

Overmountain Victory

Overmountain Victory
National Historic Trail

North Carolina/South Carolina
Tennessee/Virginia

Corps of Engineers
U.S. Army

Forest Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



The first link in a chain of evils that . . . ended in the total loss of America.

—British Gen. Sir Henry Clinton
Overall commander in North America

Mounted Patriots vs. Loyalists on Foot As this Lloyd Branson painting "Gathering of the Mountain Men at Sycamore Shoals" suggests, the overmountain patriots were mounted. Their number eventually totaled 2,000. Being on horses enabled them to overtake Major

Ferguson and his loyalist forces once the latter knew they were in pursuit. For the final leg the patriots selected 900 of their best mounted and armed men. They surrounded the loyalists at Kings Mountain, defeating them decisively and frustrating Britain's southern strategy.

The American Revolution Moves South

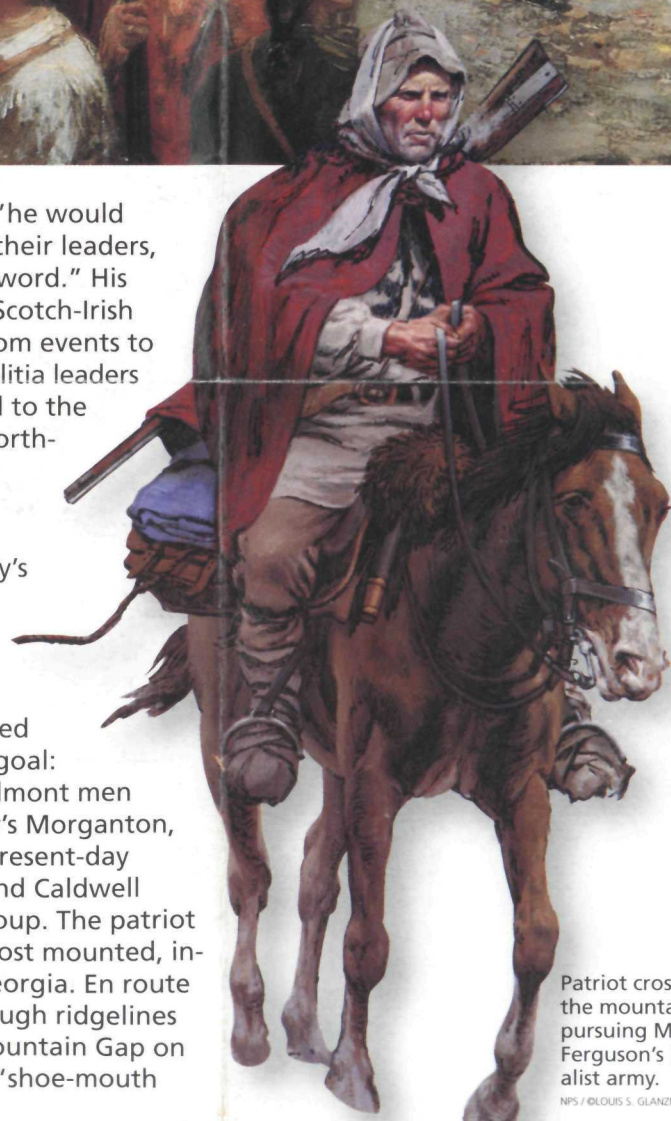
By early 1780 the American Revolution was stalemated. Unable to subdue the northern colonies, the British turned south. Campaigning from Savannah, Ga., taken in late 1778, the British took Charleston, S.C.—and 5,000 patriots—in May 1780. Southern colonies now had no organized resistance to invasion. Soon most of Georgia and South Carolina were occupied, and in August the British again routed patriots at Camden, S.C. That meant North Carolina was ripe for invasion.

British strategy hinged on rallying Americans to fight for the Crown. War planners believed southern loyalists were many and would fight the patriots if the British gained control. At first the plan seemed to work. British Inspector of Militia for the Southern Provinces Maj. Patrick Ferguson was to recruit and train this hoped-for loyalist militia. At Ninety Six, a western South Carolina post, Ferguson raised and trained several regiments of loyalist militia to support British forces and to control the re-taken colonies.

Gen. Lord Cornwallis, British commander in the South, started moving his army into North Carolina in September 1780. Ferguson and 1,000 loyalists were to advance along the western frontier to recruit more men, protect Cornwallis's left flank, and deter Scotch-Irish frontier settlers from joining the patriots. Ferguson moved north and west, probing to Gillespie Gap, east of today's Spruce Pine, N.C. He sent a verbal ultimatum to settlers west of the

Blue Ridge: quit opposing British arms, or "he would march his army over the mountains, hang their leaders, and lay their country waste with fire and sword." His demand was a strategic blunder. It forced Scotch-Irish frontiersmen—who largely stayed aloof from events to their east—into the patriot camp. Patriot militia leaders Cols. John Sevier and Isaac Shelby appealed to the patriot militia of southwest Virginia and north-west Georgia. On September 24, 1780, 400 mounted Virginia militiamen under Col. William Campbell set out from Abingdon, Va. They reached Sycamore Shoals (in today's Elizabethton, Tenn.) the next day, joining 400 men led by Sevier and Shelby, and 200 more led by Col. Charles McDowell.

On September 26, this 1,000-strong mounted militia set out to the southeast. Their first goal: to join with North and South Carolina piedmont men at Quaker Meadows plantation near today's Morganton, N.C. On September 30, 350 patriots from present-day North Carolina counties of Surry, Wilkes, and Caldwell met there with the over-the-mountains group. The patriot force would eventually total 2,000 men, most mounted, including militia from South Carolina and Georgia. En route the overmountain men had advanced through ridgelines climbing to nearly 5,000 feet. In Yellow Mountain Gap on Roan Mountain, September 27, snow was "shoe-mouth



Patriot crossing the mountains, pursuing Major Ferguson's loyalist army.

deep." On a nearby mountain bald they fired a volley to celebrate crossing the Blue Ridge. But that day two men deserted to warn the British of their approach. On September 28 the patriots split their force so the loyalists—assumed nearby—could not elude them. They reunited September 30 west of Quaker Meadows, to hunt for Ferguson in vain for five days. Alerted to their presence and strength, Ferguson was retreating toward the main British army in Charlotte, N.C.

The breakthrough came October 5 as the patriot militia learned from South Carolina Col. Edward Lacey of Ferguson's retreat toward Charlotte. The next day 900 select mounted patriots—both overmountain men and piedmont men—set out in hot pursuit that would last all night. At Hannah's Cowpens (South Carolina) they rested the horses, ate a light meal, and pondered their next move. That would be the decisive Battle of Kings Mountain, October 7, 1780. The British threat to North Carolina would be thwarted there, forcing a retreat of the main army to South Carolina.

Private citizens supplied only by themselves had marched 330 miles—mostly through bad weather, over terrain one must experience to appreciate—to attack and defeat Major Ferguson's loyalists. The victory allowed a new patriot army to form under Gen. Nathaniel Greene and to resist British moves in 1781. The revolution was back on track.



Ferguson hailed from the Scottish highlands gentry. In Gaelic his name "Feargachus" means "bold." He was cool and tenacious under fire.

At Kings Mountain he was the only British soldier in a battle that was essentially civil war between patriot militia and his combined loyalist regulars and militia.

Who Were the Backcountry and Piedmont Patriots?

American patriot Patrick Henry exclaimed "Give me liberty or give me death." His mother called the American Revolution just more "lowland troubles." She did not mean North America's lowlands but the borderlands comprising the north of Ireland, the Scottish lowlands, and England's northern counties. Most frontier people in the South were immigrants from those borderlands—which helps explain their strong reaction to Major Ferguson's intimidating challenge.



Most immigrants from North Britain's borderlands in the 1700s settled southern highland areas, but some settled piedmont or low-country areas.

Patrick Henry descended from the same stock as the overmountain folk. They had settled much of colonial America's backcountry in serial mass migrations—250,000 people—in the

1700s. Two-thirds came between 1765 and 1775. In fighting Ferguson's loyalists, they replayed five generations of similar conflict in North Britain, where so-called "borderers" had reacted violently to generations of oppression—with little love lost on the Crown or on state-sponsored religion. The overmountain folk had largely remained aloof from the revolution—until Ferguson issued his ultimatum.

Called "backwater men" here, overmountain folk made up 90 percent of the southern highlands Euro-Americans, dominating the culture even more than that figure suggests. They possessed fierce pride, were stoutly self-contained, and practiced a mili-



Isaac Shelby (left) refused to stop and rest on October 6 after 36 hours of travel. He vowed to follow Ferguson into Lord Cornwallis's lines if necessary. He later became Kentucky's first governor. **William Campbell** (middle), a Virginian, led the patriot army, chosen to

command by his fellow colonels. He died in 1781, just before the battle of Yorktown. **John Sevier** (right), widely known west of the Appalachian mountains, would be Tennessee's first governor. His march and the ensuing battle built political fortunes.

tantly non-hierarchical form of Presbyterianism. To them, everyone was a foreigner except neighbors and kin—as defined over generations of conflict in their North Britain homelands.

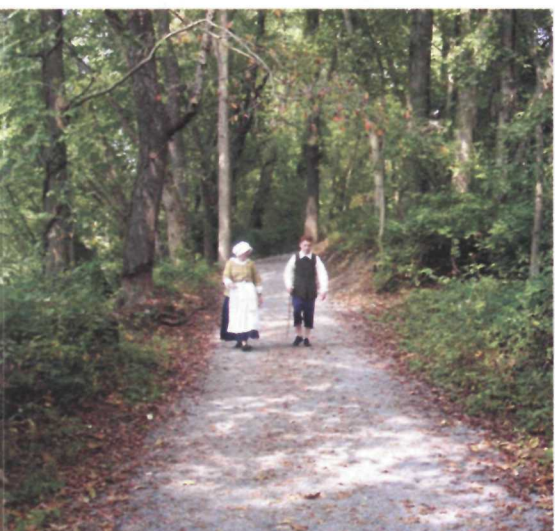
Arriving in America's backcountry they fought some of the most fierce Indian wars against some of the strongest, most war-like Indian groups. Even with the Indians subdued, the southern highlands retained their border character as a contested territory lacking established government or rule of law. The overmountain people's heritage fit them to this anarchic environment. It suited their extended family system, warrior ethic, small-farm economy, and informal and self-enforced

style of retributive justice. Writing of this American backcountry, historian David Hackett Fischer has observed that "The ethos of the North British borders came to dominate this 'dark and bloody ground,' partly by force of numbers, but mainly because it was a means of survival in a raw and dangerous world."

Major Ferguson's great mistake—it proved fatal for him and disastrous to British efforts to staunch the American Revolution—was to goad this borderlands heritage of the overmountain and piedmont settlers into championing the patriot cause so decisively.

PORTRAITS AT LEFT: SHELBY, KENTUCKY HISTORICAL SOCIETY; CAMPBELL, ROBERT WALSON; SEVIER, TENNESSEE STATE MUSEUM; TENNESSEE HISTORICAL SOCIETY COLLECTION. MAP AT LEFT BASED ON A MAP BY ANDREW MACARTHUR IN ALBION'S SEED: FOUR BRITISH PEOPLES IN AMERICA BY DAVID HACKETT FISCHER, NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1989, PAGE 637

Sites Along the Trail



Sycamore Shoals



Cowpens



Elkin Trail



Quaker Meadows



Abingdon Muster Grounds



OVTA Annual March at Sycamore Shoals

Visiting the Trail Today

The 330-mile commemorative motor route uses public highways that may be closed locally for repair or weather conditions. The eventual goal: a 330-mile non-motorized route for hiking, horseback riding, bicycling, etc. Motor route segments are in North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

With other area citizens, descendants of the patriots and loyalists formed the Overmountain Victory Trail Association (OVTA) to advocate designating a national historic trail, and Congress did so in 1980. Each year the association holds a reenactment march over a two-week period. **For information contact OVTA at www.ovta.org.**

The reenactment is open to everyone. It proceeds both on foot and in cars, so those not wishing to walk may take part. The Trail is still being developed, but you may access some of the route. Trail sections become official via agreements with

landowners. Trail logo signs (lower right) identify all certified segments. Respect landowners' rights; stay on the Trail.

Activities
Along the Trail federal, state, and local parks and forests offer museums, historical interpretive talks, commemorations, historic house tours, and a summer historical drama—at Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area—as well as birding, boating, fishing, hiking, nature walks, swimming, rafting, and winter sports. Service animals are welcome.

Safety
Drive carefully—and never stop on road surfaces to look at scenery, wildlife, or a historic site. Pull off the road completely. • Exploring on foot near roads, be alert to and cautious about traffic. • Keep track of young children at all times. • Learn how to spot poison oak, poison ivy, and other plants to avoid. • Beware of snakes

(including poisonous snakes) but don't harm them. Do not place your hands or feet where you can't see. • Watch for spiders, bees, wasps, and hornets, and check yourself for ticks and chiggers in summer. • Firearms regulations conform to state laws; see the park website (below) for Park Management, Laws & Policies.

More Information
Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail
2635 Park Road
Blacksburg, SC 29702
864-936-3477
www.nps.gov/ovvi



Visit www.nps.gov/nts for information about the National Trails System. This Trail is an affiliated area of the National Park System. Please visit www.nps.gov to learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities.

One Trail with Many Partners

Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail is part of the **National Trails System**, which is administered by the **National Park Service**. The trail is administered in cooperation with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Forest Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture; Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina; local governments; and historical societies and citizen groups.

Trail Partners offering special events and interpretive programs and activities are listed at right.

Abingdon Muster Grounds
1780 Muster Place
Abingdon, VA 24210
276-525-1050
www.abingdonmusters.org

Blue Ridge Parkway
199 Hemphill Knob
Asheville, NC 28803
828-298-0398 for a recording
828-271-4779 for headquarters
www.nps.gov/blri

Museum of North Carolina Minerals
Blue Ridge Parkway
Milepost 331
828-765-2761
www.byways.org/explore/byways/2280/places/28594

Cowpens National Battlefield
P.O. Box 308
Chesnee, SC 29323
864-461-2828
www.nps.gov/cowp

Fort Defiance
P.O. Box 686
Lenoir, NC 28645
828-754-7095
www.fortdefiance.org

Historic Burke Foundation (Quaker Meadows)
P.O. Box 915
102 East Union Street
Morganton, NC 28680
828-437-4104
www.historicburke.org

Kings Mountain National Military Park
2625 Park Road
Blacksburg, SC 29702
864-936-7921
www.nps.gov/kimo

Kings Mountain State Park
1277 Park Road
Blacksburg, SC 29702
803-222-3209
www.southcarolinaparks.com/park-find/er/state-park/945.aspx

Lake James State Park
P.O. Box 340
Nebo, NC 28761
828-652-5047
<http://lis.unc.edu/park/project/visit/laja/main.php>

Old Wilkes, Inc.
100 East Main Street
Wilkesboro, NC 28697
336-667-3171
www.wilkesheritagemuseum.com

Pleasant Gardens (Joseph McDowell House)
Highway 70 West
Marion, NC 28752
www.mcdowellinc.org

Rocky Mount State Historic Site and Museum
P.O. Box 160
Piney Flats, TN 37686
423-538-7396
www.rockymountmuseum.com

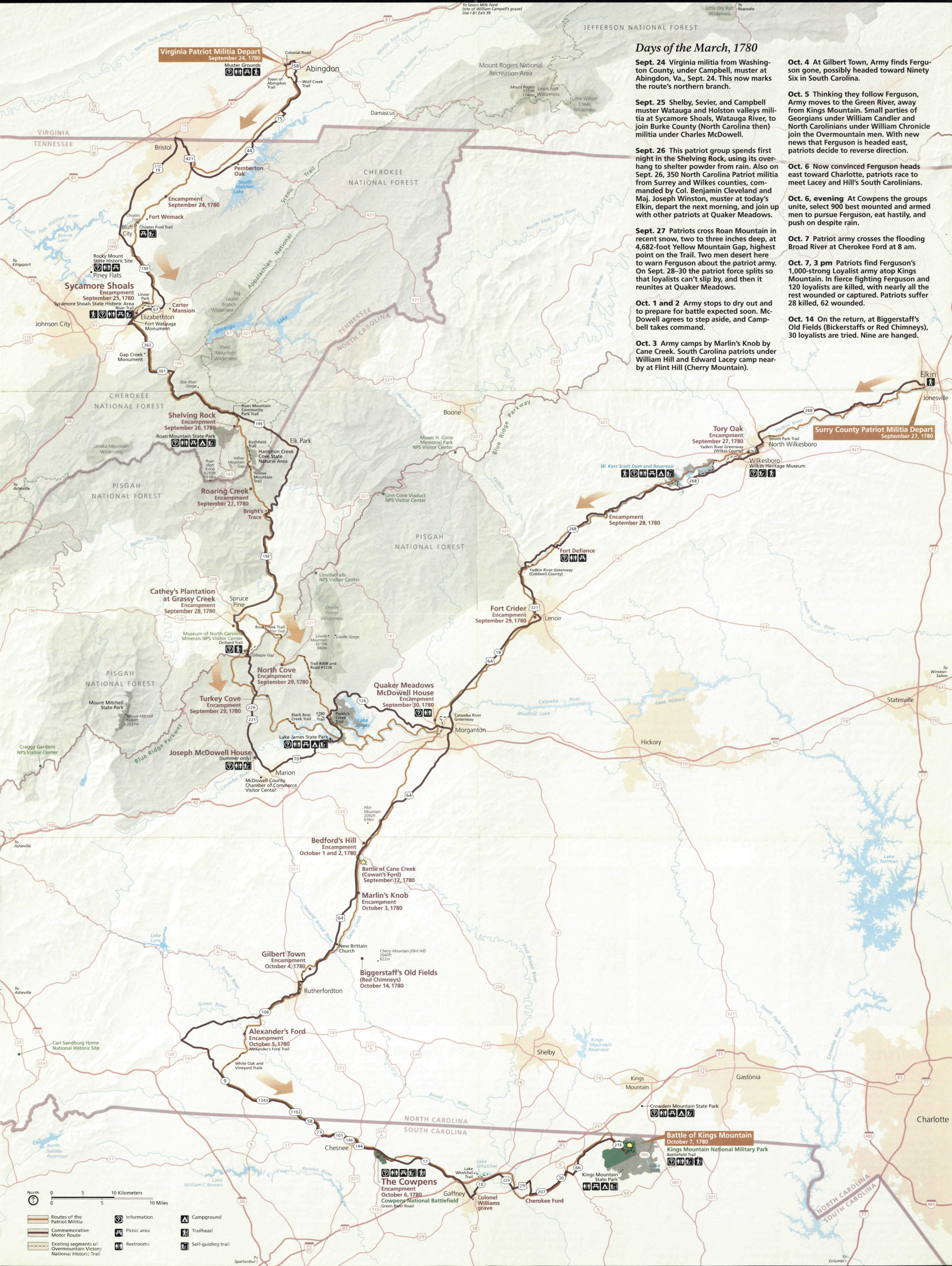
Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area
1651 West Elk Avenue
Elizabethton, TN 37643
423-543-5808
<http://state.tn.us/enviroment/parks/SycamoreShoals>

W. Scott Kerr Dam and Reservoir
499 Reservoir Road
Wilkesboro, NC 28697
336-921-3390
www.saw.usace.army.mil/wiscott/index.htm

©GPO 2011—165-615/08747 Reprint 2011
Printed on recycled paper

ALL PHOTOS NPS

Exploring the Trail Today



Days of the March, 1780

Sept. 24 Virginia militia from Washington County, under Campbell, muster at Abingdon, Va., Sept. 24. This now marks the route's northern branch.

Sept. 25 Shelby, Sevier, and Campbell muster Watauga and Holston valleys militia at Sycamore Shoals, Watauga River, to join Burke County (North Carolina then) militia under Charles McDowell.

Sept. 26 This patriot group spends first night in the Shelving Rock, using its overhang to shelter powder from rain. Also on Sept. 26, 350 North Carolina Patriot militia from Surrey and Wilkes counties, commanded by Col. Benjamin Cleveland and Maj. Joseph Winston, muster at today's Elkin, depart the next morning, and join up with other patriots at Quaker Meadows.

Sept. 27 Patriots cross Roan Mountain in recent snow, two to three inches deep, at 4,682-foot Yellow Mountain Gap, highest point on the Trail. Two men desert here to warn Ferguson about the patriot army. On Sept. 28-30 the patriot force splits so that loyalists can't slip by, and then it reunites at Quaker Meadows.

Oct. 1 and 2 Army stops to dry out and to prepare for battle expected soon. McDowell agrees to step aside, and Campbell takes command.

Oct. 3 Army camps by Marlin's Knob by Cane Creek. South Carolina patriots under William Hill and Edward Lacey camp nearby at Flint Hill (Cherry Mountain).

Oct. 4 At Gilbert Town, Army finds Ferguson gone, possibly headed toward Ninety Six in South Carolina.

Oct. 5 Thinking they follow Ferguson, Army moves to the Green River, away from Kings Mountain. Small parties of Georgians under William Candler and North Carolinians under William Chronicle join the Overmountain men. With new news that Ferguson is headed east, patriots decide to reverse direction.

Oct. 6 Now convinced Ferguson heads east toward Charlotte, patriots race to meet Lacey and Hill's South Carolinians.

Oct. 6, evening At Cowpens the groups unite, select 900 best mounted and armed men to pursue Ferguson, eat hastily, and push on despite rain.

Oct. 7 Patriot army crosses the flooding Broad River at Cherokee Ford at 8 am.

Oct. 7, 3 pm Patriots find Ferguson's 1,000-strong Loyalist army atop Kings Mountain. In fierce fighting Ferguson and 120 loyalists are killed, with nearly all the rest wounded or captured. Patriots suffer 28 killed, 62 wounded.

Oct. 14 On the return, at Biggerstaff's Old Fields (Bickerstaffs or Red Chimneys), 30 loyalists are tried. Nine are hanged.