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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 Fauquier¹ 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

*Address delivered at the unveiling of the Fort Robinson marker near Kingsport, June 18, 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 CHEROKEES 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
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THE INDIAN PEACE TREATY OF NOVEMBER 19th, 1761 WAS
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¹The Governor requested that Byrd communicate with Gen. Jeffery Amherst on the operations of the ensuing campaign. (Jan. 23, 1759.) Draper Mss.

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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 distraught garrison of Fort Loudoun. Governor Fauquier 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."²

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."³

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

²*Journal of the House of Burgesses, 1758-1761*, p. 171. For causes of the rupture see Samuel C. Williams, "An Account of the Presbyterian Mission to the Cherokees, 1757-1759," *Tenn. Hist. Mag.*, ser. II, vol. I, 125-139; P. M. Hamer, *Fort Loudoun on the Little Tennessee* (1925), *passim*.

³*Va. 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 to sue for 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 Captain 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.

On 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.

Attakullakulla 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 unseasonable 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.

⁷He had saved Captain John Stuart from massacre at the fall of Fort Loudoun, and had led Stuart in safety to this encampment.

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October, 1760, the assembly passed withdrawal of the colony's forces from the strength of an entire Overhill Cherokee.⁴ "Our last account was reported to Washington, "was Byrd, dated at Campbell's Aug't proceed after he is informed that the Object of his Destination, is Surmounting fact, Colonel Byrd was relying on Attakullakulla to induce his nation to an actual hostile invasion.⁶

After stopping at Sawyers' on the 15th of fall, encamped during the night at Stalnacker's, near the source of the Long Island of Holston, as is stated in the papers. The camp was called Fort Mingo in honor of the Cherokee chief.⁷ This spot was the residence of Stephen Holston at the time he bears Holston's name. From that place he proceeded to Philadelphia, where on the 17th of August Miss Mary Willing, of that city, received an express dated January 17: "Your express came and surprised us as to cry out Good God

October 1760, *ibid.*, 197.
 Captain John Stuart arrived at Byrd's camp on the 1st of the plan of the Overhill Cherokees to be made, Colonel Byrd dispatched one of Attakullakulla spreading news of the Virginia forces to the head-warriors by this messenger to the head-warriors of the Overhill Country, has delivered to me Capt. I am building a fort for your nation, when I will not leave one man of corn in all your country if I do not see it there." *So. Car. Gazette*, Oct. 11, 1760.
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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."⁸

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."⁹

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 the fact that the war had been instigated by Northern 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

⁸*Va. Mag. of History*, XXXVIII, 350.

⁹James Adair, *History of the American Indians*, 252.

¹⁰Col. Byrd had reported to Gen. Amherst good roads from the back settlements to the Overhill Towns. Draper Mss. 4ZZ, 28.

¹¹Stewart to Washington, *Letters to Washington*, III, 184.

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 imbruing 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 dotting 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.

¹²Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 62, 99.

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That Gentleman gave me a sad account of the situation of your
Incampment. The Dews that fall like rain, the Musquetas 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."¹³

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
Approbation 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.

¹³*Va. Mag. of History*, XXXVIII, 352-353.

¹⁴Draper Mss., 4ZZ, 37.

¹⁵For 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), 33.

¹⁶*Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1758-1761*, p. 1622.

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 meted out punishment; happily none were put to death."¹⁷

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,¹⁸ and doubtless was his assistant in the work at Long Island. By the middle of November, the soldiery 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 manifested in his re-election continuously, and usually unanimously, until 1765. He also had long service as treasurer of the colony.¹⁹

Fort Robinson was located within a mile of the crossing-

¹⁷Adelaide L. Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina* (Raleigh, 1922), I, 234 *et seq.* These troops returned through Salem the first week in December. *Ibid.*, 238. Thomas Brown was lieutenant-colonel under Waddell. *Ibid.*, 207-238. Consult: William Henry Hoyt, ed., *Papers of Archibald D. Murphrey* (Raleigh, 1914), II, 385; *N. C. Col. Rec.*, VI, 282, 315, 449, 521, 622. The regiment continued to be supplied with flour and meal from Salem.

¹⁸Koontz, *The Virginia Frontier, 1754-1763*, p. 131.

¹⁹Robinson 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, kindly, 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.

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Moravians in North Carolina (Raleigh, through Salem the first week in December, tenant-colonel under Waddell. *Ibid.*, *Papers of Archibald D. Murphey* 282, 315, 449, 521, 622. The regiment from Salem.

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one time acting governor of Virginia, an ideal representative of his class—among his fellow members of the ruling *Patrick Henry*, I, 71. Byrd was behind in the power of the treasurer of the

place of the Holston.²⁰ 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.²¹

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 Conockotoco (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

Conockotoco's (constituted Emperor of the Cherokee Nation, By the great Warriour of Choto after Old Hop's Death²² and of the Opposite faction with the Little Carpenter) 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 streight; I hope you will set yours the same, and we

²⁰Williams, *Timberlake's Memoirs*, 124.

²¹*Ibid.*, John Haywood, *History of Tennessee*, 41.

²²In 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 (Concaughto or Connecoortee). 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 skilling 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, (mutilated) & 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 dammage to the English, shall be put in there, untill the English fetch them, & do with 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.

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²⁵James G. McNeill
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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 1754, 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 Pearis, 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 Reedy 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 1756. *Family History of Sawyers*, 10; letter of George Christian to Draper, Dec. 4, 1842.

²⁵James G. M. Ramsey, *Annals 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.