

Pyle, John ^[1]

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by George W. Troxler, 1994

8 Apr. 1723–1 Jan. 1804

John Pyle, was noted for his Loyalist ^[2] activities during the American Revolution ^[3], which culminated in the massacre of a group of volunteers under his command by forces of Henry Lee and Andrew Pickens on 23 Feb. 1781. Pyle was born at Kennett in Chester County, Pa., the son of Dr. Samuel and Sarah Pyle. According to family tradition, he received his medical education in London prior to his marriage in June 1744 to Sarah Baldwin. About 1766 John and Sarah Pyle and their eight children migrated to North Carolina and settled in the Cane Creek community in Chatham County ^[4] east of Snow Camp in modern Alamance County ^[5]. Pyle soon became involved in the Regulator ^[6] movement. The earliest evidence of his presence in North Carolina is a letter from Pyle to Colonel Edmund Fanning ^[7] dated 17 Mar. 1766, in which Pyle apologized for publishing and spreading a "scandalous and Defaming" account of Fanning. Pyle signed a Regulator petition in August 1768 and in September the Hillsborough Superior Court failed to find a true bill against him when he was accused along with other Regulators of starting a riot.

In 1775 Pyle received a commission as colonel of Loyalist militia from Governor Josiah Martin ^[8] and participated in the Moore's Creek campaign. Along with his son John, Jr., he was captured by the Patriots and imprisoned at Halifax ^[9]. The Pyles and other prisoners whose presence in North Carolina endangered the Revolutionary movement were sent by the Provincial Congress ^[10] to Virginia and Philadelphia. While being transported north, the Pyles escaped and returned to Chatham County. On 13 Dec. 1776 Pyle appeared before the North Carolina Provincial Congress, took an oath of loyalty to the state, and—upon giving bond—was permitted to return to his home.

In 1781 the proximity of Lord Cornwallis's army rekindled Pyle's Loyalist sentiments. In January and February of 1781 he raised three or four hundred Loyalists between Haw and Deep rivers and sent Cornwallis a request for an escort to Hillsborough. Cornwallis detached Banastre Tarleton with his cavalry and a small body of infantry with instructions to rendezvous with Pyle at a plantation a few miles from Hillsborough. On the afternoon of 23 Feb. 1781 Pyle's force was interrupted by the Continental cavalry of Henry Lee and militia commanded by Andrew Pickens as they were moving towards Hillsborough on the "Great Road" in the southern part of present Alamance County ^[5]. Lee and Pickens had recrossed the Dan from Greene's base in Virginia. The Loyalists mistook Lee's legion, clad in short green jackets and plumed helmets, for Tarleton's dragoons, who wore similar attire. Lee, taking advantage of the deception, requested Pyle to move his force to the side of the narrow road and allow Lee's fatigued troops to pass. There are conflicting accounts of how the fighting began in the rear of Lee's column. Strong primary evidence indicates that Lee intended to bypass Pyle's force in order to surprise Tarleton, encamped two or three miles beyond. Once the deception was discovered, an orderly surrender was impossible and in ten minutes the battle was over. Casualty figures document only one casualty—a horse—but ninety-three bodies remained on the battlefield the next morning. Certainly many more dead and wounded were carried away by friends. According to local legend, John Pyle, badly injured, crawled into a nearby pond, where he concealed himself until rescued by friends. After recovering from his wounds, Pyle and his son surrendered to the local militia. Pyle earned the gratitude of the Whig ^[11] militia by caring for their wounded. His property was saved from confiscation the following November when he was found not guilty of treason in the Chatham County court.

After the Revolution John Pyle returned to his farm and medical practice in the Cane Creek community. His will, dated 13 Jan. 1799, names eight children and indicates that his wife had died prior to the will.

References:

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William S. Powell, James K. Huhta, and Thomas J. Farnham, *The Regulators in North Carolina: A Documentary History, 1759–1776* (1971).

Carl Homer Pyle, *Colonel John Pyle and His People* (1970).

George Troxler, *Pyle's Massacre, February 23, 1781* (1973).

Additional Resources:

Pyle's Defeat Monument, Burlington. Commemorative Landscapes, Documenting the American South, UNC Libraries:

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/commland/monument/38/> [12]

"Sword, Accession #: [H.1914.144.26](#) [13]." 1760-1781. North Carolina Museum of History.

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