

Legendary Loyalist Women

-- by Tom Belton

The American Revolution was fought not only by armies. Everyone who lived in the colonies was part of the war for independence. North Carolina's women contributed and suffered much for both sides of the war. This section focuses on a few women loyalists during the American Revolution and how they contributed to both domestic and military efforts.

At that time, the population of North Carolina was mostly rural. Men lived with their wives and families on farms. Like women everywhere in those days, the farmers' wives--and all the women in the household--had established roles within the family. A woman's life centered on her family and home. Even the few women who worked away from their own homes for pay performed work expected only of women--cooking, washing clothes, sewing, caring for children and the sick, and tending gardens.

The American Revolution caused big changes in all the colonies. For women, the war created responsibilities and demanded decisions and actions not previously considered. As tensions grew among the colonists about how the British government was threatening them, North Carolinians divided into three groups: the Loyalists, the Patriots, and those who did not take a stand either for or against independence. The last group included pacifists like the Moravians and Quakers, who were neutral because of their deeply held religious objections to war. Each group had women who served and suffered during the Revolution. Here are some of their stories.

Flora MacDonald

The most famous Loyalist was Flora MacDonald. She was known as a heroic woman in Scotland before she ever came to North Carolina. When in Scotland, she had saved the life of "Bonnie Prince Charlie"--Charles Stuart, whose grandfather had been king of England and Scotland. Charles had started a rebellion in Scotland in an effort to regain the throne. At the bloody Battle of Culloden in 1746, his army was defeated and he was almost captured by the enemy British soldiers. Flora MacDonald helped him to escape.

In 1774, Flora MacDonald and her husband, Allan, came to North Carolina with their family. Before they were allowed to make the voyage from Scotland, they had to take an oath, along with all the other Highlanders from Scotland, that they would remain forever loyal to the British Crown.



Painting by Allan Ramsay

The MacDonald family settled on a plantation called Killiegray in Anson County. In 1776, the royal governor, Josiah Martin, formed an army to fight the revolutionary movement. Allan MacDonald became a major in that army. Along with his son and son-in-law, he was part of the 1,600 North Carolina troops who marched off to the coast to join British troops.

Before the army left, Flora MacDonald, riding a beautiful white horse, came to the camp to cheer the men on. She called to them to fight bravely and remain loyal to the king. She rode with them during their first day's march and spent the night with them before returning home.

On February 27, 1776, the Loyalists were soundly defeated by the Patriot militia at Moore's Creek Bridge near Wilmington. Major MacDonald, their son, and their son-in-law were taken captive. Courageously, Flora MacDonald visited and comforted the families of others whose men had been killed or captured.

The Revolutionary state government seized Killiegray, and Flora MacDonald was left homeless and nearly penniless. She eventually returned to Scotland, where she was reunited with her husband after a separation of nearly six years. When she died in 1790, nearly 4,000 friends and neighbors came to honor the courageous Scotswoman at her funeral.

Mary Dowd

Another Loyalist who lost her home and land was Mary Dowd. Mary Dowd was as strong a Loyalist as her husband, Connor Dowd. The wealthy Connor Dowd continued his Loyalist activities after the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge, organizing a small, mounted army to join British general Charles Cornwallis, who was on his way to North Carolina. Although it did not fight with Cornwallis, Dowd's army did fight the Patriots. The Dowds' son was killed, and Connor fled to the British forces at Wilmington.

The revolutionaries then seized and sold his property in Cumberland County. Dowd went to England in August 1782, leaving his wife and ten children behind on their property in Chatham County. Within three months, the Revolutionary court seized the Dowd property in Chatham County as well. The General Assembly passed a special law that permitted Mary Dowd to bring legal action in her own name to collect some of the money owed to her husband. At the same time, she was actively trying to arrange for her husband's return. Connor Dowd returned in 1783, and he made a number of trips across the ocean in the years following. For the rest of her life, Mary Dowd saw the steady loss of all the land her husband had owned before the Revolution, land that was seized or sold to satisfy the debts Connor Dowd had made in support of the Loyalist side.

Elizabeth Cornell Bayard

Another woman Loyalist, Elizabeth Cornell Bayard, helped to "make law" in North Carolina. Her father, a wealthy merchant in New Bern, had deeded some property to his daughter. But since he was a Loyalist, his property was seized under the state's laws that permitted the confiscation of property to raise money to fight the Revolution. Some of his property was sold at auction to a man named Spyers Singleton. Elizabeth Bayard brought a lawsuit in the state court to get the property back from Singleton. The state supreme court decided in 1787 that

the laws under which the property had been seized were not allowed by the state constitution of 1776. The case of *Bayard v. Singleton* helped to establish the right of the courts to consider whether an act of the legislature was permitted by a constitution.

There were many heroic Patriot women in North Carolina during the Revolution as well. One North Carolinian led what has been called the "earliest known. . . political activity on the part of women" in America. A few months after the Boston Tea Party, a group of fifty-one women in Edenton signed a public proclamation that they would not drink any tea or wear clothes made from British cloth. The first reaction was to ridicule their action. A London newspaper published a caricature of the "Edenton Tea Party." James Iredell, later a justice of the United States Supreme Court, received a letter from his brother Arthur in London asking a sarcastic question: "Is there a female Congress in Edenton too?" But this public call for women to support the Revolution had an effect. The message was heard. Women brought out their unused spinning wheels and looms and made their own cloth instead of buying British-made goods. Women collectively declared their independence from English imports.

Source: North Carolina Museum of History, Women at War
(<http://ncmuseumofhistory.org/workshops/womenshistory/SESSION3.html>).