

REVOLUTIONARY WAR SOLDIER

JAMES EMERSON

By John Hudson Emerson

*Remarks delivered at the 1 May 2011 marking of the grave of
Regulator and Revolutionary War Patriot James Emerson.*

On the morning of June 19, 1771, the cell door in the Hillsborough jail was opened and twelve men convicted of high treason and sentenced to death were led to the execution site on a small hill just east of town overlooking the Eno River. The scene was described by Rev. David Caldwell, Presbyterian minister:

Tryon had the whole army drawn out under arms, except the quarter-guard and sentinels. They formed and marched in a hollow, oblong square – the first line the right, and the second line the left face; the main guard marching in the center, with the sheriff and prisoners, and the light-horse covering the outside to keep off the crowd. This order of march had been sketched and given in general orders by the Governor himself, who stopped in the manner to point out the spot for the gallows, and gave orders for the clearing of the field around to make room for the army.

James Emerson was one of those twelve. He had been captured at the battle of Alamance on the 16th of May--a battle in which the settlers in the backcountry of the North Carolina piedmont were considered in governor Tryon's own words to be in "a state of war and rebellion." The response shouted back when Tryon gave the order to fire on those who had chosen to take up arms against the oppressive British authorities was: "fire and be damned."

The first blood of a Revolution had been shed with that order given by Col. William Tryon, the Colonial Governor of the Colony of North Carolina.

At the gallows, Governor Tryon announced that the execution of six of the condemned would be respited to await the pleasure of the King, and six would be executed. The words of James Pugh as he stood on the barrel that would be kicked from beneath him have come down to us: His blood, he said, would be "good seed sown on good ground, which would produce a hundredfold."

James Emerson was one of the six men whose sentence was suspended by Governor Tryon. He would live to again take up arms against troops marching under the Union Jack and against the abusive system of government imposed on the American colonies.

There was great sympathy shown for the Regulators outside of North Carolina as the news of the battle spread. Parallels were drawn with the Sons of Liberty movement and the Regulators were viewed as the model of the entire American resistance movement.

The act of open armed rebellion by hundreds of backcountry farmers epitomized the spirit that almost four years from the day of the executions at Hillsborough would mark the beginning of the American Revolution with the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Thomas Jefferson said: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

We know little about the person we honor here today. We do not know from whence he came, the name of his parents, or the maiden name of his wife and the mother of his nine children.

James Emerson lived very close to where we are gathered today and died at a relatively young age with his last child born a few weeks after his death in 1786. Two of his sons were known to have served in the war. We do know that he was a patriot whose service for a just cause in turbulent and trying times aided the cause of freedom that we as Americans enjoy today.

Our record of his service in the Revolutionary war is marked by two official entries. He is listed as a member of Captain Joab Brooks' company in the 1772 Chatham County militia and at the end of the war he was paid 25 pounds 5 shillings for a gun furnished to the militia – an unusually high price for a gun. Without doubt he came with that rifle.

Chatham County was in the midst of a vicious and brutal civil war during the American Revolution. Murders, hangings, burnings, and other outrages were commonplace, with guerilla activity being the norm. Few records survive detailing actions of engagement of Chatham County militia or rosters of members.

At the largest battle fought in Chatham County--at Lindley's Mill on Cane Creek--300 members of the Chatham and Orange County militias fought Col. David Fanning's Tory forces in an effort to free the 200 prisoners, including the governor of North Carolina, taken at Hillsborough. Major Robert Mebane, the hero of the battle of Lindley's Mill was later murdered in Chatham County by Tory Henry Hightower, and Major John Nall, who lived a short distance from here at Bear Creek, was killed in the battle .

The army of General Cornwallis passed very close to where we stand today as he made his way toward Wilmington following the Battle of Guilford Courthouse. General Greene was following closely and we can only surmise the circumstances as these two armies passed so close to the home of James Emerson. Certainly food, shelter, and supplies were provided by the farmers in the Rives Chapel and Tick Creek area.

It is known that Col. William Washington, an officer in the army of General Greene, spent the night at the home of Isaac Brooks--just a short distance from here.

The site of this centuries-old and quiet cemetery in the heart of Chatham County is on the very land granted to James Emerson in the fourth year of our Independence. He rests here among family members, neighbors, and fellow patriots. Good seed *was* sown on good ground.

On 11 March 2011, a service of the marking of the grave of Revolutionary War soldier Henry Emerson, son of James Emerson and a member of the North Carolina Continental Line, was held in Ringgold, Georgia. Good seed was sown on good ground and produced generations of men and women whose sacrifices have aided the cause of freedom and independence and guarded the heritage left to us by our forefathers.

In closing I would like to quote the epitaph written by John Adams on the stone of Henry Adams that so impressed David McCullough that he included it in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *John Adams*: "This

stone and several others have been placed in this yard by a great, great, grandson from a veneration of the piety, humility, simplicity, prudence, frugality, industry, and perseverance of his ancestors in hopes of recommending an affirmation of their virtues to their posterity.”

By the placing of this marker today, an affirmation of the patriotism of James Emerson has been made and symbolizes the veneration that we hold for all patriots who had everything to lose and whose sacrifices gave us this great country.

Thank you

John Hudson Emerson

May 1, 2011