

# Remembering Patriot women: Mary Slocumb

Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution* (see [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The\\_Women\\_of\\_the\\_American\\_Revolution](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Women_of_the_American_Revolution)), 3d. ed. (New York: Baker and Scribner, 1849).

## As you read...

### PATRIOT WOMEN

Since women couldn't vote, hold office, join the army, or even (in most cases) own property, their role in the Revolution was limited. During the resistance, they could prove their patriotism by not buying or refusing to consume imported British products (as the women of Edenton did in 1774). They could keep their households running while their husbands were at war, and perhaps give money (as Elizabeth Steele did). And, as we see here, they could skewer British officers with their wit.

Later generations would consider Mary Slocumb a perfect lady and a true patriot. She accepted her situation with grace, charmed the occupying British officers, then won every round of conversational jousting. Meanwhile, she had sent a slave to warn her husband, a Lieutenant in the Continental Army who was raising troops in the area, not to return home into the hands of the enemy.

There is no way to know whether this story actually happened or not. Maybe it did, or maybe a small piece of it was true and the rest was invented as the story was passed down through the family. By the time this version of the story was written down in 1849, the heroes of the Revolution were remembered much as the "Greatest Generation" that fought World War II is remembered today, and stories like this were used to inspire people to similar bravery and sacrifice — especially with the approach of the Civil War and secession.

The first expedition into North Carolina projected by Lord Cornwallis, was baffled by the fall of Colonel Ferguson at King's Mountain. The disaster at the Cowpens forbade perseverance in the second attempt, and was followed by the memorable retreat of Greene. The battle of Guilford took place in March, 1781; and towards the end of April, while Lord Rawdon encountered Greene at Hobkirk's Hill, Cornwallis set out on his march from Wilmington, bent on his avowed purpose of achieving the conquest of Virginia. On his march towards Halifax, he encamped for several days on the river Neuse, in what is now called Wayne County, North Carolina. His head-quarters were at Springbank, while Colonel Tarleton, with his renowned legion, encamped on the plantation of Lieutenant

Slocumb. This consisted of level and extensive fields, which at that season presented a most inviting-view of fresh verdure from the mansion-house. Lord Cornwallis himself gave it the name of "Pleasant Green," which it ever afterwards retained. The owner of this fine estate held a subaltern's commission in the State line under Colonel Washington, and was in command of a troop of light horse, raised in his own neighborhood, whose general duty it was to act as Rangers, scouring the country for many miles around, watching the movements of the enemy, and punishing the loyalists when detected in their vocation of pillage and murder.' These excursions had been frequent for two or three years, and were often of several weeks' duration. At the present time Slocumb had returned to the vicinity, and had been sent with twelve or fifteen recruits to act as scouts in the neighborhood of the British General. The morning of the day on which Tarleton took possession of his plantation, he was near Springbank, and reconnoitered the encampment of Cornwallis, which he supposed to be his whole force. He then, with his party, pursued his way slowly along the south bank of the Neuse, in the direction of his own house, little dreaming that his beautiful and peaceful home, where, some time before, he had left his wife and child, was then in the possession of the terrible Tarleton.



Figure 1. Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton, as painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

During these frequent excursions of the Rangers, and the necessary absence of her husband, the superintendence of the plantation had always devolved upon Mrs. Slocumb. She depended for protection upon her slaves, whose fidelity she had proved, and upon her own fearless and intrepid spirit. The scene of the occupation of her house, and Tarleton's residence with her, remained through life indelibly impressed on her memory, and were described by her to one who enjoyed the honor of her intimate friendship. I am permitted to give his account, copied almost verbatim from notes taken at the time the occurrences were related by Mrs. Slocumb.

It was about ten o'clock on a beautiful spring morning, that a splendidly-dressed officer, accompanied by two aids, and followed at a short distance by a guard of some twenty troopers, dashed up to the piazza in front of the ancient-looking mansion. Mrs. Slocumb was sitting there, with her child and a near relative, a young lady, who afterwards became the wife of Major Williams. A few house servants were also on the piazza.

The officer raised his cap, and bowing to his horse's neck, addressed the lady, with the question --

"Have I the pleasure of seeing the mistress of this house and plantation?"

"It belongs to my husband."

"Is he at home?"

"He is not."

"Is he a rebel?"

"No sir. He is in the army of his country, and fighting against our invaders; therefore not a rebel." It is not a little singular, that although the people of that day gloried in their rebellion, they always took offence at being called rebels.

"I fear, madam," said the officer, "we differ in opinion. A friend to his country will be the friend of the king, our master."

"Slaves only acknowledge a master in this country," replied the lady.

A deep flush crossed the florid cheeks of Tarleton, for he was the speaker; and turning to one of his aids, he ordered him to pitch the tents and form the encampment in the orchard and field on their right. To the other aid his orders were to detach a quarter guard and station piquets<sup>1</sup> on each road. Then bowing very low, he added: "Madam, the service of

his Majesty requires the temporary occupation of your property; and if it would not be too great an inconvenience, I will take up my quarters in your house.”

The tone admitted no controversy. Mrs. Slocumb answered: “My family consists of only myself, my sister and child, and a few negroes. We are your prisoners.”

From the piazza where he seated himself, Tarleton commanded a view of the ground on which his troops were arranging their camp. The mansion fronted the east, and an avenue one hundred and fifty feet wide, and about half a mile in length, stretched to the eastern side of the plantation, where was a highway, with open grounds beyond it, partly dry meadow and partly sand barren. This avenue was lined on the south side by a high fence, and a thick hedge-row of forest trees. These are now removed, and replaced by the Pride of India and other ornamental trees. On the north side extended the common rail-fence seven or eight feet high, such as is usually seen on plantations in the low country. The encampment of the British troops being on that part of the plantation lying south of the avenue, it was completely screened by the fences and hedge-row from the view of anyone approaching from down the country.

While the men were busied, different officers came up at intervals, making their reports and receiving orders. Among others, a tory captain, whom Mrs. Slocumb immediately recognized — for before joining the royal army, he had lived fifteen or twenty miles below — received orders in her hearing to take his troop and scour the country for two or three miles round.

In an hour every thing was quiet, and the plantation presented the romantic spectacle of a regular encampment of some ten or eleven hundred of the choicest cavalry of the British monarch.

Mrs. Slocumb now addressed herself to the duty of preparing for her uninvited guests. The dinner set before the king’s officers was, in her own words to her friend, “as a good dinner as you have now before you, and of much the same materials.” A description of what then constituted a good dinner in that region may not be inappropriate. “The first dish, was, of course, the boiled ham, flanked with the plate of greens. Opposite was the turkey, supported by the laughing baked sweet potatoes; a plate of boiled beef, another of sausages, and a third with a pair of baked fowls, formed a line across the centre of the table; half a dozen dishes of different pickles, stewed fruit, and other condiments filled up the interstices of the board.” The dessert, too, was abundant and various. Such a dinner, it may well be supposed, met the particular approbation of the royal officers, especially as the fashion of that day introduced stimulating drinks to the table, and the peach brandy prepared under Lieutenant Slocumb’s own supervision, was of the most excellent sort. It received the unqualified praise of the party; and its merits were freely discussed. A Scotch officer, praising it by the name of whiskey, protested that he had never drunk as good out of Scotland. An officer speaking with a slight brogue, insisted it was not whiskey, and that no Scotch drink ever equalled it. “To my mind,” said he, “it tastes as yonder orchard smells.”

“Allow me, madam,” said Colonel Tarleton, “to inquire where the spirits we are drinking is procured.”

“From the orchard where your tents stand,” answered Mrs. Slocumb.

“Colonel,” said the Irish captain, “when we conquer this country, is it not to be divided out among us?”

“The officers of this army,” replied the Colonel, “will undoubtedly receive large possessions of the conquered American provinces.”

Mrs. Slocumb here interposed. “Allow me to observe and prophesy,” said she, “the only land in these United States which will ever remain in possession of a British officer, will measure but six feet by two.”

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## On the web

### Mrs. Wylie Jones

[http://books.google.com/books?id=PZ\\_iKWt8dCoC&pg=PA124](http://books.google.com/books?id=PZ_iKWt8dCoC&pg=PA124)

A similar story about the wife of Wylie Jones, a Patriot leader from Halifax County, appeared in the DAR American Monthly Magazine in 1896. The stories are similar enough -- and happened near enough to each other -- that we have to wonder whether this story is simply another retelling of the one originally about Mary Slocumb.

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## Notes

1. *Pickets* are groups of soldiers sent out to watch out for the approach of the enemy.

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### Figure 1 (page 2)

Painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Original image available from Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:General\\_Sir\\_Banastre\\_Tarleton\\_by\\_Sir\\_Joshua\\_Reynolds.jpeg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:General_Sir_Banastre_Tarleton_by_Sir_Joshua_Reynolds.jpeg)). This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.