

The Battle of King's Mountain

Essential Question: What was the significance of the Battle of King's Mountain?

By 1780 the British had turned their attention to the southern colonies, in part because of the large number of loyalists, or Tories who lived there. The British won an impressive victory over the Patriot force at Camden in August of 1780. Cornwallis, the British commander, then sent Major Patrick Ferguson to suppress rebellion in the backcountry. Ferguson selected a prisoner to carry a message back to the rebels across the mountains, "If you do not desist from your opposition to the British arms, I will march over the mountains, hang your leaders, and lay waste to your country with fire and sword."¹ Upon hearing of Ferguson's threat, Isaac Shelby, leader of the North Carolina mountain militia, immediately consulted with John Sevier at Sycamore Shoals. Shelby and Sevier decided to combine their forces and take the battle across the mountains to Ferguson. The men agreed to meet at Sycamore Shoals along the Watauga River on September 25, 1780. Eventually over 1,000 militia or Overmountain Men, including some from Virginia, gathered at Sycamore Shoals present-day Elizabethton. Before leaving, the men heard an inspirational sermon from Presbyterian minister and educator Samuel Doak. Doak reminded the men of the biblical story of Gideon whose small force defeated the larger Midianite army.² Armed with inspiration from Doak and 500 pounds of gunpowder, the men began the difficult march across the mountains. Two defector's from Sevier's command warned Ferguson of the approaching force. Ferguson ordered his 1,100 men, who were part of the Tory militia, to march to King's Mountain, just south of the border between North Carolina and South

¹ Jeff Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*. (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

Carolina. Upon arriving Ferguson reportedly said, “I am on King’s Mountain, I am king of that mountain, and God Almighty could not drive me from it.”³ The Overmountain men reached King’s Mountain on October 7, 1780. The force encircled the mountain and began to fight their way up using the trees for cover and giving their war cry as they advanced. Both these tactics had been learned from years of warfare with the Cherokee. Ferguson’s men fired as the Patriots advanced, but because they were aiming downhill, most of the shots went over their heads. Patriot sharpshooters methodically annihilated the British forces with their deadly accurate long rifles. Within an hour, the Patriots reached the top of the mountain. Knowing defeat was inevitable; Ferguson mounted his horse in an attempt to fight his way through the lines and escape. Ferguson was fatally shot and the remainder of his forces surrendered. Several men later claimed to have shot Ferguson, including Essius Bowman, a free Black militiaman from the Virginia Blue Ridge.⁴ Bowman was one of five Black men identified in pension records as having served with the Overmountain Men at the Battle of King’s Mountain. In addition to Bowman, Andrew Ferguson and Primus served as free men. John Broddy was the enslaved servant of Colonel William Campbell and Ishmael Titus was an enslaved man who fought as a substitute for his enslaver Lawrence Ross. Titus was later given his freedom in return for his service⁵ The Overmountain men had won a resounding and important victory.

Following the battle, 30 of the prisoners were tried for atrocities committed prior to the battle and 9 prisoners were hanged before Shelby stopped the proceedings. The

³ Randall Jones, “The Overmountain Men and the Battle of Kings Mountain.” North Carolina Encyclopedia <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/overmountain-men-and-battle> accessed 13 June 2018.

⁴ Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*, 78.

⁵ National Park Service, “African-Americans in the Revolution.” <https://www.nps.gov/teachers/classrooms/upload/Complete-LP-African-Americans-in-the-Revolution.pdf> accessed 07 June, 2021.

victory at King's Mountain had two important effects. First, news of the victory reinvigorated the Patriot spirit throughout the colonies. Years later Thomas Jefferson referred to it as the "joyful annunciation of that turn of the tide of success which terminated the Revolutionary War, with the seal of independence."⁶ Secondly, it caused Cornwallis to reevaluate his strategy and retreat to South Carolina and ultimately to Yorktown. British general Sir Henry Clinton later called the Battle of King's Mountain, "The first link in a chain of evils that followed each other in regular succession until they at last ended in the total loss of America."⁷

⁶ Biggers, *The United States of Appalachia*, 79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

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Use the information in the text to complete the graphic organizer below.

List 3 people who played an important role in the Battle of King's Mountain and explain why each is important.



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Describe the 2 groups who fought at the Battle of King's Mountain including their reasons for fighting.



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Write a 1 sentence summary that explains the significance of the Battle of King's Mountain



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