

THE INCIDENT AT CHEROKEE FORD
AND THE BATTLE OF VANN'S CREEK, GEORGIA, FEBRUARY 1779

By Robert S. Davis
Wallace State College
Hanceville, Alabama

An earlier version of this article appeared as "Cherokee Ford Fight and the Battle of Vann's Creek, Georgia," *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution* 5 (1) (winter 2008): 21-23. <http://www.southerncampaign.org/>

The Savannah River of the American Revolution had few places where high ground cut through the marsh and cane breaks along its banks to allow for a practical crossing. Even under those circumstances, the Cherokee Ford between today's Abbeville County, South Carolina, and Elbert County, Georgia, proved to be an exceptional place. The river widens where its two channels that form today's McCalla Island rejoin, making the waters so shallow as to allow early residents to move large flat stones so that travelers could walk across the river. When the river flooded, however, the ford became a ferry. To defend this strategic point from Indian war parties, the settlers also erected McGowen's Blockhouse on the South Carolina side of the ford as early as 1778.

It became tied to the American Revolution in the winter of 1778-1779. At that time, a Colonel John or James Boyd organized 600 to 800 Loyalists (Americans who supported the king, also called Tories) from minority,

often immigrant, communities on Raeburn Creek, South Carolina, and in Tryon County, North Carolina, for a rendezvous with the British troops then occupying Augusta, Georgia. He had achieved a miracle within just a couple of weeks behind the enemy lines. With drums beating, flags flying, and flutes playing merrily, he and his ad hoc regiment rode south along the Indian frontier while capturing and burning such places as Fort Independence and the outpost on Broadmouth Creek. Brigadier General Andrew Williamson and most of his frontier militia brigade had marched to the South Carolina side of the Savannah River to block the British from crossing the river at Augusta. Boyd, therefore, had to take a circuitous route to and through the Indian frontier, guided by friends from the Wrightsborough settlement in Georgia, to avoid Williamson. The Upper Ninety Six Regiment, under Colonel Andrew Pickens, remained in the backcountry to guard against Indian incursions but they had been divided among numerous forts, blockhouses, and stations.

As the king's men approached the Cherokee Ford on February 11, 1779, they had already missed Boyd's schedule for being in Augusta, some ninety miles to the southeast, by a day. They seemed destined to achieve their goal as only seven South Carolina militiamen and a lieutenant (variously identified as Lieutenant Shanklin, Ramsey, and Calhoun) defended McGowen's Blockhouse. Local historian Otis Ashmore would call this lieutenant Georgia's Horiatis

at the gate, recalling the Roman hero who gave his life defending the bridge to his city. Boyd sent an advanced party under the infamous William "Bloody Bill" Cunningham to demand the surrender of the blockhouse. The militia lieutenant refused.

The defenders of Cherokee Ford escaped martyrdom, however. Captain James Little, formerly of Georgia, had moved his family to McGowen's Blockhouse to protect them from his Loyalist neighbors. He and his company had gone on a scout in Georgia when Boyd and his band approached the ford. Little learned of the situation and used a canoe to bring his men across the winter rain swollen river. The blockhouse now had some forty or fifty defenders.

A Loyalist parley came forward and demanded the surrender of the fort. Little sent word back to Boyd that if the Tory commander wanted the blockhouse, he would have to take it by force. While the Loyalists debated, Little sent an expert horseman out of the fort to ride around and past Boyd's men to reach Captain Robert Anderson with a plea for help. A gunner asked Little for permission to fire on the gathered Loyalists to which the captain agreed. According to one account, the badly outnumbered garrison fired a small mounted cannon called a swivel gun and in another they shot from a four pounder cannon. Mordecai Miller, however, would remember, "we had a man in the blockhouse by the name of Alexander McCossin who had a blunderbuss we made a load out of our own shot bags and

horns and he loaded it and fired on the enemy in consequence of which they retreated."

At length, Boyd and his men withdrew and marched some five miles up the Savannah River to the next place where high ground on both sides of the river again penetrated the cane swamps to reach the river, near the mouth of Vann's Creek, the present-day Van Creek in Elbert County. The Loyalists swam their horses and then crossed over themselves on rafts.

In the meantime, some sixty to eighty more militiamen arrived at McGowen's Blockhouse under South Carolina captains Robert Anderson, William Baskins, John Miller, and Joseph Pickens. This combined force marched along the Georgia side of the river to find and stop Boyd's crossing. They attacked the Loyalists on the rafts but the thick cane breaks made anything like coordination impossible. Boyd's men landed at different places and then threatened to encircle the militiamen. Anderson's command did capture some horses but the battle ended as a rout of his men. The militiamen fled back to McGowen's Blockhouse at Cherokee Ford, reportedly leaving one man dead, fifteen men wounded, and eighteen men captured; the latter included captains Baskins and Miller, as well as the Samuel McGowen for whom the blockhouse likely took its name. Miller had been shot in the knee. The militiamen also left much of their equipment for which they, including McGowen, would later file claims with the South Carolina government. Boyd

allegedly later stated that he lost 100 men in the battle as casualties. Whatever his losses, they most likely consisted of members of his expedition with doubts about the march to Augusta and who used the opportunity afforded by the battle and the dense cane brakes to escape and return to their homes.

By the morning of February 14, Boyd had moved most of his command across swollen and cane choked Kettle Creek, near today's Tyrone Community in Wilkes County and roughly a mile from his friends at Wrightsborough. On very defendable hills, all but surrounded by dense cane brakes, they had camped hardly more than a day's march from their objective in Augusta. Unbeknownst to Boyd, however, the British troops had evacuated that town hours earlier to avoid entrapment and had begun a march away from Boyd and towards to their base at Savannah.

The delays at Cherokee Ford and Vann's Creek cost Boyd in other ways. Anderson and his men had joined forces with their commander Colonel Andrew Pickens and with Colonel John Dooly, commander of the Wilkes County Regiment of Georgia and the local sheriff, and his men. They pursued the Loyalists with the help of militia from the Vann's Creek area under Captain Joseph Nail acting as scouts and guides. Combined, these some 340 soldiers assaulted Boyd and those of his Loyalists who had delayed crossing Kettle Creek in order to butcher some cattle. The Tory commander fell mortally wounded, reportedly from shots fired by

Micajah Williamson and two others of Dooly's command who had slipped through the cane breaks behind the enemy lines.

Despite Boyd having allowed the dissidents in his camp to leave, many of his men again used battle and the dense cane choked swamps to escape. Baskins and Miller also persuaded their thirty-three captors to surrender and to return with them to Pickens as their captives. Only 270 of the Loyalists who started for Augusta would eventually reach the British army, a defeat for the king's cause on several levels. Planners in London had imagined that thousands of men would have used the opportunity afforded by Boyd to rally to the cause of restoring colonial America. Kettle Creek, however, came about due to the events at Cherokee Ford and Vann's Creek.

Captain James Little suffered a severe wound at Kettle Creek that took months to heal and which at first appeared to be fatal. In a war where twenty-five percent of men with combat injuries died from their wounds, Surgeon Thomas (?) Langdon saved Little and others. Captain Little proved more than fortunate at Kettle Creek. He would claim that he served in and survived twenty-two battles and skirmishes. After the war, James Little would rise to the rank of colonel and represent Franklin County, Georgia, in the state legislature before his death on April 5, 1807.

McGowen's Blockhouse would serve as a refuge by Capt. Little's family throughout the war. Today Cherokee Ford, with its historic stepping stone causeway, as well as

Vann's Creek battlefield, lay under the waters of the reservoir of the Richard Russell Dam. Larry Wilson, Central East Vice President of the Georgia Society, Sons of the American Revolution, has successfully led an effort to place a monument to the Patriots who served at Cherokee Ford and Vann's Creek at Richard B. Russell State Park in Elbert County.

Sources:

Davis, Robert S. *Georgia Citizens and Soldiers of the American Revolution* (1979), pp. 160-61.

---- *Georgians in the Revolution* (1986), pp. 11-24.

---- and Thomas, Kenneth H. *Kettle Creek: The Battle of the Cane Brakes* (1975).

Little, R. G. to James H. Saye, April 26, 1840. 33 VV pp. 224 ff., Thomas Sumter Papers, Lyman C. Draper Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison. Also see the article "Revolutionary Incidents," *Central Presbyterian*, August 20, 1859, a transcription of which is in the James Little File, DOC-1520, File II Names, RG 4-2-46, Georgia Archives, Morrow.

McCall, Hugh. *The History of Georgia* (1969 reprint, 1816),
pp. 394-95, 398.

McGowen, Samuel. Audited Account 5060-C, South Carolina
Department of Archives and History, Columbia.

Miller, Mordecai. Revolutionary War pension claim SC S
16972. *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land
Warrant Application Files*. National Archives microfilm
M804.

Speer, William to John A. Speer, December 9, 1869, and
accompanying letter from Harold Carlisle to Robert
Davis, March 25, 1976, in William Speer file, Kettle
Creek Historic Site, Box 11 RCB-19864, Record Group
30-4-18, Georgia Archives, Morrow. The Speer letter is
also published in Wade Edward Speer, *William Speer
(1747-1830)* (1998) and on the Internet at:

[http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/s/p/e/Wade-
E-Speer/FILE/0030page.html](http://familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/s/p/e/Wade-E-Speer/FILE/0030page.html)