

# **Fight At Van(n)'s Creek, Georgia**

**11 February 1779**

A conference in New York between Sir Henry Clinton and a man named Boyd (his first name remains uncertain to historians) resulted in a British scheme to promote a Loyalist rising in the Carolina backcountry. Receiving a commission as colonel, Boyd was to raise a command of Loyalists and march to the royal standard in Georgia.

In January of 1779 COL Boyd departed Savannah, the newly-captured capital of Georgia, for North Carolina. Beginning with a force he organized in Anson County, North Carolina, Boyd headed for Wilkes County, Georgia. He was determined to join the British forces in their drive to capture Augusta and destroy the remnants of the rebellion in the backcountry. Along Boyd's march he encountered some equally determined Whigs.

On 5 February COL Boyd, MAJ William Spurgin, and 350 recruits broke camp near present-day Spartanburg and marched across South Carolina. While they were on the move, 250 other North Carolina Loyalists commanded by LTC John Moore joined them, swelling their ranks to about 600 men.

Whig CPT Josiah Greer of the Little River Regiment of South Carolina embodied a force of 30 men, joined by a similar force commanded by LTC Robert McCrery, along with militiamen from COL John Thomas' Regiment. Now composed of about 250 men, they responded to this "refractory spirit North of Enoree river." Pursuing Boyd, the Carolina Whigs chased after him, crossing the Saluda, Little River, and Rocky River to reach the Savannah. However, Boyd stayed ahead of them.

A writer from the Loyalist viewpoint reported that Boyd and his men "lived off the land as they pursued their march." Writing from the Whig point of view, Benson Lossing stated of Boyd's men, "Like plundering banditti, they appropriated every species of property to their own use, abused the inhabitants, and wantonly butchered several who opposed their rapacious demands."

## **The Guardian at the Gate: McGowan's (McGowin's) Blockhouse at Cherokee Ford, South Carolina**

Receiving a warning of Boyd's approach, Colonels Andrew Pickens and John Dooly ended their siege of CPT John Hamilton's Loyalists at Carr's Fort. Considering Boyd more important than Hamilton, Pickens and Dooly re-crossed the Savannah near Fort Charlotte, close to the junction of the Broad and Savannah Rivers.

Boyd was moving west toward the Savannah from Ninety Six, headed for the river crossing at Cherokee Ford, ten miles north of Fort Charlotte. At that location in South Carolina on the northeast side of the Savannah, the Whigs had constructed a blockhouse, called McGowan's blockhouse.

Cherokee Ford had become an important crossing on the Savannah River. It was located at a point where a high ridge reached the river, allowing travelers to pass through the low, swampy areas to the river. The ford itself contained thousands of huge rocks in the shallow area, forming a river crossing. McGowan's blockhouse stood on a hill commanding this crossing. Whig CPT Robert Anderson had posted LT Thomas Shanklin and eight militiamen in the blockhouse with orders to guard the ford and not allow any Loyalists to cross.

Inside, LT Shanklin and his little party, armed with two mounted swivel guns, blocked Boyd's crossing. Boyd advanced and demanded passage, but the Whigs in the blockhouse "spiritedly refused" him. As negotiations were underway between the Whig lieutenant and the Loyalist colonel, CPT James Little and 40 Georgia militiamen arrived from the Georgia side of the ford—they made "the canoe whiz till they got over"—to reinforce the blockhouse.

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Reluctant to take casualties, Boyd moved his command five miles upriver to the high ground opposite the mouth of Van's Creek in present-day Elbert County. On 11 February Boyd crossed the Savannah River with their baggage on rafts, swimming their horses alongside. Captain Little and his Georgia Militia, and Captains Robert Anderson, William Baskin, John Miller, and Joseph Pickens and their South Carolina Militia, a total of about 100 Whigs, now opposed Boyd's 600-900 Loyalists as they approached the Georgia bank of the Savannah. However, the Whigs were unable to observe the enemy due to the dense growth of the cane breaks in the low grounds. Captain Anderson's "attention was arrested by what he conceived to be the main body." As Boyd and his men approached the landing, Anderson's men began firing "with great determination" in what was later termed as a "heated" fight. However, Boyd's command had crossed to several different landings and flanked the Whigs. Finding himself unexpectedly attacked from the rear, Anderson ordered a retreat. Boyd then continued his march toward Augusta, which Campbell had taken on 31 January.

The Whigs lost one killed, 15 wounded, and 18 captured, among the latter being Captains Baskin and Miller (wounded in both knees). Colonel Boyd is said to have lost 100 killed, wounded, and missing, many of whom having deserted him and returned to their homes in the Carolinas. The Whigs secured as many of their wounded as they could, fell back to McGowan's blockhouse, and joined Pickens and Dooly in pursuit of Boyd.

Despite their defeat at Van's Creek, the Whigs' loss was small. They remained determined to destroy Boyd. Boyd's losses at Van's Creek, however, had weakened his forces seriously.

Meanwhile, Pickens and Dooly had made a complete circle, moving upstream on the Carolina side to cross the Savannah behind Boyd on 12 February at the Cedar Shoal. The Whigs followed Boyd down the Georgia side to Fish Dam Ford on Broad River. On 13 February, unaware that Pickens was right behind him, Boyd crossed the Broad River near its junction with the Savannah and went into camp for the night on the north side of Kettle Creek—less than a mile from Carr's Fort.

On 14 February 1779, St. Valentine's Day, the Whigs defeated Boyd's command at Kettle Creek, a great encouragement to the Whig cause.

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