Did Polly Slocumb Ride To The Battle Of Moore’s Creek Bridge?

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Many myths have arisen in American history—not a few of them about the American Revolutionary War. Such myths tell us much about the people who originate them as well as about those who perpetuate them. Myths frequently detract from a subject’s stature, and if disseminated as fact, they dismay those who have a deep and abiding sense of truth.

The Lower Cape Fear region has inadvertently become involved in such a Revolutionary War myth. On the two-hundredth birthday of the republic, founded on truth and freedom of thought, let us show our intellectual maturity by examining some of our historical “facts” more objectively.

Many people consider the reputed ride of Polly Slocumb to the Battle of Moore’s Creek Bridge, on February 27, 1776, one of the unsung sagas of American history. Why then do modern historians never mention it? There does not appear to be a serious historian in North Carolina who gives any credence to the story, yet few bother to ask why.

According to computations from the tombstone of Mary Hooks Slocumb (called Polly), she was born on February 10, 1760 in Bertie County, North Carolina, and when she was ten years old, moved, with her parents, to a plantation in central Duplin County. She married Ezekiel Slocumb, son of Joseph and Mary Slocumb of Dobbs County. The bridegroom, born on June 18, 1760, was slightly younger than his bride. Where the young Slocumbs lived until they purchased land near present Mount Olive in lower Wayne County in 1787 is not definitely known. Records left by their only son Jesse indicate that in 1780 they were residing at Spring Bank in Dobbs County. However, Spring Bank was a plantation and ferry on the Neuse River in Wayne County located between Stoney and Sleepy creeks, and belonging to Joseph Green, Sr. Green was the largest slaveholder in Wayne County in 1790, and had served in the North Carolina Continental Line as commissary officer of the 10th Regiment during the Revolution. He was also a member of the Assembly. Spring Bank was willed to Green’s son. Joseph Slocumb did own land in Wayne County before 1787, and Ezekiel and Polly may have lived with him. Ezekiel is not recorded as having received any grants from the state before 1787, nor does the deed index of Wayne County show that he received land before that date.

Legend relates that on the night of February 26, 1776, Polly awoke after having a vision in which she saw “a body wrapped in my husband’s [reputedly a lieutenant] guardcloak, bloody, dead, and other dead and wounded on the ground about him. I saw them plainly and distinctly.” This statement is from Elizabeth Ellet’s Women in the American Revolution, published in 1848, seventy-two years after the event. This book gives no footnotes, sources, or data to support the narrative. Ellet published the story as fact, and relates that Polly, frightened and fearful, placed her child in the care of a servant and “went to the stable, saddled my mare, as fleet and easy a nag as ever traveled, and in one moment I was tearing down the road at full speed.” By daylight Polly reportedly was thirty miles from home, and during the morning she rode on “through a country thinly settled and poor and swampy; but neither my own spirits nor my beautiful nag’s failed in the least. We followed the well-marked trail of the troops.” Ellet reported that about eight or nine o’clock that morning the young wife heard the boom of distant cannons. “Before long Polly arrived at the battlefield and found herself administering to perhaps twenty men. They were the wounded.” During the morning she “dressed the wounds of many a brave fellow who did good fighting long after that day.” She spoke to Colonel Richard Caswell, who, according to the story, seemed to be acquainted with Polly and her husband. Working through the day, apparently without rest, she rode home that night and “with joy” embraced her child as he ran out to meet her.

For years serious historians have doubted the validity of this story but it did not seem important enough to most of them to attempt to disprove it. In recent years there have been those who have investigated the matter, and their findings are most interesting. The Ellet story is not reliable history. No sources are given or data provided to substantiate the “facts.” John Hill Wheeler, a North Carolina historian writing in 1851, copied the story verbatim from Ellet, changing only the punctuation and spelling. The Wheeler account is the most popular, and gave the legend more standing in the lore of the state. When Wheeler’s story appeared in 1851, the Slocumbs had been dead more than ten years, and Wheeler is not known to have been acquainted with either of them. Wheeler’s story offers no proof, and his
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The account does not agree with the established facts about the battle. Thus it proves vulnerable to attack by historians.

The following exemplify the many discrepancies in the Polly Slocumb story. "The well marked trail of the troops" that Polly followed would hardly have led her to the battle, since the troops from near Wayne County converged at Moore’s Creek Bridge from three different directions. And in spite of the claim that Polly spoke to Caswell at some length, and provided invaluable service to the wounded troops, she rates no mention in the reports of Caswell, Colonel Alexander Lillington, and Colonel James Moore, who commanded the battle. A lonely ride of sixty miles through the night by a young wife and mother, a full day ministering to the troops, and a sixty-mile ride back home, without rest, would surely have impressed someone! However, extant contemporary accounts of the battle do not mention Polly—an indication that she was not present.

Polly’s figures on the number of wounded differ from the various official reports by a total of eighteen men. Colonel James Moore, a person of unquestioned honesty and integrity, who was respected even by his worst enemies, reported two casualties, one dead (John Grady) and one wounded. Finally, Ellet and Wheeler say that Polly was about thirty miles from the battle at daybreak, and arrived at the scene after eight or nine o’clock. In fact, the short but important battle began at daybreak and ended within five minutes. It would seem that Polly heard the cannon two to three hours after the battle had ended.

Some years ago a national park historian, S. Michael Hubbell, wrote a detailed account of the Polly Slocumb story. His final conclusion, made on the basis of common sense and old-fashioned arithmetic, supports doubt about Polly Slocumb’s ride to the battle. Using the tombstone dates, Hubbell established Polly’s birthdate as February 10, 1760 and Ezekiel’s as June 18, 1760. Given these dates, he determined that Ezekiel was only fifteen years old at the time of the battle, a bit young even for those days. Generally soldiers in the Revolution were at least sixteen years of age. Polly’s age at the day of the battle would have been sixteen years, seventeen days. The traditional story ends with her son running to Polly as she rode up to her home; yet the records of the American Congress show that her son, Jesse Slocumb, who was a member of Congress at the time of his death in 1820, was born in 1780, four years after the battle. The Slocumb family record shows no children older than Jesse.

The most telling evidence was found in recent years in the National Archives. The pension request of Ezekiel Slocumb was discovered, and it revealed that he was born on June 18, 1760, just as the tombstone date indicates. Ezekiel stated to the federal authorities that he did not enlist in any armed force until April 1780. Slocumb did serve in 1781 in the vicinity of his home, perhaps with forces engaging Cornwallis’s army as the British passed through the area in 1781. Maybe Polly tended wounded at that time?

Nonetheless, the legend of Polly Slocumb fell on fertile ground from 1848 to 1851. Americans were seeking heroes, and most of those in the printed histories were of northern origin. As sectional pride increased, and the South edged toward the Civil War, heroes in the South were more greatly appreciated. The South did play a major role in the winning of independence for the American colonies, and this section of America has much to cherish and be proud of without accepting pseudo heroes. And by the time that the story first appeared in print there was no one to dispute it. Polly died on March 6, 1836, and Ezekiel on July 4, 1840. Their only son, Jesse, died on December 20, 1820 and was buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Their daughters were Sarah, who married Jesse Gulley and eventually moved to Alabama, and Susannah, who married Durham Grady and lived in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

If a story appears in print, there are always those who will believe it, especially when the facts are not apparent and the time is distant.

In the 1930’s there was a great revival of interest in the Slocumbs, and the Carolina Patriots Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution of Mount Olive
erected a granite marker to Polly’s "heroic" ride. This marker has been moved a number of times but now rests on the grounds of Southern Wayne High School, which were part of the Slocumb plantation. The graves of the pair were removed to the battleground by federal authorities with much pomp and impressive burial services were held there. No one bothered to check the facts. All was obviously done through sentimental motives and with patriotic zeal. The handsome statue which was erected on the highest hill of the battleground, showing a young woman with a laurel wreath on her head and dressed in a Roman Toga, was inscribed and dedicated to "The Heroic Women of the Lower Cape Fear." Below the statue lie Polly and Ezekiel Slocumb. When they were reinterred there, it was doubtless their first trip to the battlefield, and surely Polly would like to protest that she was not a woman of the Lower Cape Fear, as she lived near the very heartwaters of the Northeast Cape Fear River that begin near Mount Olive, over seventy-four miles inland. Our desire to write history as we wish it is strong indeed.

Ezekiel Slocumb did serve in the Revolution. He enlisted first in April 1790 in Captain Lazarus Crawford’s company, Colonel Benjamin Exum’s regiment of militia, and was at the Battle of Camden, South Carolina when General Horatio Gates was defeated. Afterward he joined Captain Jonathan Smith’s company, under Colonel Benjamin Sewell, and was discharged after serving six months. He reenlisted later in 1781 and served ten months as a sergeant in Captain Jernigan’s militia troops of North Carolina horsemen. During this time he was engaged principally in Wayne, Johnston, Duplin, and Lenoir counties.20 Slocumb was entitled to a pension because of his services, and his application was executed on August 21, 1832, at which time he was living in Wayne County.21 Slocumb was never, as tradition has it, a lieutenant in the army; the highest rank he achieved was sergeant in the militia. After the war he became a man of affairs in Wayne County, eventually attained the rank of colonel in the state militia, and served for a time in the General Assembly.22 Ezekiel and Polly Slocumb were people of integrity. It is inconceivable that during their lifetime they would have divulged the story of Polly’s ride to Ellet or Wheeler. During this bicentennial, let us follow in the best tradition of history, and examine our “facts” more closely. The roles played by Wayne County and the Cape Fear region in the American Revolution are well known, and the records of the state prove it. Surely the legendary ride of a young girl is not needed to corroborate it. We do not need to rely on unsubstantiated legends, romantic and appealing though they may be.

FOOTNOTES

2. Slocumb Genealogical Manuscript [hereafter cited as Slocumb MS] supplied by Miss Sara Elizabeth Mason of Birmingham, Alabama, a direct descendant of Mary and Ezekiel Slocumb, and now on file in the Genealogical Section of the North Carolina State Library, Raleigh.
3. Tombstone record at the Moore’s Creek Battlefield Park, Currie, North Carolina.
7. Wayne County Estate Papers of Joseph Green, Sr. on file in the North Carolina Archives, Raleigh.
8. Wayne County Deed Index, North Carolina Archives, Raleigh.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
16. Slocumb MS.
17. Tombstone record at the Moore’s Creek Battlefield Park.
19. Slocumb MS.
21. Ibid.

GOVERNOR JOSIAH MARTIN: THE ROAD TO THE CAPE FEAR

(continuation of article from last bulletin)

Governor Martin hastily wrote a message to General Gage about the needed arms and ammunition. Presumably this and other letters were carried on the person of Mrs. Martin to escape the vigilant committee’s detection. The committee members did stop Mrs. Martin and her party. One of her servants persuaded the committee members not to search their baggage. Mrs. Martin had time only to pack the personal clothing of her family and the family silver. She left behind all of their furniture and furnishings. These were later sold by the patriots at auction. Mrs. Martin and her family were allowed to board the ship.

Martin sent his secretary, James Higgleston, to Ocracoke Inlet, the first entrance to the port of New Bern, to direct any vessel that should arrive there with the military stores to go to the sloop of war, Cruiser, in the mouth of the Cape Fear River, near Ft. Johnston.60

Martin had invited several of the friends of government to help him celebrate the birthday of the King on June 6. Some of the guests were to be the families of John Rutherford and Robert Schaw, merchants and planters of the lower Cape Fear River. Archibald Neilson sent an express to Wilmington to his friends, the Rutherfords and the Schaws, warning them not to come to New Bern. Near Wilmington, Janet Schaw wrote in her journal that they had received the message from Neilson and that the governor’s house had been attacked. She noted that the governor’s family had escaped in a small vessel, and that the governor had fled to a man-of-war in the Cape Fear River. As it sometimes happens messages do get garbled, Mrs. Martin and the children did escape by boat, but Abner Nash and the mob did not attack the palace until much later.
Under cover of darkness, Governor Martin and Archibald Neilson easily escaped the vigilance of the committee's watchful eyes by crossing the lawn behind the palace and down to the river and the safety of a sloop. Both the governor and Neilson found refuge at Ft. Johnston, near Wilmington, on June 2. 41
Within hours, the patriot's communication network began to spread the news that Governor Martin had fled to Ft. Johnston. Robert Salter advised Colonel Richard Caswell on June 3; Richard Cogdell, chairman of the Safety Committee in New Bern, had written Samuel Johnston on June 8; and a Letter to a Gentleman in New York, dated North Carolina, June 7, 1775, was printed as an extract in a New York newspaper. This letter described how Governor Martin "has sent his family to New York, and being greatly disgusted with the people of New Bern, has taken up his residence in Fort Johnston, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River, which he has chosen as a place of retreat from popular complaints." 52
Josiah Martin was one of the few royal governors to outwit and escape the physical wrath of the patriots. While he had temporarily retreated as any intelligent officer might do, Martin had just begun to fight for what he sincerely believed in: the empire, the King, and himself. The people of North Carolina were not rid of him yet, but this is another story.

FOOTNOTES
49. Ibid.
50. [LQ, 187.