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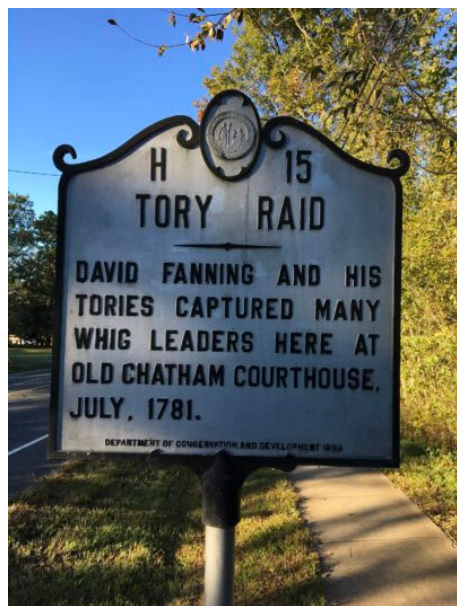
Historic Pittsboro: Revolutionary War

Loyalist David Fanning

by Francis DiNardo

From 1775 through 1782, during the American War of Independence, David Fanning, a Loyalist (a British sympathizer) militia leader was a major adversary to the Patriots (the colonial Rebels) during the southern campaigns of the American Revolutionary War which were fought primarily by local militias rather than regular armies.

Fanning terrorized Patriot militias and citizens as he rampaged through the Carolinas, including a bold raid on the Chatham County Courthouse in Pittsboro on July 16, 1781. He captured 53 prisoners, including all of Chatham County's Patriot militia officers, a Continental Captain, and their delegates to the General Assembly. During another daring raid on the Patriot government headquarters in Hillsborough, Fanning managed to capture the Patriot governor of North Carolina as well as a large number of other dignitaries.



David Fanning's roadside marker in Pittsboro

Given the rich history of his experiences in Chatham County, I offered to interview Col. Fanning for Main Street Pittsboro, and Fanning was kind enough to accept – which is quite gracious of the 262-year-old Col. Fanning. We met recently at the [Pittsboro Roadhouse](#) where we sat at a corner table, me wearing my fedora and he wearing his tri-corner hat.

Me: “Colonel, can I get you a beer?”

Fanning: “Yeah, thanks man, I’ll have a Sam Adams Lager.”

Me: “OK, I’ll be right...wait a minute...a Sam Adams?”

Fanning: (laughing) “ahhhhh ...just goofin’ on ya dude...get me a Newcastle!”

Me: “So Colonel, tell us a little bit about yourself.”

Fanning: “I was born in 1755 in Virginia but my father soon moved our family to Johnston County, North Carolina, where I spent most of my youth. I was orphaned at a young age. At the beginning of the rebellion, I had settled just across the border in South Carolina. In 1775 that region leaned heavily towards the Loyalist so I became a young officer in the local Loyalist militia.”

Me: "Had you ever considered siding with the Patriot rebels?"

Fanning: "Actually, I did change sides for a brief time in 1779. I was wounded in battle and had accepted a pardon from the South Carolina governor, which was contingent on my serving in the Patriot militia but, anticipating a British victory, I soon changed sides back to the Loyalists. I mean, you gotta back a winner, right?"

Me: "How'd that work out for you?"

Fanning: "mthrbldg hdfrr ggnm... [indecipherable]"

Me: "Anyway, let's get to the good stuff. Tell us about the Chatham County Courthouse raid in Pittsboro."

Fanning: "Yeah, let's do that, it was one of my favorite escapades! The Rebels had gathered a small force at the Courthouse on the night of July 16, 1781 for the purpose of prosecuting several Loyalists who refused to change sides. We rode 17 miles that night but arrived at the Courthouse after they had already dispersed. We posted pickets on all the surrounding roads and we were able to round up 53 prisoners, including all of Chatham County's Patriot militia officers, a Continental Captain, and their delegates to the General Assembly!"

Me: "Wow! That was quite a haul."

Fanning: "Yeah, we got a lot of big Whigs!"

Me: (groaning) "...ohhhh...terrible pun! So, what became of the prisoners?"

Fanning: "We immediately paroled a number of them who swore to cease their rebellious ways, but we brought the hardcore resisters to Wilmington where, despite Patriot efforts to ransom them, they remained until the end of hostilities."

Me: "I have to admit, that was impressive, but I've heard that you conducted an even more brazen raid. Would you tell us about it?"

Fanning: "Ahhhh...you're talking about my raid on the State Capital in Hillsborough... that was awesome! On September 12, 1781, I combined forces with those of Loyalist Colonel Hector McLean, resulting in a force of about 1100 men. We marched on Hillsborough and drove off the small Patriot force defending the capital and captured over 200 political and militia leaders, including North Carolina Governor Thomas Burke."

Me: "So, what does one do with 200 captives?"

Fanning: "Well, at that time there were very few prisons in the colonies so both the Patriots and the Loyalist had to either ransom or exchange their prisoners. I decided to deliver my captives to the British stronghold in Wilmington where they could be cared for accordingly, but

the Patriots had a different notion. Upon learning of our victory in Hillsborough, Patriot General John Butler and Major Robert Mebane moved to head us off on our

way to Wilmington. Butler and 300 Patriots ambushed us at Cane Creek near Lindley's Mill. Although we had a much larger force, Butler had occupied a strategically powerful position and we engaged in fierce combat for over 4 hours. Finally, I was able to break the stalemate by crossing Cane Creek further upstream and flanking Butler's position, driving him off.

Me: "I assume the casualties were significant."

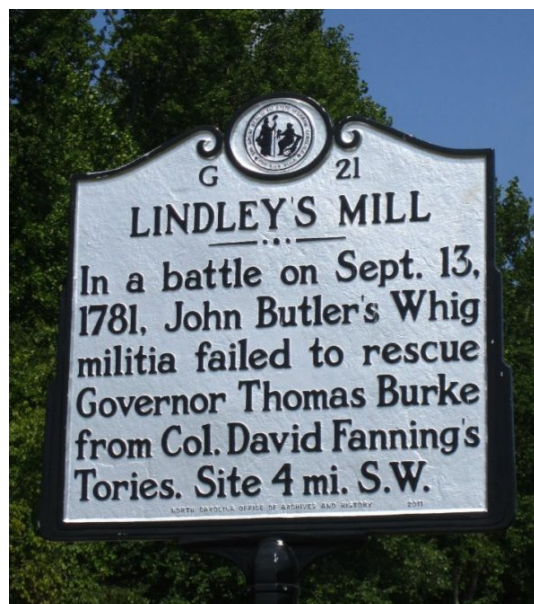
Fanning: "Yes. In addition to the death of Loyalist Colonel Hector McNeill, one of our best officers, there were about 100 fighters killed and many more wounded. I sustained a very serious wound to my arm which caused me great suffering."

Me: "I'm sorry to hear that. So, what happened to the captives you were escorting to Wilmington?"

Fanning: " We continued our march to Wilmington and delivered our captives to the British Army. Some of the captives were either ransomed or exchanged but Governor Burke was paroled to James Island in South Carolina with his pledge that he would stay there until the end of hostilities. But after 6 months Burke broke his word and resumed his office as North Carolina Governor. That dishonorable act eroded his good name in North Carolina and he was forced to resign his office several months later."

Me: "David, you mentioned that serious injury to your arm, did you have others?"

Fanning: "Oh yeah, that was not the worst of my injuries! Early in 1779, I was jailed in South Carolina but I was able to escape with a fellow prisoner. We grabbed a couple of horses from a nearby field and although the area was alerted to our escape we were able to stay hidden for several months. But one day while riding through the woods I came across a group of riders who recognized me and although I was able to elude them they raised the alarm. That resulted in a reward for my capture of 70 silver dollars and 300 paper ones. Within no time I was noticed by a group of Rebels who gave chase, and although I escaped, I took 2 bullets in the back. I turned my horse loose and hid in the woods. I suffered for 8 days before finally making it to the farm of a friend where they tended to my wounds. One of those bullets is still in my back."



Battle of Lindley's Mill roadside marker.



David Fanning fleeing a Patriot militia

Me: “Well David, thanks for meeting with me today, I know that you risk getting arrested for being here because you were one of only three North Carolina Loyalists who was not given a pardon after the war ended. Apparently, you were accused of crimes during your rampage that went way beyond the conduct acceptable in wartime.”

Fanning: [laughing] “Are you kidding! During the rebellion I was captured 14 times, each time escaping into the woods or into Cherokee lands. Do you really think the Chatham County jail could hold me? Within one hour I’d be back in Cherokee lands!”

Me: “Um, you haven’t been around here much lately, have you?”

Me: “So David, thanks so much for the interview. How long do you intend to stay here in Pittsboro?”

Fanning: “Not long, I have some business to take care of.”

Me: “I hate to bring this up Colonel, but you have a bad habit of kidnapping politicians and holding them for ransom. You’re not thinking of doing anything funny, are you?”

Fanning: [eyes shifting side to side] “No, no man! I don’t do stuff like that anymore! Really! I’m a changed man!”

David Fanning and I parted company at that point. He jumped on his horse and started galloping towards the courthouse in a great hurry. As he dashed down Hillsboro street I noticed our mayor, Cindy Perry, heading up the walk and into the courthouse. My heart stopped as I screamed, “Colonel ..COLONEL!...DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT COLONEL!”

Learn more about the history of Pittsboro and Chatham County at the [Chatham Historical Museum](#) in the Historic Chatham Courthouse
9 Hillsboro Street, open Wednesday-Friday 11am-4pm, 919-542-6222

To read more about David Fanning visit these links:

“Blood for blood”: [David Fanning and Retaliatory Violence between Tories and Whigs](#)

in the Revolutionary Carolinas

By: Gregory Mayr

Wikipedia: David Fanning (loyalist)

The Journal of the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution

Vol. 10, No. 4.1 August 2015

“The Memorial Of David Fanning”

The narrative of Colonel David Fanning (a Tory in the revolutionary war with Great Britain) : giving an account of his adventures in North Carolina, from 1775 to 1783 by Fanning, David, 1756?-1825; Wynne, Thos. H. (Thomas Hicks), 1820-1875

Chatham County 1771-1971

Hadley, Horton, Strowd

Chatham County Historical Association, 1971

October 30th, 2018

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5 Comments



Mariah Wheeler October 30, 2018 at 4:20 pm - Reply

What a fascinating story, Francis. You really got the flavor of this conniving and rebellious man. My favorite part, your introduction where you said “ me wearing my fedora and he wearing his tri-corner hat.” It got me in the mood to hear of these kidnappings as amazing and large as they were!
