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FORT ROBINSON ON THE HOLSTON*

BY SAMUEL C. WILLIAMS

A regiment of Virginia soldiers, which had been led by Colonel George Washington for about three years in campaigns against the French and the Northwestern Indians in the French interest, gained renown as the advance guard of the expedition of 1758 under General John Forbes which captured Fort Duquesne—renamed in honor of the great William Pitt, Fort Pitt (Pittsburgh of this day). The war, so far as concerned Virginia, seemingly being at an end, Washington resigned his commission as colonel, and married Martha Dandridge (Mrs. Custis) in January, 1759.

The command of this historic regiment was then assigned by Governor Francis Fauquier to William Byrd III, of Westover, a man of great wealth, well educated and of refinement—the flower of Virginia aristocracy. Colonel Byrd turned promptly to the recruiting of the regiment to full strength.

In the early part of 1760 war was flagrant between the Lower and Middle Cherokees and South Carolina. Soon the Overhill Cherokees were involved and Fort Loudoun on the Little Tennessee River was besieged by them. Governor Lyttleton of South Carolina sent appeals for aid to the governors of North Carolina

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*Address delivered at the unveiling of the Fort Robinson marker near Kingsport, June 13, 1931. The inscription on the marker, an illustration of which appears as frontispiece, is as follows:

FORT ROBINSON
ERECTED NEAR HERE IN 1761

BUILT BY LIEUT. COL. ADAM STEPHEN OF COL. WILLIAM BYRD'S REGIMENT DURING THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE CHEROKEE THAT YEAR

FROM THIS FORT, HENRY TIMBERLAKE AND THOMAS SUMTER, LATER GENERAL IN THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR, WERE SENT ON A MISSION TO THE CHEROKEE INDIAN TOWNS

THE INDIAN PEACE TREATY OF NOVEMBER 19th, 1761 WAS MADE NEAR THIS SPOT

1The Governor requested that Byrd communicate with Gen. Jeffery Amherst on the operations of the ensuing campaign. (Jan. 23, 1759.) Draper MSS.

and Virginia. British forays on Fort Loudoun.

He immediately, Earl of Pembroke, with a detachment of Highlanders was reinforced to relieve the post. Fauquier, it was later perhaps, was to

In May, 1760, one of seven and regiment.

Byrd, followed a course of the massacre.

Upon landing, blow to Byrd, his suited to his predecessor's glimpses of him at this, ever blessed with ing preci,

just from the Montgomerie lost many, enjoined you to do under in safety to your Mother, who was inseparable.

A second planed by

Journal

see Samuel G.
1757-1769, 'The
the Little T.',
6Va. Mag.
and Virginia. Major-general Amherst, commander of the British forces in America, formulated a plan for the relief of Fort Loudoun and the chastisement of the Cherokee Nation. He immediately ordered Colonel Archibald Montgomery (later Earl of Eglinton) to proceed from the north to Charles Town with a detachment of British regulars, many of them Scotch Highlanders, to attack the Lower Cherokees, while Virginians reinforced by North Carolinians should attack the Overhills and relieve the distressed garrison of Fort Loudoun. Governor Faquier appealed to the general assembly of Virginia to relieve that fort for the honor of Virginia upon which colony fell, perhaps, "too great Share in the Cause of this Rupture." ¹²

In May, 1760, the Virginia assembly authorized the raising of seven hundred men to supplement the three hundred of the regiment then near the southeastern frontier under Colonel Byrd, for a march into the country of the Overhills. There followed a delay which spelled the downfall of Fort Loudoun and the massacre of a part of the officers and soldiers who manned it.

Upon Byrd must fall a fair measure of censure for this sad blow to British prestige in the West. He was doubtless little suited to Indian warfare; certain it is, he was not the equal of his predecessor in the command of such a regiment. We have glimpses of some of the influences that may have operated on him at the time. His mother in a letter to her "most dear & ever blessed Son," written August 15, 1760, while he was spending precious time in camp, added a postscript: "Sunday 17th, just from church & Mr. Davies tells me he heard that Coll. Montgomery was attacked in the woods by 4000 Indians and lost many of his People, & if tis true he says tis impossible for you to do anything. O, Merciful Heaven grant you may return in safety to your dear Children, To your own Home and to your Mother, whose Heart is entirely yours, and whose Happiness is inseparable." ¹³

A second campaign, this time one of retaliation, was now planned by General Amherst. Virginia authorities were aroused

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¹³Va. Mag. of History, XXXVII, 156.
and thoroughly in earnest. In October, 1760, the assembly passed 
an act providing for the withdrawal of the colony’s forces from 
the north and the concentration of the strength of an entire 
regiment to go against the Overhill Cherokees. 4 “Our last 
accounts from that Quarter,” it was reported to Washington, “was 
in a letter rec’d from Colo. Byrd, dated at Campbell’s Aug’t 
10th. I cannot imagine he will proceed after he is informed that 
Fort Loudoun, the principal Object of his Destination, is 
Surrendered to the Savages.” 5 In fact, Colonel Byrd was relying 
for results on the ability of Attakullakulla to induce his nation 
unto peace more than on an actual hostile invasion. 6

Colonel Byrd’s regiment, after stopping at Sawyers’ on 
Reedy Creek during the months of fall, encamped during the 
winter of 1760-1761 at Samuel Stalnacker’s, near the source of 
The Holston River, and not at Long Island of Holston, as is 
frequently stated by historians. The camp was called Fort 
Attakullakulla, in honor of the Cherokee chief. 7 This spot was 
about nine miles west of the cabin of Stephen Holston at the 
head-spring of the river that bears Holston’s name. From that 
outpost Byrd ventured a diversion—to Philadelphia, where on 
January 27, 1761, he married Miss Mary Willing, of that city. 
His mother wrote to him, February 17: “Your express came 
this morning: … I was so surprized as to cry out Good God

4Letters to Washington, III, 211.
5Capt. Robert Stewart to Washington, October 1760, ibid., 197.
6Attakullakulla (Little Carpenter) and Captain John Stuart arrived at Byrd’s 
encampment on September 14. Learning of the plan of the Overhill Cherokees to 
attack Fort Prince George in South Carolina, Colonel Byrd dispatched one of Attakullakulla’s 
party to alarm those Indians by spreading news of the Virginia forces 
being near. On the 16th, the Colonel wrote by this messenger to the head-warriors 
of the Overhills: “My good brother the Little Carpenter, has delivered to me Capt. 
Stewart and those others of my countrymen … I am building 
forts all the way and propose soon to be in your nation, when I will not leave one 
Indian alive, one town standing, or one grain of corn in all your country if I do 
not find all the white people well when I get there.” So. Car. Gazette, Oct. 11, 1760.
7On his return to his nation Attakullakulla carried from Byrd his terms of peace: 
That Fort Loudoun, all cannon and stores should be delivered up, the fort to be garrisoned 
by Virginia troops, and that other forts in the Overhill Country might be 
erected and so garrisoned. Ibid., Oct. 18.
8Attakullakulla brought to Byrd’s camp on October 1 ten other prisoners of the 
Fort Loudoun garrison. These prisoners reported that Byrd’s peace terms would have 
been accepted by the head-warriors who had even prepared bread for the journey to 
his camp, but were prevented by the unsatisfactory arrival of a French officer, Sieur 
de Lantignac, in the nation with goods and presents from the French, who prevailed 
on most of them to believe that Byrd would put them to death when in his camp. 
Ibid., Dec. 6.
9He had saved Captain John Stuart from massacre at the fall of Fort Loudoun, 
and had led Stuart in safety to this encampment.

is my Son Mar- 
oh! My Son do not 
those Barbarians 
your Life & be- 
safted.”

In June, 1760, the Middle Cherokee leader, James Grant, 
called upon him, as to Monroe, to lay down 
the way of the contest on the Overhill. 
James Adair wrote that Byrd 
off in flourishing 
making a divers 
y the Apalachicola.

Andrew Lewis 
advance guard of the Middle Fork.

On July 18, 1761, 
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during the war. 

Colonel Byrd’s 
, and Attakullakulla 
the peace mission 
misseoomas appointed
is my Son Married & never acquainted me with it! . . . . But oh! My Son do no more I beseech you expose your Self among those Barbarians the Cherokees, as you have so often hazzard’d your Life & been at vast expence to serve an ungrateful People. 18

In June, 1761, this second campaign against the Lower and Middle Cherokees was launched from Charles Town, Colonel James Grant commanding the army of about 2600 men. But to him, as to Montgomery, came no succor from Colonel Byrd by way of the concerted contemporaneous attack by his regiment on the Overhill Cherokees. Byrd again hesitated and dallied. James Adair was with Colonel Grant in the South, leading a band of Chickasaw warriors against the Cherokees, and he thus criticized Byrd’s management: “The Virginia troops kept far off in flourishing parade, without coming to our assistance or making a diversion against those warlike towns which lie beyond the Apalache Mountains.”

Andrew Lewis, major in Byrd’s regiment, on July 6, led an advance guard of three companies to open a road leading down the Middle Fork of Holston to the Long Island.10

On July 18, 1761, Attakullakulla (Little Carpenter) appeared with the Cherokee emperor in Colonel Byrd’s camp, and interceded for peace. He represented that Oconostota, Ostenaco (Outacity), and Standing Turkey who had been active in bringing on and prosecuting the war were now sensible of their error. He disclosed that the war had been instigated by Norther and Southern Indians under French influence. Byrd replied that peace must be made with Colonel Grant. Attakullakulla was accordingly sent with a guard of soldiers to Charles Town, where in a speech of great power and pathos he set forth the great sufferings of his nation, and asked for peace. This chief’s course during the war added force to his appeal which was not denied.

Colonel Byrd from the outset had little heart for the campaign,11 and Attakullakulla was wisely chosen as diplomat for the peace mission. Colonel Byrd had been one of the commissioners appointed in 1756 to treat with the Cherokees for

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19Col. Byrd had reported to Gen. Amherst good roads from the back settlements to the Overhill Towns. Draper Ms., 42Z, 28.
their aid in the war at the North. As a result he and Attakullakulla met in treaty at Broad River in North Carolina. Dr. Andrew Burnaby, an accomplished English clergyman, who traveled through Virginia in 1760, in his *Travels through North America* gives an account, as communicated to him "by one of the gentlemen engaged in the embassy" to the Cherokees, of Attakullakulla’s interposing to save the life of Colonel Byrd. A party of the Cherokees assembled at the treaty ground were incensed by news just received of the treacherous murder of some of their warriors on the frontiers of Virginia. Burnaby says:

"Attakullakulla, or the Little Carpenter, a steady friend of the English, hastened to the ambassadors, apprised them of their danger, and recommended to them to conceal or barricade themselves as well as they could, and not to appear abroad on any account. He then assembled his nation, over whom he possessed great influence, in the council-room; inveighed bitterly against the treachery of the English. . . . "Let us not, however, violate our faith, or the laws of hospitality, by imbruining our hands in the blood of those who are now in our power; they came to us in the confidence of friendship, with belts of wampum to cement a perpetual alliance with us.'" It seems that Saloue, another chief (of the Valley Towns) also stood with Attakullakulla for the protection of the Virginia commissioners.12

In the spring preceding the 1761 campaign, Byrd had urged on Amherst the impracticability of the proposed expedition, only to be prodded by the General and Governor Fauquier to proceed. In July, Amherst gave the Colonel plainly to understand that he was "expected to push forward against the enemy."

On August 1, Byrd advanced the want of carriages and horses as a reason for failure to co-operate with Colonel Grant, and again insisted upon the impracticability of a march into the Cherokee Nation. He reported Attakullakulla’s desire for peace, and resigned his command.

On August 25 Byrd’s doting mother, in ignorance of her son’s resignation, wrote to him in camp: "Mr. Boyd told me he met an Express upon the Road to you from General Amherst. I hope you have received no orders to go to the Indian Towns."

That Gentleman gave me a sad account of the situation of your
incampment. The Dews that fall like rain, the Musquatas and
stinging Gnats out of Number, 'tis no wonder then that your
Army are so sickly.... Would to Heaven this campaign was
over and you returned to your Molly and me."

The soldiers under Byrd had become restive and critical, and
he felt under compulsion to retire, though General Amherst
was insistent that he carry out instructions to go against the
Overhill Cherokees, and advised Byrd not to think of resigning
his command until the service was completed.

It cannot be contended that the regiment, consisting of six
hundred men, largely from the Valley, was inadequate. It was
an excellent military organization. In March, 1760, the officers
had presented a petition to the House of Burgesses in which
they mention its reputation: "That by close Application, and
a steady Perseverance in the punctual Execution of their Duty,
such good Order, Regularity, and strict Discipline (which can
alone constitute good troops) have long been maintained in the
regiment so as to have attracted the Particular Notice and
Approval of the best Judges; acquired a Superiority over all
other Provincial Troops and rendered it universally admired
by all with whom it did Duty: This Assertion is clearly evinced,
by the behaviour of its officers in the many Actions it has been
engaged in, and the signal Bravery of several, whose gallant
Conduct and Glorious Deaths redound so much to the Honor
of this Colony.""14

Lieutenant-Colonel Adam Stephen,15 a man competent to the
task, succeeded to the command of the regiment; and in Sep-
tember, 1761, an order for the march southward was given at
Stalnacker's. The major was Andrew Lewis; among the cap-
tains were John McNeill, Nathaniel Gist, Jethro Sumner, and
Alexander Boyd; and among the ensigns were Philip Love and
Henry Timberlake.16 Dr. Thomas Walker was in charge of the
commissary department. Two of the privates were Gilbert
Christian, later founder of what is now the City of Kingsport,
who then no doubt first saw its site, and Richard Pearis.

14Yo. Mag. of History, XXXVIII, 359-353.
15Draper MSS., 422, 57.
16For a sketch of Colonel Stephen, who became a major-general in the Revolution,
see Samuel C. Williams, ed., Lieut. Henry Timberlake's Memoirs (Johnson City,
1927), 53.
A North Carolina force under Colonel Hugh Waddell, consisting of about four hundred men, joined the command of Stephen, coming by way of the Moravian Town (Winston-Salem) where on September 24 they camped for several days and laid in a supply of flour and meal. "Some of the men mutinied, having resolved not to march out of North Carolina. The officers met out punishment; happily none were put to death."\(^7\)

A few days march brought the main command to Long Island of Holston. It is highly probable that, after cutting the military road, Major Andrew Lewis had already begun the construction of a fort at that place. He had erected a fort for the Virginians (distinct from Fort Loudoun) on the Little Tennessee River in 1756, and was, therefore, not without experience and skill in the construction of a stockaded fort. Richard Pearis had aided Lewis in the earlier work,\(^8\) and doubtless was his assistant in the work at Long Island. By the middle of November, the garrison of the main command participating, the fort was nearly completed.

The stockade was given the name of Fort Robinson, in honor of John Robinson (1704-1766) of "Mount Pleasant," King and Queen County, who at one time was a partner of Colonel Byrd in the lead mine at Fort Chiswell. He was an alumnus of William and Mary College and had long been a leading politician, "the most influential man in Virginia." He was elected speaker of the House of Burgesses in 1737, and the esteem in which he was held was manifest in his re-election continuously, and usually unanimously, until 1765. He also had long service as treasurer of the colony.\(^9\)

Fort Robinson was located within a mile of the crossing-

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\(^{8}\)Koons, The Virginia Frontier, 1754-1763, p. 131.

\(^{9}\)Robinson was the son of John Robinson, one time acting governor of Virginia, and president of the council. "He was an ideal representative of his class—rich, generous, kind, and ever ready to oblige his fellow members of the ruling faction." Beveridge's Marshall, I, 60; Henry, Patrick Henry, I, 71. Byrd was becoming heavily involved financially, and it was in the power of the treasurer of the colony to favor him.
For Colonel Hugh Waddell, con-
mens, joined the command of
the Moravian Town (Winston-
sox), while they camped for several days and meal. “Some of the men
marched out of North Carolina.
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oravians in North Carolina (Raleigh,
ghrough Salem the first week in De-
tenant-colonel under Waddell. Ibid.,
, Papers of Archibald D. Murphey
, 315, 448, 592, 622. The regiment
rom Salem.
p. 131.

, one time acting governor of Vir-
an ideal representative of his class—
ge his fellow members of the ruling
Patrick Henry, 7, 71. Byrd was be-
in the power of the treasurer of the

place of the Holston. The war-trail of the Cherokees crossed,
by a ford, the North Fork of Holston near its junction with the
South Fork. Thus, it is indicated that the site of the fort is
where, or very near where, the marker this day unveiled stands.
The forest about the fort was cleared; the stockade was built
on a large scale, with proper bastions and thick walls, and the
 customary gate, so spiked with heavy nails that the wood was
covered. Within the enclosure were storehouses for food and
munitions, these houses having chimneys.

Haywood and Ramsey both fell into the error of ascribing
the erection of this fort to the year 1758—three years too early.

To this fort about the middle of November came a brother of
Attakullakulla as an ambassador from the king or emperor
of the Cherokees to treat for peace. He was accompanied by
about four hundred of his people. The diplomatic Attakullakulla
was, no doubt, the efficient agency in inducing Colonel
Stephen to grant the prayer in a treaty entered into on
November 19, 1761. The address of Conockotocoe (Standing Turkey),
the emperor, has been preserved, though in a somewhat
mutilated state, in the papers of Colonel Stephen in the Manuscript
Division of the Library of Congress. This document, never
before printed, reads:

From Choto September 1761

Conockotocoe’s (constituted Emperor of the Cherokee
Nation, By the great Warrior of Choto after Old Hop’s
Death and of the Opposite faction with the Little Car-
penter) Speech sent in by the Little Carpenter’s Brother.

Colonel Byrd, Now I speak to you, and send a Messenger,
the same as if I came myself. I have sent the Carpenter
& nine or ten of our head men to Charlestown to make a
firm Peace with our Brother the Governor: a Peace never
to be broke, for all our young men are tired of fighting with
their Elder Brother the English. Brother, I have set the
nation straight; I hope you will set yours the same, and we

20 Williams, Timberlake’s Memoirs, 124.
21 Ibid., John Haywood, History of Tennessee, 41.
22 In the writer’s reprint of Timberlake’s Memoirs the statement was ventured
that Timberlake’s reference to the Emperor “Kanagatucko” (as he gave the name)
was to Old Hop (Oconashito or Connecurtee). But it now seems clear that Old Hop,
the emperor, was dead and succeeded by Standing Turkey. Ramsey, Drake, and
others mistake Oconostota, the Great Warrior, for Old Hop.
shall live like Brothers as formerly, and not be akilling of one another.

We have had a good Talk with our Brother the Governor in Charlestown & now the Path is streight, and our Hearts are Clear, & the Chain is bright that has been so long Black; and we shall live like one People as formerly we did.

I am very sorry for the war that has been between us & our Elder Brother the English, but now our Path is opened and the Sky is Clear, (unintelligible) & never will fight with the English any more, but live like Brothers as formerly & trade as usual.

Great King George will be very angry with us, for what has been done, but now the Governor in Charlestown & we have made a streight Path once more, & we are all very glad of it.

We are now Building a Strong House, and the very first of our People, that does any damage to the English, shall be put in there, until the English fetch them, & do them as they think proper. This you may believe for it is spoke by one and all & the Hatchett that has been so long at War is now buried under the ground, never to be seen by the English again.

At the request of the red emperor two soldiers of the regiment were sent to the Cherokee towns in order to evidence and cement the friendship pledged in the treaty. Ensign Henry Timberlake and Sergeant Thomas Sumter volunteered for the service, and set out in a canoe on the Holston for a water journey to the Cherokee towns. An account of their experience on this journey, among the Overhill Cherokees, and later in England where they conducted a delegation of the Indians to the court of George III, is preserved in Henry Timberlake’s Memoirs. Sumter, in after years, was a brigadier-general in the Revolutionary War and a Senator from South Carolina.

Following the negotiation of the treaty, the major number of the troops were marched back to Virginia, Captain John McNeill and his company being left to garrison the fort. However, this company was itself withdrawn in a short time and the fort evacuated as useless during the peace thus forced upon the Cherokees. It was never again occupied by a military force, so far as records show.
Fort Robinson on the Holston

Two men on this expedition had intimate knowledge of the locality and region before the campaign: Captain Nathaniel Gist and Private Richard Pearis had been traders to the Overhill towns as early as 1764, trading from Long Island. Both of these men had set envious eyes on that fertile island in the Holston and had fallen out in rivalry for Virginia grants of its attractive acres.23

The beauty and fertility of the valley of the Holston proved a temptation to some men of the regiment as a region for settlement. Gilbert Christian and William Anderson, accompanied by John Sawyers, John Anderson, Robert Christian, James McNair, and Nathan Page, shortly after the troops were disbanded, explored the valley.24 They crossed the North Fork at the old ford and penetrated as far down as Big Creek in the present County of Hawkins, where they met a large party of Indians, and turned back.25

It is the writer’s belief that William Bean was a trooper on this campaign or learned of the country from another who was, and was led to settle on the waters of the Watauga in consequence. The region could not long be held locked against settlement by the hardy Virginians who were ever ready to advance civilization into a wilderness so enticing. The Byrd-Stephen campaign and Fort Robinson constituted a spear-head, the thrust of which opened the way to the first advance of settlement into the region which we of today with pride call our homeland.

23Gov. Dinwiddie to Pears, Aug. 2, 1754, Dinwiddie Papers, I, 266; Ibid., I, 77. In a petition laid before the Virginia General Assembly, Gist claimed that he had purchased the island in 1761 from the Cherokees, and asked confirmation of his title. Lewis P. Summers, History of Southwest Virginia, 83.
24Christian, Sawyers and others of this party spent the winter of 1761-1762 at Long Island, near the mouth of Rocky Creek, built cabins and planted corn in the spring of 1762, but abandoned the improvements as they were found to be on the Pendleton grant of 1766. Family History of Sawyers, 10; letter of George Christian to Draper, Dec. 4, 1843.
25James G. M. Ramsey, Anceals of Tennessee (Charleston, 1853), 93. George Christian, son of Gilbert Christian, is authority for the statement that the party, intending to go down the rivers to the Mississippi, reached the junction of the Clinch and Tennessee, met a party of Indians and were turned back.