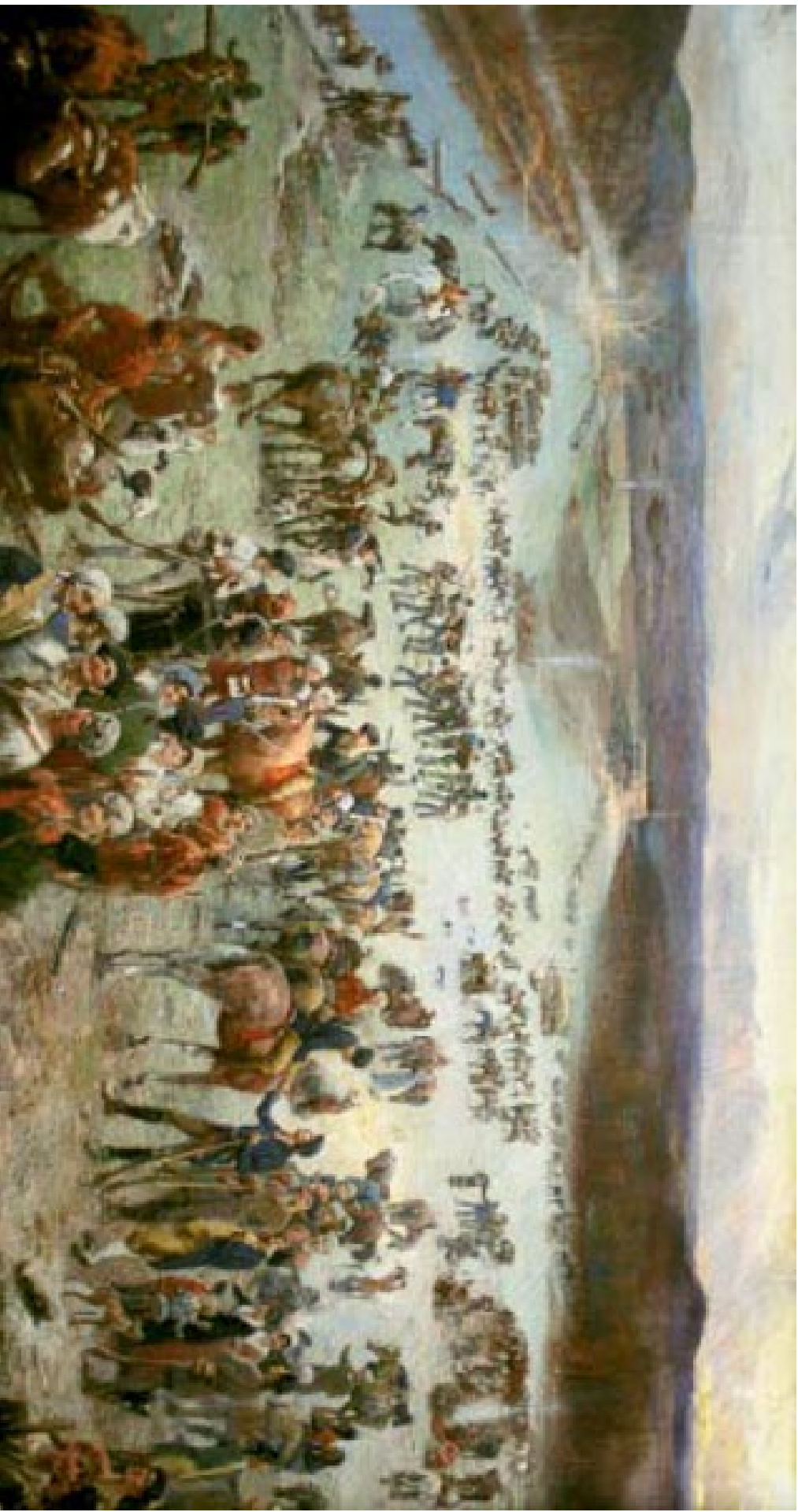


Section 3:

Battle of King's Mountain



“Gathering of the Overmountain Men at Sycamore Shoals”

Source: Lloyd Branson, “Gathering of the Overmountain Men at Sycamore Shoals”, oil, c. 1898-1915.

Courtesy of the Tennessee State Museum, Nashville

Excerpt: John Sevier: Tennessee's First Hero

Sevier's men then paused to hear the Reverend Samuel Doak deliver a sermon, which became another source of legendary folklore. A Presbyterian minister and pioneer, Doak was well known among the settlers of the Holston Valley. The son of Irish immigrants, Doak, a native Virginian, had studied theology at the Academy of Liberty Hall—now Washington and Lee University—before attending an academy in Maryland. Doak then entered the College of New Jersey—now Princeton University—where he graduated in 1775. He assumed his first pastorate in Abingdon, Virginia, and, by 1780, had moved to Washington County, where he founded the earliest schools and many of the Presbyterian churches in the region. There he formed Salem Church and St. Martin's Academy in 1783, the first chartered school in the region. In 1795, St. Martin's Academy became Washington College, named "in honor of the illustrious President of the United States," George Washington—the first institution to bear his name.¹⁷⁸

According to tradition, Sevier asked his friend Doak to conduct religious services for the men gathered at Sycamore Shoals in advance of their march to engage the British forces at King's Mountain. On September 26, 1780, Doak stood before the Overmountain Men and delivered a sermon inspired by the biblical story of the Israelite farmer Gideon and his "Valiant Three Hundred." Gideon's small army defeated a vastly superior Midianite army by the sheer force of God's will. Doak hoped this story would stir the Overmountain Men to victory over the Tories at King's Mountain.¹⁷⁹

The distinguished historian J.G.M. Ramsey knew Doak well. Ramsey attended Washington College in 1813 while Doak served as the vice-president of that institution.¹⁸⁰ In a letter to Draper dated July 12, 1880, nearly a century after the Battle of King's Mountain, Ramsey testified to the truth of Doak's words. He wrote:

It is an invariable tradition all over East Tennessee that on the point of the march of the rifleman from Sycamore Shoals on Watauga, the troops engaged in divine service and were addressed by a Presbyterian clergyman then present. This minister is said to have been Reverend Samuel Doak...The tradition has preserved this further that in his prayer or address he used the words or petition "Teach our hands to war and our fingers to fight," and also "The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" I have heard this tradition from my boyhood and from all my knowledge of the man I believe it substantially true.¹⁸¹

A year later, Draper sought to validate Ramsey's claims in his book, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes*. He recorded, "'This,' writes the venerable historian, Dr. J.G.M. Ramsey, 'is the tradition of the country, and I fully believe it.'"¹⁸²

Many years later, in 1968, Pat Alderman published perhaps the most complete account of Doak's sermon in his book *One Heroic Hour at King's Mountain*. Alderman obtained the story "through the courtesy of Mrs. Rollo H. Henley, Washington College, Tennessee...taken from the scrapbook of her father, J. Fain Anderson."¹⁸³ As a local historian, Anderson wrote several articles on East Tennessee history for the *Knoxville Tribune* and other newspapers and maintained membership in the East Tennessee Historical Society.¹⁸⁴

Within Anderson's scrapbook, Alderman found what he believed to be the very words Doak preached to the Overmountain Men on September 26, 1780. In fact, in his book, Alderman stated that he copied Doak's sermon and prayer "verbatim" from the scrapbook, though it remains unclear from this account whether the words actually came from Anderson himself. Nevertheless, Alderman treated Anderson's account of Doak's sermon as if Doak transcribed his own words on the very day he delivered them. Filled with patriotic fervor, this version of Doak's sermon contained several phrases that seemed tailor-made for Anderson's contemporaries rather than for the Overmountain Men themselves:

My countrymen, you are about to set out on an expedition which is full of hardships and dangers, but one in which the Almighty will attend you.

The Mother Country has her hands upon you, these American Colonies, and takes that for which our fathers planted their homes in the wilderness—OUR LIBERTY.

Taxation without representation and the quartering of soldiers in the homes of our people without their consent are evidence that the Crown of England would take from its American Subjects the last vestige of Freedom.

Your brethren across the mountains are crying like Macedonia unto your help. God forbid that you shall refuse to hear and answer their call—but the call of your brethren is not all. The enemy is marking hither to destroy your homes.

Brave men, you are not unacquainted with battle. Your hands have already been taught to war and your fingers to fight. You have wrested these beautiful valleys of the Holston and Watauga from the savage hand. Will you tarry now until the other enemy carries fire and sword to your very

doors? No, it shall not be. Go forth then in the strength of your manhood to the aid of your brethren, the defense of your liberty and the protection of your homes. And may the God of Justice be with you and give you victory.

Let us pray.

Almighty and gracious God! Thou hast been the refuge and strength of Thy people in all ages. In time of sorest need we have learned to come to Thee—our Rock and our Fortress. Thou knowest the dangers and snares that surround us on march and in battle.

Thou knowest the dangers that constantly threaten the humble, but well beloved homes, which Thy servants have left behind them.

O, in Thine infinite mercy, save us from the cruel hand of the savage, and of tyrant. Save the unprotected homes while fathers and husbands and sons are far away fighting for freedom and helping the oppressed.

Thou, who promised to protect the sparrow in its flight, keep ceaseless watch, by day and by night, over our loved ones. The helpless woman and little children, we commit to Thy care. Thou wilt not leave them or forsake them in times of loneliness and anxiety and terror.

O, God of Battle, arise in Thy might. Avenge the slaughter of Thy people. Confound those who plot for our destruction. Crown this mighty effort with victory, and smite those who exalt themselves against liberty and justice and truth.

*Help us as good soldiers to wield the SWORD OF THE LORD AND GIDEON.
Amen.¹⁸⁵*

Doak's words surely stirred the hearts of the Overmountain Men on that day. The historical fact remains, however, that while Doak did speak forcefully to spur the men to action, only Ramsey's "traditions" and Anderson's word offer evidence of what exactly he said. These men based the record of Doak's sermon on recollections—not notes—of the men present for the sermon and on stories passed down through many generations of descendants. Writers committed the sermon to paper many years after the Battle of King's Mountain, at a time when the chroniclers of Tennessee history sought to canonize Sevier and his fellow Patriots, believing these great heroes had not received full credit for their roles in turning the tide of the American Revolution.

Another legend that emerged from the Battle of King's Mountain centered on a long rifle nicknamed "Sweet Lips." According to oral tradition, "Sweet Lips" drove a bullet between Patrick Ferguson's eyes with deadly accuracy and ultimately struck down the British army in the southern theater. Draper chronicled the legend of "Sweet Lips" in his book, *King's Mountain and Its Heroes*. He wrote:

One of Sevier's men, named Gilleland, who had received several wounds, and was well-nigh exhausted, seeing the advance of Ferguson and his party, attempted to arrest the career of the great leader, but his gun snapped; when he called out to Robert Young, of the same regiment—"There's Ferguson, shoot him!" "I'll try and see what Sweet Lips can do," muttered Young, as he drew a sharp sight, discharging his rifle, when Ferguson fell from his horse, and his associates were either killed or driven back. Several rifle bullets had taken effect on Ferguson, apparently about the same time, and a number claimed the honor of having shot the fallen chief—among them, one Kusick, another of Sevier's sharpshooters. Certain it is, that Ferguson received six or eight wounds, one of them through the head. He was unconscious when he fell, and did not long survive. It was in the region of Sevier's column that he received his fatal shots; and not very far, it would seem, from where Colonel Shelby had posted Ensing [sic] Robert Campbell to watch the motions of the enemy so strongly ensconced behind the range of rocks.¹⁸⁶

From Draper's account, it cannot be determined with absolute certainty which gun felled Ferguson on that day. Other descriptions of the scene named Darling Jones as the man who fired the fatal shot, although pension records seem to contradict those accounts. Nevertheless, as time passed, the indelible story of "Sweet Lips" captured the imagination of the chroniclers of the Battle of King's Mountain. One account published in the *Johnson City Press* declared, "When Sweet Lips' metallic lips so spoke on that day of patriotic struggle, its voice was heard throughout the entire British armies and turned the tide of the revolution."¹⁸⁷

Even country music performer Louis Marshall Jones, better known as "Grandpa Jones," celebrated the legend of "Sweet Lips" in song. Accompanied by his famous banjo, Grandpa Jones immortalized "Sweet Lips" and the Battle of King's Mountain in 1973 with a musical tribute. Throughout the song's creative lyrics, Jones wove a tale describing the moments leading up to the Battle of King's Mountain and the battle itself. In the chorus, Jones credited a Tennessee girl with inspiring the name of the rifle that struck the decisive blow for freedom:

*Sweet Lips was a rifle named for a girl in Tennessee.
When Sweet Lips spoke,
The chains that bound us broke.
She's gone and did her part for liberty.¹⁸⁸*

Sermon and Prayer

by Samuel Doak

to the Overmountain Men at Sycamore Shoals, September 1780

- Part 1 "My countrymen, you are about to set out on an expedition which is full of hardships and dangers, but one in which the Almighty will attend you."
- Part 2 "Taxation without representation and the quartering of soldiers in the homes of our people without their consent are evidence that the Crown of England would take from its American Subjects the last vestige of Freedom."
- Part 3 "The enemy is marching hither to destroy your own homes."
- Part 4 "Brave men, you are not unacquainted with battle. Your hands have already been to war and your fingers to fight."
- Part 5 "You have wrested these beautiful valleys of the Holston, and Watauga from the savage hand."
- Part 6 "Will you tarry now until the other enemy carries fire and sword to your very doors?"
- Part 7 "Go forth then in the strength of your manhood to the aid of your brethren, the defense of your liberty and the protection of your home."

Vocabulary List

1. **Expedition:** a journey for a specific purpose.
2. **Hardships:** suffering and experiencing a lack of needed sustenance to live.
3. **Dangers:** exposure or liability to injury, pain, harm, or loss
4. **Almighty:** the Being perfect in power, wisdom, and goodness who is worshipped as creator and ruler of the universe
5. **Taxation:** money people pay to their government to pay for services
6. **Representation:** having someone elected to speak, act, or vote for other people
7. **Quartering:** providing housing for soldiers.
8. **Vestige:** the smallest quantity or trace.
9. **Freedom:** ability to move or act freely: the state of being released from something usually unpleasant
10. **Enemy:** one that tries to hurt or overthrow or that seeks the failure of another
11. **Hither:** to this place here
12. **Unacquainted:** unknown to somebody or to each other
13. **Savage:** without civilizing influences; "barbarian invaders"; "barbaric practices"; "a savage people"; "fighting is crude and uncivilized especially if the weapons are efficient"-Margaret Meade; "wild tribes"
14. **Liberty:** the freedom to think or act without being constrained by necessity or force
15. **Loyalist:** a colonist who was loyal to Great Britain; did not support the American Revolution

Sources

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/>, *Tennessee Through Time*,

<http://dictionary.kids.net.au/word/savage>