

Battle of King's Mountain



Col. John Sevier



*Col. Isaac Shelby
(Library of Congress)*



Maj. Patrick Ferguson

The Battle of King's Mountain was a unique battle in the American Revolution. With the exception of one lone British officer, it was fought entirely between Americans; no British troops fought at King's Mountain. The victory achieved by brave fighting patriot frontiersmen, known as the Overmountain Men, at the Battle of King's Mountain has been widely regarded as the turning point of the Revolutionary War in the Southern theater.

As part of the British Southern campaign, General Charles Cornwallis decided in early September 1780 to move his armies north from Georgia and South Carolina, after having defeated General Horatio Gates of the Continental Army, into North Carolina. In order to quell colonial militias to his east, Cornwallis dispatched Major Patrick Ferguson and an army of loyalists to the extreme northwestern regions of North Carolina to drive the frontiersmen led by Colonels John Sevier, Isaac Shelby, William Campbell, and Joseph McDowell west of the Appalachian Mountains. As Ferguson moved into Western North Carolina, he released a captured kinsman of Shelby and sent him across the mountains with a warning to the inhabitants: if they opposed him, he would lead his army of Tories across the Appalachian mountains, "hang their leaders and lay their country waste with fire and sword." Upon receiving the news, Shelby conferred with Sevier, who called upon Campbell's Washington County, Virginia and McDowell's North Carolina militia to join them to fight Ferguson on the other side of the mountains. They all agreed to rally their Appalachian frontier militias at Sycamore Shoals (Elizabethton, TN) in late September to take the battle to Ferguson rather than wait for him to come to them.

Most of these mountain irregulars had neither uniforms nor extensive gear, but most came armed with an abiding hatred or arbitrary and oppressive outside authority and, in the case of some, with accurate, long-range Decker rifles from Pennsylvania. While these men were rough frontiersmen, their leaders, Sevier, Shelby, Campbell, and McDowell were men of wealth and for the most part education. Sevier, a Virginian by birth, was well known in Tennessee and would become its first Governor in 1796. Likewise, Shelby, born in Maryland, had earned a reputation in Kentucky and would later become that state's first Governor in 1792. Campbell was married to the sister of Virginia's well-known patriot Patrick Henry. McDowell was popular in North Carolina and would later represent the Tar Heel state in Congress. Sevier and Isaac Shelby each had about 240 men under their command, and William Campbell's Virginians numbered some 400. McDowell's small unit pushed the total to nearly 1,000 men. A smaller force commanded by Major Charles Robertson was to remain at home and guard against Cherokee attack.

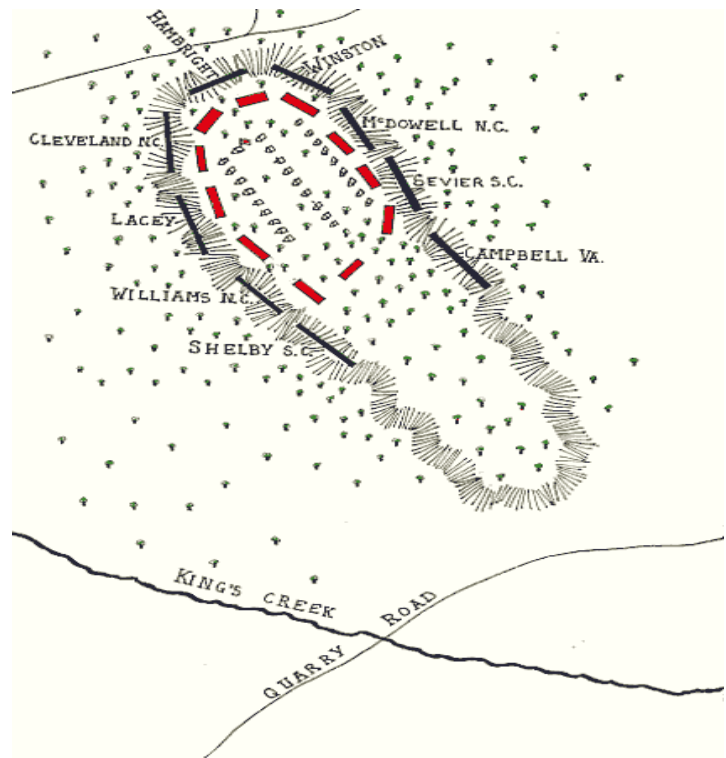
On the morning of September 26, Reverend Samuel Doak blessed the Tennessee and Virginia militia units (“help us as good soldiers to wield the Sword of the Lord and of Gideon!”) at Sycamore Shoals shortly before Sevier, Shelby, Campbell, and McDowell led their men over the mountains to rendezvous with Ferguson’s loyalist army. The Overmountain men set out following the Doe River. They ascended Bright’s Trace, crossed the Unakas northeast of Roan Mountain, then headed down into North Carolina. During the march, two of Sevier’s men deserted and fled to Ferguson with a warning. Within a few days the Overmountain army was near Morganton, North Carolina where it united with some additional 350 patriots frontiersmen from the surrounding counties of Wilkes and Surry.

As the Overmountain men moved to intercept Ferguson, a patriot force accompanied by several hundred famished women and children was making a frantic retreat across the mountains to the Watauga country. A combined British and Cherokee force had broken Colonel Elijah Clarke’s siege of Augusta and then pursued him relentlessly, committing atrocities against his captured stragglers.

Alerted that the Overmountain force were coming by Sevier’s deserters, Ferguson opted to retreat southward. The British officer ordered his men to take up a position on the pine covered King’s Mountain, the high point in a sixteen-mile mountain ridge running across the border separating South from North Carolina. Ferguson’s confidence that he could successfully defend his position against any force was misplaced.



King’s Mountain, York County, S.C.



Map of the battle of King's Mountain
<http://www.britishbattles.com/kings-mountain.htm>

Campbell, Shelby, Sevier, and other militia forces attacked on the afternoon of October 7 after Campbell had ordered the Overmountain men to “shout like hell, and fight like devils.” They did. After retreating several times before determined bayonet charges, they closed in on the loyalist defenders. The loyalist militia relied on volley fire and massed bayonet charges; the Americans, moving from pine tree to pine tree, picked them off one by one with their long rifles. William Campbell commanded the charge up the southwestern slopes, while Shelby’s attacked from the northwestern side. Led by Sevier in the center,

the Overmountain men managed to encircle Ferguson's loyalist army, denying them any hope of a retreat off of King's Mountain.

When the carnage ended and hour or so after the first shots were fired, Ferguson and several of his loyalist officers were dead. Though both forces appeared to have been roughly equal, loyalist losses were much higher—an estimated 200 to 300 were killed and more than 700 taken prisoner. At least 28 patriot soldiers died and approximately 60 were wounded. After burying their dead, the backwoodsmen marched with their prisoners into North Carolina, where Tory leaders were tried for earlier atrocities and nine were executed.

Localism then prevailed as the triumphant Overmountain men quickly returned home to defend their families against Indians. The Battle of King's Mountain was a significant patriot victory in the American Revolution, delaying Cornwallis's advance into the Carolina backcountry and quelling southern loyalists to the point they kept the peace, at least temporarily. President Theodore Roosevelt later wrote of the Battle of King's Mountain in his *The Winning of the West* that "this brilliant victory marked the turning point of the American Revolution."

The Rifle v. Musket at King's Mountain

One of the unique aspects of the Battle of King's Mountain was what perhaps led the victory of the Overmountain men: the rifle. Rifles were rarely used in the American Revolution. Rifles were hunting weapons, used by families on the frontier. Because the patriots who fought at King's Mountain were frontiersmen from Tennessee and Virginia, they carried their rifles with them to the battle. The loyalists used muskets. The greatest difference between a rifle and a musket is speed versus accuracy. A rifle, though slow to load (one shot a minute), is deadly accurate. The Overmountain men could hit a target at 200 or 300 yards. A musket, with a smooth bore, is easy to load and can be fired at an average of 3 times a minute; however, it is inaccurate with a range of only about 100 yards.

Sources: John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (2001); Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (1982); Kings Mountain National Military Park, <http://www.nps.gov/kimol>