

Regulators and the Battle of Alamance

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Essential Questions: How did the Battle of Alamance contribute to the settlement of Tennessee? How did the Battle of Alamance foreshadow the American Revolution?

The North Carolina Piedmont had never been well-governed. In the 1760s, farmers began to organize in protest against high taxes, unfair fees, and corrupt public officials. These protesters became known as “Regulators” because they wanted to regulate the colonial government. But what began with petitions and civil disobedience ended in a violent clash of militias, the Battle of Alamance, in May 1771, and the Regulators were decisively defeated.

For a couple decades, tensions had been mounting; Piedmont farmers believed that they were being overtaxed and had been paying excessive fees to local sheriffs and the colonial government. Piedmont farmers started demanding changes to the law and publicly humiliating, intimidating, and sometimes whipping officials whom they deemed to be corrupt; Judge Richard Henderson and Sheriff Edmund Fanning are two examples. In 1771 Governor Tryon struck back and ordered a special court in Hillsborough. Predicting that angry Regulators would protest this action, Tryon sent out militia to the courthouse to subdue any rebellious activity or interference with court sessions.

As the militia marched westward, approximately 2,000 Regulators assembled and met the militiamen camping beside Great Alamance Creek. Other Regulators delayed Hugh Waddell in Mecklenburg County and prevented him from joining the militia in what is now Alamance County. The composition of the militia and the Regulators reveals that the Regulator Rebellion was a regional conflict as 1,068 of 1,452 militia men were from the Eastern counties.

On May 16, the Regulators sent a message to Governor Tryon that they wanted to discuss their differences with government officials. Tryon scoffed at the suggestion and returned a message stating that the Regulators would have to disarm before any meeting could take place. The royal governor gave the Regulators one hour to surrender. Their reply: “Fire and be damned.” Tryon and the militia answered with cannon fire.

The Battle of Alamance lasted for two hours. The Regulators fired weapons behind trees and large rocks, and their effort lacked organization. Sometimes when a Regulator would run out of ammunition, he left the field of battle. As to be expected, the militia was more organized in its attack and maneuvers, and Tryon defeated the Regulators. The casualty count for the Regulators is unknown, but nine militia men died and sixty-one were wounded.

Twelve Regulators were tried for their role in the Battle of Alamance. The trial began on June 15, 1771, and all twelve men were convicted of high treason. Governor Tryon pardoned six of them, and the remaining six were hanged on June 19. The six hanged were Benjamin Merrill, captain of the Rowan County militia; Captain Messer; Robert Matear; James Pugh; and two others whose names are unrecorded. The men were buried together in a single grave. Another

outlawed Regulator, James Few, had been captured during the battle and sentenced to death without trial. Few was 25 years old and the father of newborn twins. He was hanged, and on June 13 Tryon's troops destroyed his parents' farm.

Four Regulator leaders — Herman Husband, Rednap Howell, James Hunter, and William Butler — were outlawed, and any man bringing them in, dead or alive, was promised a reward in land and money. All four fled the colony and escaped capture. Husband escaped to western Pennsylvania, disguised as a preacher under the name Tuscape Death. He later served in Pennsylvania's Revolutionary assembly and took part in the Whiskey Rebellion of 1791.

The Regulators' attempt to secure reform in local government clearly failed. The people had either to submit or move farther into the wilderness. This great numbers of them did, some going into Tennessee and others to Kentucky after Daniel Boone, employed by Judge Richard Henderson, returned with glowing reports of that region. By 1772 about 1,500 had left and others were waiting only to sell their land before joining them. The Battle of Alamance not only led to greater immigration to Tennessee but can also be viewed as early indicator of the tensions which would eventually led to the American Revolution.

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An Authentick Relation of the Battle of ALAMANCE, the 16th Day of May, 1771

Williamsburg, June 27

On Wednesday Evening, the 15th Instant, his Excellency received certain Information that the Insurgences were assembled at about six Miles from the Camp at Great Alamance. A Council of War being called, it was unanimously resolved to march the next Morning against them.

Accordingly, on Thursday the 16th, the Army leaving the Tents standing, and all the Baggage and Provisions in Camp, under the Guard of a Field Officer and about fifty Men, began to march at about eight o'Clock in the Morning, and advanced to an old Field within Half a Mile of the Rebels, when his Excellency formed the Order of Battle, in two Lines, Part of the Artillery on each Wing, and the Remainder in the center of the first Line. His Excellency then sent one of his Aid de Camps, and the Sheriff of Orange, with a Letter to the Rebels, requiring them to lay down their Arms, surrender their outlawed Ringleaders, and submit themselves to the Laws of their Country, allowing them one Hour to accept of the Terms, to prevent the Effusion of Blood, which must ensue, as they were at that Time in a State of War and Rebellion against their King, their Country, and their Laws. In the mean Time, the Army kept advancing nearer to the Enemy. The messenger from afterwards returned, and reported to his Excellency that the Rebels had received his Offers with Disdain, and the general Cry among them was, Battle! Battle!

Immediately after a considerable Body of them appeared in Sight, and waved their Hats, daring the Men to advance; upon which the Army continued moving towards them, until they were within thirty Yards of the Enemy, when his Excellency sent an Aid de Camp to inform them that the Hour was elapsed, and that he should immediately fire. They called out that he might fire and be damned. Upon the Return of the Aid de Camp the Action began, and a hot Fire was kept up on both Sides for about an Hour and a Quarter, when it abated a little from the Enemy. The Cannon was ordered to cease firing, and the whole Army to advance. Then the first Line, after engaging three Quarters of an Hour longer, drove the Enemy out of the Field, and gained a complete Victory. Their Camp was taken, with many Horses, Arms, Ammunition, Clothes, and Provisions. The Army, after having Care taken of their Wounded, got back to their Camp by Sunset. It is computed that the Rebels must have had killed in the Battle about one Hundred

Men, two Hundred more wounded, and upwards of twenty taken Prisoners. The Loss of the Loyalists was nine killed, and about sixty wounded. The Number of the Rebels in he Battle, from the best Information, could not be less than two Thousand three Hundred. Our Army did not exceed one Thousand Men, of which not more than six Hundred were engaged. The Artillery was well served, and did great Execution. The Behaviour of the Officers and Men, on this Occasion, will appear by what the Governour gave in Orders the next Day.

Source: “ An Authentick Relation of the Battle of ALAMANCE, the 16th Day of May, 1771.”
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