

THE BATTLE THAT TURNED THE TIDE: KINGS MOUNTAIN

*Once Used As A Battlefield In 1780, And Is Now A Place of History,
Education, And Honor*



In 1780, Tom Young was just 16 years old when he found himself in the thick of a firefight on a remote mountaintop in South Carolina. In his journal, he tells of sheltering behind trees whose bark had been totally shorn off by rifle fire. But he kept moving from tree to tree, up the mountain to confront the Tories commanded by British Major Patrick Ferguson.

“It’s amazing to me that these teenagers had come to fight,” Leah Taber, a ranger at the [Kings Mountain National Military Park](#), tells The Buzz. “Tom came to defend his home and family and to put an end to the threats that Ferguson had made.”

Ferguson, charged with rallying loyalists in the Carolinas to the British cause, was encamped with 1200 men along the ridge atop Kings Mountain, just south of the North Carolina border. Advancing on his position were a nearly equal number of patriots, many from settlements in the mountains of what are today Tennessee and Virginia, as well as North and South Carolina. Known as the Overmountain Men, they had come in response to Ferguson’s ill-advised warning that he would “lay waste to their country with fire and sword” if they joined the patriot cause.

“It was enough to set them off,” says Ben Richardson, Chief of Planning and Partnerships for the Southern Campaign of the American Revolution Parks Group. A

division of the National Parks Service, the group includes four national parks that preserve sites from the Revolutionary War in the Carolinas upcountry, including Kings Mountain National Military Park, Cowpens National Battlefield, Ninety Six National Historic Site, and the [Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail](#).

“The group from Virginia was the largest and came the farthest,” Leah Taber says. “They started in Abington and marched through the mountains.” Other groups came from Elkin and Wilkesboro in North Carolina and the Elizabethtown area of Tennessee.



Every year, members of the [Overmountain Victory Trail Association](#) recreate the march to Kings Mountain, arriving in time for the Oct. 7 anniversary of the battle. Many walk along parts of the 330-mile route, stopping to give educational programs at schools and historic sites along the way.

Less athletically inclined history buffs can drive the NPS Commemorative Auto Route that parallels the patriot march along state highways marked with distinctive signs. “It’s quite close to the original route the Overmountain Men took,” Ben Richardson says. His current project is developing a multi-use hiking and equestrian path along the historic route, a partnership process that involves numerous easements from local landowners and cooperation from gateway communities.

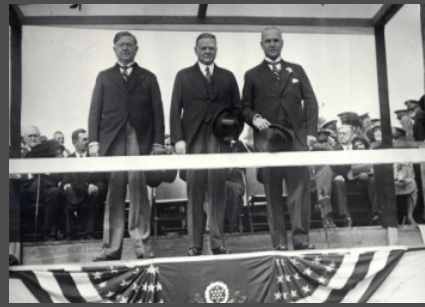
“The NPS doesn’t own any of the trail outside the parks,” he says, “but we’re gaining some momentum. And it’s a unique opportunity to walk in the footsteps of patriots.”

Once they arrived at Kings Mountain, it took the patriot forces only about an hour to defeat the British loyalists, even though Ferguson held the high ground. “This was old growth forest at the time,” Leah Taber says. “Chestnuts dominated the forest, many 4 to 6 feet in diameter. Some of the patriots wrote that two or three men could hide behind each tree.”

Today, a paved 1.5 mile path leads past the patriot positions and up onto the ridge where several monuments honor the American victory. Signboards along the way, as well as a cell phone tour, recount highlights of the battle.

Always an honored spot among local residents, Kings Mountain became a national park in 1931. It currently hosts 250,000 visitors a year, according to Taber, thanks partly to its convenient location just off I-85 near the North Carolina/ South Carolina

border. Backcountry trails lead from the national park to adjacent [Kings Mountain State Park](#), where a campground, fishing and a frontier farm are among the attractions.



One monument along the trail, flanked by a cairn of stones, marks the grave of Major Ferguson. “People throw a rock on his grave as they come by,” Richardson says. “Sort of to keep his spirit buried.” Ferguson made an easy target for the patriot rifles, riding into battle in a checked hunting coat and directing his troops by blowing on a silver whistle. Legend says he fell with eight balls through his coat.

Actually, Leah Taber reveals, Ferguson was a pretty interesting guy. “He invented a breech-loading rifle well ahead of its time. We have one of the few original Ferguson rifles in our museum,” she says. “It was actually stolen back in the 60s and we didn’t get it back until a pawn shop owner called the FBI in the 1990s.”

A couple of ironies surround Ferguson, according to Taber. Earlier in the war, at the Battle of Brandywine, he had the opportunity to shoot an officer that turned out to be George Washington, but didn’t take the shot when the officer turned away. And at Kings Mountain, his troops, armed with muskets and bayonets, were defeated by the more accurate rifles of the Overmountain Men.

The museum at Kings Mountain NMP is designed to resemble an atmospheric old growth forest with exhibits inside the trees telling the story of the Revolution in the South. Three months after Ferguson’s defeat, a patriot army defeated a force of British regulars at nearby Cowpens, SC, putting the British Southern Strategy on hold and forcing Cornwallis to retreat from Charlotte.

“This was really a civil war,” Leah Taber explains. “Colonists joined both sides. At Kings Mountain, Ferguson was the only regular military man. The rest were militia. The American loyalists wore a pine twig in their hats, and the American patriots wore a piece of white paper.”

While the story of Kings Mountain and the other Revolutionary battles fought in the Carolinas are largely forgotten today, they were well known at the time. “Thomas Jefferson called the battle at Kings Mountain the turn of the tide,” Ben Richardson says. “Up until then it was a stalemate. It wasn’t clear who was winning. But Kings Mountain was the beginning of the end for the British.”



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A graduate of Franconia College in Social Psychology, Renee has worked as Travel Editor for Charlotte Magazine and has written three travel guidebooks for Countryman Press among other writing assignments. She enjoys food and camping.



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