

"Battle of King's Mountain"  
by Major Benjamin Sharp, an Eye-Witness  
(From "American Pioneer," Vol. II, 1843, pg. 66)

Mr. J.S. Williams:

As well as I can remember, some time in August, in the year 1780, Colonel McDowell, of North Carolina, with 300 or 400 men fled over the mountains to the settlements of Holston and Watauga, to evade the pursuit of a British officer by the name of Ferguson, who had the command of a large detachment of British and Tories. Our militia speedily embodied, all mounted on horses- the Virginians under the command of Colonel William Campbell, and the two western counties of North Carolina (now Tennessee) under the Colonels Isaac Shelby and John Sevier, and as soon as they joined McDowell, he recrossed the mountains and formed a junction with Colonel Cleveland with a fine regiment of North Carolina militia. We were now fifteen or eighteen hundred strong, and considered ourselves equal in numbers, or at least a match for the enemy, and eager to bring them to battle; but Colonel McDowell, who had the command, appeared to think otherwise, for although Ferguson had retreated on our crossing the mountains, he kept us marching and countermarching for eight or ten days without advancing a step towards our object. At length a council of the field-officers was convened, and it was said in camp, how true I will not pretend to say, that he refused in council to proceed without a general officer to command the army, and to get rid of him the council deputed him to General Green, at headquarters, to procure a general. Be this as it may, as soon as the council rose Colonel McDowell left the camp, and we saw no more of him during the expedition.

As soon as he was fairly gone, the council reassembled and appointed William Campbell our commander, and within one hour after we were on our horses and in full pursuit of the enemy. The British still continued to retreat and after hard marching for some time, we found our progress much retarded by our footmen and weak horses that were not able to sustain the duty. It was then resolved to leave the foot and weak horses under the command of Captain William Neil, of Virginia, with instructions of follow as fast as his detachment could bear. Thus disencumbered, we gained fast upon the enemy. I think on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of October, in the afternoon, we halted at a place called the Cow Pens, in South Carolina, fed our horse and ate a hasty meal of such provisions as we had procured, and by dark mounted our horses, marched all night, and crossed Broad River by the dawn of day, and although it rained considerably in the morning, we never halted to refresh ourselves or horses. About twelve o'clock it cleared off with a fine cool breeze. We were joined that day by Colonel Williams, of South Carolina, with several hundred men, and in the afternoon fell in with three men who informed us that they were just from the British camp, that they were posted on the top of King's Mountain, and that there was a picket guard on the road not far ahead of us. These men were detained lest they should find

means to inform the enemy of our approach, and Colonel Shelby, with a select party, undertook to surprise and take the picket; this he accomplished without firing a gun or giving the least alarm, and it was hailed by the army as a good omen.

We then marched on, and as we approached the mountain the roll of the British drum informed us that we had something to do. No doubt the British commander thought his position a strong one, but the plan of our attack was such as to make it the worst for him he could have chosen. The end of the mountains to our left descended gradually to a branch; in front of us the ascent was rather abrupt, and to the right was a low gap, through which the road passed. The different regiments were directed by guides to the ground they were to occupy, so as to surround the eminence on which the British were encamped—Campbell's to the right, along the road; Shelby's next, to the left of him; Sevier's next, and so on, till at last the left of Cleveland's joined the right of Campbell's, on the other side of the mountain, at the road.

Thus the British major found himself attacked on all sides at once, and so situated as to receive a galling fire from all parts of our lines, without doing any injury to ourselves. From this difficulty he attempted to relieve himself at the point of the bayonet, but failed in three successive charges. Cleveland, who had the farthest to go, being bothered in some swampy ground, did not occupy his position in the line till late in the engagement. A few men, drawn from the right of Campbell's regiment, occupied this vacancy. This the British commander discovered, and here he made his last powerful effort to force his way through and make his escape; but at that instant Cleveland's regiment came up in gallant style; the Colonel himself came up by the very spot I occupied, at which time his horse had received two wounds, and he was obliged to dismount. Although fat and unwieldy, he advanced on foot with signal bravery, but was soon remounted by one of his officers, who brought him another horse. This threw the British and Tories into complete disorder, and Ferguson, seeing that all was lost, determined not to survive the disgrace; he broke his sword and spurred his horse into the thickest of our ranks and fell cover with wounds, and shortly after his whole army surrendered at discretion. The action lasted about one hour and for most of the time was fierce and bloody.

I cannot clearly recall the statement of our loss, given at the time, but my impression now is that it was two hundred and twenty-five killed, and about as many or a few more, wounded. The loss of the enemy must have been much greater. The return of the prisoners taken was eleven hundred and thirty-three, about fifteen hundred stand of arms, several baggage wagons, and all their camp equipage fell into our hands. The battle closed not far from sundown, so that we had to encamp on the ground with the dead and wounded, and pass the night among groans and lamentations.

The next day, as soon as we could bury our dead and provide litters to carry our wounded, we marched off to recover the upper country, for fear of being intercepted by a detachment from the army of Lord Cornwallis, for we were partly behind his quarters, between him and the British garrison of Ninety-Six. A British surgeon, with some assistants, was left to attend their wounded, but the wounded Tories were unprovided for, and their dead left for their bones to bleach upon the mountain. That afternoon we met Captain Neil coming on with his detachment, and encamped for the night on a large deserted Tory plantation, where there was a sweet potato patch sufficiently large to supply the whole army. This was most fortunate, for not one in fifty of us had tasted food for the last two days and nights; that is, since we left the Cow Pens. Here the next morning we buried Colonel Williams, who had died of his wounds on the march the day before. We still proceeded towards the mountains as fast as our prisoners could bear.

When we had gained a position where we thought ourselves secure from a further pursuit, the army halted for a day, and a court was detailed to inquire into various complaints against certain Tories for murders, robberies, house-burnings etc. The court found upwards of forty of them guilty of the crimes charged upon them, and sentenced them to be hung; and nine of the most atrocious offenders were executed that night by fire-light; the rest were reprieved by the commanding officer.

We set off early next morning, and shortly after the rain began to fall in torrents and continued the whole day; but, instead of halting, we rather mended our pace in order to cross the Catawba river before it should rise and intercept us. This we effected late in the night and halted by a large plantation, where Major McDowell (brother to Colonel, and who commanded his brother's regiment the whole route, and was a brave and efficient officer) rode along the lines and informed us that the plantation belonged to him, and kindly invite us to take rails from his fences and make fires to warm and dry us. I suppose everyone felt grateful for this generous offer, for it was rather cold, being the last of October, and everyone, from the commander-in-chief to the meanest private, was as wet as if he had been just dragged through the Catawba River. We rested here one day and then proceeded, by easy marches, to the heads of the Yadkin River, where we were relieved by the militia of the country and permitted to return down, which those of us who had not fallen in battle or died of wounds, effected some time in November.

During the whole of this expedition, except a few days at the outset, I neither tasted bread or salt, and this was the case with nearly every man. When we could get meat, which was but seldom, we had to roast and eat it without either; sometimes we got a few potatoes, but our standing and principal ration was ears of corn, scorched in the fire or eaten raw. Such was the price paid by the men of the Revolution for our independence.

Here I might conclude, but I cannot forbear offering a small tribute of respect to the memory of our commanding officers. Colonel Williams fell; Cleveland I have already spoken of; Sevier I did not see in the battle, but his bravery was well attested. Three times my eye fell upon our gallant commander, calm and collected, encouraging the men and assuring them of victory. At the close of the action, when the British were loudly calling for quarter, but uncertain whether it would be granted, I saw the intrepid Shelby rush this horse with fifteen paces of their lines and command them to lay down their arms and they should have quarter. Some would call this an imprudent act, but it showed the daring bravery of the man. I am led to believe that three braver men or purer patriots never trod the soil of freedom than Campbell, Shelby and Sevier.

Very respectfully yours,  
Benjamin Sharp

Benjamin sharp settled in Montgomery Co., MO in 1816, with a large family which he brought from Lee Co., VA, and after a useful life died in 1843.  
*(pg. 333 The Gentry Family in America 1909 by Richard Gentry Ph.B., M.S.)*