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Halifax Men and Greene's Campaign

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**Remarks to the Annual Meeting
Virginia Society, Sons of the American Revolution
242nd Anniversary of Nathanael Greene's 'Crossing of the Dan River'**

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Nathaniel Greene's plan in February 1781 was to use the Cole's Ferry Road through Halifax County as an avenue of retreat and to concentrate his Army at Prince Edward Court House. When Cornwallis failed to cross the Dan River, Greene stopped the army at Halifax Court House, now known as Crystal Hill. With two rivers between him and the enemy, Greene could rebuild and resupply his Army. On February 17th, Greene reported,

“Our Army is on the North side of the Bannister River, encamped at Halifax Court House in Virginia, in order to tempt the Enemy to cross the [Dan] River, as the most pleasing prospect presents itself of a strong *reinforcement* from the militia of this state.”ⁱ

And the *reinforcement* came. From 20 modern-day Virginia counties. One-thousand Virginia Militia were here and more would come.ⁱⁱ Halifax became Greene's breadbasket. Halifax provided everything from alcohol to animal fodder.ⁱⁱⁱ Citizens also rendered medical aid to Greene's wounded.^{iv} There was even a temporary Army hospital established at the home of William Wily for a period of 23 days.^v

Halifax Militia and Continentals

Halifax also provided warfighters; militia and Continental veterans. Halifax men served on all lines of defense at Guilford Courthouse. Of 1,139 militia, a quarter were already in service elsewhere when Greene arrived.^{vi} Those that were here turned out to support.

After crossing the Dan River at Irvine's Ferry, Greene dispatched Private John Irby to the County Lieutenant requesting two Halifax County militia companies for support. Captains William McDaniel and John Thompson immediately responded with men.^{vii} Among them was twenty-year-old Sergeant Nathan Formby who recalled turning out “to guard the river to prevent Cornwallis from crossing...”. Formby's career in Halifax started at the age of 17 as a Minuteman seeing duty in Tidewater for six months. He enlisted as an 18-months man and fought at Savannah where his right shoulder blade was shattered by a British musket ball. Because of his wounds, he missed his regiment's march to Charleston, SC where they became prisoners of war. Formby left active duty in December 1780 and less than two months later was guarding a river crossing to his home. He would later fight at Guilford.^{viii}

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Private John Thomas said his Halifax company was one of six or seven that marched to join Green.^{ix} These include the Companies of Captains John Thompson, William McDaniel, Joseph Morton's combined Pittsylvania-Halifax company, Paul Watlington, Francis Moore, Byrd Wall, and Edmund King.

Several Halifax men^x were selected as riflemen to reinforce Colonel William Campbell's Rifle Regiment.^{xi} Captain William Morton of Charlotte County gave up his company to form a rifle company "made up from part of several companies". Morton's remaining company was divided between the Halifax companies of John Thompson and William McDaniel who had given up men for the rifle company. These riflemen marched early to the Eno River near Hillsboro and joined Campbell.^{xii} The unit participated in the battle of Wetzell's Mill on March 6 against 1,200 British. Halifax participants included Sergeant Benjamin Marshall and Privates James Bates, John Collins, and George Joyce.^{xiii}

At Guilford Courthouse, Campbell's Riflemen with Lee's Legion, supported the left flank of the first line of defense held by North Carolina militia. They fell back towards the second line of Virginians and then, as you may recall from readings, sidestepped to the left pulling with them the British First Battalion of Guards and the Von Bose Regiment. As a side note, a documented tradition is that Captain Morton fired the fatal shot at Guilford that mortally wounded British Lt. Col. James Webster of the 33rd Regiment of Foot. According to a contemporary of Morton's, he took "deliberate aim" at Webster with a "long ducking or deer gun" containing a ball and buckshot. The weapon was reportedly still in Charlotte County as late as 1921.^{xiv}

Halifax native Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Cocke (Cook) had once commanded a Minuteman and Continental Line company. He now commanded a militia regiment in General Edward Stevens' Brigade. Cook's horse was shot from under him during the battle. He no sooner mounted another when a British ball passed through his hat.^{xv} Among Cook's Halifax Companies were those belonging to Captains McDaniel, Thompson, Wall, and King.

Acting in the capacity of Major under Lieutenant Colonel Cocke was Halifax's Haynes Morgan, *a full Colonel* with an extensive military background. Bear with me as I focus on this active, energetic and all but forgotten Revolutionary patriot.

With the coming of the French and Indian war, Morgan enlisted in 1758 in the 80th Regiment of Light Armed Foot organized by British Colonel Thomas Gage. Part of this regiment was recruited in Virginia. Gage's purpose was to create a formal British Regiment emulating the tactics, techniques, and procedures of Roger's Rangers. They wore brown uniforms, were somewhat unconventional and not unlike today's American Rangers. They were active in small unit actions and the two battles for Ticonderoga. The unit disbanded and Haynes Morgan returned to Halifax after seven years' wartime service having achieved the rank of Sergeant-Major. No small feat.

By 1773 he is a Captain of Pittsylvania County militia though his widow testified they lived in Halifax County until after the Revolution. On May 10, 1776, he is made Lieutenant Colonel of the Second Battalion of Minutemen of Augusta District under Colonel Charles Lewis. Halifax companies appear to have been under him at Gwynn's Island and the Dunmore operations. After

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several months he led the troops westward to the Holston River for the 1776 Cherokee Expedition. On June 5, 1777 the General Assembly appointed Morgan as Colonel of the “First Regiment of the Regular Troops of the Commonwealth.”

In that capacity he is active in the Southern Campaigns of 1779 and 1780. He campaigns with Greene and finally gets home to Halifax when the ‘Race to the Dan’ is completed. Morgan is reportedly exhausted. General Greene grants him an extended leave. Well, the war continues when one is on leave. Morgan was still at home when he was advised “that an engagement was daily expected” with the British. According to Mrs. Morgan, General Greene was not expecting her husband and “had appointed another officer to the command of the Regiment”. In order to participate, Colonel Morgan “took a Major’s command and acted as such throughout the day” resuming his full authority the next day.

Pension statements show Morgan was serving in Lieutenant Colonel Cooke’s Regiment. Pension statements also suggest some men thought Morgan was in command. Morgan died on April 20, 1795, in Pittsylvania, where he had bounty land on the Bannister River. He was 55 years of age. Morgan’s personal records were lost to history when his house burned up.

There were also Halifax County men amongst the Virginia Line, the 18-months men on Greene’s third line of defense at Guilford. Robert Burchett, a Halifax farmer then about 18 years of age, served in Colonel *Richard* Campbell’s Regiment and was wounded.^{xvi} Private Thomas Lester, age 20, was also in Campbell’s Regiment. During Guilford combat, Lester lost three fingers on his left hand from the strike of a British broadsword. His brother John Lester, a volunteer militiaman, accompanied him to Guilford.^{xvii} There may have been as many as seven other Halifax men present in Virginia Line units ranging in age from 17 to 34 including four farmers, two hatters, and a silversmith.^{xviii}

Captain John Watlington, a three-year veteran of the Virginia Artillery then without a command, “volunteered his services to General Greene...and commanded as an Officer” at Guilford.^{xix}

The Virginians provided stubborn resistance, but not without cost to Halifax citizens.

- Halifax native John Williamson, a veteran of Cowpens, was wounded at Guilford when retiring from the field.^{xx}
- Private Joseph Ligon was wounded, the ball of a British Brown Bess passing through his right shoulder joint destroying the socket and permanently disabling his arm;^{xxi}
- William Davis had enlisted in Lee’s Legion when they were in Halifax. He was wounded twice in the head; once by a musket ball and once by a British cavalryman’s sword.^{xxii}
- Blackman Ligon, an honorably discharged Continental veteran of the battles of Brandywine and Germantown volunteered to join Greene. He was severely wounded in the thigh and rendered permanently lame.^{xxiii}

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- Captain John Thompson, one of the first to join Greene, was killed in action that fateful day at Guilford Courthouse,^{xxiv}
- Not all wounds are visible, however. Halifax Captain William McDaniel later recalled that after the cannons ceased at Guilford, the small arms opened and in “a short time, it appeared to him, like the very heavens and earth, was coming together...”. He was targeted at one point by British soldiers who fired and “one or two balls cut through” his clothes. His bravery on the Guilford battlefield was celebrated by his men. Sometime later he suffered from “sensations of Melancholy” or what we today call post-traumatic stress.^{xxv}

Summary

Nathanael Greene’s Army was the ‘heart’ of the Revolution in the South. And for ten short days in Halifax, it was protected by the Dan and Bannister Rivers; fed by the people of Halifax; re-energized by Halifax and other Virginia militia coming on the roads and ferries leading into Halifax. For a brief window of time, the people of Halifax were the lifeline of the Revolution.

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ⁱ Greene to Joseph Clay. Letter of 17 Feb 1781 from Halifax Court House, Va. *The Papers of Nathanael Greene*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press (1994) Vol VII, p300-301

ⁱⁱ Greene wrote, “During this time the militia of Halifax and adjacent Counties were flocking to my assistance, and in the course of a little time I believe [I] had a reinforcement of near a thousand men.” See Greene to Steuben, 29 February 1781. *Greene Papers*, Vol. VII, p374-375

ⁱⁱⁱ Halifax citizens provided 12 gallons of whisky, over 45 gallons of rum, nearly 46 gallons of cider and more than 368 gallons of brandy to the Revolutionary cause. They also provide over 121,000 pounds of flour and cornmeal.

^{iv} One woman identified as Catherine Davenport housed and nursed a sick soldier for a period of 70 days. Could the soldier have been wounded at Guilford Courthouse and evacuated to Halifax for treatment and care? James Navarre was paid for 15 days of “tending and maintaining a sick soldier.” Another citizen identified as William Wilson was paid for “tending and maintaining a sick soldier” for five months. Christian Colquitt tended a sick soldier for about 50 days.

^v *Ibid*, *Virginia Revolutionary Publick Claims*, p432

^{vi} Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson Papers. ‘Recapitulation of Tours of Duty Performed by the Virginia Militia [March 1781]. *Founders Online*, National Archives; *Ibid.*, ‘Return of Militia by Counties, 28 February 1781’. *Founders Online*, National Archives.

^{vii} Pension application of John Irby (W5003).

^{viii} Pension application of Nathan Formby (W3794).

^{ix} At least one of those was a mixed Pittsylvania-Halifax Company under Captain Joseph Morton. Halifax Captain Paul Watlington may also have served in General Edward Steven’s Virginia Brigade. Captain Francis Moore’s company was in General Robert Lawson’s Virginia Brigade.

^x Pension applications of John R. Collins (R2176); William Abbott (W5616) and Sergeant James Bates (W5787). See also John Collins statement in Pension of James Bates (W5787). The rifle company was marched to the Eno River near Hillsboro and joined Campbell’s Regiment.

^{xi} Jacob St. John (W6178), of Charlotte County marched from that county under Captain William Morton. He testified, “Captain Morton then gave up his company & raised a Company of riflemen, his Company was then divided between Captain Thompson of Halifax County and Captain McDaniel of the same County.” St.

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John was attached to the company of Captain John Thompson was killed in action at Guilford. See also Charlotte County native George Joyce (S30511) who identifies Captain Morton's Lieutenant as George Gillaspay.

^{xii} See Pension applications of Benjamin Marshall (S5728) and John St. John (W6178).

^{xiii} See Pension applications of Bates (W5787), Collins (R2176), Marshall (S5728) and Joyce (S30511).

^{xiv} See 'Col. William Morton' by W.S. Morton in *William and Mary Quarterly* 1(1) 285, 286. Morton reportedly fired the fatal shot at Guilford that mortally wounded British Lt. Col. James Webster of the 33rd Regiment of Foot. According to a contemporary of Morton's, who relayed the story to the article's author, Morton took "deliberate aim" at Webster with a "long ducking or deer gun" containing a ball and buckshot. The weapon was reportedly still in Charlotte County as late as 1921.

^{xv} Pension application of Nathaniel Cocke of Halifax (R13415). See statement of R.H. Cocke, of Bacon's Castle, Surry, Va. He was the nephew to Colonel Nathaniel Cocke. Cook's Regiment was formally known as the 2nd Regiment of Volunteers. His regiment consisted of Halifax, Pittsylvania, Charlotte, Lunenburg, Prince Edward, and Mecklenburg County militia.

^{xvi} See Chesterfield Size Rolls and pension application of Robert Burchett (S10394)

^{xvii} Pension application of Thomas Lester (Lister) (S35518). On the battlefield he met his brother John, then in the Halifax militia, who saw the wound; See also Pension application of John Williamson (W26061). Halifax native John Williamson, also in the Virginia State Line, was wounded in the neck during the American withdrawal.

^{xviii} Chesterfield Size Roll

^{xix} Pension application of John Watlington (W4097). See statement of James Bates; See also Pension application of David Davidson (W6978). Future Halifax resident David Davidson was serving with the Continental Artillery at Guilford when wounded. He enlisted from Charles City County in Captain Anthony Singleton's Company of artillery serving the entire war. He was pensioned from Halifax County, Va.; Pension application of John McKenzie (W1049). Halifax County native Captain John McKenzie, served as aide to General Greene during the battle. McKenzie started the war in Halifax County serving as a Captain and alter Commissary for a 12-month tour. By 1778 he had moved to South Carolina.

^{xx} Pension application of John Williamson (W26061). Halifax native John Williamson, also in the Virginia State Line, was wounded in the neck during the American withdrawal.

^{xxi} Pension application of Joseph Hopson (Hobson) (VAS1607). Statement of Joseph Ligon. See also Pension Application of Joseph Ligon (S132). He was in Captain John Thompson's Company at Guilford.

^{xxii} Pension application of William Davis (S3255)

^{xxiii} Pension application of Blackman Ligon (W9132)

^{xxiv} Pension application of John Irby (W5003); Benjamin Hunt (R5389)

^{xxv} Pension application of William McDaniel (R6684). The application was made my McDaniel's brother Colin McDaniel.