

REVOLUTIONARY WAR TIMES AND THE RIDE OF CAPTAIN MARTIN GAMBILL

In 1775, a Boston silversmith named Paul Revere made a night ride of about two miles to warn other Patriots that the British were coming and, with the aid of a poet named Longfellow, he also rode into the pages of history. In 1780, Martin Gambill, a pioneer settler of the upper New River Valley, made a ride of over one hundred miles for the same purpose, but there was no Longfellow around to immortalize him in poetry.

What is known of the ride of Martin Gambill is buried in the military archives in Washington D.C., in old Court records and in the memories of his many descendants. The ancestors of Martin Gambill were among the last of the Scots-Irish who moved from Ireland to England after the Linen War of 1700-1704 and shortly thereafter migrated to America where most of them first settled in Pennsylvania. In the period from 1730 through 1750, many of these people were moving southward and settling along the headwaters of the James River in the central counties of Virginia, among them was Henry Gambill, the father of Martin. Martin was born near Culpepper, Virginia, in the year of 1750.

In 1768, Martin Gambill, at the age of eighteen, was already incensed at the arrogant and arbitrary actions of the British governing officials and tax collectors. When he learned that, a group in North Carolina, who called themselves "Regulators", was offering armed resistance to British laws he decided to join them. Riding his horse to North Carolina in 1768, he enlisted with the Regulators in Rowan County and participated in several skirmishes against the Tory militia of Governor Tyron. In 1771, a group of poorly equipped Regulators was badly defeated at Alamance in

Orange County and many of the survivors, including Martin Gambill, were forced to flee to the western mountains.

In 1768, all of western North Carolina was Rowan County, Surry County was formed from Rowan in 1771, Wilkes County was formed from Surry and Rowan in 1776 and Ashe County was formed from Wilkes in 1799. Records of Martin Gambill have been found in all of these counties but this does not mean that he was moving from one place to another. It is now believed that after the battle of Alamance he continued his western journey across the crest of the Blue Ridge into present Ashe County, which was to become his home. In Ashe County (then Wilkes), he enlisted in the militia in the Company of Captain William Nall. Records show that he served in this Company as Sergeant, Ensign and as First Lieutenant. Later, he also served as Captain.

In 1777, he married Nancy Nall, daughter of William Nall, and they made their home on the south fork of New River in the Chestnut Hill community of Ashe County. Both lived the remainder of their lives and are buried on this original homestead. There were very few settlers along the north and south forks of New River before 1770 and none of them had any legal claim to the land, which they occupied. Between 1770 and 1775, many more people, mostly from Virginia, began to move into the area and one of the first things they did was to organize militia units.

One of these units was under the command of Andrew Baker with James Shepherd serving as Lieutenant. Another was organized by Captain William Hardin. These groups soon united with others for the common purpose of defense and the maintenance of law and order. They called themselves the "Watauga Compact." As the state line had not yet been established most of them did not know whether they were in North Carolina or Virginia, some as far south as the present town of Boone thought that they were still in Virginia. In 1775, Chief Oconostota of the Cherokee tribe decided to move his people out of the area despite the objections of some of them.

To accomplish this move, he sold all of the land between the Kentucky and the Cumberland Rivers to a group of settlers led by Richard Henderson. Two days later, in a similar deal, he sold all of the land between the Holston and the New River to the Watauga Compact who was represented by Charles Robertson. The British refused to recognize the legality of these transactions and sent agents among the Cherokees to incite them to attack the settlers. The Indians did make sporadic attacks against individual settlers or lone hunters, and some were killed. Martin Gambill participated in several forays against the Indians and led some of these himself until the Indians were finally driven out of the area.

A few miles further down the river, below the forks of the river, settlers had started moving in between 1765 and 1770. They had also formed loosely organized militia units and John Cox had built a fort on New River at Peach Bottom. In 1774, when open rebellion had become a distinct possibility, these units were reorganized. The first Company of record was formed with John Cox as Captain and his brother David as Lieutenant. Enoch Osborne served as Ensign. In 1776, after war had become a fact, the militia was expanded. Cox's Company was divided to form a new company in which Enoch Osborne served as Captain, Ezekiel Young as Lieutenant and William Wyatt as Ensign or second Lieutenant.

In 1778, Cox's Company was again divided to form another company commanded by Captain John Henderson and Lieutenant John Bryson. In 1779, an entirely new company was formed under the command of Captain Flower Swift. Before this time, Captain Enoch Osborne had also constructed a fort between the mouth of Bridle Creek and Saddle Creek in Grayson County. By 1778, there were well established militia units in present Wilkes County under command of Colonel Ben Cleveland and William Lenoir, in Surry County under command of Colonel Joseph Winston, in Watauga County under command of Colonel John Sevier and across the mountain in Tennessee under the command of Colonel Shelby.

As there were only rough trails across the crest of the Blue Ridge into Wilkes County and not much better between the forks of New River and upper Watauga County, the militia units along New River had placed themselves under the command of Colonel William Campbell of Seven Mile Ford and his brother Arthur Campbell of Marion, Virginia. During the period from 1770 through 1780, there were also a number of British sympathizers living in the mountains that secretly organized their own "Tory" militia and served as spies for the British. Martin Gambill participated in one skirmish against these Tories at the "old fields" in Ashe County. This was the only pitched battle fought in Ashe County during the Revolutionary War.

In 1778, Colonel Charles Lynch beat off a Tory attack on the lead mines at Austinville, Virginia. In 1779, Colonel William Campbell and the New River militia broke up a large assembly of Tories at present Baywood, Virginia. As the lead mines were the only local source of lead for the militia, they were critical to their defense. In 1780, the Tory militia launched another attack on the mines with a larger force. Captain John Cox was in command of the forces defending the mines but, being short of manpower, he sent his sixteen-year-old son James to seek aid from Colonel Ben Cleveland. James Cox was captured by the Tories on his return journey. Colonel Cleveland quickly mustered his forces and overtook the Tories at the top of the mountain at a place called the "glades."

The Tories were soundly defeated, James Cox was released and some Tories were hung. By the summer of 1780, the American Revolution was beginning to look like a lost cause. The militia in the mountains of North Carolina and Virginia were being kept busy defending themselves against Tory and Indian attacks, George Washington had been unable to defeat General Clinton in New York, General Howe had been driven from Savannah, General Lincoln had been soundly defeated at Charleston, Major McDowell had been defeated at Camden and had fled with the remainder of his troops and their families to Watauga County. In

the entire South no organized and effective Continental troops remained.

General Cornwallis, who General Clinton had left in command after taking Charleston, had moved his army to near Charlotte and was preparing for a northward sweep in which he expected to crush all the remaining opposition and soon be in position to attack George Washington from the rear while General Clinton assaulted him from the front. Had this plan succeeded, Washington and many other Patriots would have been hung as traitors and the picture of Benedict Arnold would probably be on our currency. The only thing which kept Cornwallis from moving northward immediately was the knowledge that rebels who had not been subdued still remained in the mountains and he his not know the strength or spirit of these people.

Being a cautious commander, he did not want to leave this unknown force behind him or to have them on his flank during a northward march. To solve this problem he assigned one of his most capable officers, Major Patrick Ferguson, to the task of eliminating this threat before he moved north. Major Ferguson was a courageous and brilliant tactician, but he was also arrogant and overconfident; this proved to be his undoing. As the first step in his campaign, he sent two messengers into the mountains, one a freed prisoner, with orders that all opposition to the British forces cease immediately and those two hundred men be enlisted in Loyalist militia and gather at a designated place.

The order also stated that if this was not done he would come into the mountains, lay waste to their homes and farms and hang all their leaders. Tradition says that the Tory messenger was permitted to return, coated with tar and feathers, and told to tell Mr. Ferguson that others would have something to say about who was hung. After Ferguson's ultimatum was received, men from McDowell's army, then refugees in Watauga County, volunteered to act as spies and to keep track of the movements of Ferguson's army. As a means of quickly sending a warning northward, should

Ferguson start into the mountains, large piles of brush were placed on all the higher mountain peaks to be lit as signal fires.

Upon learning of Ferguson's arrogant demands, Colonel Isaac Shelby of Tennessee called a meeting of the militia commanders to be held at the home of Colonel John Sevier, between Boone and Deep Gap, on September 18, 1780. Martin Gambill attended this meeting as a representative of the New River militia units. While the meeting was still under way, the message came flashing across the mountains that Ferguson's army was on the move in their direction. A decision was quickly made to intercept him before he could reach the mountains. Sycamore Shoals was selected as the meeting place for the militia units and September 25, one week away, was set as the date. As the signal fires only extended to Watauga County, it was necessary to send messengers to alert Colonel Campbell and the individual company commanders.

Martin Gambill volunteered to carry the message to Colonel Campbell and to dispatch other messengers to the captains of the local units along the way. He left the home of Colonel John Sevier late in the afternoon of September 18, 1780. The exact route taken by Martin Gambill on his long ride is not known, but as most of the roads and trails existing at that time followed streams, the route can be guessed at with a good probability of being correct. Rather than follow the convolutions of the south fork of New River, he probably followed the old Indian and trading trail which ran close to the present route of US 221 to where this trail crossed the south fork. From there he would have turned down the river to go by his home and then continued down the river to cross at the mouth of Prathers Creek (then Praters Creek).

Following Prathers Creek to the foot of Bakers Ridge, he would have crossed over a low spur of the ridge to the head of Potato Creek at daylight on the morning of September 19 at the home of Captain Enoch Osborne. Captain Osborne had just harnessed his horses to start plowing. As Gambill emerged from the river, his horse fell dead from overexertion and the shock of the cold water. Captain Osborne sent him to the house to get some breakfast while

he switched his saddle to one of the plow horses. Gambill would then have continued up the north side of New River to the mouth of Fox Creek and followed this stream to the present town of Troutdale, Virginia.

Crossing the mountain through Comers Gap, he continued down the "hog trough," now the Hurricane Road, to a branch of the Holston River. At the "red bridge," now Thomas Bridge, Osborne's horse fell dead. He secured another mount, it is not known from whom, and continued to the middle fork of the Holston River, which he followed to the home of Colonel William Campbell, at the present site of the village of Seven Mile Ford, arriving there just after dark. Colonel Arthur Campbell was at that time guarding the lead mines. In a little more than twenty-four hours, Martin Gambill had ridden over a hundred miles with no sleep and little food, crossing rough rivers and rugged mountains and alerting the militia along the way.

Colonel Campbell and his group of about 400 men arrived at Sycamore Shoals on the evening of September 24 to find Sevier and Shelby and their men already encamped and distributing what meager supplies they had. On the morning of September 26 this united force of about 1000 men, some mounted and some on foot, began their difficult trek across the high mountains to join the troops of Colonel Ben Cleveland and Major Joseph Winston at Quaker Meadows, near the present town of Morganton, North Carolina. The next morning, October 1, 1780, they began their southward march, which was to end at King's Mountain on the afternoon of October 7.

It is not known for certain how many of these mountain men marched to King's Mountain. Different accounts have listed the number as anywhere between 1200 and 1600. It is known that 900 men were selected for the final attack while the remainder was held in reserve. At Quaker Meadows Colonel Campbell had been elected as over-all commander when General Gates failed to respond to their request to send them a commander. Many Tories along the route of their march had kept Ferguson informed of the

movement of the rebels. When Ferguson learned the size of the force, which would be confronting him, he began a hasty retreat back toward Charlotte and the protection of Cornwallis.

When he saw that he could not complete this retreat in time, he selected King's Mountain as a place, which he was sure that he could defend. The exact composition of Ferguson's army is also unclear. An early history of North Carolina states that he had 1124 men under his command consisting of 150 Scottish Highlanders equipped with breech loading rifles, 400-seasoned Loyalist militia and the remainder was local Tory militia. Ferguson applied typical Prussian military tactics to this battle as this had worked very well for him before. His men were ordered to fire volleys on command and to make bayonet charges in ranks. Colonel Campbell gave his men different orders. Having no gunpowder to spare, they were told to fight as individuals, to hide behind trees and rocks, to fire only when they had a target to aim at, to retreat before bayonet attacks until they could reload, and to avoid hand-to-hand combat if possible.

Ferguson did not know how to fight this kind of battle; in less than two hours, he and 500 of his men were killed and many more wounded. Among the wounded was Martin Gambill, who took a musket ball through his left elbow. The battle of King's Mountain is now history, but until very recent times the importance of this battle to the successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War has been largely overlooked by most historians. After the loss of Ferguson's army, Cornwallis was forced to await reinforcements before he could start his northward campaign. General Greene, noting the success of the tactics applied at King's Mountain, began a war of harassment with the aid of such able men as Williams, Marion and Morgan.

These men struck in quick raids, destroyed as many supplies as possible and then retreated; they led Cornwallis on wild chases through swamps and forests and ambushed his troops along the way. Cornwallis tried repeatedly to engage them in a big battle and later he complained bitterly that they would not "stand and fight

like gentlemen." In the one battle when the patriots did engage him in force at Guilford Courthouse he was soundly beaten. Once again, Cornwallis was forced to seek reinforcements and turned toward the coast where he hoped to accomplish this. He was eventually forced to take refuge on an island in the James River near Yorktown.

When George Washington learned of Cornwallis's predicament, he made a forced march from New York to Yorktown and there he forced the surrender of Cornwallis, thus ending the war with victory for the rebels. General Clinton, the British commander, later wrote of the battle of King's Mountain that it was "the first link in a chain of evils that followed each other in regular succession until they at last ended in the total loss of America." (A United States Senator recently stated on network television that he had never heard of a democratic government being established by the point of a bayonet; this Senator should read a little American history!)

We may never know but it could well be that the ride of Martin Gambill changed the course of American history; in any event, it had far more effect on the outcome of the Revolutionary War than did the ride of Paul Revere. Had Colonel Campbell and the New River militiamen not gotten the message in time to gather for the battle of King's Mountain it could well have ended with victory for Ferguson and made it possible for Cornwallis to succeed in his plans for the defeat of George Washington. It has long been tradition among many of the families still living along the waters of New River that their ancestors participated in the battle of King's Mountain and few have doubted that this was true.

However, few records have been found to support these traditions. It now appears that this lack of records can be explained. Little attempt was made to determine who did participate in this battle until after the Veterans Pension Act was passed in 1832 and by this time many of these veterans and their officers had died. As this act was extended to widows and dependent children many of them also filed claims, most of which

were rejected due to lack of records. The first claim of Nancy Gambill, widow of Martin, filed in 1834 was also rejected, but after others filed many sworn statements, she was finally granted a pension in 1851. In 1836, the US Congress passed another act, which made additional Federal lands available to War of 1812 veterans. Claims filed under this act are also a rich source of information about the men of the New River Valley. In her pension claim, Nancy Gambill stated that Martin crossed over the Blue Ridge into present Wilkes County and took command of Larkin Cleveland's Company as Captain and that he took these troops to King's Mountain under the command of Colonel Benjamin Cleveland.

In an application filed from Morgan County, Kentucky, by James Sturgill, a former Private in the company of Captain Enoch Osborne, in 1834 he stated that he was also under the command of Cleveland. Other claimants also made similar statements. It now appears likely that Colonel Campbell, knowing that the New River men would not have time to get to Sycamore Shoals, sent orders back by Martin Gambill that they were to take the much-shorter route across the Blue Ridge and join with Colonel Cleveland. Thus, these men did not appear on Cleveland's records because the only records available in 1832 were his original muster rolls. They did not appear on Campbell's records because he did make a record of the men he led to King's Mountain and the New River men did not go with him. Several of these pensions were later made and land grants honored after others made many sworn statements in behalf of the claimants, such was the case of Nancy Gambill who was granted land after she had passed the age of ninety.

--- David Andrew Sturgill for the Alleghany Genealogical-Historical Society, Inc.

Sources:

Personal interviews with many of the older residents of the upper New River valley during the 1930s and 1940s. Many of these people then past the age of 90. Court records of Montgomery and Grayson Counties of Virginia and Ashe, Wilkes, Surry and Rowan

Counties of North Carolina. Deed and will records of above named counties. Pension claims filed in the Military Archives in Washington, DC including the claim of Nancy Gambill and James Sturgill. Archives of North Carolina at Raleigh, NC, veterans land claims filed under the Congressional land act of 1836. North Carolina veterans land grants made in Tennessee and filed at Rogersville in Hawkins County, Tennessee. Moore's 'School History of North Carolina' published in 1882 by A. Williams Co. Couch's 'History of Wilkes County' published in 1850. John Preston Arthur's 'History of Western North Carolina' published in 1924.