THE BATTLE OF KINGS MOUNTAIN.

BY WILLIAM K. BOYD.

The Revolution in North Carolina has three distinct stages. First of these was a period of patriotic agitation which culminated in the instruction for independence in April, 1776, and the formation of a State Constitution in the following November. Then came years of reaction, when security from attack and division within the patriot party produced apathy and indifference toward the fortune of other colonies. Finally danger of British invasion in 1780, accompanied as it was by the rising of the loyalists, aroused new interest in the struggle for independence, and the British campaign in North Carolina proved to be the prelude to Yorktown. In this last phase of the war belongs the battle of Kings Mountain. In all the long conflict with the mother country no blow was struck more suddenly or effectively, and few had more important consequences. To appreciate its dramatic character as well as results the course of the Revolution in the South must be borne in mind.

The first attempt at Southern invasion in 1776 had failed. When Clinton and Cornwallis approached the coast of North Carolina in May of that year they learned of the defeat of the Royalists at Moore's Creek and found a military organization ready to resist invasion. They therefore diverted the expedition further south and laid seige to Charleston; there also fortune was against them, and in a few weeks they returned to New York. For two years the Southern colonies were practically unmolested. Then, in 1778, the British again undertook invasion. The movement was coincident with a crisis in the war. The attack by way of Canada had culminated in Burgoyne's defeat at Saratoga, and the only result of the invasion of the middle colonies was the capture

of New York. Washington was still at bay, and expediency suggested a campaign far removed from his leadership. Political affairs also embarrassed the English government. Opposition to the political methods of George III caused sympathy for the colonies, and in June, 1778, a commission arrived in Philadelphia offering all the claims of the colonists except independence. These liberal terms were not accepted and during the remaining years of the war England had to reckon with the French, whose alliance with the United States had been concluded the preceding February. A commercial problem was now involved; the American products in greatest demand in European markets were from the South, especially those from the Carolinas and Georgia; indeed Southern products upheld American credit abroad. The French alliance made the control of this source of supplies more important than ever. Finally, a large proportion of the people in the Carolinas and Georgia were loyalists—the exact per cent will never be known. As the British, after the rejection of compromise, treated the patriots as traitors and conducted the war as a conflict against rebels, the cooperation of the loyalist element was necessary.

For these reasons an expedition was sent against Georgia in 1778. Soon Savannah was captured, Augusta taken, and in December, 1779, Charleston, S. C., was besieged. After a brave defense the city surrendered in May, 1780. An elaborate campaign was now planned, nothing less than a northward invasion, which would cut off the South from the other colonies and so limit Washington's resources. The leadership of the movement was given to Lord Cornwallis, and Sir Henry Clinton, the commander-in-chief, returned North. Cornwallis readily advanced to Camden, where he established his headquarters, and sent advance divisions of his army to Augusta, Ga., and Ninety-six, S. C. Many conditions favored him; the early leaders of the Revolution in

South Carolina were dead or in prison, and the offer of parole as military prisoners made to the people was widely accepted; some were willing for the revival of British administration in the interest of trade; others, believing that the Continental Congress had neglected the interests of the South, were apathetic. While these conditions favored the British, one fatal policy turned the scale against them; that was the decision to subdue one part of the people with the assistance of the rest, to make the war a civil conflict. To this end all who had taken parole were restored to their rights and duties as citizens and all who should fail in their allegiance to his Majesty were denounced as rebels. In order to enforce these demands and organize the people, as well as to collect supplies for invasion, Col. Patrick Ferguson was sent into upper South Carolina.

This officer, the central figure in the battle of Kings Mountain, was one of the most brilliant men in the British army. His defeat and tragic death have robbed him of the place in popular knowledge which he deserves. For his age and rank few men have won greater distinction. Born in 1744, he entered the army at the age of fifteen; at twenty-four he had reached the rank of captain and had seen service on the continent and in the West Indies. The possibility of war in America turned his energy to two aims: one, to invent a breach-loading, rapid-fire rifle which would enable the British soldier to be a match for the riflemen of the American frontier; the other, to collect a select band of men, instructed in the use of his rifle and the methods of frontier warfare. In 1777 he was assigned to the American service and with his chosen band of American volunteers, about 300 in number, he participated in the battles of Brandywine and Monmouth, made several predatory expeditions into New Jersey and New York, and in 1779 joined Cornwallis in the seige of Charleston.

His services as advance agent of the British army were eminently successful. His message to the people was one of conciliation. "We come not to make war on women and children, but to relieve their distresses." He had rare powers of persuasion. "He would sit for hours and converse with the country people on the state of public affairs and point out to them from his view the ruinous effects of disloyalty to the crown. This condescension on his part was regarded as wonderful in a king's officer, and very naturally went very far to secure the respect and obedience of all who came within the sphere of his almost magic influence." Ferguson was also an organizer of ability. Loyalists were soon formed into companies, and in the Ninety-six district seven battallions of about 4,000 men were soon organized, largely through his activity. Civil as well as military authority was conferred upon him, and as the people between the Saluda and the Broad rivers had never recognized the South Carolina State government, a good opportunity was open for the revival of the British administration.

While success attended the efforts of Cornwallis and Ferguson the revolutionary cause in North Carolina was disorganized. The State's entire quota in the Continental line had been captured and imprisoned at Charleston and the militia paroled. The Tories were active once again. No less than sixty-two officers were commissioned by Ferguson from the counties of Anson, Chatham, Cumberland, Orange, and Randolph. The notorious David Fanning was gathering his band of outliers. A new patriot army had to be organized. Its basis was a new draft of 4,000 militia, ordered by the Assembly of 1780, commanded by Richard Caswell, and reinforcements from the Continental army who arrived in North Carolina about the time of the surrender of Charleston. While Cheraw was chosen as the place of mobilization, Gen. Griffith Rutherford organized nearly eight hundred men

at Mallard's Creek, near Charlotte. A detachment under Col. Francis Locke defeated the loyalists at Ramsour's Mill on June 20; another under William L. Davidson inflicted defeat at Colson's Mill on the Pee Dee a month later, while William R. Davie, cooperating with Sumter, won another victory at Hanging Rock on August 5. The hope of effective resistance aroused by these minor victories vanished with the disastrous defeat of Gates at Camden on August 15. Cornwallis gradually approached the State; by September 8 he reached the Waxhaws; by the last of the month he was in Charlotte, where, on October 3, Governor Martin, once again on North Carolina soil, issued a proclamation calling all loyal men to unite with the army.

At this crisis, while Davie and Davidson were collecting militia in the neighborhood of Charlotte, the blow which checked the British invasion was made at King's Mountain. It was largely the work of mountaineers from the western slope of the Blue Ridge. In 1771 a migration to that region from the western counties began. Soon a form of self government, the first ever worked out by native born Americans, was established in the valley of the Watauga, and in 1776 representatives from Washington District, Watauga Settlement, were admitted to the Provincial Congress at Halifax, and later Washington, Greene, and Sullivan counties were created, under the sovereignty of North Carolina.[1] To the resistance to British invasion Watauga had already contributed over two hundred men under Maj. Charles Robertson and Col. Isaac Shelby who crossed the hills in July, and, cooperating with Col. Charles McDowell, made the Cherokee Ford of Broad River their headquarters. From that place expeditions were sent out against the loyalists at Thickety Fort, some twenty miles distant, Cedar Springs on the Pacolet, and Musgrove's Mill on the Enoree. But after the rout

[1] See Early Relations of North Carolina and the West, BOOKLET, January, 1908.

of the regular army at Camden, these militia and mountaineer recruits dispersed to their homes. They were followed by Ferguson as far as Gilbert Town, about three miles from Rutherfordton. The people of the country, believing that the struggle for independence was ended, flocked to the British standard and took the oath of allegiance. Detachments of Ferguson's troops engaged in skirmishes with the retiring patriots as far west as Old Fort.

The retreat of McDowell and Shelby, however, was temporary. It was their aim to renew the fight after the crops were gathered. This decision was hastened by a well authenticated threat of Ferguson. Through a paroled patriot he sent a message to the mountain men "that if they did not desist from their opposition to the British arms he would march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders, and lay their country waste with fire and sword." This was repeated to Shelby, Lieutenant-Colonel of Sullivan County. Perhaps with it came news of the loyalist expeditions between Gilbert Town and the mountains. Shortly after he rode from his home to Jonesboro, county seat of Washington County, and visited John Sevier, the county lieutenant. Both concluded that the time to assume the offensive had come. Sevier agreed to rouse the men of Washington County and those troops of McDowell who had taken refuge there, while Shelby undertook to enlist the cooperation of the neighboring Virginia settlements on the Holston as well as secure aid from his own county. Sycamore Shoals was chosen as the *rendezvous,* and there on September 25 came Sevier and Shelby with 240 men each, 160 of McDowell's scattered troops, and Col. William Campbell, of Washington County, Virginia, with 400 Virginians, who had been persuaded by correspondence with Shelby to aid the North Carolinians rather than march eastward and join the defense of Virginia.

The arrangements for the campaign were in keeping with that sense of individualism which characterized the early days of Watauga. Besides a few beeves which were slaughtered in the early part of the march, the only food was corn meal mixed with maple sugar, which each man carried in his wallet. The arms consisted of rifles, tomahawks, and hunting knives. There was no commander-in-chief; and during the battle fighting was by individuals rather than groups. Funds were provided by money from the land sales in the office of John Adair, the entry taker of Sullivan County. "I have no authority by law to make any disposition of this money," he said. "It belongs to the treasury of North Carolina and I dare not appropriate a cent of it to any purpose; but if the country is overrun by the British our liberty is gone. Let the money go, too. Take it. If the enemy by its use is driven from the country, I can trust that country to justify and vindicate my conduct." Nearly $13,000 was thus secured; it was later refunded by the State of North Carolina. Finally, after an address by Rev. Samuel Doak, pioneer minister of Watauga, which tradition says closed by invoking the sword of the Lord and of Gideon, the group of military bands took up their march in search of Ferguson on September 26.

The route lay across Roan Mountain. On the summit two members of the expedition were missed. Suspecting desertion the leaders turned from the more northerly route to the Toe River, thence up Grassy Creek through Gillespie's Gap, into the north branch of the Catawba. Here, on September 29, they were joined by Col. Charles McDowell, and the next day at Quaker Meadows, the McDowell home, by 350 men from Wilkes and Surry counties under Col. Benjamin Cleveland and Maj. Joseph Winston. On Sunday, October 1, they passed Pilot Mountain and camped just south of that famous beacon for travelers. On Monday, because of the rain, they

remained in camp and in the evening the officers gathered to choose some common authority, for absence of one head had fostered rivalry and disorder; moreover, it was believed that Ferguson was in the neighborhood of Gilbert Town, and common leadership in the hour of battle seemed especially desirable. Col. Charles McDowell was the ranking officer, but his leadership was not acceptable, and there was rivalry among the other North Carolina leaders. Shelby, therefore, suggested that a request be sent to General Gates, at Hillsborough, for a commander and that until such one should arrive, Colonel Campbell, a Virginian, assume the leadership of the expedition. This was accepted, and McDowell volunteered to act as messenger to Gates, the leadership of his men being assumed by his brother, Maj. Joseph McDowell, of Quaker Meadows.

On October 4 the little army reached Gilbert Town to find that Ferguson had fallen back. Indeed Ferguson does not seem to have given the mountaineers much consideration; his message was probably an idle taunt rather than a sincere threat. To him a more important patriot force was a small band under Capt. Elijah Clarke, of Georgia, which hovered around the Georgia-Carolina frontier. On September 27 he left Gilbert Town and went south in search of Clarke. Three days later, while at Broad River, the two deserters from the mountain army came to his camp and told of the enemy's approach.

Before this new and unexpected danger there were two alternatives: one to join Cornwallis at Charlotte, the other to remain in the borderland and meet the enemy if he approached. In making a decision three points had to be considered: the expediency of preventing a union of Clarke and the mountain army, the recall of many troops that had been given furloughs, and the desire to prevent a reversion from the loyalist cause among the people at large. These prob-

lems, as well as his own daring spirit, led Ferguson to hold his ground and meet the enemy. He therefore sent a message to Cornwallis for aid and issued the following statement to the people:

DENARD'S FORD, BROAD RIVER,
TRYON COUNTY, October 1, 1780.

GENTLEMEN:—Unless you wish to be eat up by an inundation of barbarians, who have begun by murdering an unarmed son before his aged father, and afterward lopped off his arms, and who by their shocking cruelties and irregularities, give the best proof of their cowardice and want of discipline; I say if you wish to be pinioned, robbed, and murdered, and see your wives and daughters, in four days, abused by the dregs of mankind—in short, if you wish or deserve to live, and bear the name of men, grasp your arms in a moment and run to camp.

The Backwater Water men have crossed the mountains; McDowell, Hampton, Shelby, and Cleveland are at their head, so that you know what you have to depend upon. If you choose to be degraded forever and ever by a set of mongrels, say so at once, and let your women turn their backs upon you and look out for real men to protect them.

PAT. FERGUSON,
Major 71st Regiment.

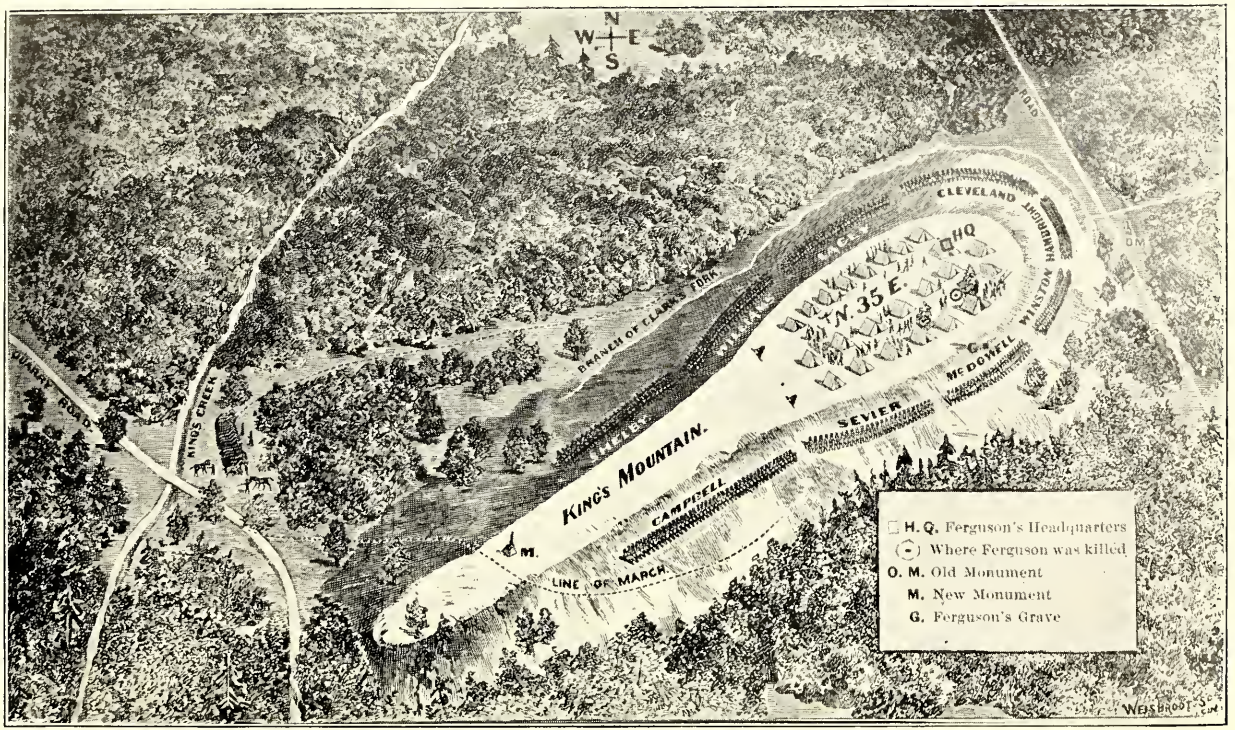
This message to Cornwallis was delayed because the carrier was pursued by some patriots, reached Cornwallis the day after the battle, and consequently no reinforcements ever reached Ferguson. Disappointed at lack of support and believing that Sumter and Clarke had joined the mountaineers, Ferguson decided to fall back toward Charlotte. On October 6 he reached the southern extremity of King's Mountain. This is a ridge about sixteen miles in length, running from a point in North Carolina southwest into York County, South Carolina. The spur now reached by Ferguson is in York County, about one and one-half miles from the North Carolina line, and about six miles from the highest elevation of the mountain. It is about six hundred yards in length and rises from a base of two hundred and fifty yards to a top

*There is no other evidence than this of violence being perpetrated by the mountain army. The first paragraph was probably intended by Ferguson to appeal to the fear of the people.

from sixty to two hundred and twenty wide, offering a commanding view of the surrounding country. On this summit Ferguson camped; his intention evidently was to await reinforcements and to let the enemy find him if he could. This decision, judged by European standards of warfare, was a wise one; the shrubbery and underbrush on the sides of the mountain made an assault *en masse* difficult, while Ferguson's troops, well trained in the use of the bayonet, could repulse those who might reach the summit. On the other hand, the mountaineers were skilled marksmen, and the top of the mountain was "so narrow that a man standing on it may be shot from either side." The patriots also fought individually, not collectively. These facts, with alternate charges on either side of the mountain, gave them an immense advantage.

In the meantime Campbell and his men, believing that Ferguson had retired to Ninety-six, had started south in pursuit. On the evening of October 5 they reached the ford of Green River. As some were discouraged and many exhausted, a band of 700 picked men, well mounted, was chosen to continue the pursuit. The next morning news was brought by Col. Edward Lacey of Ferguson's relative position and that a body of North and South Carolina militia was moving southward from Cherry Mountain and might be met at Cowpens.* By a hurried march a junction of the two forces was accomplished. A council was held, Campbell was again chosen leader, and two hundred and ten recruits were added from the militia. A few footmen probably increased the entire number to 993 men. Then, on the night of the 6th, the march in the direction of King's Mountain was begun. Rain and darkness caused the guides to lose their way, and by morning the army had advanced not more

*There was dissension among these militia about joining the mountain army. See McCrady, South Carolina in the Revolution, pp. 764–775.



Battlefield of Kings Mountain.

than five miles. The rain continued until noon; but by straining every nerve King's Mountain was reached about three in the afternoon, October 7.

Leaving the horses one mile from the base, a plan of attack in keeping with the methods of frontier warfare was adopted, viz: to surround the mountain and make alternate charges and retreats, fighting individually, each man for himself. Accordingly troops were arranged as follows: On the north side were stationed Shelby with Lacey's and Williams's militia; on the south Campbell, Sevier and Joseph McDowell, while Cleveland and Winston, with South Carolina militia under Hambright, were across the N. E. part of the hill. So quickly were these plans effected that Ferguson knew nothing of them until the fire of the attacking party was heard. The loyalists were then quickly arranged into two battle lines along the height, one to resist attack by volleys of musketry, the other to charge the enemy under the leadership of Ferguson. The patriot attack was led by Campbell's men, who ascended the most difficult part of the ridge, creeping from tree to tree and making targets of Ferguson's troops. They received the volleys from the firing line and when near the summit a bayonet charge. Before this counter attack they retreated down the mountain. But before Ferguson could regain the summit Shelby's men had ascended the opposite side of the mountain; they, in turn, retreated before a bayonet charge. When Ferguson had once more regained the summit, not only Campbell had returned to the fight but the right and left wings of the patriot army were in action. The engagement thus became general. Among the loyalists Ferguson was the commanding spirit. Riding along the ridge, making his presence known by a silver whistle, he led charge after charge against the mountain men, who simply continued the tactics with which the battle was begun. Finally, while leading an attack on Sevier's men, Ferguson

fell, pierced by half a dozen bullets. Capt. Abraham DePeyster, of New York, attempted to take the place of the fallen leader. In vain, for white flags were displayed at different points and DePeyster himself soon despaired and raised the symbol of surrender. Unfortunately not all the mountaineers seem to have understood the meaning of the signal and continued their fire. Campbell deserves most credit for ending the needless slaughter; he rushed among the troops exclaiming, "Cease firing; for God's sake, cease firing!"

Thus after an hour's engagement the loyalists were thoroughly defeated. The battle had important results. It was the first decisive check to the British invasion of the Carolinas, for Cornwallis, hearing of Ferguson's defeat, concluded that the patriot army numbered several thousand and therefore fell back from Charlotte to Winnsboro, S. C. Equally important was the time thus gained by the patriots in which to rally the militia and secure aid from the Continental army for resistance to invasion. The moral effect also should not be overlooked, well summarized by Bancroft: "The victory at Kings Mountain, which in the spirit of the American soldier was like the rising at Concord, in its effects like the success at Bennington, changed the aspects of the war. It fired the patriots of the two Carolinas with fresh zeal. It encouraged the fragments of the defeated and scattered American army to seek each other and organize themselves anew. It quickened the North Carolina Legislature to earnest efforts. It encouraged Virginia to devote her resources to the country south of her border."

The story of Kings Mountain does not end with the victory. The spontaneous and individualistic character of the campaign have given rise to several controversies. Of these claims for honors and leadership among the patriots stand foremost, and this controversial spirit still survives. The

services of Col. William Campbell were the earliest subject of dissension. The Legislature of Virginia voted him a sword in recognition of his part in the Kings Mountain campaign, and the North Carolina Assembly conferred a similar honor on Shelby and Sevier. None were immediately delivered; but after the death of Campbell Virginia presented a handsome sword, in commemoration of his services, to W. M. C. Preston, his grandson. This was in 1810. Shelby and Sevier then began a correspondence whose aim was to secure the swords promised but never presented by North Carolina. Comparisons of their own services with those of Campbell were made, as well as the claim that at the end of the battle Campbell was about one mile from the firing line. These questions were also discussed in the newspapers of Tennessee in 1812. Later Shelby's letters were published by Sevier's son after his father's death. They called forth a reply by W. M. C. Preston in 1822, and the next year Shelby's famous pamphlet of 1823 appeared. The general trend of the evidence seems to indicate that Shelby and Sevier were the promoters of the campaign and that Campbell, who opened the attack at Kings Mountain, left his horse in the rear with a servant, who was thus mistaken for Campbell.

A singular coincidence is a similar controversy among the loyalists. The descendants of Abraham DePeyster claim that to Ferguson does not belong the chief honor of defense, that he was killed early in the conflict, and that the command was then taken by DePeyster. While some evidence has been brought forward in support of this claim, the majority of the accounts of the battle are to the contrary and support the general view that the fall of Ferguson was almost immediately followed by tokens of surrender.

The relative importance of the McDowells in the campaign is another question full of controversy. Says one historian:

"To the brothers Charles and Joseph McDowell, of Quaker Meadows, and to their no less gallant cousin, Joseph McDowell, of Pleasant Garden, Burke County, N. C., are due more credit and honour for the victory at King's Mountain than any other leaders who participated in that decisive and wonderful battle." However, their names were not placed on the battle monument at King's Mountain.

Another problem of the battle is that of numbers. The patriot force can be estimated with some degree of certainty; it numbered about 993 men, as before stated. Not so Ferguson's command. It consisted of 100 Provincial Rangers, picked men from New York and New Jersey, and recruits from the Carolinas. The exact number is unknown. Tarleton fixes the Rangers at 100, the militia at 1,000; the diary of Allaire, the principal loyalist account of the battle, and the American official report also make the total number 1,100. Yet there is evidence that Ferguson's full strength was not in the battle; that a foraging party was sent out that morning; that it did not return until evening, when it had a skirmish with the patriots, and killed Col. James Williams. If this be true the numbers on both sides actually engaged were very nearly equal.

The losses are far more indefinite, for the official report of the patriots and private accounts differ; but a fair estimate is 300 killed and wounded and 600 prisoners for the loyalists. The losses of the patriots were insignificant; according to the official report 28 killed and 62 wounded; but these returns, tabulated by regiments, do not include Shelby's command.

By far the most delicate problem of the campaign was the treatment of the prisoners. Civil war is the most severe of all wars. During the battle kinsmen and neighbors were arraigned against one another and in some instances brother fought brother. Resentment and enmity naturally continued after the battle was ended. The march of the patriots home-

ward was begun the day after battle. On October 11 Colonel Campbell was constrained to issue the following order: "I must request the officers of all ranks in the army to endeavor to restrain the disorderly manner of slaughtering and disturbing the prisoners. If it can not be prevented by moderate measures, such effectual punishment shall be executed upon delinquents as will put a stop to it." However, there was another incentive to vengeance besides the cruelty and hatred of the conqueror, viz: the character of some of the captives. According to a statement submitted to Colonel Campbell, some were robbers, house burners, murderers and parole breakers. Moreover, news came of the atrocities committed by Tarleton's Legion. A desire arose to retaliate against British policy, to punish wrongdoers, and to warn loyalists everywhere. Therefore, while the army was encamped at Bickerstaff's, about nine miles from Rutherfordton, Colonel Campbell, on the advice of other leaders, ordered a court-martial to sit immediately, composed of field officers and captains, who were ordered to inquire into the complaints which had been made. For this hasty action a precedent was found in a North Carolina law which authorized two magistrates to summon a jury, conduct a trial, and even impose capital penalties. As most of the officers were magistrates at home, the tribunal hastily organized, had something of the character of a civil as well as military court. According to Shelby "thirty-six men were tried and found guilty of breaking open houses, killing the men, turning the women and children out of doors, and burning the houses." Naturally the rules of evidence which protect the prisoner were not strictly observed. The number condemned is variously reported, ranging from thirty to forty. Fortunately all were not executed; after nine had been hanged, the sense of mercy was aroused, and either by Campbell's orders or a reconsideration by the court, the sentence of the remaining

prisoners was rescinded. Circumstances helped to bring a kinder fate to most of the captives. Many were paroled, as many as 100 on the second day after the battle. The mountain men were anxious to reach their homes as quickly as possible, and the hasty march and the wet weather helped many to escape. As there was no prison at hand, the Moravian village of Bethabara was chosen as a place to house and keep the captives until orders should be received from the proper authorities. There they were led by Campbell to await orders from the American army. Gates ordered them to be taken to the Lead Mines in Montgomery County, Virginia. But the commanding officer there objected, as the loyalists were strong in the neighborhood. Governor Jefferson, of Virginia, was then consulted; he referred the matter to the Continental Congress, and Congress referred the care of the prisoners to the States from which they came. This was impractical and Gates finally ordered them to be transferred to Salisbury, N. C., for imprisonment. In the meantime conditions at Bethabara favored the prisoners. The Moravians were friendly and the civil authorities, under guise of binding over to court, took 187 from the camp. Others enlisted in the patriot militia; some faithfully, others as a means to get back to the British lines. So when the prisoners arrived at Salisbury the original number of 600 had been reduced in various ways to 60.

The sources of the material for the study of the battle are of course responsible for these controversies. The patriot leaders drew up an official report shortly after the conflict but private accounts written by them differ from it in many details. The official report, some nonofficial descriptions, and the diary of Anthony Allaire, the principal loyalist source, are given in Draper's *Kings Mountain and Its Heroes.* But a large number of manuscripts in possession of the Tennessee His-

torical Society and the Gates collection in the New York Historical Society remain unpublished.

Bibliography. Draper, *Kings Mountain and Its Heroes* is by far the most important study of the battle and its problems. Roosevelt's *Winning of the West* contains a well written and critical chapter on the subject. McCready, *South Carolina in the Revolution;* DePeyster, *The Affair at Kings Mountain* (Magazine of American History, vol. 5), and Schenck's *North Carolina,* 1780-81, are of interest and value. From these references to magazine articles and pamphlets are easily traced. See also Bailey, Sketch of the Life and Career of Col. James D. Williams (Cowpens, S. C.)