

Fanning, David ^[1]

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by Lindley S. Butler, 1986



Sketch of David Fanning's famous horse, the Bay Doe, being stolen. Print courtesy of the North Carolina State

1755–14 March 1825[Archives](#).

^[2]

David Fanning, loyalist partisan leader in the [American Revolution](#) ^[3], was born in the settlement of Beech Swamp, Amelia County, Va., the son of David Fanning who drowned in the Deep River in North Carolina before his son was born. Before the death of the elder Fanning the family had moved to that part of [Johnston County](#) ^[4], N.C., that is now [Wake County](#) ^[5]. By 1764 young Fanning and his older sister, Elizabeth, were orphaned and bound to guardians. Needham Bryan, Jr., a county justice, became David's guardian, and the boy was apprenticed to Thomas Leech, who may have been a loom mechanic. Although Fanning was reported to be working as a loom builder in [Chatham County](#) ^[6] during the Revolution, he said nothing of his early years other than the statement that he was "farmer bred." Although he later attempted to recover his father's Virginia property of 1,100 acres, he never secured his inheritance. [Eli W. Caruthers](#) ^[7] repeated several traditions about Fanning's sojourn with the John O'Deniell (O'Daniel) family in [Orange County](#) ^[8]. It was here that the young Fanning was cured of the disease scald head, which left him bald, and that he gained a wide reputation as a tamer of horses. In 1773 he journeyed to western South Carolina and settled with Joseph Kellet on Raeburn's Creek, a tributary of the Reedy River. In addition to farming, Fanning may have traded with both the [Cherokee](#) ^[9] and the [Catawba](#) ^[10] Indians.

Upcountry South Carolina did not readily follow the lead of Charleston in the revolutionary movement; the region in 1775 was primarily loyal to the Crown, and the militia of the district was commanded by Colonel Thomas Fletchall, a [loyalist](#) ^[11]. At this time David Fanning was a sergeant in Captain James Lindley's company, which was mustered on 15 May and found to be solidly loyalist. During the summer, [Whig](#) ^[12] delegates traveled through the upcountry to convince the inhabitants to support the rebellion, but they met with little success. Finally hostilities began and, with North Carolina's support, the South Carolina Whigs defeated the Loyalists in the "Snow Campaign" of December 1775. During the loyalist rising, Fanning was involved in the capture of a quantity of Whig gunpowder being sent to the Cherokees and in the capture of Ninety-Six by the loyalists. On 22 December at the Battle of the Big Cane Brake, where most of the loyalists were taken prisoner, Fanning escaped and fled to the Cherokees. His capture a month later was the first of fourteen captures over the next three years. He was allowed to return home when news was received of an amnesty for loyalists.

In June 1776 the Whigs became alarmed over rumors of an impending Indian attack. Uncertain about the position of the former loyalists, the Whigs arrested many of them, including David Fanning. In the confusion following the Indian raid of 1 July, Fanning escaped and led a company of loyalists to the Cherokees. He participated in an unsuccessful Indian attack on a Whig fort, and then he went to North Carolina for nine months. There was no haven for him there. After being imprisoned and rescued three times, he returned home to Raeburn's Creek settlement by 10 March 1777.

For the next eighteen months, until August 1779, Fanning was either commanding loyalist units in the field, hiding in the forest from Whig pursuit, or imprisoned by the Whigs. He was confined in the Ninety-Six jail several times, twice in chains, and each time he escaped. He was only brought to trial for treason, in November 1777, and he was acquitted. In the loyalist rising that began in March 1778, he commanded a company that ranged on the Georgia border, taking Whig prisoners and supplies. During his escapes he was wounded once and vigorously pursued. The Whigs offered a reward of \$300 in currency for him in 1779. After being nearly killed and seeing his supporters banished from the state, he agreed to a conditional pardon from Governor John Rutledge in August 1779.

Fanning returned home and soon agreed to serve in the Whig militia, possibly as a frontier scout. Not until the British victory at Charleston in May 1780 did he return to the loyalist cause. When the British began to gain control of the state, he took to the field with William Cunningham, recruiting loyalist militia and reducing the few Whig strongholds left in the upcountry.

For several months Fanning scouted on the Indian border. Following the defeat of Major Patrick Ferguson's loyalists at Kings Mountain in October 1780, the Whigs began to regain control of the upcountry region. Consequently, Fanning left South Carolina and went to the Deep River settlement in Chatham County ^[6], N.C., where he lived for several months, quietly seeking followers in anticipation of a British invasion of the state.

Fanning revealed his intentions to raise a loyalist force in February 1781, when Lord Cornwallis ^[13] and his British army occupied Hillsborough. Both before and after the Battle of Guilford Court House ^[14] on 15 Mar. 1781, Fanning actively recruited loyalists, skirmished with the Whig militia, and scouted for Cornwallis. After the British retreated to Wilmington ^[15], he established a fortified base at Cox's Mill on the Deep River in Randolph County ^[16]. From this camp his company began to range through the surrounding counties, frequently sparring with the Whigs and capturing their supplies. Dissension among the loyalists led him to request and receive a commission from Major James H. Craig, commander of the British garrison in Wilmington. On 5 July 1781, Fanning was appointed colonel of the Loyal Militia of Randolph and Chatham counties. He promptly called a general muster of the loyalist militia on 12 July and recommissioned officers for twenty-two companies in the counties of Randolph ^[16], Chatham, Orange ^[8], Cumberland ^[17], and Anson ^[18].

For the next year Fanning's loyalist militia dominated central North Carolina. His own courage and resourcefulness were unsurpassed. Samuel A. Ashe ^[19] remarked in an earlier biographical sketch that he was "one of the boldest men, most fertile in expedients, and quick in execution, that ever lived in North Carolina." Riding usually with no more than a few dozen men, Fanning caught and paroled numerous Whig prisoners, captured and destroyed supplies, and fought thirty-six skirmishes and battles. At times several hundred Whig militia were assigned the fruitless task of stopping him, but they were frustrated in every attempt to capture or defeat him. Unfortunately, the partisan struggle was a bitter civil war, bringing death and destruction to both Whig and loyalist families in the region. Both sides executed prisoners, destroyed the homes and property of their opponents, and violated truces, but only the loyalists were condemned for their actions.

In July, shortly after reorganizing the Loyal Militia, Fanning led a raid on the seat of Chatham County to stop the court-martial and probable execution of loyalists. In the process he took fifty-three prisoners, including most of the court officials and militia officers, as well as several members of the General Assembly. In August he ravaged the Cape Fear valley on a trip to Wilmington for ammunition and supplies. While returning to Chatham County, he joined Colonel Hector McNeil of Bladen County ^[20] who was being pursued by a superior Whig force commanded by Colonel Thomas Wade. On 1 September near McPhaul's Mill on Drowning Creek, Fanning assaulted and routed the Whigs.

Upon his arrival at Cox's Mill, Fanning issued a call for the loyalist militia to muster. His fame brought a number of new recruits, and he soon found himself at the head of 950 men. He was reinforced by contingents of 200 men under Colonel Archibald McDugald of Cumberland County ^[17] and 70 men with Colonel McNeil. In command of this sizable force, Fanning undertook his most daring exploit of the war, the capture of the temporary state capital, Hillsborough. With complete surprise, the loyalists entered the capital on the foggy morning of 12 September. After brief skirmishing, primarily by Governor Thomas Burke ^[21] and his aides, loyalists were released from the jail and some 200 Whig prisoners were gathered. Among the prisoners were the governor, his council, many Continental officers and soldiers, and members of the General Assembly. In an effort to rescue the governor, the Whig commander, General John Butler ^[22], rallied the militia and intercepted Fanning on 13 September on the banks of Cane Creek near Lindley's Mill. The ensuing battle, one of the largest of the war in North Carolina, lasted four hours and cost nearly 250 killed, wounded, and captured of the forces engaged. Carelessness of the loyalist advance guard, resulting in the death of Colonel McNeil, nearly brought defeat, but Fanning flanked the Whigs, attacked them in the rear, and caused Butler's outnumbered but stubborn militia to retreat. Severely wounded in the left arm, Fanning was left with loyalists in the area, and Colonel McDugald delivered the prisoners to the British at Wilmington.

After his recovery, Fanning again took to the field, but he now faced overwhelming Whig numbers. The evacuation of Wilmington by the British in November 1781 removed his source of supplies and arms; accordingly, in January 1782 he began negotiations for a pardon through General Butler. Over the next five months several truces were arranged and violated by both sides. A crescendo of violence, murder, and destruction broke over the central counties in these early months of 1782. In late April, Fanning married Sarah Carr and thereafter sought to leave the state. Finally in May, he and his bride reached a truce area in South Carolina and then made it to Charleston. In an Act of Pardon and Oblivion passed in North Carolina in May 1783, David Fanning was one of three men specifically exempted.

In September 1782 the Fannings left Charleston for Saint Augustine, Fla., where they remained until September 1784, when they embarked for Canada. David Fanning lived the rest of his life in the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. He settled at Long Reach, King's County, New Brunswick, eventually acquiring land and two mills. He represented

King's County in the Provincial Assembly from 1791 until 27 Jan. 1801, when he was expelled. A few months earlier he had been convicted of the rape of Sarah London and sentenced to death. Protesting that he had been falsely accused, he appealed his conviction and was pardoned by the provincial governor. Ordered to leave the province, Fanning moved to Annapolis County, Nova Scotia. In Nova Scotia he undertook [shipbuilding](#) ^[23] and was the part owner of two merchant vessels. His last home was in Digby where he died and was buried at Holy Trinity Church. He had one daughter, Ferebee, and two sons, Ross Currie Carr (1791–1871) and David William (1793–1810). A master of partisan warfare, Fanning was truly, in the words of Samuel A. Ashe, "one of the most extraordinary men evolved by the [Revolutionary War](#) ^[3]." Surrounded through most of his life by conflict and controversy, much of it generated by himself, he finally found peace in his last years in Nova Scotia.

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Additional Resources:

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Hill, William Laurie. "Fanning Loses the Bay Doe." Illustration located between pages 254 and 255. *The master of the Red Buck and the Bay Doe; a story of Whig and Tory warfare in North Carolina in 1781-83*. Charlotte: Stone Publishing Co., 1913. From Internet Archive <https://archive.org/details/masterofredbuckb00hill/page/254> ^[30]

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