

Songs of the Regulators

Music has always played an important role in political movements — especially when few people could read and write and ideas had to be transmitted orally. The Regulators also used songs to communicate their complaints about colonial leaders. Sung at meetings or in taverns, political songs reminded people of their anger and inspired them to action.

Rednap Howell, a schoolmaster from New Jersey who became a leader of the Regulator movement, is said to have written these songs. No original copy of the songs survives, if they were ever written down at all. The two verses here were reprinted in the *Raleigh Register* in 1825, as they were remembered by an aged former Regulator. We don't have any way of knowing the tunes, but most likely Howell's words would have been set to the tunes of folk songs that settlers already knew.

The best-known of the poems, "When Fanning first to Orange came," told of Edmund Fanning's corruption:

When Fanning first to Orange came
He looked both pale and wan,
An old patched coat upon his back,
An old mare he rode on.
Both man and mare wa'n't worth five pounds,
As I've been often told,
But by his civil robberies
He's laced his coat with gold.¹

A second song tells the story of John Frohock, the lieutenant-colonel of Rowan County's militia regiment and a member of the colonial assembly. The Regulators charged him with extortion — illegally demanding money by making threats — but the jury was packed with militia officers, and Frohock was not convicted.

Says Frohawk to Fanning, to tell the plain truth,
When I came to this country I was but a youth;
My father sent for me; I wa'n't worth a cross;
And then my first study was to steal for a horse.
I quickly got credit, and then ran away,
And hav'n't paid for him to this very day.
Says Fanning to Frohawk, 'tis folly to lie,
I rode an old mare that was blind of one eye;
Five shillings in money I had in my purse,

My coat it was patched, but not much the worse;
But now we've got rich, and it's very well known,
That we'll do very well, if they'll let us alone.²

On the web

Analyzing the songs of the Regulators

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In this lesson plan, students read songs written by the Regulators -- protesters against high taxes in North Carolina's Piedmont just before the American Revolution. Students analyze the lyrics of the songs to determine the political, economic, and social concerns of the Regulators.

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Notes

1. These lyrics were reprinted in John Spencer Bassett, *The Regulators of North Carolina (1765-1771)* (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/bassett95/bassett95.html>). Annual report of the American Historical Association, 1894, p. 157.
2. Reprinted in *Revolutionary History of North Carolina, in Three Lectures* (see <http://www.learnnc.org><http://books.google.com/books?id=UheoDQG9Qs0C>) (Raleigh: William E. Cooke, 1853), p. 17.