

Fanning, David ^[1]

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by Marty Matthews, N.C. Historic Sites Curator of Research, 2014.

1755-1825

David Fanning was probably born in Amelia County, Virginia, although some sources give his place of birth as what is now Wake County in North Carolina. His father died before he was born and his mother died shortly thereafter. He later claimed his guardians abused him as a child and he ran away from them when he was about sixteen.

Fanning suffered from a condition known as “scald head,” probably one of several skin diseases characterized by oozing sores, scaly scalp, and loss of hair. His appearance was said to be so distasteful that he would not impose himself on others while they were eating nor sleep in the same bed with anyone else, in a day and age when people often shared beds in roadside taverns and inns. If he became the villainous monster Revolutionary War Patriots claimed, it is easy to see why in light of his childhood and disfigurements.

By age 16, Fanning had taken up board with John O’Deniell in Orange County, North Carolina, who helped cure him of his ailment. For the rest of his life, he wore a silk scarf on his head to hide his baldness and the scarring that the disease had caused. While working with O’Deniell, the young man became proficient in breaking horses and learned to read and write.

He moved to the Pee Dee area of South Carolina when he was about 19 and eventually became an Indian trader, becoming acquainted with both the Catawba ^[2] and Cherokee ^[3]. At some point near the beginning of the Revolution ^[4], he claimed a group of Whigs attacked and robbed him, resulting in him becoming a rabid Tory ^[5] (loyalist to the British Crown).

Throughout the Revolution, Fanning wreaked havoc upon his Patriot adversaries, joining with both the British and Cherokee in his exploits in South Carolina. Whig forces captured him repeatedly and he escaped just as often.

By 1781 he had made his way back into North Carolina, following Lord Cornwallis’ troops. He set up camp near Cox’s Mill on the Deep River in present-day Randolph County, launching repeated attacks on area Whigs. The hostilities in central North Carolina as a result of clashes between Fanning’s Loyalists and area Patriots resulted in a bitter and violent backcountry civil war.

Shortly after the encounter at Alston ^[6]’s House in the Horseshoe ^[7] in 1781, Fanning and his forces occupied Hillsborough, North Carolina’s temporary capital. They took Governor Thomas Burke ^[8] prisoner, as well as members of his council and the general assembly. In the subsequent attempt to rescue the prisoners, one of the largest battles of the Revolution in North Carolina occurred at Lindley’s Mill ^[9] resulting in 250 casualties and captured soldiers.

By late 1781, when Cornwallis left Wilmington, Fanning found himself outnumbered by Whigs and unable to get needed supplies and equipment. Now the Whigs turned the tables on Fanning by continually harrassing and attacking his

followers. He did find time to marry his wife, Sarah Carr, in April 1782 and the two made their way to South Carolina, reaching Charleston later in the year.

By 1784 they had arrived in Canada, where Fanning ended up as a shipbuilder, after successfully dodging a charge of rape. He died in Nova Scotia in 1825 at the age of 70. Had the British won the war, David Fanning may have been hailed as a hero and a wily guerilla fighter, much like Patriots' Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter, constantly surprising opponents with unorthodox tactics that kept them on their toes, but usually caught them off guard. As things turned out, he was one of only three men excluded by the state of North Carolina in its "[Act of Pardon and Oblivion](#)^[10]" of 1783.

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