

## **Legett, John** <sup>[1]</sup>

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by Carole Watterson Troxler, 1991

**1742–11 Dec. 1812**

John Legett, captain in the Royal North Carolina Regiment <sup>[2]</sup>, was a founder of the settlement of members of that corps, the South Carolina Royalists, and the King's Carolina Rangers at Country Harbour, Nova Scotia, and directed the community's affairs until his death. A native of North Carolina, he owned 2,200 acres along Rockfish and Drowning creeks, the Great Marsh, Raft Swamp, and the Cape Fear River <sup>[3]</sup> in Bladen <sup>[4]</sup> (largely present-day Robeson <sup>[5]</sup>) County, most of it from grants in the early 1770s. He sold provisions and rum on Rockfish and managed a gristmill, sawmill, and blacksmith shop.

Legett raised and helped arm 120 men for the Moore's Creek Bridge campaign <sup>[6]</sup> and after the battle was imprisoned twice, at Philadelphia and Boston, for a total of three years. Exchanged, and with his 1776 captain's commission in provincial service confirmed, he entered South Carolina with the British in 1780, raised a company for Lieutenant Colonel John Hamilton <sup>[7]</sup>'s North Carolina Volunteers (later Royal North Carolina Regiment), and commanded it for the remainder of the war. He accompanied Lord Charles Cornwallis through North Carolina but remained in Wilmington <sup>[8]</sup>, where he occasionally commanded the post in the absence of Major James Craig. After returning to Charleston in the evacuation of Wilmington, the regiment went to St. Augustine and with two other southern provincial corps (the King's Carolina Rangers and the South Carolina Royalists) manned the garrison for a year.

Unlike many Loyalist exiles, Legett never tried to return to North Carolina. In 1786 he remarked that "being well acquainted in the country, and knowing the disposition of the Inhabitants, [he] was frequently employ'd in such Services as rendered him particularly obnoxious to the Rebels, and (as he conceives) makes it very unsafe for him to return to North Carolina." Legett was named in the 1779 and 1782 confiscation and banishment acts following the sale of his movable property by the revolutionaries. In 1780 General William Henry Harrington took most of Legett's land to compensate himself for indigo seized by the British. Legett's wife was in their home as late as 1777, but apparently she died during the war. He left two children with friends and seems never to have seen them again. They may have been Jeremiah who lived in Beaufort County <sup>[9]</sup> and Wright who lived in Robeson County <sup>[5]</sup> at the time of the 1790 census.

After Britain ceded East Florida to Spain, the provincials who were willing to go to Nova Scotia were discharged at Halifax in November 1783. The following June about 210 white men with their 25 wives and 20 children, 36 blacks, and 5 indentured servants moved to land allotted to the three corps at Country Harbour on the isolated and virtually unsettled eastern coast of Nova Scotia. Farming was possible on some of the inland lots and along the Country Harbour River, but most of the land was thinly soiled, steep, and extremely rocky, rendering agriculture grim and futile. Those who remained and survived the colds and scurvy quickly learned to fish and to exploit the untouched birch, beech, maple, pine, spruce, and hemlock trees. In 1787 only about one-half of the white male settlers were still living there.

The remaining twenty-eight years of Legett's life are inseparable from the fate of Country Harbour. Responsibility for the settlement rested with the ranking officers: five captains, of whom he was senior. Key leadership was taken by Legett, George Dawkins from South Carolina, and Joseph Marshall from Georgia. They laid out a town on the eastern side of the harbor and named it Stormont, probably at the suggestion of Marshall, whose family was from Northern Ireland.

Hope for Stormont's success lay in fishing, lumbering, and the development of the harbor, which was the largest inlet between Halifax and Canso. Ships could navigate to about ten miles inland, and the town site was six miles from the mouth, where the harbor still was more than one-half mile wide. By the end of 1784 Legett, Marshall, and Dawkins reported that roughly 3,000 salmon had been smoked and 800 quintals of cod taken. Early in 1786 seventeen officers headed by Legett obtained a grant of beach downstream from the town to be used by anyone in the settlement for staging and flaking their catch. The area was being used for the purpose already, and the grant ensured public access to it. Two schooners totaling 78 tons were built at Stormont in 1784, along with six boats from 23 to 30 feet in the keel and twelve small boats for inshore fishing. In addition, 50,000 feet of lumber had been sawed for shipping and 50,000 shingles and 30,000 clapboards produced. Nova Scotia was enjoying a brief expansion in shipbuilding <sup>[10]</sup>, but both shipbuilding and fishing soon were hurt by the admittance into the British West Indies of fish in American vessels beginning in 1788.

"Legett's Landing" was the most prominent feature of the harbor, and traces of it remain at the water's edge. Legett's livelihood was in lumbering, fishing, and trade. In his store he sold provisions and spirits, as he had in North Carolina, and he consistently had the only license to retail spirits at Country Harbour. His two-story house stood between the homes of Dawkins and Marshall on a hillside overlooking the harbor. He called it "The Willows" and his nearest farm lot "The Wigwam."

Legett's partner was his well-educated and shrewd second wife, whom he married on 1 Nov. 1786, when they were aged

forty-four and fifteen, respectively. Her father, the Reverend Bernard Michael Houseal, was pastor of the German church in Halifax <sup>[11]</sup> under appointment from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts <sup>[12]</sup>. The German native had served as pastor of Lutheran churches in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York and had translated French and German for the British forces in New York. In marrying Legett, Eva Margaretta Houseal was the first of four sisters to marry officers at Country Harbour. Legett in effect made a connection that benefited his fellow officers; the Reverend and Mrs. Houseal were regarded as having "superior" education and culture, their sons were naval officers, and their remaining daughters married naval officers.

The Legetts' first child, Sibylla Eliza Amelia Maria Sophia, was born on 27 Aug. 1787. Thirteen more children were born at Country Harbour between 1789 and 1809: John George, Margaret Mary, Sophia Maria Salome Kelly, Charles Edward Dawkins, Bernard Houseal, Absalom Benjamin Charles, James Michael (lived six months), Frances Carolina, Ann Wilhelmina, Sophia (lived seventeen months), Amelia Dawkins, Arabella Sarah, and Luisa Kermiston (or Hamilton).

Legett was a justice of the peace and town official until his death. His supervision was still apparent in 1809, when he complained to the bishop's secretary that the schoolmaster at Stormont (employed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel <sup>[12]</sup>) was frequently drunk and neglected his duties. The schoolmaster, who had been a quartermaster in the King's Carolina Rangers, was transferred but not replaced, and Margaretta Legett filled his function without appointment or salary.

In October 1811 Legett and much of what he had created since the Revolutionary War <sup>[13]</sup> were destroyed by a tidal wave and hurricane force winds that hit eastern Nova Scotia. He was thirty miles away in Guysborough, the county town, when what his wife described as "a violent and sudden Tempest and Inundation" struck Country Harbour. In Guysborough the wind leveled buildings, including the sturdy parish church, but as the sixty-nine-year-old Legett picked his way home among the felled trees blocking the bridle path he saw the effect worsen. Weakened already by a fall from a cliff a year or two earlier, he never recovered from what he found at Stormont. Every structure he owned was flattened and its contents were laid waste. Legett was taken to his daughter's house a few miles away, where he lingered on for fourteen months. He was buried in Country Harbour in a family cemetery now unseen. The *Nova Scotia Royal Gazette* of 31 Dec. 1812 described him as "a good husband, a tender indulgent father; a pleasing sincere friend, and a general peace-maker amongst his neighbors." When his widow had their devastated property auctioned in 1818 to pay estate debts, the entire 2,860 acres brought only £122. She eventually moved to Liverpool, England, with the family of their son John George, who commanded a Cunard vessel, and died there in 1857.

One item that Margaretta Legett salvaged and kept for the rest of her life was the uniform coat that Legett had worn in the North Carolina Volunteers and the Royal North Carolina Regiment. In the Public Archives of Nova Scotia since 1941, a gift of great-great-grandchildren, the coat is the only extant uniform item of a North Carolina Loyalist unit known to this writer.

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## Subjects:

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