

# Violence in Wilmington

BY JANET SCHAW

*Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776*, edited by Evangeline Walker Andrews (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921).



Figure 1. "The Bostonians Paying the Excise Man." This British illustration shows the tarring and feathering of Boston Commissioner of Customs John Malcolm in 1774, shortly after the Boston Tea Party.

Good heavens! what a scene this town is: Surely you folks at home have adopted the old maxim of King Charles: "Make friends of your foes, leave friends to shift for themselves."

We came down in the morning in time for the review<sup>1</sup>, which the heat made as terrible to the spectators as to the soldiers, or what you please to call them. They had certainly fainted under it, had not the constant draughts of grog supported them. Their exercise was that of bush-fighting<sup>2</sup>, but it appeared so confused and so perfectly different from any thing I ever saw, I cannot say whether they performed it well or not; but this I know that they were heated with rum till capable of committing the most shocking outrages. We stood in the balcony of Doctor Cobham's house and they were reviewed on a field mostly covered with what are called here scrubby oaks, which are only a little better than brushwood. They at last however assembled on the plain field, and I must really laugh while I recollect their figures: 2000 men in their shirts and trousers, preceded by a very ill beat-drum and a fiddler, who was also in his shirt with a long sword and a cue at his hair<sup>3</sup>, who played with all his might. They made indeed a most unmartial appearance. But the worst figure there can shoot from behind a bush and kill even a General Wolfe<sup>4</sup>.

Before the review was over, I heard a cry of tar and feather. I was ready to faint at the idea of this dreadful operation. I would have gladly quitted the balcony, but was so much afraid the Victim was one of my friends, that I was not able to move; and he indeed proved to be one, tho' in a humble station. For it was Mr Neilson's poor English groom<sup>5</sup>. You can hardly conceive what I felt when I saw him dragged forward, poor devil, frightened out of his wits. However at the request of some of the officers, who had been Neilson's friends, his punishment was changed into that of mounting on a table and begging pardon for having smiled at the regt.<sup>6</sup> He was then drummed and fiddled out of the town, with a strict prohibition of ever being seen in it again.



Figure 2. Robert Howe, who trained the Brunswick County militia, went on to become a major general in the Continental Army.

One might have expected, that tho' I had been imprudent all my life, the present occasion might have inspired me with some degree of caution, and yet I can tell you I had almost incurred the poor groom's fate from my own folly. Several of the officers came up to dine, amongst others Coll: Howe<sup>7</sup>, who with less ceremony than might have been expected from his general politeness stepped into an apartment adjoining the hall, and took up a book I had been reading, which he brought open in his hand into the company. I was piqued at his freedom, and reproved him with a half compliment to his general good breeding. He owned his fault and with much gallantry promised to submit to whatever punishment I would inflict. You shall only, said I, read aloud a few pages which I will point out, and I am sure you will do Shakespear justice. He bowed and took the book, but no sooner observed that I had turned up for him, that part of Henry the fourth, where Falstaff describes his company, than he coloured like Scarlet. I saw he made the application instantly; however he read it thro', tho' not with the vivacity he generally speaks; however he recovered himself and coming close up to me, whispered, you will certainly get yourself tarred and feathered; shall I apply to be executioner? I am going to seal this up. Adieu.

I closed my last packet at Doctor Cobham's after the review, and as I hoped to hear of some method of getting it sent to you, stayed, tho' Miss Rutherford was obliged to go home. As soon as she was gone, I went into the town, the entry of which I found closed up by a detachment of the soldiers; but as the officer immediately made way for me, I took no further notice of it, but advanced to the middle of the street, where I found a number of the first people in town standing together, who (to use Milton's phrase) seemed much impassioned. As most of them were my acquaintances, I stopped to speak to them, but they with one voice begged me for heaven's sake to get off the street, making me observe they were prisoners, adding that every avenue of the town was shut up, and that in all human probability some scene would be acted very unfit for me to witness. I could not take the friendly advice, for I became unable to move and absolutely petrified with horror.

Observing however an officer with whom I had just dined, I beckoned him to me. He came, but with no very agreeable look, and on my asking him what was the matter, he presented a paper he had folded in his hand. If you will persuade them to sign this they are at liberty, said he, but till then must remain under this guard, as they must suffer the penalties they have justly incurred.<sup>8</sup> "And we will suffer every thing," replied one of them, "before we abjure our king, our country and our principles." "This, Ladies," said he turning to me, who was now joined by several Ladies, "is what they call their Test, but by what authority this Gentleman forces it on us, we are yet to learn." "There is my Authority," pointing to the Soldiers with the most insolent air, "dispute it, if you can." Oh Britannia, what are you doing, while your true obedient sons are thus insulted by their unlawful brethren; are they also forgot by their natural parents?

We, the Ladies, adjourned to the house of a Lady, who lived in this street, and whose husband was indeed at home, but secretly shut up with some ambassadors from the back settlements<sup>9</sup> on their way to the Govr to offer their service, provided he could let them have arms and ammunition, but above all such commissions as might empower them to raise men by proper authority. This I was presently told tho' in the midst of enemies, but the Loyal party are all as one family. Various reasons induced me to stay all Night in the house I was then at, tho' it could afford me no resting place. I wished to know the fate of the poor men who were in such present jeopardy, and besides hoped that I should get word to my brother, or send your packet by the Gentlemen who were going to the man-of-war. In the

last I have succeeded, and they are so good as [to] promise to get it safely there to my brother or the Govr who would not fail to send it by first opportunity to Britain. Indeed it is very dangerous to keep letters by me, for whatever noise general warrants made in the mouths of your sons of faction at home, their friends and fellow rebels use it with less ceremony than ever it was practised in Britain, at any period.

Rebels, this is the first time I have ventured that word, more than in thought, but to proceed.

The prisoners stood firm to their resolution of not signing the Test, till past two in the morning, tho' every threatening was used to make them comply; at which time a Message from the committee compromised the affair, and they were suffered to retire on their parole to appear next morning before them. This was not a step of mercy or out of regard to the Gentlemen; but they understood that a number of their friends were arming in their defence, and tho' they had kept about 150 ragamuffins still in town, they were not sure even of them; for to the credit of that town be it spoke, there are not five men of property and credit in it that are infected by this unfortunate disease.

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## On the web

### From Caledonia to Carolina: The Highland Scots

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Many Scots immigrated to North Carolina due to growing population, changing methods of farming, and the defeat of the Highland Scots by English and Scottish forces in 1746. The first organized settlement of Highland Scots was in Cumberland County, where 350 people moved to in 1739.

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## Notes

1. This “review” was a chance for the people of Wilmington to review or observe the drilling of the local militia. After the first battles at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, militias in all the colonies began preparations for war with Britain.
2. Guerilla fighting in the bush, or countryside.
3. A *cue* was a long roll of hair worn like a pigtail, from a man’s natural hair or from his wig.
4. General James Wolfe (1727–1759) led the British Army to victory over the French at the Battle of Quebec, in the Seven Years’ War. Wolfe was killed in the battle, but the victory helped to establish British rule over Canada.
5. Servant.
6. We learn here that a man was to be tarred and feathered for smiling at — or, more probably, for making fun of — the regiment of militia! In case you are wondering, tarring and feathering does mean literally coating someone from the waist to the shoulders in hot tar and then rolling

him in feathers. The purpose was simply to injure and humiliate the wrongdoer, and typically the victim was expected to leave town and not return. This was never a legal punishment but something done by mobs. In 1774 and 1775, though, colonial leadership did nothing to stop this kind of “vigilante justice,” and often encouraged it as a way of putting down opposition to the Revolution.

Tarring and feathering was still used by vigilantes in the United States into the twentieth century. This National Archives photograph (see <http://www.learnnc.orghttp://www.archives.gov/global-pages/larger-image.html?i=/central-plains/kansas-city/public/great-plains-originals/images/war-sedition-tar-l.jpg&c=/central-plains/kansas-city/public/great-plains-originals/images/war-sedition-tar.caption.html>) shows what the practice did to the victim.

7. Colonel Robert Howe, who was in charge of training the Brunswick County militia. Howe had been a military and political leader in North Carolina in the 1760s and defended Governor Tryon against the Regulators, but he had disagreements with the new governor, Josiah Martin, who removed him from power. Howe joined the resistance to Britain, trained the local militia, and eventually became a major general in the Continental Army.
8. On March 6, 1775, the Wilmington Committee of Safety had accepted the Continental Association, the system adopted by the Continental Congress for imposing a trade boycott with Britain. The members of the Committee of Safety went in a group to each house in the town to demand that people sign the Association or explain why they refused, so that “such enemies of their country may be set forth to public view and treated with the contempt they merit.” Nine merchants and planters and two tailors refused to sign and were placed under the boycott. A group of four to five hundred militia, led by John Ashe, marched to Wilmington and threatened these eleven men with military execution. There is no way to know how many people signed the Association out of fear and how many genuinely supported the boycott.
9. Scottish Highlanders, who supported Governor Martin and the British troops in the Revolution. Highlanders would play an important role in the Battle of Moores Creek Bridge in December 1775.

## About the author

### JANET SCHAW

Janet Schaw was born in Lauriston, a suburb of Edinburgh, Scotland, in about 1740. She is known for her journal of a trip to British colonies in the West Indies and North America in the 1770s, which was published in 1921 as *Journal of a Lady of Quality; Being the Narrative of a Journey from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina, and Portugal, in the Years 1774 to 1776* (ed. Evangeline Walker Andrews, in Collaboration with Charles McLean Andrews, Farnam Professor of American History in Yale University

[i-iii], 341 p., ill.

NEW HAVEN: Yale University Press

LONDON: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press.

1921.

Little is known about her personal life. The editors of her journal conjecture that at the time of her voyage to America, she was about thirty-five or forty years old. Her father, Gideon Schaw, married Anne Rutherford on 23 Jan. 1723; she bore him six children. As early as 1726 Gideon and Anne were living at Lauriston Yards on a fourteen-acre farm, which at that time was outside the city limits of Edinburgh. Because Gideon held positions in other areas of Scotland from 1730 to 1751, no records of

Janet's birth or baptism can be found. But it is believed that she spent many years in Lauriston, and that she was living there at the time of her father's death in 1772.

On 25 Oct. 1774 Miss Schaw and her brother Alexander, along with Fanny, an attractive girl of eighteen or nineteen, John, Jr., a lad of eleven, and William Gordon, who were the three children of John Rutherford, a prominent resident of North Carolina who had sent his children to Scotland for their education in 1767, all sailed aboard the Jamaica Packet, bound for the West Indies and North Carolina. Also on board were Mrs. Mary Miller (Janet's maid) and Robert (Alexander's East Indian manservant). On the same day that she sailed, Miss Schaw began her journal.

First sailing to the West Indies, the Schaw entourage stopped by the islands of St. Christopher and Antigua, where they were entertained by some of the first families of the islands. Alexander had received an appointment in the customs office of St. Christopher, but he obtained a leave from that position. From there they sailed to North Carolina.

Apparently Janet Schaw intended to return with her brother to St. Christopher after leaving the children with their father in North Carolina, although it is unlikely that she expected to remain in the islands any length of time. Landing first in Brunswick, she stayed in that town from 14 Feb. to 17 Mar. 1775. From there she went to Schawfield, the plantation of her elder brother Robert, which was located on the northwestern branch of the Cape Fear River, a few miles above Wilmington. She then journeyed to Wilmington and then to Point Pleasant, the plantation of Colonel James Innes, which was located on the northeastern branch of the river. Janet spent the remainder of her time in North Carolina visiting the last three places named.

On 6 or 7 July her brother Alexander returned to England, having been persuaded by Governor Josiah Martin to carry his dispatches and inform Lord Dartmouth of the situation in North Carolina. Because of the worsening situation in the colony, Miss Schaw, Fanny, and the Rutherford boys went aboard the Cruizer, a British warship stationed in the Cape Fear. From there they boarded the George to cross the Atlantic. On 4 Dec. 1775 the party arrived in Portugal, where Janet remained until at least the middle of January 1776. Then she and the boys returned to Scotland aboard the George. There is no record of Miss Schaw's life after her return, other than that in 1778 she was living in "New Town," in the northern section of Edinburgh.

Janet Schaw was a most remarkable woman, and her *Journal of a Lady of Quality* gives an excellent Loyalist viewpoint of North Carolina just prior to the outbreak of the Revolution. The North Carolina Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has a contemporary manuscript copy of her journal.

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