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THE WATAUGANS AND THE CHEROKEE INDIANS IN 1776

By PHILIP M. HAMER

The attack that the Cherokee Indians made upon the Wataugans in July of 1776 has been ascribed by Tennessee's historians to the machinations of British agents. In the light of evidence that is now available, this explanation seems not to be correct.

John Stuart, who appeared earlier in the history of Tennessee as an officer at Fort Loudoun, was British Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Southern Department. Soon after the Revolution began he had been compelled to flee from South Carolina to St. Augustine in the loyal province of East Florida, but he nevertheless advised the Indians that they should refrain from any participation in the conflict between the British king and his rebellious subjects in America.¹ Early in October, 1775, however, he received from General Thomas Gage, his superior commander in Boston, the following order:²

You will now still have it in your power to hold a Correspondence with the Indians, which I beg you may improve to the greatest advantage; and even when opportunity offers to make them take arms against his Majesty's Enemies, and to distress them all in their power, for no terms is now to be kept with them. The Rebels have themselves open'd the Door; they have brought down all the Savages they could against us here, who with their Rifle men are continually firing on our advanced Sentries.

In reply Stuart wrote that he would pay "the strictest attention" to the order that he had received. He explained, nevertheless, that a great many of the frontier inhabitants of Carolina were loyal to the British government. "In such circumstances," he continued, "I conceive, that an indiscriminate attack, by Indians,

¹Philip M. Hamer, "John Stuart's Indian Policy during the Early Months of the American Revolution," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Dec., 1930.

²British Public Record Office, Colonial Office Papers, Class 5, vol. 76, p. 381. These papers, which have been used in the form of transcripts in the Library of Congress, will hereafter be referred to as C. O., 5.

would be contrary to your Excellency's idea; and might do much harm. But I shall dispose them to join in executing any concerted plan; and to act with, and assist, their well disposed neighbours."³

From other letters that Stuart wrote at this time and subsequently it is clear that he interpreted his orders from General Gage as meaning only that the Indians should be prepared to be used in cooperation with armed forces of Loyalists or British regulars against the armed forces of the Revolutionists. He planned no incitement of the savages to indiscriminate attacks upon the frontier settlers. To his deputy in the Cherokee Nation, Alexander Cameron, he wrote:⁴

I am now to acquaint You that I have received Instructions to employ the Indians in my Department to distress His Majesty's Rebellious Subjects by all practicable Means, that Government and the Constitution may be reestablished in the distracted provinces.

Altho' I do not construe this Instruction as an Order to attack the frontier Inhabitants of the provinces indiscriminately; by which Means the innocent might suffer and the guilty escape, yet in Consequence of it my Duty requires that no Time be lost in employing the Indians of the Different Nations to give all the Assistance in their Power to such of His Majesty's faithful Subjects as may already have taken or shall hereafter take Arms, to resist the lawless Oppression of the Rebels and their Attempts to overturn the Constitution and oppose His Majesty's Authority.

In order to prepare the Indians for service with the British, the superintendent determined to send his brother, Henry Stuart, on a special mission. He accordingly instructed his brother to proceed to Pensacola and from there send word to the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians of the order that had been received from General Gage. From Pensacola, with powder sufficient to give him "greater weight and influence," he was to go to the Upper Creek Indians and then to the Overhill Cherokee. In both of these nations he was to communicate General Gage's order to John Stuart's deputies, drive away all supporters of the Revolution, and attempt to engage the Indians to act, when called upon,

³John Drayton, *Memoirs of the American Revolution* (Charleston, 1821), I, 297-98.
⁴Dec. 16, 1775, C. O., 5, vol. 77, p. 55.

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strictest attention" obtained, nevertheless, of Carolina were circumstances," he attack, by Indians,

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in the king's service. He was given, however, this final warning: "You will understand that an indiscriminate Attack upon the Provinces is not Meant, but to act in the Execution of any concerted Plan and to assist his Majesty's Troops and Friends in distressing the Rebels and bringing them to a sense of their Duty."⁵

Henry Stuart proceeded to Pensacola and then to Mobile. Here he met Chiucanacina, better known to the whites as the Dragging Canoe, a Cherokee chieftain who had come with others of his tribe to "enquire into the cause of the present quarrel and disorders in the Colonies and the Reason why their supplies of Ammunition and goods (which were formerly brought from Georgia and Carolina) were stopt." Henry Stuart attempted to explain the nature of the contest between the colonists and the British and gave assurances that, though the Revolutionists had reduced the Indians to distress by stopping their trade, the superintendent was sending them ammunition so that they might supply their families with food by hunting and defend themselves against their enemies.

After some delay, finding that it would be impossible to go immediately to the towns of the Creek Nation, Henry Stuart determined to go first to the Cherokee. With thirty horse-loads of ammunition he went from Mobile, by way of the Chickasaw country, to the Tennessee River where the Dragging Canoe and about eighty Cherokee patiently awaited his arrival. With these Indians he proceeded up the river for the Overhill Cherokee towns which were located in the present southeastern Tennessee. With him also, from the Chickasaw, came Captain Nathaniel Gist, an officer in Virginia's regiment in the Cherokee War in 1760, a man "Active & Resolute," as Henry Stuart described him, who "expressed a great Inclination to take a part in the Service of Government." On April 24, after a tedious journey of fifty-five days that was enlivened by an attack by enemy Indians, the party arrived at Toquah on the Little Tennessee.⁶

Soon after his arrival, Henry Stuart met many of the headmen in conference at Chote. He was received, wrote Cameron, "with the greatest marks of Respect, Five Colours were displayed on

⁵John Stuart to Henry Stuart, Oct. 24, 1775, *ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶Henry Stuart's journey is described in his letters to John Stuart, May 7, 1776, C. O., 5, vol. 77, p. 285, and Aug. 25, 1776, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, X, 763-85. In the Library of Congress transcript of this document the name of the Dragging Canoe is spelled, as in this article, "Chiucanacina."

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.⁶ et many of the headmen , wrote Cameron, "with ours were displayed on

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the Town House, a party Naked and painted was Detatched from the main Body with two Drums and Twelve Eagle Tails to meet him at the End of the Square where they danced and told their War Exploits by Turns." Guns were fired and then Stuart and Cameron "were taken hold of and Supported with a Beloved man under each arm to the Town house."⁷ The Indians gave assurances that the fact that some of their warriors had met, in South Carolina, with commissioners appointed by Congress did not signify that they had been won over to support of the Revolutionists. An oath of loyalty was administered to all white men in the Nation. The British agents were convinced that the Cherokee would fight when called upon, and they urged the superintendent to send ammunition not only for the Indians, but for the frontier Loyalists with whom it was hoped the Cherokee could cooperate. Henry Stuart wrote: "The young men I know will be ready at the first word but to employ them before Something Effectual can be done may be attended with bad Consequences."⁸ Cameron commented: "I would not willingly have the Indians to Committ any Hostilities before some of the Kings Troops were Actualy in Arms in N^o Carolina S^o Carolina or Georgia."⁹

The difficulty with which these two agents of the British government were confronted was not that of securing from the Cherokee promises of aid when it should be requested, but of restraining the young warriors, at least, from making an immediate attack upon the men, women, and children, the Tories and the Whigs, who had settled in what is now northeastern Tennessee on lands that the Cherokee said were theirs.

Not many more than a hundred miles to the northeast of the Overhill Cherokee towns on the Little Tennessee were several hundred frontiersmen who had settled in the fertile valleys of the Holston, Watauga, and Nollichucky rivers. The first to come to the Watauga had erected their cabins as early as 1769, and the Nollichucky region had been settled by 1772. They were an advance guard of those restless, land-hungry frontiersmen who could not be restrained by proclamations of the British king and royal governors or later by Congress from taking from the Indians the lands that they desired.

⁷Cameron to John Stuart, May 7, 1776, C. O., 5, vol. 77, p. 273.

⁸Henry Stuart to John Stuart, May 7, 1776, *loc. cit.*

⁹Cameron to John Stuart, May 7, 1776, *loc. cit.*

At the treaty of Hard Labour in 1768, in pursuance of a policy of the British government, John Stuart had agreed with the Cherokee Indians upon a boundary line back of the Carolinas and Virginia beyond which white men would not be permitted to settle. Already, however, men had built their cabins in the upper Holston Valley, to the west of that line, and in 1770, at the treaty of Lochaber, a westward extension of that line was secured that was expected to leave no white settlers on Indian lands. According to the terms of this treaty, the Indian boundary line was to run westwardly from a point where the North Carolina Indian line met the Virginia boundary near the New River, along the present-day boundary between Virginia and North Carolina and Virginia and Tennessee, to within six miles of the Great Island of the Holston (the present Kingsport), and from there northwardly to the Ohio. Late in the following year John Donelson and Alexander Cameron marked this line, and it was then that the Wataugans, who seem to have thought that they had settled within the boundaries of Virginia, discovered that they were south of the boundary line, within North Carolina's chartered limits, but on land that by the king's orders and the treaty of Lochaber had been reserved to the Indians.¹⁰

The Wataugans were resourceful. Being outside the jurisdiction of any legally established government, they made a government for themselves. In 1774 the governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore, in protesting against the refusal of the British government to extend Virginia's jurisdiction to the Ohio and the consequent encouragement to those who might settle there to govern themselves, referred to the Wataugans in the following words:¹¹

In effect we have an example of the very case, there being actually a set of People in the back part of the Colony bordering on the Cherokee Country, who finding they could not obtain titles to the Land they fancied, under any of the neighbouring Governments, have settled upon it without, and contented themselves with becoming in a manner tributary to the Indians, and have appointed Magistrates and framed Laws for their present occasions and to all intents and purposes erected themselves into

¹⁰Clarence W. Alvord, *The Mississippi Valley in British Politics* (Cleveland, 1917), II, 61-89; Archibald Henderson, *The Conquest of the Old Southwest* (New York, 1920), pp. 191-4.

¹¹Dunmore to Dartmouth, May 16, 1774, C. O., 5, vol. 1352, p. 141.

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pursuance of a policy agreed with the Cherokee Carolinas and Virginia permitted to settle. in the upper Holston at the treaty of Loch- was secured that was Indian lands. According ndary line was to run Carolina Indian line ver, along the present- Carolina and Virginia eat Island of the Hol- e northwardly to the nelson and Alexander that the Wataugans, led within the bound- outh of the boundary ts, but on land that er had been reserved

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though an inconsiderable yet a Seperate State, the Consequences of which may prove hereafter detrimental to the peace and security of the other Colonies; it, at least, Sets a dangerous example to the people of America of forming governments distinct from and independent of His Majesty's Authority.

As for their lands, though Cameron ordered them to leave, the Wataugans secured a lease from the Indians.¹² Years later, in 1776, the Cherokee version of this transaction was thus reported:¹³

They said that when Mr. Cameron ran the line of Virginia there were people who had set themselves down on this side the Boundary Line; they were ordered to remove off but they begged as their crops were then on the ground that they might be allowed to reap them and that they would certainly remove the Spring following; some of them went away but others and more people came in their room; they at last brought goods and prevailed on some of their people to give leases; that many of them were against their staying on the Land, But that the people who brought the goods told them that they would stay on the land whether they took the goods or not and now that the time has expired which they had to stay on the land, they pretend that they purchased it . . . Some of the Traders who were present at these transactions affirm this to be a true state of the case and that they believe that under a pretence of taking Leases and Receipts for Rent they had got deeds signed.

Whatever the means whereby the Wataugans, as well as Jacob Brown of the Nollichucky settlement, secured their leases, the Cherokee were dissatisfied. As early as January 20, 1770, John Stuart reported: "As the Virginians are making great encroachments on the Lands of the Cherokees, it is hard to tell how long our present tranquility may last."¹⁴ Four years later he wrote to Governor Martin of North Carolina:¹⁵

That nation is still extreamly uneasy at the encroachments of the white people on their hunting Grounds at

¹²John Haywood, *The Civil and Political History of the State of Tennessee* (reprint, Nashville, 1891), p. 55.

¹³Henry Stuart to John Stuart, Aug. 25, 1776, *loc. cit.*, p. 768.

¹⁴Stuart to Haldimand, Haldimand Papers (transcripts in Canadian Archives), vol. 4, p. 93.

¹⁵*Colonial Records of North Carolina*, IX, 825.

Wataga River, where a very large Settlement is formed upwards of fifty miles beyond the established Boundary, and as I am apprehensive that it consists of Emigrants from your province to which it is contiguous I must beg your Excellency's Interposition to endeavour to prevail on them to remove otherwise the consequences may in a little time prove very fatal. I have in the mean time ordered an Interpreter with a party of principal Indians to warn them to remove within a certain time, and should they then neglect to move off, I am much afraid it will be impossible to restrain the Indians from taking redress themselves by robbing and perhaps murdering some of them.

Martin accordingly issued a proclamation ordering the inhabitants of Watauga and Nollichucky to remove from the Cherokee lands.¹⁶ Neither this proclamation nor an order from Cameron to remove within ten days¹⁷ produced the desired results. The frontiersmen replied that they had leased the land and would not remove from it.¹⁸ A year later, in March, 1775, Richard Henderson purchased Transylvania from the Cherokee Indians at the treaty of Sycamore Shoals. Emboldened by this example, the people of the future Tennessee purchased the lands that for years they had been occupying.¹⁹

The Cherokee, meanwhile, had been restless. There had been some mutual outrages on the frontier. In 1774 it was feared for a time that the Cherokee would join the Shawnee Indians in their war against the Virginians. In 1776 Henry Stuart found abundant evidence of a desire of the young warriors to drive the white men from their lands.

At Mobile, early in 1776, the Dragging Canoe had complained to Henry Stuart that Virginians and North Carolinians had made settlements on the lands of his people and that the Cherokee "were almost surrounded by White People, that they had but a small spot of ground left for them to stand upon and that it seemed to be the Intention of the White People to destroy them from being a people." In reply Henry Stuart had explained that these encroachments "were made contrary to the Kings Orders, that

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 982.

¹⁷Cameron to Stuart, Apr. 12, 1774, Haldimand Papers (transcripts in Canadian Archives), vol. 12, p. 359.

¹⁸Cameron to Stuart, June 3, 1774, C. O., 5, vol. 75, p. 347.

¹⁹Archibald Henderson, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-25.

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affairs were in such a situation at this time that they seemed to trample on his Authority and that we could not do anything with them but that we hoped things would not continue long so." He also reminded the Cherokee warrior that the Indians were to blame "for making private bargains for their Lands" in violation of the advice that their superintendent had given them. To this the Dragging Canoe replied that these bargains had been made only by some of the old men who were "too old to hunt and who by their Poverty had been induced to sell their Land but that for his part he had a great many young fellows that would support him and that were determined to have their Land." As they proceeded up the Tennessee River, Henry Stuart found that the Indians repeatedly talked of the whites who were living south of the boundary line and declared their determination to drive them off. On the river they met several boats with white people bound from the Holston region to Natchez. These emigrants told the Indians that the frontiersmen talked of settling as far south as the French Broad River and had declared that if the Cherokee should oppose them they would drive them from their towns. This further aroused the Indians of Stuart's party who sent off messengers to their friends with the result that by the time the towns were reached "nothing was talked of but War, to the no small uneasiness and discontent of the most thinking and sensible part of the Nation."²⁰

To the assembled chiefs, soon after his arrival, Henry Stuart made a vigorous protest against the proposed attack upon the frontier settlers. "I told them," he reported, "... that there were many poor ignorant people on their Lands who were made to believe that the Lands were legally purchased and that they thought the Cherokees had no objections to their Settling them ... That if they should attack these people that they themselves had been the means of bringing on their Land they would draw on themselves the Resentment of every body." He urged them to prevent the sending out of a war party that was being planned, for "that would doubtless involve their Nation in Ruin." He promised that he would write to the white settlers and attempt to induce them to remove. To this the Indians agreed, and Isaac Thomas, a trader, was sent with a letter from John Stuart and

²⁰Henry Stuart to John Stuart, May 7 and Aug. 25, *loc. cit.*

Alexander Cameron and a "talk" from the Indians to the inhabitants of Watauga and Nollichucky.²¹

The letter that Thomas carried was dated May 7 and began with this assurance: "Humanity and a sincere desire to preserve innocent and wrong informed people from the great danger that seems to threaten them are our only motives for writing to you at this time." It continued with a warning that the Indians were greatly discontented because of the settlements upon their land and probably would have attacked before this had it not been for the restraining influence of Stuart and Cameron. It offered land in West Florida to those who would be willing to remove to that region. It concluded: "Tho Nothing in our power shall be wanting to prevent the Indians from [doing] you any injury We can have no hopes of any application of ours in Your behalf having any effect should not your answers prove Satisfactory. The Indians expect that you will remove in twenty days."²²

On the night of May 11, Isaac Thomas arrived with this letter at the home of William Bean, an inhabitant of Watauga. On the following day the alarming intelligence contained in it was communicated to a number of the settlers who gathered about Thomas. The trader assured them that in his opinion the young warriors of the Cherokee would attack them, despite the opposition of their older chiefs.²³ The frontiersmen, not only those on the Indian side of the boundary but those north of it, were greatly alarmed and because of their lack of ammunition with which to defend themselves were reported to be "in a flying condition."²⁴

As for the Wataugans and the inhabitants of Nollichucky, many of them determined to attempt to hold their lands. Their first need was to delay, if they could not prevent, the Indian attack. Accordingly, they sent Isaac Thomas back to the Cherokee country with conciliatory messages. In a letter to Cameron and Henry Stuart, dated May 13, John Carter, who was chairman of the Watauga Committee, expressed surprise that the Cherokee desired to destroy their friends, and declared a willingness to give up the land when "legally called upon." With what was perhaps

²¹*Ibid.*

²²The letter is printed in Philip M. Hamer, ed., "Correspondence of Henry Stuart and Alexander Cameron with the Wataugans," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Dec., 1930.

²³Deposition of Gabriel Shoat, May 13, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, p. 38.

²⁴[Gilbert Christian to William Preston], May 16, 1776, *ibid.*, p. 40.

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a touch of sarcasm, he wrote that the settlers thought the warning they had received "so laudable that it certainly must be handed down to Posterity after we shall be no more, That you have been the material Instruments of our Brothers [the Indians] not shedding innocent Blood." With reference to the Revolutionary conflict, he made this profession of loyalty: "Subjects must Obey Their Sovereign, which We as Subjects sincerely determine to do." This diplomatic message continued with a request that the Indians allow the settlers a further extension of time to remove, in order that the innocent and the loyal might not be murdered. "We pray," it concluded, "that they will let us know by some Express immediately after you receive this where we shall make an Asylum for We, (some of us at least,) are determined to support His Majesty's Crown & Dignity . . ."²⁵

Thomas brought also a letter from Aaron Penson (or Pinson) of the Nollichucky settlement that contained assurances of the loyalty of the inhabitants of that region. Furthermore, John Bryan, who had accompanied Thomas on his return from Watauga, told Cameron and Stuart that the inhabitants of Nollichucky were willing to leave their lands and desired only to know a place to which they might be permitted to move "untill things should take a turn in the settlements." He suggested the head of Nollichucky at the foot of Iron Mountain, and to this the Cherokee agreed. "At this time," reported Henry Stuart, "things looked favourable and we had some hopes that the Indians might be prevented from falling on the new Settlements."²⁶

Thomas and Bryan were sent back to the settlements with letters from Stuart and Cameron, dated May 23, and a "talk" from the Indians, to the inhabitants of Watauga and of Nollichucky. The letter to the latter promised land in West Florida to those who were loyal to the king, but stated regarding the Revolutionary affiliations of the whites:²⁷

The Notice we gave of the intention of the Indians was intended for the Inhabitants in general without any regard to their Political Principles, for howsoever different Our Opinions may be from any of the Inhabitants we Could never have forgiven Ourselves if by Ommitting to inform

²⁵Printed in Hamer, ed., *op. cit.*

²⁶Henry Stuart to John Stuart, Aug. 25, 1776, *loc. cit.*, pp. 769-70. Penson's letter seems not to have been preserved.

²⁷Printed in Hamer, ed., *op. cit.*

you of what Came to Our knowledge of the Intention of the Indians, if [*sic*] we had suffered innocent women and Children to fall a Sacrifice.

The Wataugans were assured:²⁸

We do not apprehend the dispute between Great Britain and the Provinces, influences the Indians in the least in their behaviour to the people who are settled on their Lands. The discontent of the young fellows is not at all new although the effect of it has not hitherto appeared. It was like to have made bad blood among themselves; but Now they seem unanimously resolved to recover their lands.

The "talk" from the Indians, as summarized by Henry Stuart, said that "they sent once more in a Friendly manner to the people settled on their Lands to desire them to remove and they hoped they would comply with their request, as they said they had no inclination to do them any injury, and as the time first fixed for their departure was rather short they gave them Twenty days longer."²⁹

The future Tennesseans had thus secured the postponement of the Indian attack. Their professions of loyalty to the British king, moreover, should not be taken at their face value. It seems to be reasonably certain that these professions, certainly of the inhabitants of Watauga, but less certainly of the inhabitants of Nollichucky, were intended to mislead Stuart and Cameron. Their relations with the Revolutionists in Virginia and North Carolina after the receipt of the first letter of warning from Henry Stuart and Cameron are enlightening with reference to this. They were faced with the necessity of deciding whether to remain upon their lands or to obey the demand of the Indians and remove. Many of them determined to hold their lands. To do this, it was necessary that they receive assistance from the neighboring Virginians, and it seems highly probable that they sought to secure this by identifying their conflict with the Indians with the greater conflict, then in progress, between the American Revolutionists and Great Britain.

Almost immediately after its arrival on May 11, the letter that Thomas had brought from the Cherokee country—or, if we can

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Henry Stuart to John Stuart, Aug. 25, 1776, *loc. cit.*, p. 770.

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rely on Henry Stuart's report of a conversation with Thomas, a copy "which was very different from the original"³⁰—was delivered to Anthony Bledsoe, a member of the Revolutionary Committee of Safety of Fincastle county, Virginia. Bledsoe sent it to the chairman of the Committee, William Preston. He described the situation as gloomy, and he asked for ammunition for the defense of the settlers who were not on the Indian side of the line. He thought that those who were on the Indian side would move, if such action should be recommended to them, and he promised that he would so advise them.³¹ William Preston gave the Wataugans similar advice, and William Christian wrote:³²

By all means every person over the line ought to move instantly, if they did, perhaps the Indians would not be Wrought upon by our enemies to cross the line for some time, if the people do not move, ruin must overtake them, do what they will, if the [*sic*] join our enemies, they must fly from that Country but I think better things of them . . . I was informed [that] . . . men were gathering to go over the line & move those who would not voluntarily do it.

To leave their lands, however, was not what the Wataugans desired to do, and it was apparently in response to Bledsoe's advice that William Cocke wrote:³³

I shall Ever glory in my duty to my Country as well as strict Obediance to the Command of my Superior Officers. The present unhappy war with Our mother Country Calls on us to avoid Every step that might have the smallest tendency to bring on a war with any Other power but when you Consider the glorious Cause in which the americans have Successfully begun war in defence of Liberty & property I hope the good people of Wataugah & holson will stand acquitted by Every unbiest mind for following so good an example nor Can we think we shall in any manner incur the displeasure of the Hon^o the Convention by shewing a spirit of Resistance to their & Our Enemies, for Every letter from the Cherokee nation rote by Cameron & Stewart menefestly tend to shew that they have

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 769.

³¹Anthony Bledsoe to William Preston, May 14, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, p. 39.

³²To William Preston, June 8, 1776, *ibid.*, p. 49.

³³To Anthony Bledsoe, May 27, 1776, *ibid.*, p. 44. In this and all other quotations the attempt has been made to reproduce the spelling, capitalization, punctuation, etc. of the original.

no disine against any but those who are friends to the glorious Cause of america. I therefore must Inform you & Col^o Preston whom I have rote to to lay your hands upon your hearts & Call to mind the many good services of those people who are now instead of being requiteed—are calld on to leave their homes and Crops and Expose their families to ruing & in Our behalves only let the Hon^o the Convention know that in Every war we have been ready and Ever furnished our Quota of men & have been as ready to Open Our purses this being done which I think we Justly mearit we doubt not but the Hon^o the Convention who have been Esteemd throughout america for Equity & humanity will no longer look upon us as a Seperate people but will willingly afford us such assistance as may Inable us to defend Our Selves from an Enemy that only wish to destroy their unalterable friends.

Cocke's letter quite clearly shows his desire to persuade the Revolutionists of Virginia that the Indians intended to attack only the supporters of the Revolutionary cause. In so far as the letter and the Indian "talk" that Thomas had brought to Watauga on May 11 are concerned, Cocke's statement that letters from Cameron and Stuart proved such an intention was false. As has been mentioned, it is possible that significant changes had been made in the letter from Cameron and Stuart before it was forwarded to the Fincastle Committee. But what Cocke had particularly in mind, no doubt, was another letter that Henry Stuart was alleged to have written.

According to a deposition of Nathan Read, a stranger came to Charles Robertson's gate on the evening of May 18 and delivered a letter that bore the signature of Henry Stuart. This letter informed the settlers that it was not "the desire of his Majesty to set his friends and allies, the Indians, on his liege subjects," and that those who should express a willingness to join the king's forces would "find protection for themselves and their families, and be free from all danger whatever." It urged those who desired to prevent "inevitable ruin to themselves and families" to make a written pledge of loyalty and willingness to fight in defense of the Crown. Furthermore, it stated that a British army was to land in West Florida, march to Chote in the Overhill Cherokee country, and with Creek, Chickasaw, and Cherokee Indians take

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possession of the frontiers of Virginia and North Carolina while at the same time British forces attacked the sea coasts of those provinces.³⁴

A copy of this letter, which differed so greatly in tone from the one that Thomas had brought a week earlier and from the one he was to bring from Cameron and Henry Stuart eleven days later, was sent by Anthony Bledsoe to William Preston, with an urgent request that the Committee be called to devise measures for the defense of the frontier.³⁵ William Christian, when he read it, wrote that he was "glad the ministerial gentry" had "been so rapid in discovering without further disguise their aim, as . . . in their last letter."³⁶ The original, it was said, was sent to North Carolina. A copy was presented to the Virginia Convention on June 7, and this body took steps to provide for the defense of the frontier. Copies of the letter were circulated extensively.

About a month after this letter was reported to have arrived at Watauga, Isaac Thomas, after his second visit to that settlement, was again in the Cherokee country. What Thomas reported regarding that letter was described by Henry Stuart:³⁷

He declared on Oath that he was informed by several of the Inhabitants of Watoga that a letter was forged by one Jessy Benton in Mr. Cameron's name and so like his hand writing that it would be impossible to know that it was a forgery; that they had given out that it was brought to the House of one Roberts in the night by a man wrapped up in a blanket who immediately rode off; that it was said to contain information that 500 Creeks, 500 Choctaws, 500 Chicasaws and a Body of Troops from Pensacola with all the Cherokee Nation were immediately to fall on the Frontiers of Virginia and North Carolina; that the letter was forwarded to North Carolina and Virginia in order to engage their assistance against the Cherokees . . . The forged letter was forwarded to South Carolina, but they thought proper to affix my name instead of Mr. Cameron's.

Andrew Williamson and Edward Wilkinson, former friends of

³⁴Printed in J. G. M. Ramsey, *The Annals of Tennessee* (Charleston, 1853), p. 147. Not even a copy of this letter can be found in the archives of Virginia or North Carolina. A copy was printed in *Purdie's Virginia Gazette*, June 7, 1776.

³⁵May 22, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, p. 42.

³⁶Christian to Preston, June 8, 1776, *loc. cit.*

³⁷Henry Stuart to John Stuart, Aug. 25, 1776, *loc. cit.*, p. 782.

Cameron in South Carolina who were now supporters of the Revolution, wrote to Cameron in protest against this letter, which, they said, was written by Henry Stuart to the Wataugans and contained a threat against the frontiers of Virginia and North Carolina. They said that if there should be an Indian war, this letter would be a cause of it.³⁸ In vigorous protest, Henry Stuart wrote to Wilkinson, with whom he had long been acquainted, and denounced the letter as a forgery by "Villains" who desired "to involve the Settlements of Virginia and North Carolina in an unjust War with the Indians" in defense of people who had defrauded the Cherokee of their land.³⁹

Without the original of what was said to be Henry Stuart's letter and without more direct testimony than is available, it is impossible to determine conclusively whether this letter was or was not a forgery. It is probable that it was. Henry Stuart's report of the situation in the Cherokee country and of his experiences therein bears evidence of being trustworthy. It is a straightforward account that in a number of details is corroborated by the independent testimony of others. It seems unlikely that Henry Stuart would have sought to deceive his brother, John Stuart, to whom he made his report. It is true that there had been requests by up-country Loyalists of South Carolina that troops be sent to aid them, and a proposal to this effect was submitted by John Stuart to General Clinton at Cape Fear, but the proposal was not adopted and it was determined that no immediate use of the Indians would be attempted. This proposed plan for the relief of Carolina Loyalists seems, moreover, to have been generally known to both parties on the frontier. The route proposed in the letter that was alleged to have been written by Henry Stuart, through the Creek and Chickasaw towns to those of the Overhill Cherokee, was a most impracticable one, and was so viewed by William Preston.⁴⁰

On the other hand the situation of the Wataugans lends support to the testimony of Isaac Thomas, as Henry Stuart reported it, that the letter in question was a forgery. It was quite clear to the frontiersmen that they could not keep their lands without a defiance of the Indians that would involve them in an Indian war.

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 783.

³⁹Printed in Hamer, ed., *op. cit.*

⁴⁰Quoted in Ramsey, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

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If they should be loyal to the king, they must obey the orders of his agents and give up their lands. If they should support the American Revolution and at the same time make it appear, whether true or not, that the Indians proposed to attack them, not because they occupied land beyond the boundary line, but because these Indians were incited by British agents to attack the enemies of Britain's authority, then they could expect to receive aid from the Revolutionary Virginians in defeating the Indians and retaining their lands. If a result of the Revolution should be the destruction of the king's authority in America, then there would be, the Wataugans might well believe, an end to the British Indian policy in violation of which they had occupied their lands for seven years.

Whether forgery or not, the circulation of this letter resulted in the identification of the cause of the Wataugans with that of the Revolutionists. Furthermore, every action of the leaders at Watauga indicated their support of the Revolution. John Carter informed the Virginians that his reply of May 13 to Cameron and Stuart had led these men to believe that the frontiersmen were Loyalists. When John Bryan and Isaac Thomas returned to Watauga after delivering this reply, Carter reported that Bryan's deposition showed the Loyalists to be in complete control of the Cherokee Nation. He did not, however, send the letters of May 23 that Thomas brought. He reported, not that they specifically stated that the question of loyalty had nothing to do with the demand of the Indians, but rather that they were of the same tenor as the earlier ones.⁴¹ The Wataugans sent a petition to the Virginia Convention in which they "begged to be taken under the Protection of Virginia."⁴² Later they sent a petition to the Revolutionary authorities of North Carolina asking that they be annexed to that province.⁴³ They raised one hundred men whom, with powder and lead that they purchased from Virginia, they stationed between themselves and the Cherokee. Nevertheless, it was thought that some of the frontiersmen were inclined to support the British cause. As a result, men from Holston under Captain John Shelby and from Watauga under Captain [James] Robertson captured more than seventy of these

⁴¹John Carter to William Preston, May 30, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, p. 45.

⁴²Christian to Preston, June 8, 1776, *loc. cit.*

⁴³Printed in Ramsey, *op. cit.* p. 134.

suspects who readily took an oath of allegiance to the Revolutionary cause.⁴⁴

The Virginia Revolutionists were convinced that an Indian attack was in preparation. They believed that the British agents, Cameron and Stuart, were responsible for it. Preparations were made to defend the frontier settlers.

In a last attempt to avert an Indian war, which the Virginians sincerely desired to avoid, Isaac Thomas was sent again to the Cherokee country.⁴⁵ He carried, not a promise of the inhabitants south of the Indian line to remove from their lands, but a "talk" from the Fincastle Committee to the Indians. This communication contained assurances of friendship for the Cherokee, but warned them that they should not permit evil and designing men to persuade them to join in the contest between the Americans and the servants of the king who wanted to take the money of the Americans without their consent and to treat them like slaves; it urged that complaints regarding the people of Watauga and Nollichucky should be presented to the government of Virginia at Williamsburg or to the commissioners appointed by Congress to treat with the Indians; it declared that the demand that the settlers move from their lands was only a pretense to secure a breaking of relations with former friends; it demanded that the Indians, who had recently killed white men on the path to Kentucky, be punished, and that no further murders be committed; it threatened that a refusal of this demand would be followed by an invasion that would result in "the destruction and perhaps utter extirpation of the Cherokee Nation"; and it concluded with a demand that "to avoid all these Calamities of a destructive War" some of the old men be sent to confer with the whites at the Great Island of the Holston.⁴⁶

In the meanwhile, since May 23 when Thomas had left the Cherokee country with the second group of letters for the inhabitants of Watauga and Nollichucky, the war spirit among the Indians had increased. The sixteen days that had been fixed for the return of Thomas passed and when he did not appear the young Cherokee became apprehensive that an army was being prepared to be sent against them. It was at this time that a

⁴⁴William Preston to Pendleton, June 15, 1776, Draper Mss., 4QQ, p. 50.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*

⁴⁶"A Talk from the Committee of Fincastle in Virginia," C. O., 5, vol. 77, p. 383.

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delegation of fourteen Northern Indians, painted black, arrived at Chote. They asserted that white men were rapidly taking their lands and building forts. They said that the French had promised them ammunition and arms, that the soldiers of the British king were going to attack the enemies of the Indians from the sea, and that if all the Indians should unite to fall upon their enemies they would find these enemies as nothing. They appointed a time, ten days later, for a meeting with the whole of the Cherokee Nation. "After this day," wrote Henry Stuart, "every young Fellow's face in the Overhills Towns appeared Blackened, and nothing was now talked of but War." Henry Stuart and Cameron attempted to restrain them by warning them that "an indiscriminate attack" without a body of white people with them "would be the means of drawing on them the King's displeasure and of uniting all parties against them." The old warriors agreed, but the young ones blamed Stuart and Cameron for having warned the frontier settlers. Reports were brought to the Indians that forts were being erected along the frontier and that an army was being raised in Virginia to invade their country.

The day appointed for the "Grand Talk" at Chote with the delegates from the Northern Indians arrived. These warriors made long speeches in which they urged that all the Indians unite to crush their enemies, the white men who had taken from them their lands. Under the leadership of the Dragging Canoe the young Cherokee expressed their readiness to fight, but the old men sat dejected. Cameron and Henry Stuart refused to touch the war belt that the Shawnee delegate presented, and declared that they would not sanction war until John Stuart should authorize it. For some days the issue of war remained undecided, the young men urging it and Cameron and Stuart, though their lives were in danger, continuing to oppose it.

It was at this critical time that Isaac Thomas arrived with the "talk" from the Fincastle Committee. This communication "so exasperated the Indians," reported Henry Stuart, "that we had little hopes after this of being able to restrain them." Thomas reported also that about six thousand men, who had been raised on the frontiers of Virginia and North Carolina to fight the king's troops, had determined instead to oppose the Indians, that the Wataugans had built forts, and that the inhabitants of Nollichucky had been compelled to take an oath of neutrality but did

not consider themselves bound by it. Finally, it was reported in the Overhill towns that in response to the instigations of the Northern Indians, the inhabitants of the Lower Cherokee towns had attacked the Carolina settlements.

War could no longer be prevented, and Henry Stuart and Cameron considered that all that could now be done was to give strict orders that the boundary line should not be passed, that Loyalists and women and children should not be killed, and that hostilities should be ended at John Stuart's command. In an attempt to protect the Loyalists of Nollichucky, Captain Nathaniel Gist agreed to go with four white men and some Indians to warn them that they could save themselves by coming to the Cherokee or by putting up a white flag. But the four white men, Isaac Williams, Jarret Williams, William Falling, and Isaac Thomas, fled. On the night of July 8 they slipped away from the Indians and three days later arrived at Watauga and told of the Cherokee plan of attack. Gist, as an employee of the British, with other white Loyalists, accompanied the Indians a few days later when they set out against the Wataugans. Cameron went to the Lower towns, and Henry Stuart returned to Pensacola.⁴⁷

From this study of the situation in the Cherokee country during the weeks preceding the attack upon the Wataugans, it appears that this attack was not the result of any incitement of the Indians by Alexander Cameron or Henry Stuart or John Stuart. It was not the result of any plan that British authorities had made. It was a result, fundamentally, of the fact that the whites had settled upon lands to which the young warriors, at least, claimed they had no title. The long existing discontent among the Cherokee because of the steady encroachments upon their lands, the steady advance of white settlements upon their hunting grounds and increasingly nearer to their towns, was heightened, no doubt, by the stories that came to them of the progress of the Revolutionary conflict among the whites. This discontent was precipitated into an attack upon the frontier settlements by the urging of the Northern Indians and by the threatening attitude of the Virginians.

⁴⁷The situation in the Overhill Cherokee country, immediately preceding the attack, is described vividly and in detail in Henry Stuart's report to John Stuart, Aug. 25, 1776, *loc. cit.* Additional information is to be found in Cameron to John Stuart, July 9, 1776, C. O., 5, vol. 77, p. 331 and Aug. 31, 1776, *ibid.*, vol. 78, p. 43; John Stuart to Lord Germain, Aug. 23, 1776, *ibid.*, vol. 77, p. 247, and to General Howe, Aug. 30, 1776, *ibid.*, vol. 94, p. 87; in the deposition of Jarret Williams, in Ramsey, *op. cit.*, p. 148; and in a letter from Charles Robertson and James Smith, July 13, 1776, *Colonial Records of North Carolina*, X, 665.

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