

Davidson's Fort's Role in History

By: Senator Joe Sam Queen

Davidson's Fort, also referred to as Rutherford's Fort in many Revolutionary War pension applications, is the old fort for which Old Fort N.C. received its name. Although its history is echoed in our nations founding documents, its importance is not well known. The fort was built near the head of the Catawba River in 1776 as part of the Revolutionary War by Griffith Rutherford's patriot militiamen. It was the western most outpost on the North Carolina frontier and served as the staging site for the Rutherford Expedition and as a defensive fortification protecting the western settlements from Cherokee hostilities. The Rutherford Expedition against the Cherokee was the largest patriot militia campaign of the Revolutionary War. Some 2700 frontiersmen answering the call to serve in the state militia bearing their own rifles, providing their own provisions, including over 1500 horses, gathered here in late August of 1776 to march under the command of General Griffith Rutherford against the Cherokee in direct response to the clause Thomas Jefferson penned July 4th in the Declaration of Independence:

"He (King George) has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rules of warfare are an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions."

The significance for the prospects of the new nation of having this highly motivated patriot militia form here on the western frontier in the summer of 1776 can not be overstated. The future options for the Loyalist and Tory forces in the Southern Colonies were greatly restricted. Their allies, the Cherokee were permanently taken out of the Revolutionary War. Instead they had a large victorious patriot militia controlling their western flank. They were effectively pinned down in the South. Consequently, for the next four years George Washington's Continental Army survived largely because Cornwallis would not leave the Southern Colonies to assist General Howe in finishing off Washington and his fledgling army.

In 1780, many of these same frontier militiamen formed into what we call the Over Mountain Men and were again victorious over the Tories at the Battle of Kings Mountain. The chain of events that began on the Western Frontier at Davidson's Fort in the summer of 1776 were' essential to the eventual victory over the Crown's force at Yorktown in 1781. Davidson Fort is truly a place of national significance for the role it played in forming the militia on the Western Frontier. A militia that was crucial to the patriots winning the Revolutionary War and securing our independence. Appropriately, North Carolina would not even ratify the Constitution until the revolutionary spirit of these frontier militiamen was incorporated into the United States Constitution as the Second Amendment of the Bill of Rights:

"A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed"

Few places in America can claim a greater contribution towards gaining American independence than Davidson's Fort. Few places can claim a greater demonstration of the famed Spirit of 1776 than Davidson's Fort. No place better focused the contributions of the Scotch-Irish frontier settlers, with their yearning for freedom and independence and their dislike of King George and his tyrannical ways, to the larger purpose of forging a new American nation than did Davidson's Fort.