

Bryan, Samuel ^[1]



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by John K. Bryan, Jr., 1979

ca. 1726–98

Samuel Bryan, Yadkin River pioneer and Loyalist^[2] officer, was born in what is now Lancaster County, Pa., to Morgan Bryan^[3] and his wife, Martha Strode. In 1730, Samuel's father obtained a 156-square mile grant in Virginia's Northern Neck, near the present Winchester; Samuel and his six brothers and two sisters grew up there in a frontier environment but in a comparatively prosperous home. As the older children formed their own families, their father began searching for sufficient unclaimed land to support the future needs of the growing clan. Thus, in the fall of 1748, the entire Bryan family set out for the Yadkin River in newly organized Anson County^[4], N.C. Several thousand acres were purchased from Earl Granville in the next few years by the married children and their father, most of them by Morgan Bryan for his younger, unmarried sons.

Samuel and the other Bryan children may well have been raised in the Society of Friends, although their mother had come to America among Huguenot^[5] refugees and their father's heritage was probably Presbyterian. Formal Quaker^[6] meeting affiliation was not maintained in Virginia, and no discernible church affiliation prevailed on the Yadkin. Traveling Moravian^[7] preachers ministered to the Bryans' spiritual needs and officiated at many of their marriages, baptisms, and funerals; Moravian journals contain many references to their "good friends," the Bryans.

Samuel Bryan proved to be among the more able and enterprising of the brothers. Like his father, he bought and sold a number of tracts as new Scotch-Irish and German settlers^[8] arrived seeking land. In the process, he established a farm of some two thousand acres on the west bank of the Yadkin, just south of the "shallow ford" crossing of the "great wagon road^[9]" that linked Salisbury, seat of newly formed (1753) Rowan County^[10], with the Wachovian^[11] villages and the east. On this property, he operated a mill and a ferry and established fisheries by damming shoals and tributaries along the Yadkin. He was also authorized to operate an ordinary—a natural consequence of his proximity to the well-traveled wagon road.

Bryan was listed on the rolls of the Rowan County militia^[12] for 1754-55, along with his brother, Captain Morgan Bryan, Jr. During the French and Indian War^[13], he and most of his brothers served in the militia patrols that ultimately put an end to the devastating Cherokee raids. At the height of the Indian activity (1758–61), most of the Bryan wives and children "went to forting" at Bethabara^[14], Fort Dobbs^[15], and other stockaded strongholds nearby.

With the death of their parents in 1761 and 1763, Samuel and his brothers shared in the division of the large estate. All were married and some were actively engaged in real estate transactions to consolidate and expand their substantial holdings. When smaller landowners banded together as Regulators to resist the government's oppressive and unevenly administered taxation, the Bryans and other long-established families of the region declined to support the Regulator movement^[16].

In 1769, some two hundred Rowan County residents proposed Samuel and Morgan Bryan, Jr., as temporary vestrymen, in petitioning the royal governor for the establishment of an Anglican^[17] parish. This nomination not only evidenced the esteem with which Samuel and his brother were regarded but may have reflected their political orientation as well.

Discontent with Crown^[18] policies, festering in Western Carolina since the War of the Regulation, grew as events throughout the colonies gradually fostered a general alienation. However, Rowan County's increasingly rebellious mood was due far more to its resentment of the political and economic domination of the eastern part of the colony than to any widespread disaffection for the king. Samuel Bryan was among the first of several prominent citizens hailed before Rowan County's committee of safety^[19], on 1 Aug. 1775. His brother Morgan, Jr., a member of the committee, was to have his own loyalty challenged on later occasions. Most of the better-situated families in the Forks of the Yadkin decried the growing schism. Samuel Bryan was among the first openly to declare himself a loyal subject of the king and, with 194 other residents of Rowan and Surry counties, he sent an address of loyalty^[20] to Royal Governor Josiah Martin^[21] in the fall of 1775. A few months later, having retreated from New Bern to the safety of the British warship *Scorpion* on the lower Cape Fear River^[22], Governor Martin dispatched orders commissioning local justices whom he believed loyal to raise troops for the king throughout North Carolina. In Rowan County, Samuel Bryan and his brother William, together with William Spurian and Matthias Sopenfield, were so charged. Samuel promptly raised a company of men, but William was busy with an ambitious Kentucky land venture and did not accept the commission. William and several of his brothers and neighbors had been resolved for some time to establish their families anew in Kentucky, along with their Boone relatives; one important motive was to avoid the increasingly acrimonious Whig-Tory confrontations in Rowan County.

According to tradition, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Bryan's authority to take his militia company to the support of the governor was challenged by one of his officers. Young Lieutenant [Richmond Pearson](#) ^[23] had the foresight to instruct some of his Whig friends to load their muskets just before Bryan ordered the troops to assemble. When the group was informed that they were to rendezvous with the British, Pearson refused to obey and offered his resignation. Bryan ordered him arrested, but the armed Whigs forced an impasse. At length it was decided to settle the matter with a fistfight between Bryan and Pearson. Bryan lost, whereupon the lieutenant and his supporters departed with impunity. This tale may be apocryphal, but Bryan did, indeed, march his Rowan County men to Cross Creek in February 1776 to join a gathering band of North Carolina Scots. The Tory force of fifteen hundred to two thousand headed for the coast to link up with British troops expected to land shortly. On 27 Feb., however, the Highlanders were routed at [Moore's Creek Bridge](#) ^[24] by a rebel force under Colonels [Richard Caswell](#) ^[25] and [Alexander Lillington](#) ^[26]. This first Whig-Tory battle so discouraged North Carolina's Loyalists that the British were denied their overt military support for at least two years. All the officers under Bryan were captured, but he and his remaining men managed to make their way home.

The Whigs, now in control of local government, intensified their persecution of Loyalists throughout the upland region. Bryan was among those forced to take to the woods. "The Bryans is hiding out," noted a contemporary Moravian journal entry.

In 1777, Bryan went to New York City to describe the plight of frontier Loyalists and seek relief for them. Lord Howe and North Carolina's refugee Governor Martin armed Bryan with proclamations and messages of encouragement for his beleaguered associates. Lord Cornwallis, British commander in the southern theater, sent instructions to all Loyalists in the South, however, to stand fast until he called upon them to assist him.

Harassment of Bryan and allied families in the Forks increased. Neutrality was impossible. Refusal to take the state's prescribed Oath of Allegiance and Fidelity meant confiscation of property and eventual expulsion from the state. Ironically, a number of accused Loyalist sympathizers would gladly have departed the state for Kentucky under [William Bryan](#) ^[27]'s leadership were it not for British-inspired Indian depredations throughout that "dark and bloody ground." Bryan's Station, Ky., begun in 1775 a few miles from Boonesborough, was not deemed safe to occupy until the fall of 1779, when several hundred Rowan County men, women, and children made the long trek via Boone's Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap.

Committed to the military effort, Samuel Bryan did not join the exodus. He and some of his nephews may have been involved in the fight at [Ramsour's Mill](#) ^[28] on the Yadkin, where a substantial Loyalist force was defeated by a smaller Whig group in June 1780. Soon afterward, apparently convinced that he and his adherents could no longer weather local Whig pressure, Bryan raised the royal standard in the Forks of the Yadkin. At least 500 men responded to the call, and in late June, Bryan took them eastward with General [Griffith Rutherford](#) ^[29]'s rebel militia in hot pursuit. Gathering Loyalists as he went, Bryan shook off Rutherford and reached the Grassy Islands ford of the Pee Dee River. There his growing command was augmented by a few British dragoons, but at [Colson's Mill](#) ^[30] on the Pee Dee, the poorly armed Loyalists were caught and mauled by a small Whig cavalry force under Colonel [William L. Davidson](#) ^[31]. Nevertheless, Bryan got his men to the British post at Anson Court House, where he turned over his command of 810 men to Major Archibald McArthur, the British commander. There, Samuel Bryan's commission as colonel of the Royal North Carolina Militia was confirmed.

Writing three years later of Bryan's zeal and loyalty, North Carolina's ousted royal governor said, ". . . he fully evinced his influence to be greater in the County where he lived than that of any Loyalist who appeared in the Course of the War by bringing followers to join the King's standard at so late a period as the year 1780, from a considerable distance within the Country possessed by the enemy, to the number of 800 upwards. Upon the whole I am warranted to declare that I believe no man took his part during the rebellion upon more honest principles or supported it better. . . ."

After a series of feinting maneuvers and countermarches in Anson County, Bryan took his men to Thomson's Creek. Leaving Lieutenant Colonel John Hampton in charge, he went to General Cornwallis's headquarters at [Camden](#) ^[32]. With three companies of men, he was sent to reinforce a mixed command of British and provincial troops at Hanging Rock in the South Carolina Waxhaws. General Thomas Sumter, with Colonel Andrew Neel and Major [William R. Davie](#) ^[33], attacked the position on 31 July 1780. The battle developed when Davie struck Bryan's men, thinking them the main body of defenders. The Tories were decimated in the surprise assault, but the attack faltered when the rebels began plundering the commissary. Bryan rallied his remaining men, slipped through a swamp around Sumter's right flank, and renewed the action. Again Bryan's provincials were badly mauled, but when Tarleton's infantry and the main body of Loyalists entered the fight, Sumter withdrew.

Returning to Camden, Bryan commanded one wing of [John Hamilton](#) ^[34]'s Royal North Carolina Regiment when Cornwallis met and completely routed General Horatio Gates's main army of Continentals and Whig militia on 16 Aug. 1780. But later that year, American fortunes improved. The smashing victory of the "over mountain men" in October at [Kings Mountain](#) ^[35] demoralized the Loyalist militia; Gates's replacement as American commander in the South by General [Nathanael Greene](#) ^[36] cheered Continentals and Rebel militia alike; and Daniel Morgan's remarkable success at [Cowpens](#) ^[37] in January 1781 drew Cornwallis out for his fateful and eventually disastrous foray into the interior Carolinas. Bryan's activities during that period are unknown. He may have led some of the Loyalist troops who accompanied Cornwallis during his frustrating pursuit of Greene in early 1781. However, the [Moravians](#) ^[7] failed to mention their old friend and neighbor in listing the officers who were with Cornwallis when the British passed through Salem on 10 Feb. Bryan is not mentioned as a participant in any of the subsequent series of British reverses, which culminated at Yorktown in October 1781.

The date and circumstances of Bryan's capture, together with that of Lieutenant Colonel John Hampton and Captain Nicholas White, have not been ascertained. The three were tried in Salisbury during the March term of court, 1782. State

Attorney General [Alfred Moore](#) ^[38] conducted the prosecution, and the Loyalist officers were ably defended by [Richard Henderson](#) ^[39], [John Penn](#) ^[40], [John Kinchen](#) ^[41], and Bryan's adversary at Hanging Rock, William R. Davie. Bryan and Hampton were characterized as men of unimpeachable honor and integrity who had committed no atrocities or acts of violence other than the seizure of food for the sustenance of their troops. Nevertheless, all were found guilty of "treason and felony" and sentenced to be hanged. At the time of sentence, the Rowan County Court took note of the plight of the families of the trio and allowed their wives to retain sufficient property to support their children. Bryan's wife was allowed to keep "about 900 acres where the family now lives," and the slaves, livestock, and furniture she could retain were listed in detail. It was also noted that eight daughters were living at home, the youngest of whom was about fifteen months of age.

The executions were delayed, however, when the defense attorneys petitioned Governor [Thomas Burke](#) ^[42] for clemency. In the petition, Bryan was described as an "esteemed man of indomitable courage, of Candor and Sincerity, remarkably honest in his dealings and very friendly in his disposition." Executing him, the attorneys insisted, would be a "reflection on our Government." Burke extended clemency to all three, and the General Assembly endorsed his decision. An exchange of prisoners was arranged with the British. The governor went so far as to provide extra protection for the trio against the threatened violence of Whig zealots in the Salisbury area. In Charleston, British Lieutenant General Alexander Leslie played a role in the prisoner exchange and his letters reflect his high regard for Bryan. Burke wanted Colonel Elijah Clark of the North Carolina Militia exchanged for Bryan, but General Greene's command mistook these intentions and the three Loyalists were exchanged for Virginia officers. Bryan, Hampton, and White were sent to Charleston.

When word came that the British planned to evacuate the southern colonies, Loyalist leaders in Charleston made a last effort to regain at least part of their American holdings before the withdrawal. Twenty-five of the most influential were chosen to draw up a petition to Sir Guy Carleton, commander in chief of Charleston, asking that the Loyalist troops be permitted to keep the town and its artillery so as to bargain with the Whigs. Bryan was among those selected and penned his signature to the document. The petition was denied.

On 8 July 1782, Bryan's command was officially disbanded. The following month, he submitted a claim for back pay and appointed an attorney to handle his petition for compensation. In the petition, he sought half pay for his four years of forced inactivity between 1776 and 1780: his officers captured in February 1776 had ultimately reached New York City and received their pay, but because he had escaped capture and was under orders to await recall, he had not been paid; moreover, his long period of hiding and the clandestine encouragement of his followers had run him into debt. Bryan's petition, endorsed by Governor Martin, Lord Cornwallis, and Sir Guy Carleton, was ultimately denied.

In September 1782, Bryan sailed with other Loyalists for St. Augustine, Fla., with the hope that his wife and children could join him there. Early in 1783, however, the Loyalists, now gathered in large numbers in East Florida, were informed that the British must also abandon that region. Most of the refugees went either to the West Indies or to Nova Scotia. Bryan and others, however, took a schooner to [Wilmington](#) ^[43]. Arriving on 10 June 1783, they were detained as "obnoxious characters" by local authorities but were ultimately permitted to go their way.

Bryan had been named personally in the General Assembly act giving the State of North Carolina title to confiscated Loyalist property. In many cases, however, the state did not exercise its right to sell such property. There is no record of Bryan's holdings being sold by the state, and his petition to the Crown for compensation made no mention of any loss of personal property or real estate. It is uncertain whether Bryan was ever officially pardoned by the state. Apparently he managed to resume his life as a farmer on his Rowan County plantation. That he could do so for fifteen more years is further tribute to his character and reputation, in view of the enduring bitterness and discrimination against former Tories that prevailed. At least five of his nephews and one or more of his sons saw active Loyalist service. Two are known to have been killed, and three others were apparently treated at a British military hospital in Wilmington while on active duty.

Samuel's brothers [William](#) ^[27], James, and Morgan, Jr., together with some of his nephews, were credited with Rebel military service, primarily against Indians in Kentucky. While later generations largely ignored Samuel and his achievements, his Loyalist activities do not appear to have alienated his surviving brothers and other relatives. He corresponded with those who had moved to Kentucky and as late as 1797 visited them in the company of his older brother Joseph, [Daniel Boone](#) ^[44]'s father-in-law. However, at least one son relocated in upstate New York, presumably to shed his Loyalist identification and make a fresh start.

On 5 Aug. 1798, Bryan made his will; it was probated during the November term of Rowan County Court. In it he named as beneficiaries his wife, Elizabeth (née McMahon), and eleven children: Samuel, Jr., Morgan, Ann Enochs, Margaret Ellis, Elizabeth Hampton, Sarah Linville, Mary, Martha, Elinor, Kezia, and Susanna. In 1808, presumably after the death of his mother, Samuel, Jr., sold the remainder of his father's Yadkin plantation.

Bryan and his wife were probably buried on the property, but the grave site is unknown.

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Subjects:

[American Revolution \(1763-1789\)](#) [46]

[Biographies](#) [47]

[Military personnel](#) [48]

Authors:

[Bryan, John K., Jr.](#) [49]

Origin - location:

[Anson County](#) [50]

[Rowan County](#) [51]

From:

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1 January 1979 | Bryan, John K., Jr.

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Links

[1] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/bryan-samuel> [2] <https://www.ncpedia.org/loyalists> [3] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/bryan-morgan> [4] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/anson> [5] <https://www.ncpedia.org/huguenots> [6] <https://www.ncpedia.org/quakers> [7] <https://www.ncpedia.org/moravians> [8] <https://www.ncpedia.org/german-settlers> [9] <https://www.ncpedia.org/great-wagon-road> [10] <https://www.ncpedia.org/geography/rowan> [11] <https://www.ncpedia.org/wachovia> [12] <https://www.ncpedia.org/militias-colonial> [13] <https://www.ncpedia.org/french-and-indian-war> [14] <https://www.ncpedia.org/bethabara> [15] <https://www.ncpedia.org/fort-dobbs> [16] <https://www.ncpedia.org/history/colonial/regulator-movement> [17] <https://www.ncpedia.org/church-england> [18] <https://www.ncpedia.org/crown> [19] <https://www.ncpedia.org/committees-safety> [20] <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr09-0372> [21] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/martin-josiah> [22] <https://www.ncpedia.org/rivers/cape-fear> [23] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/pearson-richmond> [24] <https://www.ncpedia.org/moores-creek-bridge-battle> [25] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/caswell-richard-0> [26] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/lillington-alexander> [27] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/bryan-william> [28] <https://www.ncpedia.org/ramsours-mill-battle> [29] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/rutherford-griffith> [30] <https://www.ncpedia.org/colsons-supply-depot> [31] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/davidson-william-lee> [32] <https://www.ncpedia.org/camden-battle> [33] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/davie-william-richardson> [34] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/hamilton-john> [35] <https://www.ncpedia.org/kings-mountain-battle> [36] <https://www.ncpedia.org/american-revolution-part-5-gen-nath> [37] <https://www.ncpedia.org/cowpens-battle> [38] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/moore-alfred> [39] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/henderson-richard> [40] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/penn-john> [41] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/kinchen-john> [42] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/burke-thomas> [43] <https://www.ncpedia.org/wilmington> [44] <https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/boone-daniel> [45] <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.html/document/csr19-0001#p19-98> [46] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/us-revolution> [47] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/biography-term> [48] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/subjects/soldiers> [49] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/authors/bryan-john-k-jr> [50] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-25> [51] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/origin-location/piedmon-13> [52] <https://www.ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/dictionary-no>