

HEROINES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Cornwallis's English army was a threat to this area after the fall of Camden on August 18, 1780. A second threat were Indians who were sworn enemies of the Catawbas and had allied themselves with the English. The Catawba warriors had taken their women and children to Virginia and were serving in Gen. Thomas Sumter's militia.

The Whig, or Patriot, women were thus left to fend for themselves and their children in isolated cabins. The family's livestock and grain were special targets of the English who were mostly living off the land they captured.

Sarah Neel Johnston's husband, David, was off with Capt. Jacob Barnett's horse troop when British soldiers took the Johnston's slaves. Sarah Johnston pursued the captors of the slaves and recaptured them for herself. How she did this is not known, but David Bigger, a local historian wrote that she brought the slaves back from the Charleston area through "wild country."

According to tradition, she sat up half the night guarding the slaves, with a loyal slave guarding his fellows in the other half. When she got back to York she hid the slaves along with her other valuables in Laurel Hill Cave, now under Lake Wylie on the Catawba River north of the Buster Boyd Bridge.

David Bigger wrote that Sarah Neel Johnston heard of the Battle of Kings Mountain and rode to the battleground where she found her brother and other wounded and nursed them.

Another of Bigger's stories was about the family of Mathew Wilson. Wilson was home sick with all of his sons in service when Tories arrived with the intention of hanging him. Wilson's wife and children begged so hard for Wilson's life that the English relented but took all of their horses.

Matthew Wilson's daughter, who was around 13 or 14 years of age, was furious with the Tories. She followed them to their camp on Rocky Ford. The Tories were hungry and left camp to go to the nearby home of Daniel Whitenor to demand their dinner. While they were gone, Edith "cut the halters of the horse belonging to her father, mounted her favorite, whistled and all her father's horses followed her back home."

Col. William Bratton was off with his troops on July 11, 1780 when Captain Huck, the destroyer of Hill's Iron Works, arrived at Brattonsville plantation. The colonel's wife, Martha Bratton, bravely faced Huck who was at the head of some 400 Tories. The accounts of what happened next vary somewhat, but all agree that Mrs. Bratton refused to answer as to the whereabouts of her husband and other questions. Threatened with death and, it is said, with a reaping hook at her throat, she did not flinch. Her life was saved when a Tory militia officer, Capt. John Adamson of Camden, demanded that she be left alone.

The Chester area had a number of heroines. Their story has been told by Mrs. Elizabeth Ellet in her three-volume "Women in the American Revolution," published in 1848-1850. Mrs. Ellet got her information from Daniel Green Stinson

who lived on Fishing Creek and as a boy heard many stories of the brave women of Chester.

The Chester heroines included Mary McClure who rode horseback through the enemy lines to get to Charleston; Isabel Ferguson who guarded a cave containing the community's valuables; Esther Walker, a highly skilled nurse; and Mary Johnston who organized the women to work the fields and provided a set of signals by which they communicated.

Stinson wrote of Sarah McCalla, who took food and clothes to the Whig prisoners in Camden jail and persuaded the British officers to release her husband. And he wrote of Mary Adair who was treated roughly as the British demanded she tell her sons to join them. She refused. One of her sons was John Adair who grew up to be an outstanding governor of Kentucky.

While the men were at war the women harvested the crops. The team of Mary, Margaret and Ellen Gill, Isabella and Margaret Kelso, Sarah Knox, Margaret, Mary, and Elizabeth Mills, Mary McClure, and Nancy Brown joined together to reap not only their own grain fields but that of other Whigs away from home in the summer of 1780.

The final picture that emerged of the women of Chester District is one of great courage and determination. The heroines were all motivated by a firm belief that, in the words of Katherine Steele--"Katie of the Fort:--"We are in the right!"