

Overmountain Men: The Militia Leaders that Defeated Patrick Ferguson At King's
Mountain

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts Degree
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Abstract: The Battle of King's Mountain has been written about from several angles, but historians seem to focus on blaming Patrick Ferguson for his own defeat. After reading the secondary sources I came to believe that credit should be given to the Patriot militia leaders that fought and defeated Ferguson. Available primary sources gave credence to that opinion and supported the idea that it took exceptional militia leaders to defeat Ferguson. He had made mistakes, but only skilled leadership allowed the Patriots to take advantage of the situation and achieve victory. The leaders that this paper will focus on are Isaac Shelby, John Sevier and William Campbell.

As the Revolutionary War was fought to a standstill in the Northern Colonies, the British High Command turned its attention to the Southern Colonies. It was here, they believed, they would find an untapped wealth of Loyalist support. Using that support British armies could march north out of Charleston, sweep across South and North Carolina, enter Virginia and bring the war to the Patriots of the Northern colonies on a new front. The plan began with success, Charleston fell to the British in early 1780, and soon after that rural South Carolina, while not completely danger-free, was for the most part subdued.

After achieving these early successes the British made plans to move into North Carolina, at the time a hotbed of Patriot militia activity. Dividing his forces into three groups, General Charles Cornwallis, British supreme commander in the South, began to march north. On his western flank was a column of a hundred Loyalist infantrymen from New York supported by local militia. In command of this force was Colonel Patrick Ferguson, a rising star in the British Army. Although one arm was nearly useless from a wound he had received, Ferguson had served with distinction since he was 15 years old. His command was well disciplined and his magnetic personality was constantly drawing new recruits to his militia. He was tasked with subduing Patriot militia activity in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains as well as gathering and training Loyalists of the area. Much like the British entering the South, Ferguson was able to achieve initial success, enlisting close to one thousand volunteers in his Loyalist militia. However, his tactics and aggressiveness, not to mention his mere presence in the area, were soon going to cause him a lot of trouble.

The militia leaders of Western North Carolina, Eastern Tennessee and Southwestern Virginia had dispersed their men upon hearing of Ferguson's arrival in the area. Now they were regrouping and formerly independent units were uniting into a single force. They met at Sycamore Shoals in Watauga, and chased Ferguson across North Carolina. Catching him on King's Mountain, they surrounded the base of the mountain and, marching uphill, they killed Ferguson and destroyed his 1,100-man Loyalist force. Then, just as quickly as they had gathered, they disbanded and returned to their homes throughout the Appalachian Mountains.

The unique nature of the force that met and defeated Ferguson has prompted a number of historians to write about the battle. The current historiography focuses on blaming Patrick Ferguson for making a series of mistakes that led to the defeat force at King's Mountain. Authors that have written about King's Mountain tend to focus on several areas. First, why did the militiamen rally to face Ferguson at all? Second, why did Ferguson decide to make his defensive stand on King's Mountain, rather than other areas that might have given him a better chance of success? Third, having chosen King's Mountain, why did Ferguson not take full advantage of the benefits his position provided him?

There are several historians who attempt to answer one or all of the above questions. The most thorough is Lyman Draper, author of *King's Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of King's Mountain, October 7th 1780 and the Events which led to it*. His book is an exhaustively researched example of the annals approach to writing history; he examines every event in minute detail. Draper spent the majority of the 1840s traveling in the South researching his book on King's Mountain and that

breadth of research is reflected in his book. Draper was able to talk to people whose parents had participated in the battle, which adds an element of accountability to his narrative. His extensive research and relatively unbiased approach to the subject matter have made Draper's work the standard by which all books about King's Mountain are judged.

Almost seven decades later, Pat Alderman, author of the books *One Heroic Hour at King's Mountain* and *The Overmountain Men*, wrote with a focus on the Patriots side of the battle. While his books are much shorter than Draper's, they are as well documented and often use similar, if not the same, primary sources. Alderman had a strong bias towards the Patriots and tried to make them appear honorable and justified, so while reading his books you must take that into account. Alderman also had a passion for historical artifacts, which provided another angle for his research. He studied rifles, muskets, ammunition, as well as men's horses, supply wagons and uniforms to gain a new perspective on his subject.

The first government document that attempts to answer these questions is the National Park Service's history of the battle site, written by Wilma Dykeman. Dykeman is able to eliminate almost all biases from her work. That is most likely because the piece was written for and published by the government, and as a result has had most of the author's personal views removed from it. The book contains useful information, particularly about the physical appearance and arrangement of the battle site. Having this information is crucial when reading first hand accounts of the battle that are not as accurate with their descriptions of the geography and the battle site.

In 1997, John Buchanan wrote *The Road to Guilford Courthouse* about the Revolution in the Southern Colonies and it contains a chapter about the Battle of King's Mountain. Buchanan works as an archivist and used his knowledge of primary sources to his advantage in his research. He was able to get past what other historians have written and back to primary sources for his facts about the battle. The depth of his research allows the source to be more useful than its length would make it seem possible. Almost every section includes useful information or a fact that sheds light on information other authors pushed to the background.

The first question most of these sources try to answer is, why did the militiamen gather to face Ferguson at all? As the Congressional report says, "The militias of the South had been defeated almost every time they had entered battle against the British."¹ Alderman makes the most direct attempt to answer the question, but he arrives at very different conclusions than other authors. Benton Rain Patterson, in his book *Washington and Cornwallis: The Battle for America*, takes a more ideological approach to the question, saying that the men were motivated by the threat to their homes and their belief in the ideals of liberty and freedom. Ferguson's advance was the first British attempt to move into the mountains of North Carolina. As such, it represented the first time that the homes and land of the militiamen were under threat. Normally the militias would ride out of the mountains to engage in a few skirmishes and if the action got too intense, they would always retreat to the hills. Now the fight would be in the hills, close to home, and that was a powerful motivating factor.

¹ Army War College Historical Section, *Historical Statements Concerning the Battle of King's Mountain and the Battle of the Cowpens, South Carolina*, (Washington, DC: US government Printing Offices, 1928) 18.

When Alderman discusses the militia rallying, he cites two reasons as paramount, their exceptional leaders and their fear of the British army. British cavalry leader Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton was widely known across the South for his brutal tactics in warfare. People believed that unless they drove the British out of Western North Carolina it would only be a matter of time before Tarleton was terrorizing the countryside. Alderman also mentions that the leadership of these particular militia units was exceptional, a claim that can be verified by both their reputations entering the battle and their performance during the battle. Isaac Shelby and William Campbell in particular were excellent at rallying their men throughout the battle. Campbell personally led his men back up King's Mountain three times after they nearly broke under the bayonet charges of Ferguson's men.

The two reasons given by Alderman are better reasons; because fear and loyalty are both exceptional motivators and men are very likely to cite those as the reasons for their actions. Also, they can be directly traced to instances and facts that a historian can verify with other sources. However, the second reason given by Patterson, fear for their homes, was also a powerful justification for the militia's actions. Most likely, a combination of the three would be responsible for men coming to fight when their leaders called.

Why Ferguson chose to make his stand on top of King's Mountain is also a question that many authors try to answer. However, because of the subjective nature of the question, the answers cannot be easily verified. Most writers agree, and Pat Alderman says directly, that if Ferguson had taken a direct route, he could have made it

to Charlotte before the pursuing Patriots were able to catch him.² However Ferguson's retreat was anything but direct, and when he reached King's Mountain he stopped completely and turned to face the Patriots. In the words of the Congressional Report regarding the Battle of King's Mountain, Ferguson acted with "deliberation and full intent to engage in battle."

Almost all historians blame Ferguson for making a poor decision with his defensive location, it is his justification for that decision they debate. Alderman blamed Ferguson's overconfidence and his dependence on the bayonet charge for his defeat. Patriot militias had a poor record of holding their line in the face of a bayonet charge, so Ferguson's confidence could be understood. Dykeman echoes this idea, saying that Ferguson chose to defend King's Mountain because of his confidence in the training and discipline of his troops and the fact that he was not afraid of the patriot militias. Both of these reasons are probable, but hard to substantiate with facts. The Congressional report offers a final possibility, and that is the fact that Ferguson believed he had found the best available defensive position and therefore made his stand there.

The final question, why did Ferguson not take full advantage of the situation he found himself in, is the most difficult to answer. Ferguson was in command of the high ground and with a little work could have made his position unassailable. However he did not order his men to build defensive fortifications from the readily available wood or even earthworks. He also did not station as many sentries as he normally would and the Patriots were able to advance to within a quarter mile of his camp without an alarm being raised. Russell, Dykeman, and Buchanan all advance the same theory about Ferguson's

² Pat Alderman, *One Heroic Hour at King's Mountain* (Erwin Tennessee, 1958) 14.

³ Army War College Historical Section, 25.

actions; that he felt the height of King's Mountain gave him such an advantage that the Patriots would be unable to advance up the hill to attack him. Lyman Draper advances two other opinions, first that Ferguson thought he had overwhelming strength of numbers, and second that Ferguson, under constant pressure, panicked and ran to the first high ground that he could find.⁴ Neither of these opinions seems valid. Ferguson was a trained military officer who was more than capable of making a decision about tactics despite an advancing enemy. Ferguson also knew that the force advancing towards him was equal in number and that he could not rely on numbers to win the victory.

Ultimately, Ferguson staked his force on an indefensible position and lost the entire western wing of the advancing British Army. The reasons why Ferguson made that decision are varied, and most cannot be verified with observable facts. My answer to the first question is that the militiamen rallied to face Ferguson because of a combination of fear for their homes and the ability of their local commanders to inspire them. To the second question, Ferguson chose King's Mountain because he was overconfident in his troop's ability to match the Patriots in combat. Finally, he did not make any improvements to his position because of the same self-assured attitude that led him to make his stand on the top of King's Mountain.

As described above, books written about the Battle of King's Mountain put the blame for the British defeat on Patrick Ferguson. They mention the Patriot leaders and militiamen only to describe how rare it was for a force like the one marching on King's Mountain to hold together as well as it did. This paper will focus not on blaming Patrick Ferguson for his defeat, but instead on giving credit to the Patriot militia leaders who

⁴Lyman Draper, *King's Mountain and its Heroes: History of the Battle of King's Mountain, Oct. 7th 1780*

and the >nts which led to it n iti Peter Thomson, 1881), 289.
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were able to defeat Ferguson on King's Mountain. My thesis is that very skilled local Patriot militia leaders took advantage of Ferguson's lack of geographical knowledge and defeated him at King's Mountain.

First, I will talk about the geography of the area where Ferguson was fighting and how his lack of knowledge hampered his ability to move decisively and led to him choosing King's Mountain as a battle site. When the British marched out of Charleston to invade North Carolina, Ferguson was the commander of the westernmost column of the three headed north. In the center was General Charles Cornwallis, in command of the largest number of British regulars and heading for the city of Charlotte. At the same time Ferguson was marching into North Carolina, Cornwallis was encamped at Charlotte. Ferguson was able to recruit almost a thousand men into his militia units, but ran into trouble with the Patriot militia force that had mustered at Sycamore Shoals. When Ferguson received reports about how large his opponent's force had become, he turned his army and headed towards Charlotte. His efforts to make it to Cornwallis' camp led him to drive his men much harder than he ever had previously. In his diary, Lieutenant Anthony Allaire, a Loyalist militiaman, recounts a day in the week prior to the battle as follows:

"Thursday, [September], 28th. Got in motion at five o'clock in the morning.. .marched seven miles to creek, forded it, continued on about a mile further.. .reached Broad River.. .forded it.. .marched two miles onward, reached Green River.. .forded it, and marched two miles farther.. .lay on our arms till four o'clock the next morning."⁵

After days of making three miles, twelve miles, four miles, twenty miles and sixteen miles, Ferguson's army arrived at the top of King's Mountain. King's Mountain only stood about sixty feet high, but it was the only high ground in the area. This made it a landmark and drew Ferguson's attention; it seemed the most defensible position in the area so he camped his men on top of it. It was "almost 600 yards long varying in width from 60 to nearly 120 yards, the top mostly bare of trees, but the sides wooded and rough."⁶ Once he was on top of the mountain, Ferguson declared "[I am] king of this mountain and God Almighty himself could not drive him from it."⁷ It was here that Ferguson decided to fight the battle to decide who would control the western portion of North Carolina.

Militarily, taking the high ground was a sound decision, it was widely accepted that defenders on higher ground would be able to hold off an attacking enemy. Captain Alexander Chesney, a member of Ferguson's officer corps said "King's Mountain, from its height would have enabled us to oppose a superior force with advantage..." Isaac Shelby said the mountain was "high and exceedingly steep in front" and was "interspersed along the top with craggy cliffs of rock."⁹ It would seem that by making his camp on top of this mountain Ferguson had created an unassailable position for his force. However he overlooked some other features that allowed the advancing Patriot militia to first attack and then defeat his encamped army.

Benton Rain Patterson, *Washington and Cornwallis: The Battle for America*. (New York: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), 249.

⁷ John S Pancake, *This Destructive War*. (Tuscaloosa AL, University of Alabama Press, 1985), 118.

⁸ Alexander Chesney, "Diary of Alexander Chesney," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 7, no. 1 (1921): 53.

⁹ Isaac Shelby, "Letter to Colonel Arthur Campbell," *Virginia Argus*, 26 October 1810, excerpted in *Kings Mountain and Its Heroes*, Lyman Draper, p 524.

The militiamen that had gathered from Virginia, Tennessee and Western North Carolina had one trait in common; they lived in the woods and had for most of their lives. Between their experience fighting Indians and the daily hunting trips they made to feed their families, the men were experts at fighting and shooting in the woods. King's Mountain was covered in forest almost to its top; Chesney describes it as "covered with wood."¹⁰ He continues to lament that the cover "sheltered the Americans and enabled them to fight in the [their] favorite manner."¹¹ The favorite manner that Chesney mentions is fighting from cover, advancing from tree to tree and never exposing oneself to the enemy. This style of fighting was so effective that George Scheer and Hugh Rankin entitled the chapter of their book on the Battle of King's Mountain "From tree to tree to the summit."¹² The Patriots were able to fight in this style because they had made change in weaponry that the British Army had not. Instead of using smoothbore muskets, the Patriot militia was armed with long barreled rifles. Smooth bore muskets were notoriously inaccurate and had to be fired in concentrated volleys to compensate for their inaccuracy. The combination of the rifling in the bore, the length of the barrel and the skill with which the Patriots used them made their rifles extremely accurate and deadly.

Ferguson had moved his men to the top of King's Mountain using the few trails that existed through the woods. In his mind these were the only routes to the top of the mountain, and he placed his sentries to cover these routes. Besides

¹⁰ Alexander Chesney, "Diary of Alexander Chesney," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 7, no. 1 (1921): 57.

¹¹ Alexander Chesney, "Diary of Alexander Chesney," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 7, no. 1 (1921): 57.

¹² George Scheer and Hugh Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1957) 478.

these men, he placed only a few other pickets, leaving the majority of the mountain's slopes unguarded against the advancing Patriots.

Ferguson was used to fighting in traditional British style, large units of infantry making battlefield maneuvers, a slow steady advance followed by a final charge. To fight this type of battle, Ferguson needed to operate in an open area, where possessing the high ground might mean a ridge of only ten or twenty feet. At King's Mountain Ferguson put his men atop a sixty-foot ridge and asked them to fire downward. By doing so, he "positioned men where they were almost certain to overshoot approaching men."¹³ Aiming a rifle down hill is one of the most difficult shots to make, especially with the muskets with which the British were armed. Men who were not accustomed to the angle would not compensate for the slope of the hill and usually overshoot their target.

Captain Abraham DePeyster cautioned Ferguson about his troop placement as well as his opponent, noting, "These are those damn yelling men" a reference to the whoops that often preceded a militia attack.¹⁴ Ferguson had little experience fighting mountain militia units and did not understand how tactics needed to be adapted to defend against their fighting style.¹⁵

The men that were fighting Ferguson had been living on the western edge of the colonies for years. Living in this area a man had to be able to defend both himself and his family, or he would not be able to survive. As a result of how hard they had to work to keep their homes, the men were very attached to them. If their homes were threatened, they would respond with speed and violence, as

John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1997), 229.
Allaire, 31.
Archibald Rutledge, "Battle of King's Mountain," 1, no. 1 (1966): 24.

Ferguson found out. The Overmountain Men began to muster in response to a letter that Ferguson sent to Shelby. In this letter, Ferguson threatened to "march [my] army over the mountain and lay waste the country with fire and sword."¹⁶ After receiving the letter, Shelby wrote to other local militia leaders and asked them to rally their men to face Ferguson and drive him out of Western North Carolina.

When Ferguson realized that the militia units were banding together and coming to fight him, he issued a second proclamation calling the advancing militia a "set of mongrels" and "an inundation of barbarians."¹⁷ He pled for the surrounding population to rally to his defense, but his words only angered them and they left him isolated at King's Mountain, alone to face the advancing Patriot militia.

At the head of the militia were three men, all raised in the woods of southern Appalachia and all experienced Indian fighters, who would all be critical to the Patriot victory. They were Colonel Isaac Shelby, commanding 240 men from North Carolina, Colonel John Sevier, commanding 240 men from Northwestern North Carolina, and Colonel William Campbell, commanding 400 men from Virginia.¹ By the end of October 7¹, each of these men performed bravely under fire and used all their leadership skills to keep their men moving up the mountain to victory. Isaac Shelby was the man responsible for calling the muster at Sycamore Shoals, John Sevier was the first commander Shelby had

¹⁶ Alderman, *One Heroic Hour at King's Mountain*, 19.

¹⁷ Patrick Ferguson, *The Back Water Men* (Denards Ford, NC, 1780), 1, excerpted in Lyman Draper *King's Mountain and its Heroes* (Cincinnati: Peter G. Thompson, 1881), 204.

⁸ Alderman, 20.

recruited and William Campbell was the commander that Shelby and Sevier had worked the hardest to recruit.¹⁹ Between the three men they commanded 880 men at the original muster, a good number of which had made it through two selections to be in the final attack force.

John Sevier had been a member of his local militia since the age of 16. Almost as soon as he joined he gained a fearsome reputation as an Indian fighter, a reputation that helped fuel his rise through the ranks. He joined the militia in 1761, was promoted to captain in 1771, lieutenant colonel in 1777 and full colonel in 1779.²⁰ When called by Shelby, he arrived at Sycamore Shoals with 240 men from Washington County, North Carolina. He was part of several councils between the militia leaders to discuss tactics and leadership roles during the ride towards King's Mountain. Upon arrival at King's Mountain he was placed in command of the southeast portion of the attacking circle.²¹

The man responsible for organizing the muster at Sycamore Shoals was Colonel Isaac Shelby, who commanded 240 men from Sullivan County, North Carolina. It was his cousin who was paroled by Ferguson with the letter that threatened to "lay waste the country with fire and sword."²² Shelby had joined the militia in Virginia in 1774, at age 24 and had a distinguished career in the service.²³ During that career, he had several times been selected to perform special tasks for the Patriot cause.

¹⁹ Colonel Isaac Shelby, *Notes and Documents King's Mountain Letters of Colonel Isaac Shelby*, ed. J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1938), 374.

²⁰ J.D. Bailey, *Commanders at King's Mountain*, (Gaffney SC: DeCamp Publishers, 1926), 326.

²¹ Colonels William Campbell, Isaac Shelby and Benjamin Cleveland, "Formal Report of the Battle of King's Mountain October 1780," *Virginia Gazette*, 18 November 1780, 1.

²² Alderman, 19.

²³ Bailey, 81.

The first was a running battle fought on and off from 17 July until 21 July, 1780.²⁴ He engaged the enemy starting at Cedar Springs, North Carolina and during a slow, fighting retreat kept them engaged until they reached Clifton Mill #1 on the North Carolina-South Carolina border. It was during this engagement that he first proved his ability to retreat without losing control of his men and then reform to continue fighting.²⁵ This skill would serve him well when faced with the bayonet charges that Ferguson relied on as a main defensive technique.

Shelby's military skill was confirmed by his actions during the siege of Fort Thicketty. Hearing that Patriot militia were advancing on his post, the commander of the fort sent out a call for reinforcements then brought everyone inside, locked the gate and prepared to outlast the attackers.²⁶ Shelby arrived at the fort and within three days had gotten the commander to surrender without a shot being fired.²⁷

The final piece of Shelby's reputation was made at Musgrave's Mill.²⁸ It was at this battle, through cunning use of a false retreat and having possession of the slightest high ground, that Shelby was able to engage and defeat a numerically superior force of Loyalist militia.²⁹ In ninety minutes of action, Shelby captured two hundred prisoners and could have marched on #96, a town near the North Carolina-South Carolina border. Instead he had to disband his force because the defeat of General Gates at Camden had made North Carolina unsafe for Patriot

²⁴ Shelby, *Notes and Documents*, 371.

²⁵ Shelby, *Notes and Documents*, 371.

²⁶ Buchanan, 227.

²⁷ Shelby, *Notes and Documents*, 370.

²⁸ Colonel William Campbell to Colonel Arthur Campbell, 20 October 1780, *Draper Manuscript Collection*, ed. Lyman Draper (Nashville TN: Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 1929) 1.

²⁹ Shelby, *Notes and Documents*, 372.

forces. The breakup of Patriot forces did not last long and within two months, Shelby was once again rallying his men to ride and face Ferguson for control of Western North Carolina. Shelby's single-minded determination drove the Patriot militia across North Carolina in pursuit of Ferguson; he would tolerate no distractions or side missions.³⁰ When the Patriots arrived at King's Mountain, Shelby was in command of one of the center columns of advance, just to the west of Sevier.³¹

The final member of the elite commanders of the Patriot militia was Colonel William Campbell. William Campbell had joined the militia at 29, the eldest of the three King's Mountain leaders, but had rapidly distinguished himself. At the time of King's Mountain, he had been ranked above lieutenant for all but

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six months of his military career. He had led the raid that reached deepest into the Cherokee nation, culminating in the battle at Chickamauga in April 1779. Immediately following that raid, he took a force of 150 men to meet a Loyalist militia at Wytheville. After that action, he continued to operate in the Virginia countryside until a request for troops arrived from Colonel Shelby.

When Colonels Shelby and Sevier were trying to organize the area's militias into a single force, they both knew that getting Campbell and his Virginians were a crucial piece.³³ Campbell led the largest single militia unit in the area, and was widely regarded as a superior military commander.³⁴ Initially

³⁰ Benjamin Sharp, "Battle of King's Mountain", *American Pioneer* 5, (1843): 180.

³¹ Colonels William Campbell, Isaac Shelby and Benjamin Cleveland, "Formal Report of the Battle of King's Mountain October 1780," *Virginia Gazette*, 18 November 1780, 2.

³² Bailey, 18.

³³ Colonel Isaac Shelby, "Letter to Evan Shelby," *Virginia Gazette*, 4 November 1780, 2.

³⁴ Shelby, *Notes and Document*, 373.

Campbell turned down the request, believing that his place was defending his home territory, however after a second request was sent, Campbell left Virginia with about half of his men.³⁵ After William's departure, his brother, Colonel Arthur Campbell, sent two hundred more men to Sycamore Shoals, increasing the force under William's command to four hundred men.³⁶ This was the largest single contingent of men at the muster, and was welcomed with great relief by Shelby and Sevier. Campbell was in command of one of the two center columns during the attack on King's Mountain.³⁷

The arrival of troops at Sycamore Shoals ended on the 25th of September and the Patriots departed the following morning.³⁸ At that time they had the first selection, men without horses were left to follow the cavalry at their best possible speed. The horsemen chased Ferguson across Western North Carolina; stopped briefly in Gilbert Town and Quaker Meadows and ultimately cornered their prey on top of King's Mountain. On October 2, the leaders of the militia met to determine who would be in command while they were fighting. They knew that having six or seven leaders was not an effective command structure for battle.³⁹ They decided that based on military experience and size of command, William Campbell was the logical choice to command their forces.⁴⁰ On October 6th, information came to the militia officers that Ferguson was encamped on the top of King's Mountain and intended to stay there for some time. With this information

³⁵ Colonel William Campbell to Colonel Arthur Campbell, 20 October 1780, *Draper Manuscript Collection*, ed. Lyman Draper (Nashville TN: Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 1929), 1.

³⁶ Draper, 175.

³⁷ Colonels William Campbell, Isaac Shelby and Benjamin Cleveland, "Formal Report of the Battle of King's Mountain October 1780," *Virginia Gazette*, 18 November 1780, 2.

³⁸ Draper, 176.

³⁹ Draper, 188.

⁴⁰ Bailey, 36.

the Patriots held a second selection, narrowing the fighting force to 900 of the best-mounted and armed men, who left in the evening and rode for King's Mountain.

Around noon on October 7¹ they arrived at the base of King's Mountain, exhausted from a full night's ride but eager to fight the battle that had caused their hardships. Benjamin Sharp, a soldier under the command of Campbell, says the Patriot mindset was "to make it [King's Mountain] the worst for him [Ferguson]."⁴ The battle plan drawn up by Campbell and Shelby was very simple: surround the base of the mountain, advance towards the top, and force the British to surrender when they realized that they were surrounded.

It was in the execution of this simple battle plan that the three commanders showed their leadership skills and bravery. As the men advanced towards the mountain on foot, they were arranged in four large columns. On the far west was a column under the command of Colonel Benjamin Cleveland, east of his position was Colonel Shelby, east of Shelby was Colonel Campbell and the eastern most flank was under the command of Colonel Sevier.⁴² Shelby describes the Patriots' advance as assuming "a position, so as to fire on them [British] nearly about the same time."⁴³ The intention was to leave the British and Loyalist force with no avenue for retreat, only the chance to surrender.

⁴ Benjamin Sharp, "Battle of King's Mountain", *American Pioneer* 5, (1843): 181.

⁴² Colonels William Campbell, Isaac Shelby and Benjamin Cleveland, "Formal Report of the Battle of King's Mountain October 1780," *Virginia Gazette*, 18 November 1780, 2.

⁴³ Colonel Isaac Shelby, "Letter to Evan Shelby," *Virginia Gazette*, 4 November 1780, 2.

The Patriots were able to come upon the Loyalist pickets without alerting them and took them without a shot being fired.⁴⁴ This allowed the Patriots to advance very close to Ferguson's camp without being noticed. It gave the Patriots a great advantage in terms of surprise and they caught the British off guard. Captain Chesney lamented that the advance was "so rapid.. .that I was in the act of dismounting to report that all was quiet.. .when we heard their firing."⁴⁵ The action began with British forces firing on the columns led by Campbell and Shelby, while the two outermost columns continued forward until they surrounded the mountain before beginning their march uphill. William Campbell let out a yell "There they are boys, shout like hell and fight like devils".⁴⁶ Hearing this scream struck home with several officers on Ferguson's staff including Captain DePeyster who responded, "These things are ominous, they are the damn yelling boys."⁴⁷ Ferguson, however, had little experience fighting woodsmen militia and was unaware of the danger they posed. He referred to them as "damned banditti" and refused to believe that they could defeat him in battle.⁴⁸

The action rapidly became heaviest in the areas where Shelby and Campbell were advancing, Campbell mentions that the "action was as heavy as you can conceive for the number of men."⁴⁹ Despite the surprise of the attack, Ferguson was able to rally his men to defend their camp. His tactic of choice was a charge with fixed bayonets, which had served British commanders well in

⁴⁴ Isaac Shelby, "Letter to Colonel Arthur Campbell," Virginia Argus, 26 October 1810, excerpted in *Kings Mountain and Its Heroes*, Lyman Draper, p 524.

⁴⁵ Alexander Chesney, "Diary of Alexander Chesney," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 7, no. 2 (1921): 105.

⁴⁶ Draper, 245.

⁴⁷ Draper, 245.

⁴⁸ Draper, 156.

⁴⁹ Colonel William Campbell to Colonel Arthur Campbell, 20 October 1780, *Draper Manuscript Collection*, ed. Lyman Draper (Nashville TN: Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 1929) 1.

previous battles against Patriot militia. Ferguson's reliance on this defensive tactic had precedent; it was rare that militias could hold together in the face of a charging wall of steel. However, the leaders of this particular Patriot militia were skilled enough to hold their men together.

The first bayonet charge was made against Colonel Campbell as he advanced up the eastern side of the mountain. He was able to retreat without his men being routed, and when the British were drawn back up the hill to defend against other attacks, Campbell reformed his men and went back on the offensive. Shelby said, "The [Virginia] militia soon rallied to their gallant commander."⁵⁰ The British had to return to the top of King's Mountain to defend against attacks coming from the column headed by Colonel Shelby. The advance by Campbell and Shelby's men forced the British to move back and forth across the top of the mountain several times during the battle. Robert Campbell, a soldier in the Virginia militia, recalled the militia's actions: "[they] were rallied by their gallant commanders, Campbell and Shelby."⁵¹

Both Shelby and Campbell faced three charges and each commander was able to rally his men all three times. Shelby recalled the action in a letter to his father: "they repelled us three times with charged bayonets; but being determined to conquer or die, we came up a fourth time."⁵² On that fourth and final charge up King's Mountain, Campbell's men were able to gain the summit and sweep along the ridge, forcing the British into a small defensive circle from which none could

⁵⁰ Isaac Shelby, "Letter to Colonel Arthur Campbell," *Virginia Argus*, 26 October 1810, excerpted in *Kings Mountain and Its Heroes*, Lyman Draper, p 524.

⁵¹ Robert Campbell, "Battle of King's Mountain," in *Annals of the Army of Tennessee*, ed. Edwin L. Drake. (Nashville TN, 1878).

⁵² Colonel Isaac Shelby, "Letter to Evan Shelby," *Virginia Gazette*, 4 November 1780, 2.

escape. Campbell recounts the charge: "We gained the summit.. .and drove them along the summit nearly to the other end."⁵³ It was at this time in the battle that Ferguson was shot and killed. By the time he fell, he had been shot eight times. His men carried him to the center of the circle and command of the battle fell to Captain DePeyster. The situation he faced was hopeless but he "disputed the ground as long as it was possible."⁵⁴ He soon raised a white flag and tried to surrender his remaining men. Here, Shelby and Campbell were forced to show their leadership skills again.

While the British were advancing into North Carolina there had been several instances where the victorious British and Loyalist forces had slaughtered surrendering Patriots. As a result, the Patriots at King's Mountain were not inclined to give any quarter to the British as they surrendered. However, Shelby and Campbell were ready to handle the situation. Shelby, upon seeing the battle was nearly over rode his horse through the Patriot lines "within 15 paces of [the British] lines and commanded that they lay down their arms and they shall receive quarter."⁵⁵ This inspired the British to more seriously consider surrendering, while the Patriots that heard it were forced to recognize that the British were to receive mercy when they surrendered.

When the white flag was raised, Campbell saw that several of his men were still firing so he rode his horse down the line and forcibly threw the men's guns offline. His actions soon brought all shooting to a halt and the Battle of

⁵³ Colonel William Campbell to Colonel Arthur Campbell, 20 October 1780, *Draper Manuscript Collection*, ed. Lyman Draper (Nashville TN: Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 1929), 1.

⁵⁴ Samuel Ryerson, "King's Mountain," *Royal Gazette*, February 24, 1781 p. 3.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Sharp, "Battle of King's Mountain", *American Pioneer* 5, February 1843.

King's Mountain to an end. The casualties were not very high on the Patriot side, 28 men killed and 62 wounded, but the Loyalists had 225 killed and 163 wounded.⁵⁶ Each side lost a colonel, the British Patrick Ferguson and the Patriots James Williams. The disparity among in numbers of casualties reflects the positions that the sides held. The Patriots were in cover while the British were forced to fight from the open top of King's Mountain.

The Battle of King's Mountain was a unique occurrence; an army came together, marched into a single battle, won and then disappeared back to their homes. Never before had such a large militia force been able to operate so effectively. Nor had militia been able to succeed against such a highly trained enemy officer. The victory at King's Mountain was made possible by a few , skilled Patriot leaders who were able to tactically outsmart their opponent and crush him in battle.

The two factors responsible for Patrick Ferguson's defeat at King's Mountain were his lack of geographical knowledge with regards to King's Mountain and the skill of the militia leaders that he was fighting. The fact that Ferguson did not know the geography of King's Mountain was a factor but even with Ferguson on top of King's Mountain, a mistake or lapse in leadership on the part of the Patriots would have enabled him to escape with his men. If the plan of attack had not been so well executed, Ferguson might have slipped out between the encircling Patriot units. If Campbell, Shelby and Sevier had not led their men so well, the Patriot lines might have been broken by the first bayonet charge. These three mountain militia leaders were able to meet a rising star in the British

army in battle and defeat him decisively.⁵⁷ The victory was possible only with exceptional leadership, and they were able to provide it for their men. Benjamin Sharp reflected on the commanders: "I believe that three braver men, and purer patriots never trod the soil of freedom, than Campbell, Shelby and Sevier."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Wilma Dykeman, *The Battle of King's Mountain 1780: With Fire and Sword* (Washington D.C.: US Department of the Interior, 1978), 28.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Sharp, 'Battle of King's Mountain', *American Pioneer* 5, (1843): 2. I 18

Primary Source Annotated Bibliography

Allaire, Anthony. *Diary of Lieut. Anthony Allaire*. New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1968.

This diary is short and has only a brief section on the Battle of King's Mountain, but the information is extremely helpful. Allaire provides a first hand account of the battle from the perspective of a Loyalist volunteer, fighting against his neighbors on the side of a foreign power. Allaire wrote as a young man, and sounds like a person who is more than a little scared of what he has gotten involved with. The diary continues past the day of the battle and discusses his treatment in Patriot captivity and his eventual escape.

Campbell, Ensign Robert. "Battle of King's Mountain." *Annals of Tennessee History*, Nashville, Tennessee: October 1878.

Robert Campbell was one of the men that followed Colonel William Campbell over the mountains from Virginia to engage Ferguson. His account is brief but filled with information that would not be available in other places. He makes several notes about the quality of his commanders, which is an area that I want to focus, making this source a valuable one for my paper.

Campbell, Colonel William, Colonel Isaac Shelby and Colonel Benjamin Cleveland. 1780. "Formal Report of The Battle of King's Mountain October 1780". *Virginia Gazette*, 18 November 1780, 1-3.

Written on the top of King's Mountain and hand delivered to the Patriot southern commander, this report is the combination of three Patriot leaders' views on the battle and events leading to it. Because the officers wrote it, the report makes the battle seem much more organized than the other accounts say it was. It also omits several things that reflect negatively on the Patriot leadership that were mentioned in other sources. Working from this source I will try to reconstruct the battle as much as possible to see how the Patriot leaders functioned while under fire.

Campbell, Colonel William to Colonel Arthur Campbell, October 20, 1780. In *Draper Manuscript Collection*. Edited by Lyman Draper. Nashville TN, Tennessee Historical Society Publications, 1929.

Another of the letters sent in the aftermath of the battle by Patriot leaders. This one, written by Colonel Campbell to his brother, includes many of the same topics as letters written by Colon Shelby. The change of author does create a change in perspective, one that is heightened by the fact that Campbell and Shelby were on different sides of the battlefield. Campbell covers topics including attacking strategy, who he saw in the fighting and the wounded.

Chesney, Alexander. "Diary of Captain Alexander Chesney." In *King's Mountain Battle as Seen by a British Officer*, edited by Samuel G. Williams. *Tennessee Historical Magazine*, 7, no. 1 (1921): 51-66, no 2. (1921): 104-110.

Captain Chesney's diary in its entirety for the three months prior to and the month after the Battle of King's Mountain. Within the entries are several inconsistencies with recorded fact that provide some insight into the mindsets of the British commanders. It also corroborates several other facts that are mentioned in other primary sources that seemed like they might be false or invented. Patriot participants wrote the majority of the primary sources I consulted and this provides an interesting counterpoint to their accounts.

Hardin, Martin D. "King's Mountain as told by Isaac Shelby." *American Review* (1848). Excerpted in *Kings Mountain and its Heroes*, Lyman Draper (see full citation in secondary sources), p 540-546.

General Martin D. Hardin had a series of conversations with retired Colonel Isaac Shelby just after the turn of the 19th century, conversations that he noted exhaustively. Upon the death of Shelby and Martin, the notes were compiled and published in the *American Review*. While slightly rambling and disorganized, the article that resulted is an excellent source of first-hand insight to the battle. Since Shelby is one of the leaders that I want to talk about in detail, this source will be very helpful in my research.

Ryerson, Samuel. "King's Mountain." *Royal Gazette* Rivington, NY, February 24 1781 p 3-4.

Captain Ryerson was one of the leaders of the Provincial Army that Patrick Ferguson brought south with him from New York. He was one of the officers captured at the end of the battle, and along with Lieutenant Allaire, was later released in a prisoner of war exchange. His experience was unique because he was one of about 100 fighting men who were not from the Southern Appalachians. He also provides a further Loyalist perspective to the battle and its aftermath.

Sharp, Benjamin. "The Battle of King's Mountain." *American Pioneer* 5, no. 2 (February 1843): 179-181.

A militiaman from Washington County Virginia, Sharp writes about the Battle of King's Mountain from the very beginning when the first call for men went out from Shelby and Sevier. He provides keen insight into how the battle was fought from the common soldier's perspective. Taken in combination with several other sources, it provides a complete picture of the battle from both sides, common infantry soldiers as well as officers. Using this source to both contradict and reinforce claims made by other sources will allow me to expand my knowledge of the fighting and learn how the soldier viewed their officers.

Shelby, Isaac. "Letter to Colonel Arthur Campbell." *Virginia Argus* October 26th 1810.
Excerpted in *Kings Mountain and its Heroes*, Lyman Draper, p 524 -525.

Writing at almost the same time as the letter to his father, Shelby also sends a letter to the brother of Colonel William Campbell. Arthur had remained in Virginia with the other half of the Virginia militia that William had left with late in September. The letter includes Shelby's views on the tactics that he used with the Patriot forces and the ones that Ferguson used to defend his position. There is brief discussion about the ground that the Patriots had to cover, all topics that apply directly to sections of my paper.

Shelby, Isaac. "Letter to Evan Shelby." *Virginia Gazette* November 4, 1780: 2.

After the battle, Isaac Shelby wrote several letters to people he knew to tell them about the results, the tactics he used and the people wounded or killed. The one he wrote to his father is very detailed in its discussion of how difficult it was to scale the sides of King's Mountain, a topic that has direct relevance to my discussion of the geography aiding the Patriot forces. He also mentions the British defensive techniques and that can also add to the section about Patriot leadership.

Shelby, Isaac. *Notes and documents: King's Mountain, letters of Colonel Isaac Shelby*.
Edited by J.G. de Roulhac Hamilton. Baton Rouge, La.: LSU Press, 1938.

A primary source written by one of the leaders of the Patriot militia, the letters discuss both the battle and the events that led up to the fighting. Shelby provides, not surprisingly, a unique perspective on the events that led up to the battle. He discusses topics such as the muster of militias from three states, the pursuit of an enemy across much of a state and the problems of trying to lead a force made up of such different groups of men. The letters sometimes stray from relevant information, but when on topic, the information they contain is very useful with regards to understanding the battle from a participant's perspective.

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