

The Regulators

From the website of Alamance Battleground (see <http://www.nchistoricsites.org/Alamance/>) State Historic Site.

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Figure 1. A monument at Alamance Battleground remembers those who died in the final, violent clash between the Regulators and the colonial government.

During the years leading up to the American Revolution many North Carolina people became strongly discontented with the way the provincial government was handling the colony's affairs. However, their quarrel was not with the form of government or the colony's laws but with abuses by government officials.

Grievances affecting the daily lives of the colonists included excessive taxes, dishonest sheriffs, and illegal fees. Scarcity of money contributed to the state of unrest. Those living in the western part of the province were isolated and unsympathetic with the easterners and it was in those frontier counties that the War of the Regulation began.

Minor clashes occurred until the spring of 1768, when an association of "Regulators" was formed. Wealthier colonists considered them to be a mob. The Regulators never had an outstanding leader, though several men were prominent in the movement; including James Hunter, Rednap Howell, William Butler, and Herman Husband. Husband, a Quaker and follower of Benjamin Franklin, circulated political pamphlets advocating peaceful reform.

Violent resistance

Discouraged over failing to secure justice through peaceful negotiations, the reformers took a more radical stand. Violence, lawlessness, and terrorism reigned. When the government retaliated against them, the Regulators defiantly refused to pay fees, terrorized those who administered the law, and disrupted court proceedings.

It fell to royal governor William Tryon to bring the backcountry revolt to a speedy conclusion. In March 1771, the governor's council advised Tryon to call out the militia and march against the rebel farmers.

Volunteers for the militia were mustered. When the expedition finally got under way, Gen. Hugh Waddell was ordered to approach Hillsborough by way of Salisbury, with Cape Fear and western militia at his command. Tryon and his army proceeded more directly

toward Hillsborough. Waddell, with only 284 men, was challenged on his way by a large group of Regulators. Since he was outnumbered, the general decided to turn back. On May 11, Governor Tryon and his forces left Hillsborough intending to rescue Waddell. After resting on the banks of Alamance Creek in the heart of Regulator country, Tryon gathered his army of approximately a thousand men. Five miles away, 2,000 Regulators had assembled.

The Battle of Alamance

The battle began on May 16 after the Regulators rejected Tryon's suggestion that they disperse peacefully. Lacking leadership, organization, and adequate arms and ammunition, the Regulators were no match for Tryon's militia. Many Regulators fled, leaving their bolder comrades to fight on.

The rebellion of the Regulators was crushed. Nine members of the king's militia were killed and 61 wounded. The Regulator losses were much greater, though exact numbers are unknown. Tryon took 15 prisoners; seven were hung later. Many Regulators moved on to other frontier areas beyond North Carolina. Those who stayed were offered pardons by the governor in exchange for pledging an oath of allegiance to the royal government.

The War of the Regulation illustrates how dissatisfied much of the population was during the days before the American Revolution. The boldness displayed by reformers opposed to royal authority provided a lesson in the use of armed resistance, which patriots employed a few short years later in the American War for Independence.

On the web

Alamance

<http://www.unctv.org/webcast/history/alamance.html>

This hour-long movie, produced by UNC-TV, tells the story of the Regulators and the Battle of Alamance.

Alamance Battleground

<http://www.nchistoricsites.org/Alamance/>

Visitors to Alamance Battleground may view the field of battle, which is marked by a granite monument given as a memorial in 1880. A short DVD presentation on the battle entitled "Alamance" is available for viewing in the visitor center. Also located on the grounds of the site is the Allen House, a log dwelling characteristic of those lived in by frontier people on the western fringes of the colony.

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