May 1782, State Archives of North Carolina GASR Apr-May 1782, Box 1*.

While these North Carolina women were living on board ships in the harbor of Charleston, they did receive some monetary compensation from their loyalist's commanders. Colonel Gray, North Carolina Loyalist Commander, authorized payments to some loyalist refugee women on board one ship. The list includes the names of these women and the numbers of children for each woman. According to the list, each child was allotted \$20.⁸⁷ There are several other records listing other loyalist women who received support from Loyalist units. According to Colonel Samuel Campbell, North Carolina Loyalists Militia commander at James Island, South Carolina, the women and children of the North Carolina Regiment of Militia were allotted "\$5 for women, \$2 for each child."⁸⁸ These women had to leave all their possessions behind and live for months on board ships in the Charleston harbor. These North Carolina women and children remained loyal to the British crown and when the war shifted toward the Patriots and independence, they chose to remove themselves to a place more hospitable for their protection.

Abigail and Ann Howard were two loyalist women who left North Carolina when the Patriots forced their removal. After Martin Howard, the chief justice of North Carolina died; these two women sent many petitions to the state of North Carolina requesting compensation for properties and goods seized by the state. They began seeking compensation in 1784 listing the

⁸⁷ Colonel Gray, "List of Refugees in Charleston, South Carolina dated 19 October 1782." *British Records, Treasury, Board Papers, Miscellaneous, Documents Relating to Refugees, North Carolina State Archives Carolina Militia, Receipt Books, Pay Lists*. List includes Barbara Stanley, 4 children; Eve Mukler, 5 children; Mary Lively, 4 children; Elizabeth Blakely, 5 children; Sarah Walker, 1 child; Margaret Rupert, 1 child; Widow Rupert; Mary Dowdenny, 1 child; Mary Hammell, 6 children; Mary Martindale, 1 child; Katherine Blakely, 4 children; Katherine Walker, 6 children; Widow Dorrard.

⁸⁸ Colonel Samuel Campbell, "James Island, South Carolina, A Return of the Distressed Women and Children of the North Carolina Regt. Of Militia Commanded by Coll. Saml. Campbell," *British Records, Treasury Board Papers Miscellaneous, Carolina Militia, Receipt Books, Pay Lists*. The total numbers listed are : 39 women, 62 children, 6 widows, and 24 orphans. Another report by Captain John Legitt includes the victuals supplied to these refugees including, vinegar and rum. ("An Account of Officers and Soldiers and Women belonging to the North Carolina's Commanded by Capt. John Legitt, Victualled on Board the Aolus Transport Joseph Boumels Master Commencing 5th Octr 1782, " This ship was bound for St. Augustine dated 5 October 1782.)

costs of the properties owned by the family in North Carolina. This list includes “A plantation upon the River Neuse North Carolina worth \$500, bonds of notes on interest in both Carolinas, \$800, paper money left in America \$573.”⁸⁹ They continued to seek compensation as late as 1786, however they did not receive an affirmative response to many of their requests. They wrote to the state legislature after the first denial of their request stating that “The people of this state think it is a small crime to wrong each other but none at all to cheat and defraud the unfortunate friends to the British government.”⁹⁰ These Loyalist women ironically first moved to Boston and eventually left North America for England but continued to seek compensation from North Carolina. Finally in 1788, the state legislature rewarded Ann and Abigail Howard 50 pounds compensation for one year.

Historian Peter R. Johnston estimated the number of Loyalists living in North Carolina at the time of the war as high as one half of the total population.⁹¹ This included women living in the state after their husbands left with the British. Sarah Beachem was one of these women who requested from the state legislature to allow her to leave the state with her children, possessions, and property. The state legislature ruled “that she deserved to have her petition granted but nonetheless rejected it because the law allowed the wives and widows of Tories to retain only a dower interest in their husband’s estates.”⁹² She eventually did leave the state without her property. Many women, like Sarah Beachem were forced to abandon their properties and start their lives elsewhere. North Carolina became a hostile place for many Tory women and they chose to remove themselves from the state during and after the war.

⁸⁹ Ann and Abigail Howard, “Claim of Abigail and Ann Howard dated 25 February 1784,” *British Records, Exchequer and Audit Department, Claims, American Loyalists*, State Archives of North Carolina.

⁹⁰ Ann and Abigail Howard, “Petition of Ann and Abigail Howard dated 16 January 1785,” *British Records, Exchequer and Audit Department, Claims, American Loyalists*, State Archives of North Carolina.

⁹¹ Johnston, 188.

⁹² Sarah Beachem, “Petition of Sarah Beachem dated 26 April 1782,” State Archives of North Carolina.

The War of American Independence left many women in North Carolina with their lives changed forever. Whether they were directly involved with the war, such as those living in the war's path and camp followers, or forced to leave their homes because of their husband's political affiliation, women in the late 18th century impacted the outcome of the war. Some women were involved with the war as spies or suppliers of goods directly to the army. Others tried to survive the war to the best of their abilities protecting their properties and children. The war gave women a sense of empowerment they previously were denied. The absence of their husbands allowed women to participate in the outside world by continuing their husband's jobs or interacting with other women on a political level. The impact of women on the war reveals how involved women became in the daily activities with the armies and the state legislature. Many women gave their support, money, and material goods to benefit the army of their choice. The years of 1780-1781 were the most pressing with women seeking to establish themselves in a turbulent world largely outside of their control. However, they sought recognition of their sacrifices by seeking compensation from the state legislature. These North Carolina Revolutionary women significantly influenced the war by helping to support the troops, maintaining their homes, providing for their families, and changing their attitudes about themselves by seeking compensation for their actions amid hostilities and destruction.

North Carolina women were dramatically affected by the Revolutionary War due to the immediate proximity of the warring armies and the constant strife between Whigs and Tories. These North Carolina women and their children became participants in the War for American liberty by providing services to the armies, maintaining fidelity to their ideals, and seeking to preserve their domestic capacity while suffering from constant invasion of pillaging soldiers of both sides. The Southern campaign of the American Revolution was fought within the towns,

communities, and around the farms of women who struggled to maintain their livelihoods while amid the hostilities of warfare. Women were not inactive players within this revolution; they used their legislative rights to petition for monies and supplies. These petitions reveal that women engaged in various roles and they sought compensation for the patriotic or loyalist duties they performed. These women were living amid hostilities and destruction while continuously striving to preserve their homes, families, and society.

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