

MARCH TO KINGS MOUNTAIN

THE REVOLUTION IN THE CAROLINA BACKCOUNTRY

A FRONTIER FORGED IN CONFLICT

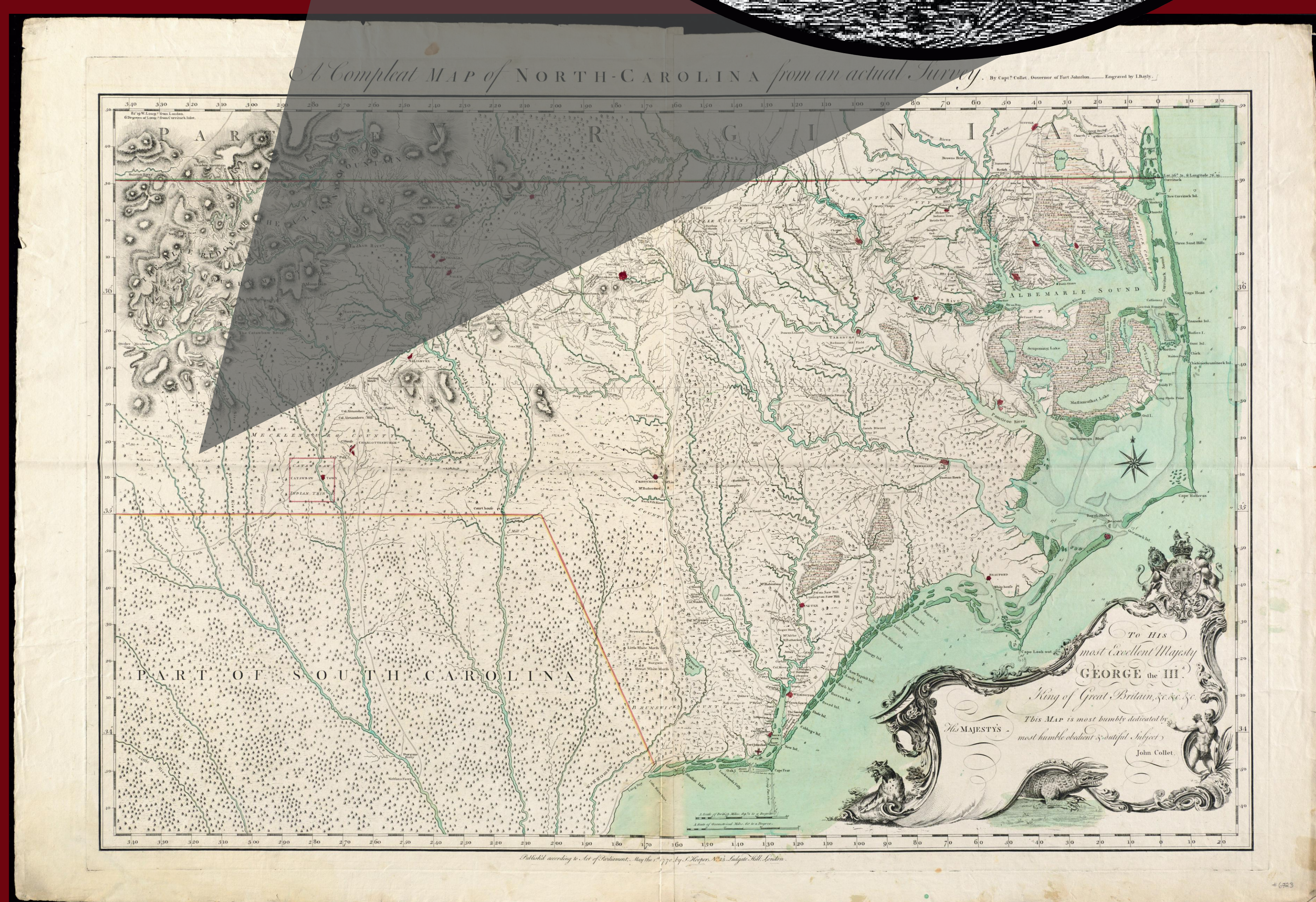
In the 1700s, North Carolina's western backcountry stretched from the Piedmont into what is now Tennessee. White settlers began migrating west over the Blue Ridge Mountains in the mid-1700s, despite this territory primarily belonging to the Cherokee Nation and other American Indian tribes.

Isolated communities were established, such as the Watauga settlement (now Tennessee) and Gilbert Town (Rutherford County). Many of these frontier settlers were of English, Scots-Irish, and German descent. They developed distinct social and political identities due to their distance and isolation from the English-dominated coastal cities.

"Ferguson's Head-Quarters," from *Kings Mountain and Its Heroes*, by Lyman Draper; The Internet Archive.



Depiction of Gilbert Town, a small settlement established around 1769 in present-day Rutherford County.



"A compleat map of North-Carolina from an actual survey," John Collet, 1770; Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library.

While the North Carolina backcountry had sporadic involvement in the Revolutionary War from 1775 to 1779, by 1780 it had become the focus of the fighting. British commanders won a series of battles in Charleston and Camden, South Carolina, and shifted their focus to North Carolina. Their goal was to rally Loyalists (pro-British colonists) and destabilize Patriot resistance in the South.

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THE OVERMOUNTAIN MILITIA

The British anticipated support from Loyalist colonists and allied American Indians. James Simpson, the British Attorney-General for South Carolina, stated, “I am of the opinion whenever the King's Troops move to Carolina they will be assisted by [a] very considerable numbers of the inhabitants...” However, Simpson’s expectation proved to be a critical miscalculation.

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK



Handmade reproduction of a circa 1780s hunting shirt, 2025, Jason Melius.

After the British captured a vast majority of the southern Patriot army at the Siege of Charleston in the spring of 1780, General Charles Cornwallis sent Major Patrick Ferguson into western North Carolina. Ferguson marched through the Carolina foothills, endeavoring to rally Loyalists. His troops raided towns to root out rebel Patriots and build their forces. This violence occurred outside the battlefield, disrupting the lives of everyday individuals.

Modern depiction of a backcountry family in the late 1700s.



Illustration by Stephen Marchesi, 2025, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.

As word of Ferguson’s growing Loyalist army spread, backcountry Patriots began to mobilize. Led by Colonels Isaac Shelby, John Sevier, William Campbell, Benjamin Cleveland, James Williams, and Charles McDowell, men from present-day Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia rallied together. Many of these men came from isolated communities west of the Blue Ridge Mountains and are now collectively known as the “Overmountain Men.”

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THE BATTLE OF KINGS MOUNTAIN

With their ranks assembled, the Overmountain militia set out on a grueling journey to confront the Loyalists. For thirteen days and over 200 miles, they traveled on foot and horseback through the Carolina backcountry. They endured harsh weather, poor food, and difficult river crossings. These frontier soldiers were skilled horsemen and expert marksmen armed with hunting rifles and tomahawks. As the forces advanced, additional Patriots from the North and South Carolina Piedmont joined their ranks, forming a force of roughly 2,000 men.

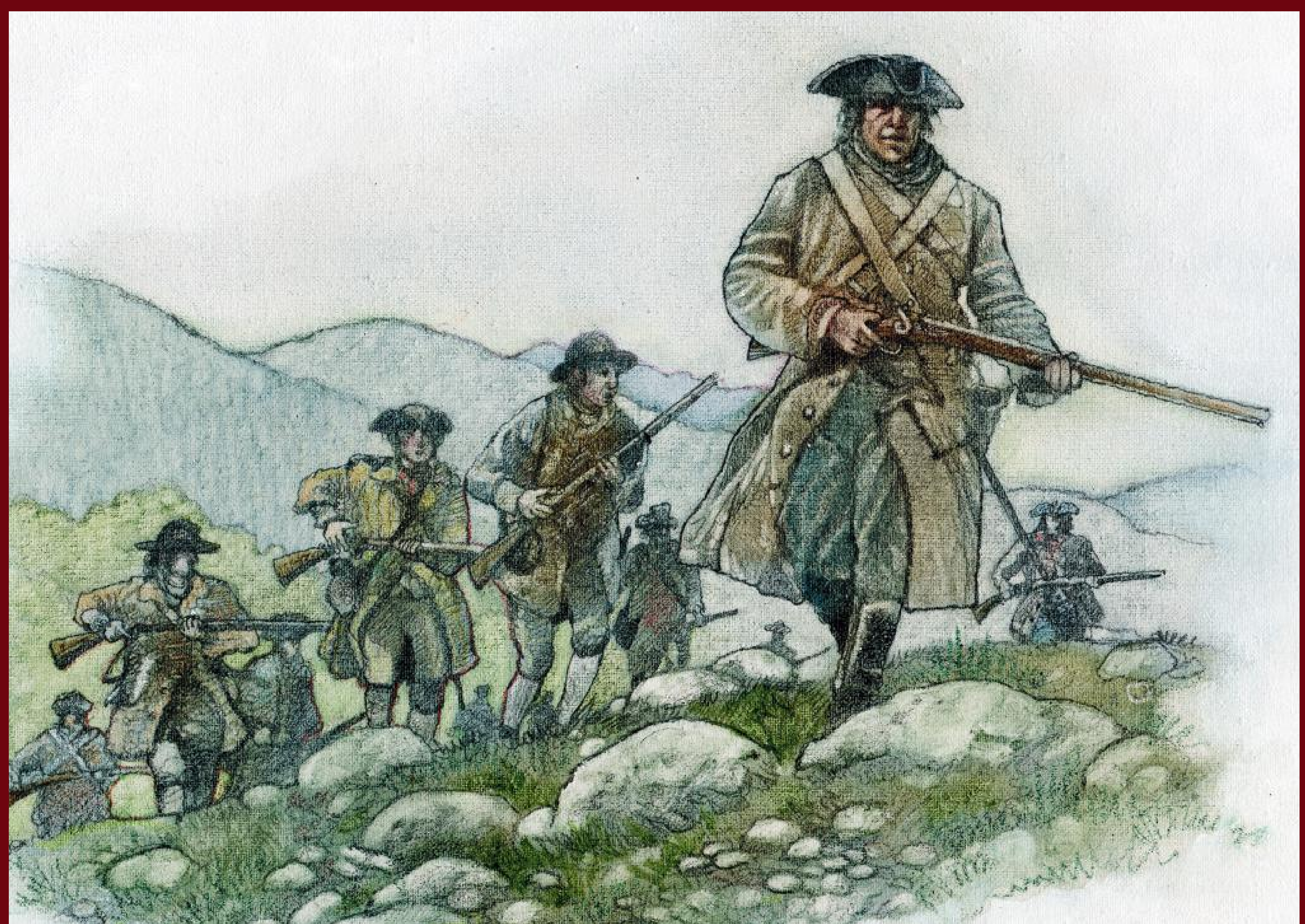


Made of wood and metal, typically around eight pounds and four feet long, the rifle featured spiral grooves (rifling) inside the barrel, which improved accuracy and range by causing the ball to spin in flight.

Kentucky Flintlock Rifle, 1770–1790, credit Charles Bremner Hogg Jackson, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

On October 7, 1780, a chosen group of roughly 900 Overmountain Men rode ahead to reach Kings Mountain, where they surrounded and overwhelmed Ferguson's Loyalists. This victory was decisive; Patriot forces killed Ferguson and captured his entire Loyalist army. The defeat severely weakened British General Cornwallis's southern campaign and marked a crucial turning point in the Revolutionary War by denying the British the support of frontier Loyalists.

British commander Sir Henry Clinton later called the battle "the first link in a chain of evils" that ended in the loss of America. Even reflecting on the war many years later, Thomas Jefferson hailed it as "the joyful annunciation of the turn of the tide of success which terminated the revolutionary war."



Modern depiction of the Overmountain Militia. Illustration by Stephen Marchesi, 2025, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.

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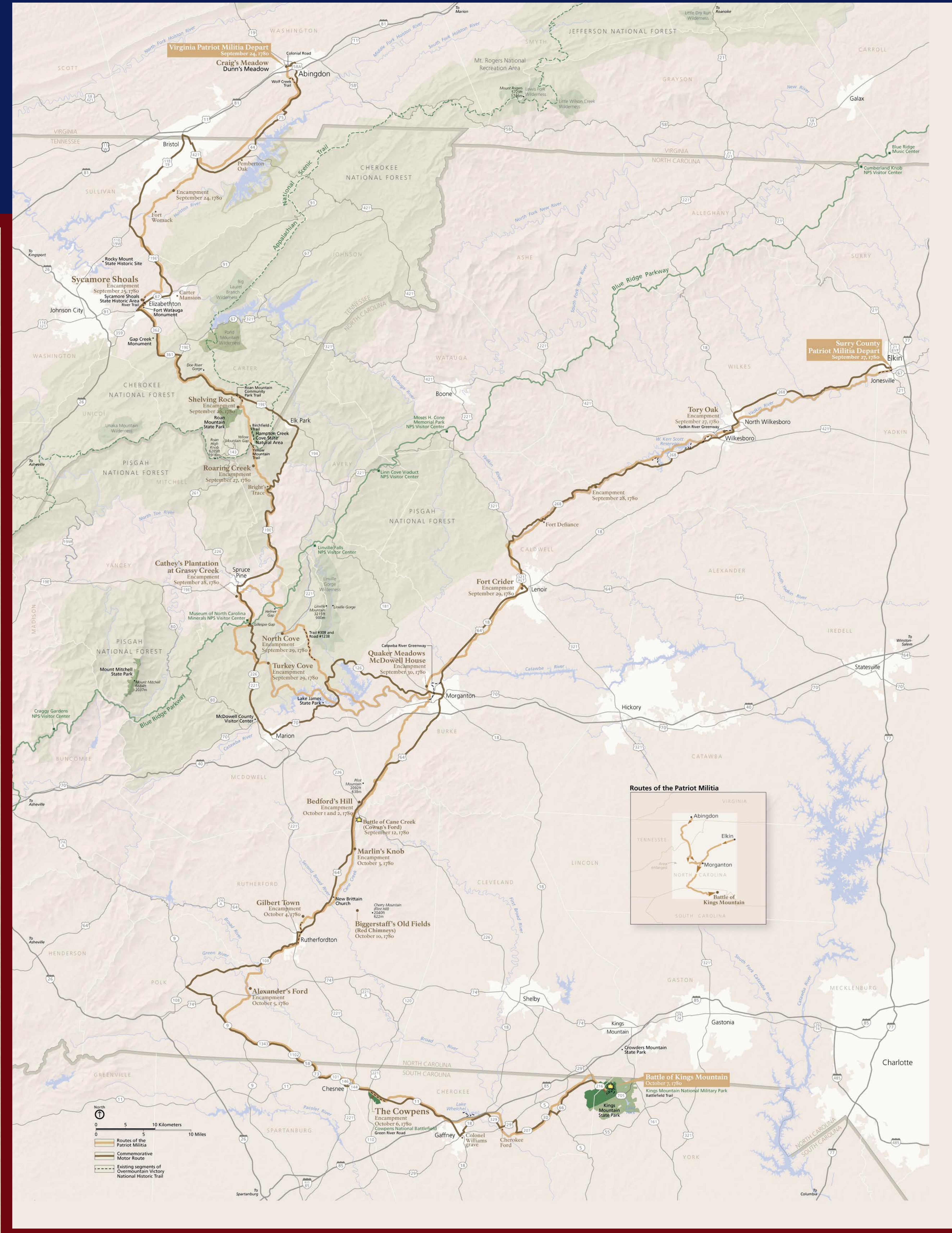
AFTERMATH AND TODAY

The aftermath of Kings Mountain was both grim and transformative. In the days following the battle, exhausted and starved Patriots tried and executed several Loyalist prisoners, reflecting the deep divisions and personal violence that tore Carolina communities apart. Yet the triumph inspired renewed confidence across the South and compelled British forces to retreat from their advance into North Carolina and rethink their plans.



TAKE A CLOSER LOOK

In the centuries since the 1780 battle, Kings Mountain National Military Park has become a place of reflection and remembrance. Annual events and living history demonstrations commemorate the Americans who fought and died there, the Patriot “Overmountain Men” and their Loyalist neighbors. The National Park Service also preserves the surrounding landscape



Historic route of the Overmountain Men from Virginia to Kings Mountain, South Carolina. Map courtesy of the National Park Service.

as a cultural heritage area. The journey taken by the Overmountain Men is commemorated by the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, which traces the route of the Patriot militia across approximately 330 miles from Virginia to South Carolina. This trail is one of 21 National Trails in the United States that allow visitors to walk and drive along routes that have shaped America’s identity.



This exhibit is brought to you by America 250 NC and the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources in partnership with the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail.