

# THE LINCOLN COUNTY HISTORIAN

## THE BATTLE OF RAMSOUR'S MILL



2020  
V1•N3

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If you're a newcomer, or even a longtime resident, it's possible that you've missed the fact that Lincolnton's Battleground Elementary School is aptly named, for it sits directly upon the ground of a fierce Revolutionary War battle.

It's also possible that you've been too distracted to notice the historic marker on North Aspen Street, just in front of Lincolnton High School. It briefly describes a decisive Revolutionary War battle, fought 240 years ago on Lincoln County soil, that left at least 100 dead and 200 wounded. It's important to understand

the events of that foggy morning. The Patriot's (or Whig's) surprise attack at the Battle of Ramsour's Mill is often credited for scattering the North Carolina Loyalists (or Tories), diminishing local support for the British cause, paving the way for a turn-of-the-tide Loyalist defeat at Kings Mountain in October, and the eventual British defeat at Yorktown.

Narratives gathered from eyewitnesses include an account by General Joseph Graham in 1825 and another written by William R. Davie in 1803. A third narrative by Wallace M. Rein-

*Continued on page 5*



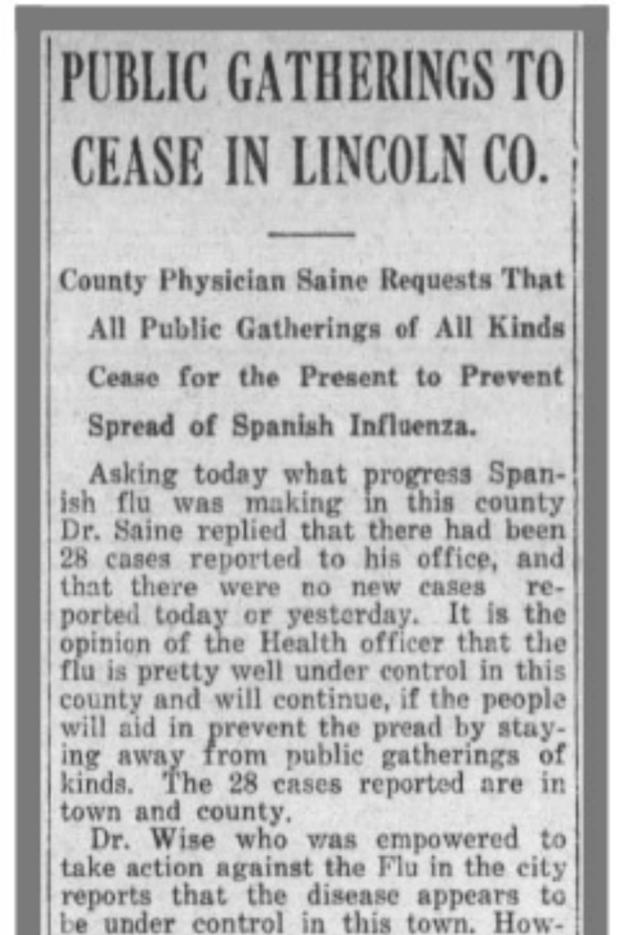
## Lincolnton Faces Pandemic Parallels from 1918

“In view of the fact that thousands of our people in civil life and tens of thousands of our men in the army camps are affected with this disease, it is, therefore earnestly requested that from this day until a date to be determined by the health officer, all schools in the county be suspended at once, nor to hold any meetings or gathering in any church; to conduct, keep open, or to enter for the purpose of patronizing or loitering, or otherwise as the case may be, any vaudeville, or moving picture shows, carnivals, circus or other places of amusements; nor to unnecessarily loiter about any public place or to hold or participate in any public meeting or gatherings indoors of whatever kind or nature – to the end that the public health of this community may be properly safeguarded.

“This, the 9th day Oct. 1918, JNO. W. SAINÉ, M.D. County Health Officer.”

So it was for Lincolnton during the second wave of the 15-month influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, the first wave being largely unnoticed in the first nine months of 1918. By October, influenza was overwhelming the state’s rudimentary health system. For the period, the local Red Cross established an influenza hospital in the High School building with 71 patients. At the time of this report, 36 had been discharged and two, Betty Herndon Finger, colored, of Freedman, and Mrs. Luther Heavner of Laboratory, died of pneumonia related to influenza. County-wide cases were numbered at about 500, with three deaths in the county and seven in the city.

The parallels to our current reality are unmistakable. In larger cities like Raleigh, Greensboro, and Charlotte, sickness and death took their tolls with more than 13,500 reported dead statewide, the true number is believed to be almost double due to underreporting. These included soldiers at Camp Greene near Charlotte, where coffins were reported to be stacked floor to ceiling with young soldiers. Blacks were more likely to die than whites. In a Lincoln Tribune article on October 28, Dr. Saine said that although cases of flu were declining, one or two of the area’s mills were reporting that the disease



had just gotten started.

Also relatable is research conducted by Lauren Austin, PhD, for her study, “Afraid to Breathe: Understanding North Carolina’s Experience of the 1918-1919 Influence at the State, Local, and Individual Levels.” Her examination of accounts of people’s experiences, government archives, newspapers, and letters suggest a growing public desensitization due to government downplaying the epidemic’s seriousness, officials instructing the public to remain calm and maintain normality, businessmen wanting to restore sales, and simply boredom with quarantine measures.

The good news for all was that North Carolina’s health system took a giant leap of growth following the pandemic, and the public health system began to take hold; silver linings to a very dark cloud over Carolina skies.

### SOURCES

Newspapers.com

North Carolina and the Blue Death: The Flu Epidemic of 1918. Anchor: A North Carolina History Online Resource. ([www.ncpedia.org](http://www.ncpedia.org))

“Afraid to Breathe” Understanding North Carolina’s Experience of the 1918-1919 Influenza Pandemic at the State, Local, and Individual Levels. A graduate dissertation by Lauren Amanda Austin, UNC Charlotte, 2018.

## Letters to the Association

From J. Zimby

*“I’m looking for a picture of the County Home that was once located in Boger City.”*

You’re referring to Lincoln County’s *third* county home or “home for the aged and infirmed” commonly called “the poor house.” The black residents lived in a separate brick facility. The second floor was an open space used for meetings and church services. It was set back from Highway 27 between Lithia Inn Road and Salem Church Road and extended back, with surrounding farmland, to the railroad tracks. According to a 1918 article from the Lincoln County News, the new Boger Crawford Cotton Mill and Mill village was bordered by the County Home property on the east.

County homes statewide were the forerunners of today’s rest home, and generally served older residents who had no other place to live. From LCHA information, Lincoln County’s first county home was on Bethel Church Road northeast of Lincolnton. The second was located on a farm owned by the county on Highway 182 in the Howard’s Creek section. An outbreak of typhoid fever killed a number of the residents and led to the close of this home around 1908.

As an aside, the LCHA has a collection of documents from 1909 that includes bids, contracts, and correspondence about the construction of three buildings (Main Building, Colored Building, and Infirmary) known collectively as “County Home.”



The Lincoln County Historian is published six times a year by the Lincoln County Historical Association for LCHA members and contributors.

Story submissions and ideas for upcoming issues are welcomed and encouraged.

Our future goal is to distribute our newsletter via email only. If you prefer a printed copy, please let us know.

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## Why Was the Future Site of Lincolnton Chosen for a Battle?

Without background, it seems that this area would be an unlikely choice for the scene of a significant Revolutionary War battle. Understanding the dynamics at play, however, explains why the future site of the county seat and Ramsour's Mill were ideal.

Stanley D.M. Carpenter, Ph.D, is a retired US Navy Captain at the US Naval War College in Newport, RI, and author of *Southern Gambit: Cornwallis and the British March to Yorktown*, and a Raleigh native whose family has lived in the Lincoln and Gaston Counties region since the 1760s. According to Carpenter, British authorities calculated that the majority of southern colonists were loyal. They tended to cluster throughout the colony with the heaviest concentrations among the Highland Scots around Cross Creek (Fayetteville), Cumberland County, along the coast, and among the Germans in what was then Tryon County.

“Since the militia system was based on locality with typically all or most of the men coming from the same locale, both officers and troops, many if not most of the Ramsour's Mill Loyalists lived with 30 or so miles of the Mill,” says Carpenter. The location was especially perfect to officers such as Lt. Col. John Moore and Major Nicholas Welch, who were native sons of Lincoln County from the Indian Creek settlement.

“That's only one reason that Ramsour's Mill was chosen as a mustering point. It also lay on the route of advance into North Carolina for Cornwallis,” says Carpenter. “More specifically, the Piedmont route wove through the Mecklenburg, Tryon, and Rowan Counties region and then on toward the Hillsborough area. This route represented the Great Wagon Road down from Pennsylvania through Virginia into the Carolinas and was a natural route to take for an operating army, especially if one needed to move swiftly.

“Strategically, the first thing any force does in the period before embarking on active operations is to prepare food

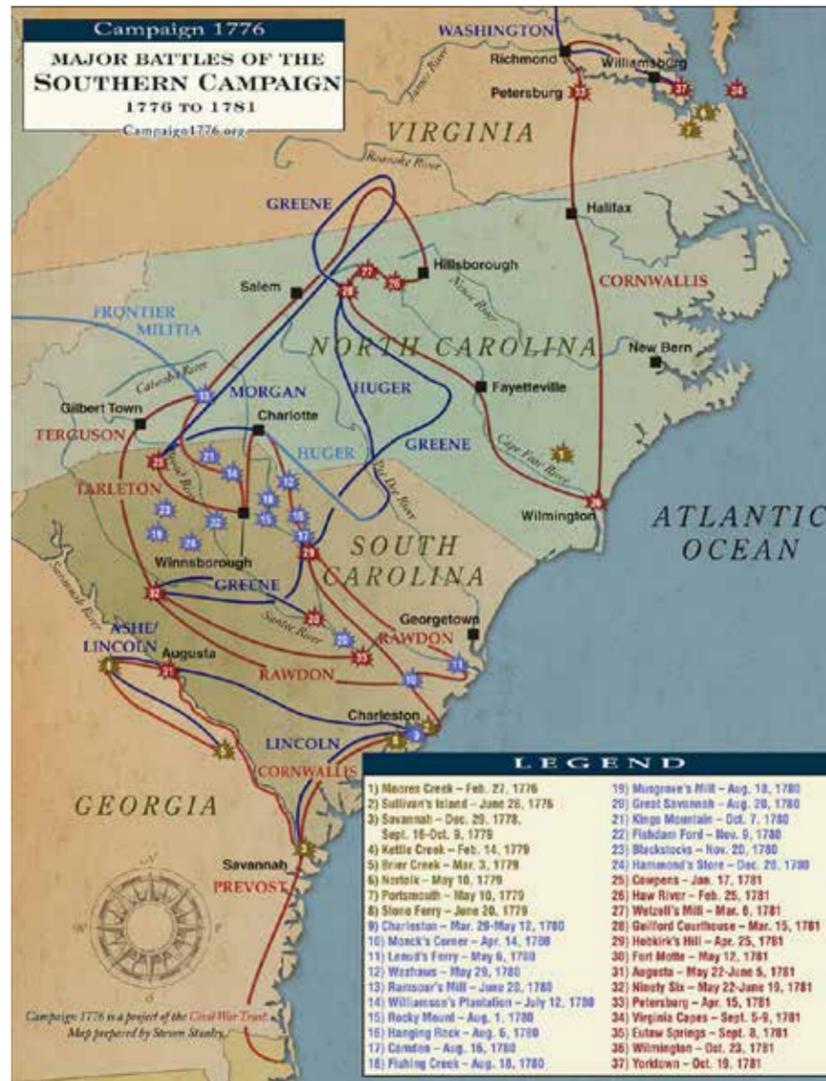
rations,” says Carpenter. “Musters were always at mills where the troops could gather crops and grind corn and wheat.

“Clark's Creek and the Little Catawba River offered a reliable water source, with the river adding a transportation possibility for men and supplies.”

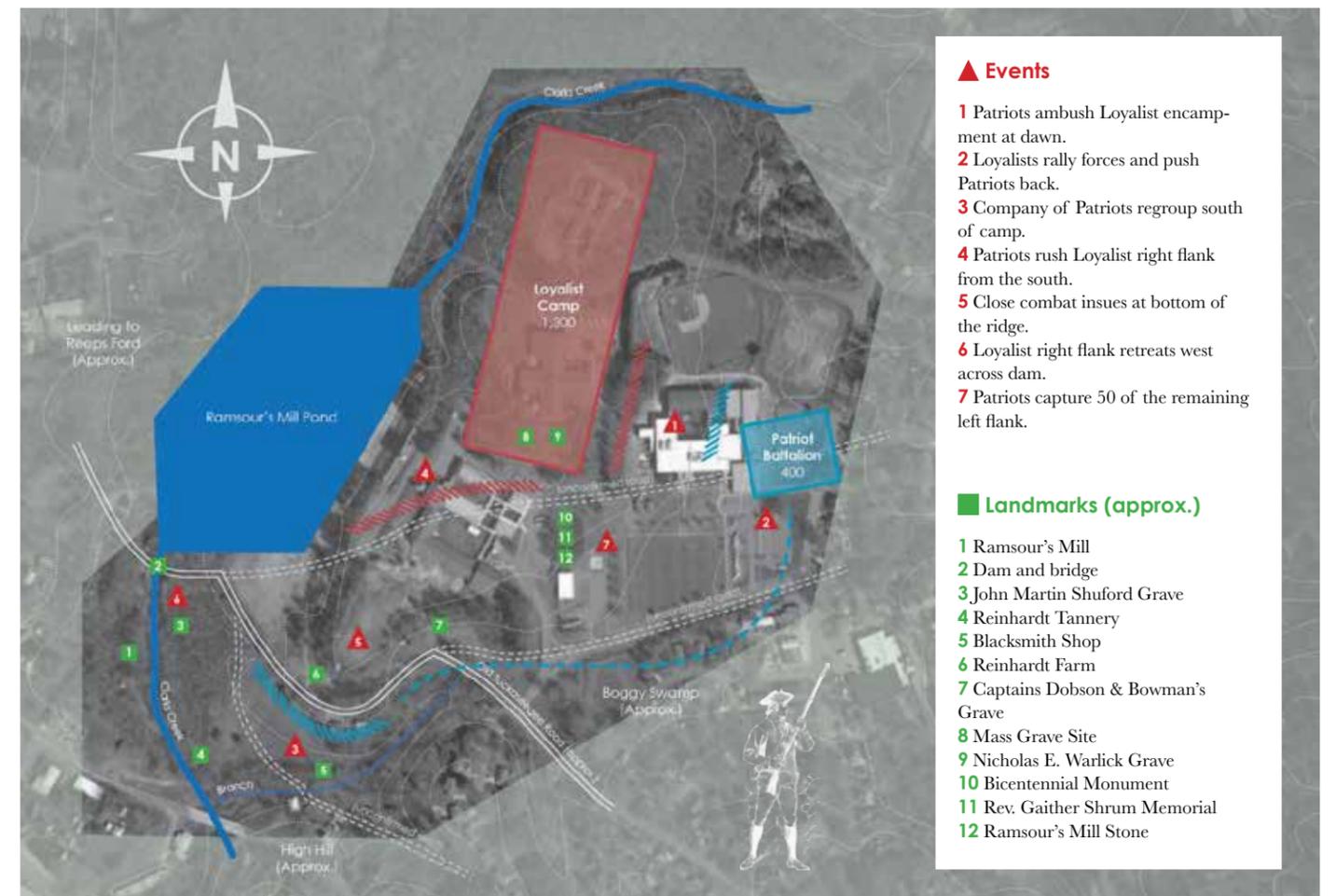
Several key roads passed through the area leading in all directions, so when the force was ready, they could march out to wherever they needed to be.

Finally, high ground is the most defensible, and the Ramsour's Mill site offered two areas of high ground where the Loyalist troops encamped and where the main battle wound up being fought.

“So, geographically in 1780-81, Lincolnton was dead in the center of the action and represented the natural muster place for the Loyalist force,” says Carpenter.



## Battle of Ramsour's Mill Cont.



hardt, father-in-law of Warren Fair, was published in 1937. The source for much of the Reinhardt manuscript is attributed to stories told to him by Adam Reep, who was not accurately determined to be present at the battle.

For the purpose of this narrative, our primary source is a more concise article written by local historian Ann M. Dellinger.

To set the stage, the war for America's independence that began five years earlier in Massachusetts, had entered the South. Following decisive victories in Georgia and South Carolina, Lord Cornwallis and the British army was poised to enter North Carolina in the spring of 1780.

In early June, local officers Lt. Col. John Moore and Maj. Nicholas Welch, flush from recent victories, returned home and issued a call for local residents to assemble and support the British. By the evening of June 19, around 1300 Loyalists, men and boys, encamped on the east bank of Clark's Creek on the land of Christian Reinhardt (above). Many of them were unarmed. On the west bank was a gristmill operated

by Jacob Ramsour.

Meanwhile, a Patriot (or Whig) force of some 400 composed primarily of men gathered from Rowan, Burke, Iredell and Mecklenburg counties, and commanded by various officers, was being gathered to disperse them. On the evening of June 19, the Patriot force, about one-fourth of the men mounted cavalry, assembled on Mountain Creek, some sixteen miles northeast of Ramsour's Mill. General Griffith Rutherford, who had assembled about 800 men near Tuckaseegee Ford on the Catawba River, sent a messenger to Locke advising him to meet him the following night at Colonel Joseph Dickson's plantation (about two miles out of Mount Holly).

Locke did not receive Rutherford's message. Instead, in a discussion of possible action, cavalry officers Major James Rutherford and Captain Galbraith Falls proposed a surprise attack. After considerable debate by other officers, a decision was made to attack the Loyalist encampment at daybreak. Locke's Patriot militia units left Mountain Creek and made an overnight march to Ramsour's Mill, stopping about a mile from the site for officers to plan the attack. It was decided

that Captains Falls, McDowell, and Brandon should go in on horseback and march in front. That was the extent of the planning since, according to Graham, "No other arrangements were made and it was left to the officers to be governed by circumstances after they should reach the enemy."

Meanwhile, the Loyalists were encamped on a hill three hundred yards east of Ramsour's Mill on land owned by Christian Reinhardt, and the site of the present-day Battleground Elementary School. It provided a strategically excellent position.

At dawn on Tuesday, June 20, 1780, a heavy fog blanketed the Loyalist encampment. Captain Falls and his men made contact with the enemy as they came upon the Loyalist picket guard about 600 yards east of the main body. The picket fired and fled to their camp. The horsemen pursued and turning to the right out of the road, they were within thirty steps of the encampment before being discovered.

Led by their cavalry, and Col. Locke's men two deep behind them, the Patriots marched to battle. The surprise attack caught the sleepy Loyalists off guard without time to form their line. They quickly rallied, however, and fired back, causing the horsemen to retreat.

Seeing the effect of their fire, the Loyalists came down the hill exposing themselves. The horsemen reorganized and returned to the fight with the infantry close behind. The Loyalist counterattack drove the Patriots back down the hill, but there they regrouped and again advanced the hill, pushing the Loyalists further beyond the crest.

The sides seemed evenly matched until Patriot horsemen were able to attack the Loyalists on the right flank. Fighting was fierce and the action was close, according to Graham, and the parties became mixed. With no bayonets, they struck each other with rifle butts and often hand to hand. This three-pronged attack was too much for the Loyalists who retreated westward down the ridge and across Clark's Creek at and near the mill. They crossed the creek at various places, including swimming the millpond, and rapidly dispersed into the countryside.

By the end of two hours, all fighting had ceased. As

the fog lifted, the scene revealed the dead and wounded. According to Graham's account, "As there was no organization of either part nor regular returns made after the action, the loss could not be ascertained with correctness. Fifty-six lay dead on the side of the ridge where the heat of the action prevailed. Many lay scattered on the flanks and over the ridge toward the mill. It is believed that seventy were killed and that the loss on each side was equal. About one hundred men on each side were wounded and fifty Loyalists were taken prisoners. The men had no uniforms and it could not be told to which party many of the dead belonged."

According to Graham, Captains Falls, Dobson, Smith, Bowman, and Armstrong were killed; and Captains Houston and McKissick wounded. Of the Loyalist Captains, Cumberland, Murray, and Warlick were killed, and Capt. Carpenter was wounded. Other sources list Captains Sloan and Knox among the dead.

Meanwhile, General Rutherford received word of the fighting and hurried with his men to the site. They arrived at midday, after the smoke had cleared. Rutherford dispatched Major Davie and his cavalry to round up enemy stragglers, and work began at aiding the wounded and burying the dead. While the bodies of some men killed in the battle were returned to their homes for burial, the majority of the unidentified dead were placed in a long, deep trench on the west side of the hill. Unable to distinguish Loyalist from Patriot, the dead were respectfully buried together.

Today, children learn and play on the site of the carnage of brother against brother and neighbor against neighbor. Athletic fields and classrooms mask the scene of 240 years ago. Yet remnants of the loss, the mass grave of 70 soldiers and the final rest of John Martin Shuford, Whig Captains John Dobson and John Bowman, Tory Captain Nicholas Warlick, his brother Philip Warlick, and Israel Sain, are reverently remembered at a somber wreath-laying service held annually by the Sons of the American Revolution and the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Visit [NCpedia.org/biography/graham-joseph](http://NCpedia.org/biography/graham-joseph), for an overview with links, including the full text of *General Joseph Graham and His Papers on North Carolina Revolutionary History* by Gen. William Graham.

## Upcoming Events

All scheduled events, including the Battle of Ramsour's Mill weekend and the Mid-Year Pottery Market, are cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions.

We look forward to presenting programs as soon as we are able.

In the meantime, here we are in the midst of living an historical event, and we welcome your observations and family experiences, photos that depict our activities during the quarantine. Send your stories and photos to [LincolnCountyHistoryNC.com](http://LincolnCountyHistoryNC.com).

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Members added after April 30 will appear in the July-August issue.

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