

Battle of Kettle Creek -- February 14, 1779

During the American Revolution, Georgia was the youngest and least populated of the thirteen Colonies. About 25,000 Georgians were located in the Savannah River corridor from the coastal settlement of Savannah to Augusta and Wilkes County. Most of Georgia was under British control, except for Wilkes County, which the British called the "Hornet's Nest."

Encouraged by the capture of Savannah and Augusta, British Lt. Col. Archibald Campbell directed Lt. Col. (James) Boyd to raise a large force of Loyalists in the Carolinas and then join Major John Hamilton to rally Loyalists in Wilkes County. As Boyd crossed South Carolina, Loyalists swelled his ranks to over 700 militia.

It was early in February 1779, when Colonel Andrew Pickens with his South Carolina Militia, and Colonels John Dooly and Elijah Clarke with the Wilkes County Georgia Militia joined forces to pursue Hamilton. They caught up with him at Carr's Fort in Wilkes County, but as the siege continued, Pickens learned of Boyd's approach. Pickens considered Boyd more important than Hamilton; and started after him into South Carolina.

Boyd crossed the Broad River near its junction with the Savannah on the morning of February 13, 1779, and camped that night at a fast moving and flooded stream, called Kettle Creek -- less than a mile from Carr's Fort. Pickens had re-crossed the Savannah, and then circled back to follow Boyd into Wilkes County.

On Sunday, February 14, outnumbered more than two to one, Pickens attacked with 200 of his men in the center, about 100 men commanded by Dooly on his right, and 60 men on the left led by Clarke. Colonel Boyd was completely surprised by the attack. His horses were turned out to graze and men were slaughtering a stolen cow in a flat area between a steep hill and Kettle Creek. Placed near the top of the hill, Boyd's pickets fired on the advance guard led by Capt. James McCall up the hill, and gave alarm to the Loyalists below.

Clarke and Dooly became bogged down in the swampy land on both flanks and were unable to support Pickens' frontal attack. Boyd directed Major William Spurgen to find a way to cross the swollen creek, and then led about 100 Loyalists up the hill to reinforce his pickets. When Boyd was fatally wounded, his troops panicked and fled back down the hill. Spurgen crossed the creek and attempted to regroup the Loyalists when fighting became very intense for over an hour. Clarke finally crossed the creek and attacked Spurgen. Dooly and Pickens overwhelmed the remaining Loyalists who had not managed to cross the creek

The Loyalists were routed with losses of 70 killed or wounded, and 150 captured. Boyd's wounds were mortal, and he died a few hours after the battle. The Patriots reported 9 killed and 23 wounded or missing. Several prisoners were tried and convicted of high treason, and five hanged; the rest were pardoned. Spurgen attempted to lead those who

escaped to rejoin the British, but only 270 reported to Campbell in Augusta, the remainder probably returned to their homes.

Although the Battle of Kettle Creek was smaller than many others, it was Georgia's most memorable victory during the American Revolution. More importantly, it demonstrated considerable flaws in the British Southern Strategy and prevented a rallying of the expected thousands of Loyalists in the South at a crucial time in the War.

Washington – Wilkes and Life in the Hornet's Nest

About a year after the Battle of Kettle Creek on January 23, 1780, the Georgia Commons House of Assembly passed an act declaring the "Town at the Court house in Wilkes County which shall be called Washington." This action was remarkable considering the hostile conditions in Georgia and its timing which was several years before the Continental Army defeated the British and almost a decade before George Washington became President.

During 1780 and 1781, Heard's Fort near Washington became the temporary Revolutionary Capitol of Georgia when Stephen Heard served as Governor. None in Revolutionary America suffered more than the inhabitants of Wilkes County. The following paragraphs are representative of their courage and sacrifices including the actions of many whose names have long been forgotten.

The British occupied Augusta and frequently sent raiders into Wilkes County. Homes were burned and women and children killed while the men were away fighting. One band brutally murdered John Dooly in his home; and Stephen Heard's wife and child died from exposure in a snowstorm after their cabin was burned. Elijah Clarke had to lead three hundred men with four hundred women and children over two hundred miles with limited rations into the Carolina mountains for refuge so he and the militia could continue the fight for their freedom.

Nancy Hart, wife of soldier Benjamin Hart, became the heroine of numerous legends, including one in which she killed two Tories and held others at gunpoint while her daughter ran for help.

Austin Dabney, a slave who served as a private in the Wilkes County Militia, fought with Elijah Clarke on many occasions. Dabney took a rifle ball through his thigh, making him a cripple for the rest of his life. He was the only African American to be granted land by Georgia in recognition of his bravery and service during the Revolution and one of the few to receive a military pension.

The actions of many in the Wilkes County Militia deserve recognition. At the Battle of Musgrove's Mill, Captain Shadrick Inman rode forward with a small group of riflemen to entice the British into the fire of Patriots hidden behind breastworks. Thirty under the command of Major William Candler fought in the victorious Battle of King's Mountain. Major John Cunningham who fought at Kettle Creek later commanded Georgians at

Cowpens. Micajah Williamson was one of the men who shot Lt. Col. Boyd at Kettle Creek and later took command when Elijah Clarke was ill with smallpox.

Others endured torture and the ultimate sacrifice- death. In September 1780, Elijah Clarke had to end his siege of Augusta, and was forced to leave behind many wounded. Thirteen were hanged by Lt. Col. Thomas Brown, but this was considered merciful when compared with the fate of others he turned over to the Indians. Twenty-one were held in irons for several months at the British Fort Cornwallis.

In July 1781, the Wilkes County Militia assembled for the last time and helped drive the British from Augusta. One year later the British evacuated Savannah and in September 1783, The Treaty of Paris was signed, ending the War for American Independence.

Preserving the Kettle Creek Battleground

Shortly after the Daughters of the American Revolution Chapter was chartered in Washington, Georgia, members were anxious to purchase the land on which the Battle of Kettle Creek was fought. In early 1900, twelve and one-half acres were purchased for the sum of seventy-five dollars.

The ladies began to raise money to mark the Battleground and in 1929, the United States War Department appropriated funds to create a marble monument. The Kettle Creek Monument was unveiled on June 6, 1930, with a program that elicited national recognition.

In Hearst's Sunday American, a review of the monument dedication reported, "The historical old town of Washington Wilkes has renewed its interest in the events and traditions which have surrounded it since Colonial days. It has become again a matter of real pride that there was one spot in Georgia utterly unconquerable in the days of 1776, and that here was fought the battle referred to by an historian as the Gettysburg of the Revolution."

Each year on the anniversary of the battle, DAR members traveled to War Hill and laid a wreath at the site. During the 200th Anniversary celebration in 1979, a new monument was unveiled and shortly after the DAR conveyed the Battleground site to Wilkes County.

In 1998, the Georgia Society Sons of the American became active in the sponsorship of a Memorial Ceremony at the Battleground. The DAR and SAR, along with several Washington- Wilkes organizations, annually recognize the Anniversary of the Battle of Kettle Creek during the second weekend in February in a celebration called "Revolutionary Days."

Activities include a Parade and Living History presentations in the historic Washington Town Square; Tours of the Kettle Creek Battleground; Dramatic Portrayal of the February 14, 1779 Battle; and a Memorial Ceremony at Kettle Creek Battleground. The Ceremony includes Revolutionary War soldiers with battle flags, Fife and Drums,

Patriotic Music, Musket Salute and Wreath Presentations. All activities are free and the public is encouraged to attend .