

Program on Regulator Movement in NC Piedmont

Historian Carole Watterson Troxler gave what she called an “off the cuff” talk on the Regulator Movement in the North Carolina Piedmont on Sunday, February 25, 2018. Her presentation, the third of three educational programs on the Revolutionary War period in North Carolina sponsored by the Chatham County Historical Association, kept the large audience in the historic Chatham Courthouse engaged.

Troxler told the story of growing unrest among backcountry counties in the 1760s—the frontier of the time. These were interior counties like Chatham’s parent county, Orange, which were distant from the colony’s coast-oriented locations of political power and commerce which were dominated by the planter and large merchant classes. The backcountry counties had little representation in the elected assembly.

Troxler’s focus was the issues and cultural context that fostered the Regulator Movement and determined its progress.

The backcountry farmers that settled our area were faced with corrupt local government officials who abused the fee system that regulated their interaction with local citizens and imposed excessive taxes. With money in short supply, fees and fines often resulted in the removal of property from settlers, who had no recourse to higher authority. Settlers often found even their claims to land that they had worked and improved for years in question.

At the same time, many of the settlers were members of “dissenter” religious cultures—those opposing the established Anglican religion of England. These groups often had relied on political activism to defend their beliefs, and drew on that background in expressing their political grievances in the colonies.

At first the settlers used peaceful and legal means—petitions and complaints—to express their dissatisfaction, but as their grievances were largely ignored, the voices of those who called for more active and sometimes violent expression of grievances gained traction.

The formation of smaller backcountry counties from larger ones—such as the creation of Chatham from part of Orange, was in part a response to the political unrest. Smaller counties resulted in easier access by backcountry settlers to court and recording documents. From the colonial government’s point of view, they also facilitated the governing of the backcountry and were a deterrent to the assembly of dissidents.

The Regulator Movement culminated, in 1771, in the Battle of Alamance. Royal Governor Tryon called for a militia to bring the revolt to a speedy end. In May 1771, a group of about 2,000 Regulators met Tryon’s militia of about 1,000. The Regulators rejected Tryon’s suggestion that they disperse peacefully, and that battle began.

Despite their greater numbers, the Regulators were no match for the militia. They lacked leadership, organization, and adequate arms and ammunition and the rebellion of the Regulators was quickly crushed.

Carole Watterson Troxler retired from Elon University in 2003 after 33 years of teaching. She has written many award-winning books and articles exploring the impact of the Regulator movement and the American Revolution on the southern backcountry.



Dr. Troxler is the author of five non-fiction books, including *The Loyalist Experience in North Carolina* (1976); *Shuttle and Plow: A History of Alamance County, North Carolina* (1999); *Pyle's Defeat: Deception at the Race Path* (2003); and *Farming Dissenters: The Regulator Movement in Piedmont North Carolina* (2011). More recently, The North Carolina Society of Historians has honored Professor Troxler with a 2017 Historical Book Award for her newest book and first work of fiction, *The Red Dog: A Tale of the Carolina Frontier (Lizzy's Yarn)*, a work also set in the 1760s in the Piedmont region of central North Carolina.

A native of LaGrange, Georgia, Troxler holds a doctorate in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a former Woodrow Wilson Scholar and a member of Phi Beta Kappa. She serves on the board of the Alamance Battleground Foundation and loves living in the woods in Alamance County, North Carolina, where she encourages native plants and plays Old-Time Music.