

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NEW ACQUISITION MILITIA**

**Michael C. Scoggins**, York County Historical Center, May 2002

It was not until June 1772 that the border between North and South Carolina west of the Catawba River was established by survey. After this survey, a large tract of land between the Broad and Catawba Rivers that had previously been claimed by North Carolina was incorporated into South Carolina. This area includes modern York County and a portion of Cherokee County, and was originally designated by South Carolina as the New Acquisition region of the District between the Broad and Catawba Rivers. In June 1775 the South Carolina Provincial Congress ordered each of its twelve districts to raise a regiment of foot soldiers for the defense of the province, and this order was soon followed by a request from the Continental Congress for three regiments of provincial troops. The New Acquisition Militia (NAM) was organized under the command of Col. Thomas Neel, and its original officers included Samuel Watson, William Byers, Alexander Love, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Robert McAfee, Francis (Frank) Ross, and William Bratton. At the same time, a company of rangers from the New Acquisition was organized under the command of Capt. Ezekiel Polk. These rangers operated independently of the militia and were attached to the Third South Carolina Regiment under Col. William Thomson. Most of these officers (Neel, Polk, Watson, Byers, Love and Fitzpatrick) were also delegates from the New Acquisition to the First and Second Provincial Congresses, held in Charleston in January and November 1775.

In September 1775 a militia enlistment and draft was held in the New Acquisition to prepare for possible action against British, Loyalist and Indian forces. On November 3 a group of Loyalists in the Ninety Six District under Maj. Patrick Cunningham seized a wagon load of powder and ammunition which the Provincial Congress was sending to the Cherokees as a peace offering. On November 7 the Provincial Congress ordered Col. Richard Richardson to assemble and march six companies of rangers (including Capt. Polk's company), along with drafts of militia from the regiments of Cols. Richardson, Thomson, Savage, Neel, and Thomas, in order to recover the stolen munitions and arrest Cunningham and his party. On November 19, Cunningham drove the Ninety Six District militia under Maj. Andrew Williamson into Fort Ninety Six and laid siege to the fort for two days, after which a truce was negotiated. Soon after, a force of militia and regulars under Cols. Richardson and Thomson moved into the region between the Broad and Saluda Rivers to quell the growing Loyalist movement there. On December 22, a detachment of Richardson's army, including the NAM, surprised and captured Cunningham's Loyalist force at Great Canebrake on the Reedy River in Greenville County (Battle of Great Canebrake). Due to heavy snowfall during this expedition, it came to be known as the Snow Campaign.

In April 1776 the Provincial Congress passed a resolution requiring that drafts from each of the "country militia," including Col. Neel's regiment, march to Charleston and take up stations there for the defense of that city. Each draft was to remain on duty for one month and then be relieved by a new draft. At least some of the NAM, along with Thomson's Rangers and a company of Catawba Indians, were involved in the Battle of Sullivan's Island on June 28, 1776. During this battle the South Carolina troops on Sullivan's Island repulsed an attempted invasion by British forces under Sir Peter Parker. The NAM was again called into action in early July 1776 when the Cherokee Indians, encouraged by British sympathizers, began attacking frontier settlements in western SC. Along with a company of Catawba Indian scouts, the NAM marched west to the Keowee River and joined other SC militia units under Brig. Gen. Andrew Williamson on what became known as the Cherokee Campaign. On August 1, Williamson's force was ambushed by Cherokees and Loyalists at Seneca Old Town (Essenecca) in Pickens County (Battle of Twelve Mile Creek). A sharp engagement ensued during which Maj. Frank Ross was wounded in the head by a Cherokee tomahawk, and the Indians were dispersed. On August 8 there was another skirmish between Williamson's troops and the Cherokees at Oconore in Oconee County. In early September 1776, Williamson's force, now numbering some 1500 men, moved into Cherokee County, NC and destroyed the town of Topton in Cherokee Valley. On September 19, about 1000 Cherokee warriors ambushed Williamson's army in Macon County, NC and were driven off after a hard fight of about two hours (Battle of Black Hole). On September 23, Williamson rendezvoused with the NC militia under Brig. Gen. Griffith Rutherford, and for the next two weeks the combined force of NC and SC militia destroyed Cherokee towns, crops and food caches in Macon and Swain Counties, NC. On October 11, after destroying most of the Cherokee Middle and Valley Towns, the militia were sent home.

In August 1777 the New Acquisition Militia under Col. Neel and his son, Capt. Thomas Neel Jr., once again marched against the Indians in western SC. In late 1778 or early 1779, the NAM was sent out against Loyalists in the Thicketty Creek and Fair Forest Creek settlements on the west side of the Broad River. Another enlistment and draft was held in December 1778-January 1779, and in February 1779 the NAM was sent to join Gen. Williamson in defending the SC-Georgia frontier, where the troops were placed under the overall command of Brig. Gen. John Ashe of NC. On March 3, Ashe's force was outflanked and defeated by British and Loyalist forces under Lt. Col. Archibald Campbell and Lt. Col. Mark Prevost at the Battle of Briar Creek in Screven County, GA. On March 29, the NAM and the Lower Ninety Six

District Militia under Col. LeRoy Hammond attacked and defeated a party of Cherokee Indians and Loyalists five miles east of Rocky Comfort, in Richmond County, GA. Maj. Ross was wounded in the abdomen and died two days later. He was buried with full military honors on April 1, across from Augusta on the SC side of the Savannah River. Capt. William Bratton became major at this time.

On March 31 the NAM along with other SC militia units was sent to defend Charleston against a new British invasion under Maj. Gen. Augustine Prevost. On June 20, 1779, under the command of Brig. Gen. William Moultrie, the NAM was involved in an unsuccessful attack on Gen. Prevost's forces at Stono Ferry, near Charleston. Col. Thomas Neel Sr. was killed in this action, and Lt. Col. Samuel Watson assumed command of the regiment and Maj. William Bratton became second-in-command.

After Prevost abandoned his attack on Charleston, the NAM returned home and does not appear to have been involved in any more engagements during the rest of 1779 and the early part of 1780. On May 12, 1780, Maj. Gen. Benjamin Lincoln surrendered his 5,500-man Continental Army in Charleston to the British Army under Sir Henry Clinton, and in early June 1780 the New Acquisition Militia was disbanded by Col. Watson and Lt. Col. Bratton at Bullock's Creek Meeting House. Col. William Hill and Lt. Col. Andrew Neel, another son of Col. Thomas Neel Sr., reformed the regiment and established a camp at Hill's Iron Works on Allison Creek. The NAM was reinforced by Lt. Col. James Lisle, who took most of Col. Matthew Floyd's Loyalist militia regiment from the Broad River region over to the Patriot camp at the iron works. Andrew Neel mounted an expedition to attack Loyalist settlements on the Broad River, and during his absence from camp a Loyalist force under Capt. Christian Huck of the British Legion attacked and destroyed Hill's Iron Works. After the destruction of the iron works on June 18, 1780, the NAM retreated across the Catawba River into North Carolina and attached itself to the command of Col. Thomas Sumter, who was organizing a partisan brigade of North and South Carolina militia on Catawba Indian land. On July 12, a combined force of New Acquisition Militia under Hill, Andrew Neel, Bratton, and John Moffett, along with a Chester contingent under John McClure, Edward Lacey, and Michael Dickson, ambushed and defeated Huck's force at Williamson's Plantation near Bratton's home. News of this victory brought fresh recruits into Sumter's camp, and two regiments of militia from the New Acquisition were formed under Sumter's command, one led by Col. Hill and the other by Col. Bratton.

Various elements from these two regiments fought throughout the summer and fall of 1780 at the battles of Rocky Mount (July 30, where Lt. Col. Andrew Neel was killed), Hanging Rock (August 6), Fishing Creek (August 18), Bigger's Ferry (September 8), King's Mountain (October 7), Fishdam Ford (November 9-10), and Blackstock's Plantation (November 20). Some troops from the New Acquisition served under Col. Hill and Col. Edward Lacey in the great Patriot victory at Cowpens on January 17, 1781. Sumter was commissioned senior brigadier general of South Carolina troops in October 1780, and for most of the next year he attacked various British fortifications along the Congaree and Santee Rivers. Elements of the NAM were involved in battles at Ft. Granby (February 19-21), Ft. Motte (February 24), Ft. Watson (February 27), Ratcliffe's Bridge (March 6, where Col. Thomas Neel Jr. was killed), Friday's Ferry (May 2), Orangeburg (May 11), and Ft. Granby again (May 15), with varying degrees of success. By this time the New Acquisition Militia had ceased to exist as an independent regiment, and its soldiers served under various officers, chiefly Bratton and Lacey, during Sumter's campaigns in the spring and summer of 1781. Some of these men served with Lacey under Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Greene at the Siege of Fort Ninety Six from May 22 until June 19, 1781, and then returned to Sumter and fought at Quarter House (July 15), Biggin's Bridge and Biggin's Church (July 16), Quinby's Bridge (July 17), and Shubrick's Plantation (July 17). When Sumter retired from the field in late 1781, the command of his brigade passed to Col. William Henderson, who commanded troops from the New Acquisition under Gen. Greene at the Battle of Eutaw Springs on September 8. Some of these men remained with Col. Lacey and were stationed at Edisto Island until the British abandoned Charleston in December 1782. This effectively ended the war in South Carolina, and those troops from the New Acquisition who were still in the field were able to finally return to their homes and families and resume their lives in peace.