DURING THE FIRST HALF OF THE CONFLICT FEW PIONEERS OF the Appalachian Frontier took part in the American Revolution. Indeed, the struggle of the thirteen colonies for independence was almost as remote to the frontiersmen as if it were taking place on another planet. Yet in conquering the wilderness they were unconsciously helping to build that political edifice for which their warring brothers to the east were laying the foundation.

The conquests of the pioneers resulted in the establishment of new commonwealths which, united to the thirteen original colonies, were to advance the borders of the United States to the Mississippi River and eventually even beyond it. While the settlers were jealous of their local independence, as Americans they felt drawn to a larger commonality for whose cause they were always ready to fight. And now they were about to be given an opportunity to come to the relief of their brothers on the seaboard and, in so doing, to strike a telling blow in the advance of American nationality.

In 1779 the theater of operations shifted from the North to the South. By the end of that year the British had conquered Georgia. In the following spring they captured Charleston, reduced all of South Carolina and marched triumphantly northward. Their leader, Charles, Lord Cornwallis, commanded a formidable force of British and Hessians, Irish volunteers and refugees from Florida. Cornwallis could count, too, on the support of numerous Tories who flocked to the royal standard in increasing numbers with each new victory. In addition he had bands of warriors sent him by the half-breed, Alexander McGil-
livray, chief of the Creeks, and some Cherokee who, never friends of the Americans, eagerly sought vengeance by aiding the British. In the face of this threatening human avalanche the patriots for the moment lost all hope of victory and retreated westward.

As Cornwallis marched northward he ordered two of his most redoubtable officers, Colonel Banastre Tarleton and Major Patrick Ferguson, to scour the country, raise Tory regiments, scatter patriot troops and crush what opposition remained. The two men were vastly different in character and personality. Tarleton, commander of a cavalry force, was a uniformed brute. His men plundered and ravaged, mistreated prisoners, outraged women and hanged all those whom Tarleton suspected of being in sympathy with the Americans. His victories were nearly always preludes to massacres. Once he attacked over three hundred Virginians under Colonel Abraham Buford. One hundred thirteen of these unfortunates were shot or butchered on the spot
while they begged for quarter, a hundred and fifty were wounded, and the rest were taken prisoner.

Ferguson, son of Lord Pitfour of Aberdeen, was a lean, dark man of thirty-six years. Standing scarcely eight inches above five feet, he was short for a Highlander. His hair, straight and black, suggested a Celtic strain in his blood. No pleasant features graced his face, but his solid military gifts, his sincere manner and the calculating intelligence which gleamed in his eyes when he spoke won him the esteem of his officers and men alike. Toward the enemy he showed on several occasions a princely magnanimity.

Once when he was lying with his men in a forest near Brandywine Creek, Pennsylvania, Ferguson saw two mounted American officers approaching, one dressed as a hussar and the other in a dark green and blue uniform with a high cocked hat. He gave and then recalled an order to fire three shots near them. The hussar wheeled his horse away, but his companion came to within a hundred yards of Ferguson, who, advancing from the forest, ordered him to halt. The American looked at Ferguson and then moved on. Ferguson, leveling his pistol at the man, repeated his command in vain. He could have "lodged half a dozen balls in or about him" before he was out of reach, but his principles forbade him to "fire at the back of an unoffending individual, who was acquitting himself very coolly of his duty."

The next day Ferguson was relating the incident to some wounded officers when a surgeon joined the group and told them that George Washington, attended only by a French officer in hussar dress, had been in the vicinity. Ferguson later wrote that he was not sorry he had been unaware of Washington's identity at the time of the encounter.

Toward American women Ferguson showed the same nobility of character. Once when he was taking part in an action commanded by Hessian officers he learned that some American women had been mistreated. He went in a rage to the commander and demanded that the men who had disgraced their uniforms be instantly put to death.

At fifteen Ferguson had received his baptism of fire in Flanders. A few years later, as a captain of infantry, he quelled a
revolt of the Caribs on the island of St. Vincent. While studying
tactics and strategy at Woolwich he invented a rifle that could
be loaded at the breech without ramrod and could fire four aimed
shots a minute. Generals and statesmen attended his shooting
exhibitions, and once even George III appeared with his guards
to watch him use his ingenious weapon.

In 1777 Ferguson with a hundred officers and men, each
armed with the new gun, joined Cornwallis in America. Fer­
guson quickly earned the reputation of being the best shot in the
British army. He reputedly could load and reload his rifle quicker
than the quickest American pioneer. Sometimes, seeing a bird
on a bough or fence, he would drop his reins, draw "a pistol from
his holster, toss it aloft, catch it as it fell, aim, and shoot" off the
bird's head. At Brandywine he won acclaim as commander of a
corps of picked riflemen. In that battle, however, a ball shattered
his right arm which hung useless for the rest of his life. On
recuperating he took up left-handed swordplay, at which he be­
came very proficient.

As commander in the back country Ferguson was obliged to
undertake duties lying outside the scope of a military officer. He
was, in the words of Cornwallis, "more . . . of a justice of peace
than . . . a soldier." Beside commanding his own independent
unit, he organized and regulated all loyalist volunteers, inspected
grain and cattle and performed marriage ceremonies. The Tories
of the back country of Georgia and the Carolinas responded
eagerly to his call. Soon finding himself at the head of nearly a
thousand men, he made preparations to invade the back country
of North Carolina.

Word of Ferguson's activities had reached a small force of
Americans under Colonel Charles McDowell of Burke County,
North Carolina. Convinced that he could not dispel the threat
with his own meager numbers, McDowell sent a messenger across
the mountains to the Watauga and Holston settlements, request­
ing the assistance of John Sevier and Isaac Shelby. Shelby re­
ponded with approximately two hundred mounted riflemen and
a part of Sevier's regiment under Major Charles Robertson.
Sevier had trained these men to fight according to the Indian
motto, "Fight strong and run away fast." They used the red man's tactics of ambuscade, surprise attack at dawn and swift flight.

For a month the forces gave and took. At Musgrove's Mill Shelby and an officer named Elijah Clarke routed a force of Tories and then made preparations to attack the settlement of Ninety-Six, which had fallen into Royalist hands. The defeat of the American army under Horatio Gates at Camden, however, forced Shelby and his men to abandon their plans. Rejoining McDowell, they left their prisoners with him and, forseeing the uselessness of attempting to dislodge Cornwallis from Ninety-Six with their small numbers, returned to their homes on the Watauga and the Holston. McDowell and his men soon followed.

Ferguson pursued them to the gap through which they had passed only a half hour before and then, realizing that his forces were too small and too exhausted to engage McDowell's troops and their frontier friends on their own ground, marched to Gilbert Town in Burke County. There he penned a warning to the pioneers that, if they refused to surrender and return to their rightful allegiance, he would invade their country, destroy their homes and hang their leaders. Ferguson then paroled a prisoner, Samuel Phillips, whom he had taken in the chase, and sent him with the warning to Shelby.

While waiting a reply he pursued the duty of arresting rebels in the district. One of them was a certain Captain Thomas Lytle, whose beautiful and spirited wife, learning that Ferguson was about to appear with his men, availed herself of the occasion to put on her newest gown and beaver hat. When Ferguson arrived, Mrs. Lytle asked him to dismount and come in, but he ignored the invitation. Instead he advised her to persuade her husband to return to the allegiance of the King.

"Colonel Ferguson," she replied, firmly, "I don't know how this war may end; it is not unlikely that my husband may fall in battle; all I positively know is, that he will never prove a traitor to his country."

Ferguson fixed upon her a patronizing gaze. "I admire you as the handsomest woman I have seen in North Carolina—I even
half way admire your zeal in a bad cause; but, take my word for it, the rebellion has had its day, and is now virtually put down. Give my kind regards to Captain Lytle, and tell him to come in. He will not be asked to compromise his honor; his verbal pledge not again to take up arms against the King, is all that will be asked of him.” The British commander bowed and led away his soldiers.

Meanwhile on the Holston Shelby had received Ferguson’s warning to the frontiersmen. Leaping onto his horse, he sped to Watauga to confer with Sevier. He found the settlers enjoying a barbecue and a horse race given by Sevier on the banks of the Nolichucky. Stealing away from the crowd, the two men planned to meet Ferguson and defeat him before that officer could carry out his threat.

They sent messengers to ask Colonel William Campbell, who lived in a Virginia settlement on the Clinch, to hurry to their assistance. At first Campbell, preferring to strengthen his position at home and let Ferguson interpose himself between the mountains and Cornwallis, refused; but, on receiving a second plea, he decided to co-operate. The valley soon rang with the call to arms. Pioneers poured into Sycamore Shoals from every direction. McDowell with his troops dashed across the mountains over which they had escaped a few weeks before.

Daybreak on September 26, 1780, found over a thousand soldiers and civilians gathered on the level ground beside the river. Most of them were armed with the Deckard rifle, “a gun of remarkable precision for a long shot, spiral grooved, with a barrel some thirty inches long, and with its stock some three and a half feet, carrying bullets varying from thirty to seventy to the pound of lead.”

The Americans were little encumbered with baggage—each carried a blanket, “a cup . . . with which to quench his thirst, a wallet of provisions” which included mixed corn and meal and a skillet to cook his meat. This assemblage was vastly different from that which had gathered on the same spot six years before to buy the Dark and Bloody Ground. Now no Indians were
present. No money figured in the Americans' endeavor to secure the limitless frontier. The Indians' local chief, Dragging Canoe, new leader of the Chickamauga, in 1779 had gone on the war-path, had suffered defeat at the hands of Evan Shelby and had fled to the caves of the far Tennessee. No white woman had been present then, only the advancing white men and the retreating red men. But now mothers, sisters, wives, sweethearts and children emerged from the cabins to cheer on the men who were going to secure the liberty of their homes.

The men leaned on their rifles in an attitude of respectful attention while their beloved preacher, Samuel Doak, invoked Divine protection and guidance and closed with the Bible quotation: "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" The women took up the words, crying again and again: "The sword of the Lord and of our Gideons!" To these shouts, "as bugles on the wind of dawn, the buckskin-shirted army dashed out upon the mountain trail."

The frontiersmen took along a number of cattle which, however, soon impeded their advance. Abandoning them on the mountainside, they decided to rely for food on wild game and on the mixed corn meal and maple sugar each man carried. Passing between Roan and Yellow mountains to the summit of the range, they halted for drill and rifle practice in ankle-deep snow.

When Sevier reviewed his men he found that two of them were missing. Knowing that the Watauga settlements were infested with Tories, he suspected that the missing men had slipped away to carry warning to Ferguson. If this suspicion was justified, he faced two problems: to accelerate the march of his men to keep Ferguson from getting reinforcements from Cornwallis, and to march by another trail to prevent being captured before they themselves received reinforcements.

Descending the deep side of the mountain, the ragged army crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains at Gillespie's Gap and pushed on to Quaker Meadows where Colonel Benjamin Cleveland, whom we have already met as a hunter in Kentucky, joined them with 350 men. Along their route scores of settlers who had been eager to march at the tap of the drum swung into their column.
The American force now numbered about fifteen hundred men, but they had no commanding officer. During their advance, differences and quarreling among their men had caused them no little trouble. When on October 2 they encamped only about eighteen miles from Gilbert Town where they expected to find Ferguson, they decided that the time had come to remedy the situation. McDowell volunteered to carry a message to General Gates who, after his defeat at Camden, had retreated into North Carolina with some of his staff and was believed to be somewhere in the vicinity of Hillsboro.

While they were writing the letter Sevier and Shelby realized that Gates might, on receiving their request, wonder why the governor of North Carolina, the highest military officer of the state, had not provided them with a commander. The truth was that Sevier had done something of which he thought the governor might strongly disapprove. Unable to borrow sufficient funds on his private responsibility, he had conferred with John Adair, who was in charge of the North Carolina land office, and suggested that the public money in Adair's possession be turned over to Shelby to meet the military exigencies of the hour.

Adair had replied: "I have no authority by law to make that disposition of this money; it belongs to the impoverished treasury of North Carolina, and I dare not appropriate a cent of it to any purpose; but, if the country is over-run by the British, our liberty is gone. Let the money go, too. Take it. If the enemy, by its use, is driven from the country, I can trust that country to justify and vindicate my conduct—so take it."

Thus Sevier had obtained between twelve and thirteen thousand dollars. In these circumstances he felt that an interview with the governor had better be deferred. Hence the request to Gates was worded as follows:

As we have at this time called out our militia without any orders from the Executive of our different States and with the view of expelling the Enemy out of this part of the Country, we think such a body of men worthy of your attention and would request you to send a General Officer immediately to take
the command. . . . All our troops being Militia and little acquainted with discipline, we would wish him to be a Gentleman of address and able to keep up a proper discipline without disgusting the soldiery.

Gates, perhaps annoyed by the wording of this letter, failed to reply. Shelby then suggested that they appoint Colonel William Campbell, who, being the only Virginian among the officers, would arouse no jealousy by his position. The officers all agreed to this choice. The new commander, a settler of the Holston region, had fought in Lord Dunmore's War and had been one of the officers who at Fort Gower pledged themselves to fight in defense of American liberty.

At the beginning of the American Revolution Campbell had been commissioned captain and had assisted General Andrew Lewis in dislodging Dunmore from Virginia. Repairing to the Holston region, he studied military tactics which were to prove of great value in his subsequent campaign at King's Mountain. In April 1780 he was promoted to the rank of colonel. He served briefly as a member in the house of delegates, and led an expedition against the Chickamauga towns which had declared for the British. He was fighting Tories in the back country of North Carolina when he was called to join the pioneers in the campaign against Ferguson.

Campbell was a ruddy-complexioned man with reddish hair and bright blue eyes. Slightly over six feet tall, raw-boned and muscular, he stood as straight as an Indian. His irascible temper concealed a heart of gold. In church after the sermon ended he would look around to assist all the women of the neighborhood, especially the aged, in mounting their horses. Of Scotch-Irish descent he had acquired the principles and predilections of his persecuted ancestors. His devotion to liberty was deep and fervent.

The two Tories who had deserted Sevier's troops soon reached Ferguson who thereupon left Gilbert Town and marched southward to make contact with Cornwallis. Ferguson's force was much reduced. Some of his men were pursuing Elijah Clarke
toward Augusta and a number of others were on furlough. On reaching Denard's Ford, about eight miles from Gilbert Town, Ferguson posted a notice calling on Tories to join him:

Gentlemen:—Unless you wish to be eat up by an inundation of barbarians, who have begun by murdering an unarmed son before the aged father, and afterwards lopped off his arms, and who by their shocking cruelties and irregularities, give the best proof of their cowardice and want of discipline; I say, if you wish to be pinioned, robbed, and murdered, and see your wives and daughters, in four days, abused by the dregs of mankind—in short, if you wish or deserve to live, and bear the name of men, grasp your arms in a moment and run to camp.

The Back Water men have crossed the mountains; McDowell, Hampton, Shelby, and Cleveland are at their head, so that you know what you have to depend upon. If you choose to be degraded forever and ever by a set of mongrels, say so at once, and let your women turn their backs upon you, and look out for real men to protect them.

With this piece of propaganda Ferguson attracted several hundred more men.

On the evening of October 6, 1780, Ferguson and his men—about eight hundred strong—arrived at King's Mountain—a mile or so south of the North Carolina line in present York County, South Carolina. The summit of the mountain, known as the Pinnacle, jutted its isolated rocky spur sixty feet above the surrounding countryside. Saplings and big timber of oak and pine palisaded its steep sides. Its bald top, resembling an Indian paddle varying in width from 120 yards at the blade to 60 yards at the handle, was cropped with rocks and boulders and was so narrow that a man standing on it could be shot from either side. Falsely confident of the strength of the mountain and determined to "distinguish himself on the glorious field of Mars" and win "undying honors and fame from his King and country," Ferguson led his troops resolutely up the rocky eminence. As the sun sank and the tents sprang up he boasted to his officers that he was on
King’s Mountain, that he was king of that mountain, and that God Almighty could not drive him from it.

Meanwhile, on the same evening the pioneers arrived at Cowpens, a large estate which they seized from its wealthy Tory master. After supping on his roasted cattle and his corn—they themselves had speedily mowed the corn—they sent out a man named Gilmer, a skillful actor who could cry, laugh or pretend lunacy with conviction, to obtain information of Ferguson’s whereabouts. From a Tory to whom he pretended that he wished to join Ferguson, Gilmer learned of the British commander’s approximate strength, his route and the manner in which he communicated with Cornwallis.

On receiving Gilmer’s information, Campbell held a council of his officers and agreed to attack Ferguson with a detachment of their best men before aid could reach him. The flickering firelight in Cowpens retreated and faded away as the picked men, numbering over nine hundred, thundered toward their destination. The rest, following at their best pace, joined their comrades in time to share the glory of victory.

Rain overtook Campbell’s forces as they rode. Though soon drenched to the skin, they managed to keep their weapons and powder dry by wrapping them in knapsacks, blankets and hunting shirts. Some of the horses bogged down in the soggy earth. Their owners pulled them out and whipped them forward. The men halted neither for food nor for rest. Two or three miles from King’s Mountain they captured a messenger whom Ferguson had sent to Cornwallis with another appeal for help. They asked him how they would recognize Ferguson. He replied that the British commander had the habit of wearing a checkered shirt or duster over his uniform. Colonel Hambright, native of Germany, told his men to bear this in mind. “Well, poys,” he said, “when you see dot man mit a pig shirt on over his clothes, you may know who him is, and mark him mit your rifles.”

In the afternoon of October 7 the Americans reached their destination. The rain had ceased; the sun shone brilliantly. The men dismounted and tethered their streaming horses. Then they received the final order: “Fresh prime your guns, and every man
go into battle firmly resolving to fight till he dies!" The plan of battle was simple enough: they were to surround the mountain, to hold the enemy on the summit and to keep firing from behind trees and rocks.

Campbell, leading the attack, exclaimed in a stentorian voice: "Here they are, my brave boys; shout like hell and fight the devils!"

Instantly a swelling cacophony of savage yells shook the forest, momentarily filling Ferguson and his men with dread. Captain Abraham De Peyster, remembering that Shelby's men had yelled at Musgrove's Mill, said to Ferguson: "These are the damned yelling boys!"

Cleveland and his men, passing around the left side of the mountain, halted before a swampy piece of ground. Availing himself of the temporary delay, Cleveland went among his men making the following speech by piecemeal:

My brave fellows, we have beaten the Tories, and we can beat them again. They are all cowards: if they had the spirit of men, they would join with their fellow-citizens in supporting the independence of their country. When you are engaged, you are not to wait for the word of command from me. I will show you, by my example, how to fight; I can undertake no more. Every man must consider himself an officer, and act from his own judgment. Fire as quick as you can, and stand your ground as long as you can. When you can do no better, get behind trees, or retreat; but I beg you not to run quite off. If we are repulsed, let us make a point of returning, and renewing the fight; perhaps we may have better luck in the second attempt than the first.

The British outposts, seeing Shelby leading his men across a gap in the forest, sounded the alarm. Instantly Ferguson jumped into the saddle and blew his silver whistle as a command for his men to charge. Some of them, fixing their bayonets, charged down the slope only to be shot by groups of Americans behind them. Most of them fell on Shelby's men who, having no bayonets, recoiled before the onslaught. As the pioneers backed down the slope they heard Campbell's stentorian voice commanding them to return to the fight. They stiffened and aimed at the.
soldiers on the summit. They began to climb the hill again, darting from tree to tree. With a large sword—the claymore of Argyle—gleaming in his hand and his blue eyes glittering with determination, Campbell galloped hither and thither until his horse gave out. Then he led his men on foot, his voice growing hoarse, his face blackening with powder smoke.

A Tory thrust his bayonet through a hand and into a thigh of Robert Henry, a boy of sixteen who was aiming at him from behind a log lying across a hollow. Completely transfixed, Henry fell on his antagonist. Just then one of his companions, William Caldwell, pulled the bayonet out of Henry’s thigh, and, finding it still sticking in the boy’s hand, Caldwell loosed it from its hold with a kick. Jumping to his feet, Henry picked up his gun with his uninjured hand, only to find it empty. When he fell on the Tory he had discharged his rifle. The Tory’s profuse bleeding indicated that the bullet had severed a main artery.

Meanwhile Shelby and his men still advanced up the slope on the other side. Some of Ferguson’s men drove them down the hill again; but only for a moment, for they returned with a deadlier fire. The battle raged on every part of the mountain. Now it flashed along the summit; now, around the base; and now, up the sides, like the sulphurous blaze of a volcano. The shouts of the Americans, the reports of hundreds of rifles and muskets, the loud commands and encouraging words of the officers mingled with the groans of the wounded all along the line, and every now and then with the shrill screech of Ferguson’s silver whistle high above the din and confusion of battle.

At this juncture Shelby and Sevier, leading their Wataugans, reached the summit. The firing circle pressed in. The pioneers, leaping over the boulders, swung their tomahawks and long knives. White handkerchiefs fluttered. Captain De Peyster, realizing that the morale of the troops was gone, begged Ferguson to surrender. “Surrender to those damned banditti?” the Scotsman growled. “Never!” And turning his horse downhill he charged into the Wataugans, hacking right and left until his sword was broken at the hilt.

One of Sevier’s men, Gilleland, seeing Ferguson approach, leveled at him, but his gun snapped. Turning to a companion,
Robert Young, he shouted: "There's Ferguson—shoot him!"

"I'll try and see what Sweet-Lips can do," muttered Young, drawing a sharp sight and discharging his rifle.

Others also fired on the commander. Ferguson slumped on his horse with six or eight wounds, one of which had penetrated his head. Two of the Wataugans seized the bridle of his frenzied horse which had plunged on with its dead master hanging from a stirrup.

The battle had lasted less than an hour. When Ferguson fell De Peyster assumed command and, advancing with a white flag, surrendered his sword to Campbell. Other white flags waved along the hilltop, yet the firing continued because many of the pioneers were ignorant of the meaning of the flags. Sevier's sixteen-year-old son, having heard that his father had fallen, kept on furiously loading and firing, until presently he saw his father ride among his troops, commanding them to cease.

Of the Americans, 28 were killed and 62 were wounded. The British losses were much greater: 225 killed, 163 wounded, and 715 taken prisoner. The Americans captured 17 wagons full of supplies.

Some of the leading officers divided Ferguson's belongings among themselves. Captain Joseph McDowell helped himself to six of the commander's china dinner plates and a small coffee cup and saucer. Shelby took Ferguson's silver whistle. Sevier took his silken sash—his commission of lieutenant colonel—and De Peyster's sword. Campbell took Ferguson's beautiful white horse because his own had been killed and he was too heavy to travel on foot. Another officer took Ferguson's pistol and still another, his large silver watch.

Surrounded by the stench of the dead, the groans of the dying, and the pitiful begging of the wounded for a little water, the victors rested that night on the battlefield.

Two pressing motives impelled them to rise with the sun. They had to hasten homeward for badly needed supplies. And, encumbered as they were with so many prisoners and wounded and wagons, they feared the arrival of Tarleton and a formidable force might catch them unaware and completely undo the recent
victory. They hurriedly buried their dead. Feeling that the wagons would retard their march over the rough country, they drew them over their campfires and let them burn. Then toward noon all of them began to leave the field save Campbell who remained with a few of his men and a handful of prisoners chosen to bury their fallen comrades. The rest of the prisoners were permitted to carry their own rifles—with the flints removed from the locks. The wounded were borne away on horse-drawn litters made of tent cloth or blankets.

Ferguson’s body was stripped of uniform and boots, wrapped in a cowhide and thrown into one of the ditches. After they had buried as many of the dead Tories as they could find, Campbell and his charges rejoined the marching column. The smell of flesh and blood persisted on King’s Mountain for several weeks, attracting wolves from the surrounding hills. The gaunt gray beasts feasted on the corpses that had been overlooked and left unburied, and even scratched out several bodies from the shallow graves. In time they became so bold that they attacked several persons that visited the field. For a long time after the battle King’s Mountain was the favorite resort of wolf hunters from both the Carolinas.

Burdened with the wounded, the Americans made slow progress on their march homeward. By the end of a week they got as far as Bickerstaff’s, only forty miles from King’s Mountain. All along the way settlers complained to the officers of the outrages they and their families had endured at the hands of some of Ferguson’s men. Tories had robbed and burned homes, raped wives and daughters, whipped children and even killed some of the settlers.

Swayed by repeated recitations of these enormities, Campbell and his fellow officers halted at Bickerstaff’s to investigate the tales. The suspected prisoners were tried and thirty-nine of them—found guilty of theft, arson, rape and murder—were condemned to be hanged. The officers found ample justification for passing these severe sentences. No court of justice, they reasoned, could punish the offenders, and to detain them as prisoners of war was to make them objects of exchange. Should such pests
of society be turned loose, probably to renew their crimes? If a captured deserter is not exempt from the gallows, why should a murderer be?

That night, by the light of pine knot torches, the first group were swung up on a huge oak, three at a time, until nine had “gone to their final account.” Three others were about to follow suit when suddenly an amazing spectacle unfolded before them all. One of the condemned men was Isaac Baldwin. As leader of a gang in Burke County he had often sacked homes, stripped occupants of food and all their clothing save what they were wearing, and tied them to trees and whipped them severely, leaving them helpless and bloody.

All eyes were turned on Baldwin and the two men who were to die with him. Baldwin’s brother, a mere lad, approached to bid him farewell. The boy managed to cut the rope that bound his brother while he threw his arms around him and screamed and lamented. In a flash Baldwin broke through the line of soldiers that surrounded him and under cover of darkness darted away toward the forest. Dumbfounded, the soldiers let him get away; and when they realized that he had eluded more than a thousand marksmen—the best of the frontier—they admired his daring feat so much that not one of them would agree to go after him. And furthermore, the diversion created by Baldwin’s daring softened their hearts. They had had enough of the executions. Sevier and Shelby, who were in charge, stopped the hangings then and there. The twenty-nine remaining condemned men were untied and pardoned.

The journey was resumed. Still fearing the arrival of Tarleton, the Americans hastened their march, crossed the Catawba River and sojourned for a few days at McDowell’s estate at Quaker Meadows. All along the road small groups of the prisoners managed to escape. When the Americans arrived at the Moravian villages of Salem and Bethabara late in October they had only about two hundred prisoners left in their custody. These eventually were taken to Hillsboro and placed in prison. At the end of the Revolution they were released. Soon after they arrived in Hillsboro the Americans scattered and quietly returned to their homes.
News of the victory of King's Mountain soon spread throughout the embattled colonies. George Washington called the battle "an important object gained" and "a proof of the spirit and resources of the country." Congress praised "the spirited and military conduct" displayed by Colonel Campbell and his officers and men. General Nathanael Greene was convinced that the "militia of the back country are formidable." To General Horatio Gates the victory was "great and glorious." Thomas Jefferson wrote later that King's Mountain "was the joyful annunciation of that turn of the tide of success, which terminated the Revolutionary War with the seal of independence."

Time, however, has sobered these encomiums somewhat. Most historians no longer regard King's Mountain as a major victory. Nevertheless, it certainly had important results. It forced the British forces to withdraw from North Carolina. Cornwallis retreated ninety miles, from Charlotte to Winnesboro, South Carolina. The British commander's withdrawal broke the Tory spirit in the whole back country while it heartened the rebels who, since Gates's defeat at Camden, had been greatly depressed. A few days after King's Mountain Nathanael Greene succeeded Gates and strengthened the American cause by his bold strategy.

By dividing his army, for example, Greene compelled Cornwallis to do likewise, enabling Daniel Morgan to strike at the British under Tarleton at Cowpens and to win a brilliant victory on January 17, 1781.

About two months later Cornwallis defeated Greene at Guilford Court House in the back country of North Carolina, but it was such a costly victory that Tarleton called it "the pledge of ultimate defeat." Three days later Cornwallis retreated toward Wilmington. Since all these movements emanated from King's Mountain, that battle may be considered "the pivot of the war's revolving stage, which swung the British from their succession of victories toward the surrender of Yorktown."