Herrall Blackmore: An Unknown Hero of American Independence

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As we approach the 200th birthday of American independence, it is fitting that we should honor those who contributed to the winning of our freedom. But we know the names and deeds of only a few of that company of courageous men and women, many of whom fell to unmarked graves or passed without any praise or even remembrance. However, a chance reference sometimes leads to facts and details which, when assembled, reveal the portrait of a real hero. Such was the case of Herrall Blackmore of Wilmington. (That he was an ancestor of mine is only incidental and should neither be held against him nor accounted creditable to me.)

We knew of him. Family stories told that he had been born in Berkshire, England, and had come from Manchester by the port of Liverpool when he was about twenty-seven years of age. An elderly cousin said he had heard that there was a grant from the Lord Proprietors for the land from the Neuse River to the Cape Fear River to him and that the deed was recorded in the New Hanover County Courthouse. It was this rumor that sent me to Wilmington; and although I found nothing as grand as my cousin told, I did find a deed concerning Herrall Blackmore which was the first of many details which now fill out his portrait.

The Register of Deeds (Book K, p. 19) of New Hanover County, Wilmington, North Carolina, reports that on September 20, 1768, Herrall Blackmore, "a Mariner," paid one hundred eleven pounds and ten shillings for "a certain piece or lott of land settuate lying and being in Wilmington in ye Province of North Carolina." This property had been sold for unpaid debts at public auction at the courthouse in Wilmington on July 7, 1768, to John Quince who testified that he had taken it on behalf of the said Herrall Blackmore and therefore was desirous that the title be made accordingly.

A man who could make such a purchase was no ordinary sailor. Family tradition says he had considerable wealth and that he had made several crossings of the Atlantic until the opportunities in the new world attracted more than monetary investments and an American woman captured his heart.

But first there were such mundane matters as keeping fire buckets and working the street. In the newly found "Wilmington Town Book 1743-1779, there is an entry of the town commissioners meeting on September 19, 1768, which threatened to issue warrants to several citizens for their "deficiencies at the working on the streets." "Harrol" (sic) Blackmore was listed as being deficient for one day. Also at the same meeting, "Capt. Blackmore" was named among several other householders for not complying with the order for providing buckets and set a penalty of forty shillings if not complied with by the 20th of December. On January 22, 1772, Herrall Blackmore was assessed one pound as "Ground rent" for "Platform, Steps and Cellar 11 feet," and on January 4, 1773, the town commissioners ordered "that William Wilkinson and Herrall Blackmore be fined Forty shillings each for their chimneys being on Fire last October." On May 18, 1774, "Harrol" (sic) Blackmore with seven others was asked to appear at the next meeting of the commissioners "to show cause why they should not be fined for dealing & trafficking with negroes contrary to Law," but at the next meeting he was acquitted.

We do not know when or where Herrall Blackmore and Mary Kenan were married. He had a pew (Number 44) in St. James' Church in Wilmington, but it is more likely that they were married at the bride's home at Golden Grove (now Kenansville). Mary's father, Felix Kenan, was a vestryman in St. Gabriel Parish and probably had his own minister to perform the wedding ceremony. Unfortunately the Reverend Hobart Briggs took his records with him when he fled the country on the eve of the Revolutionary War. However, we have a prayerbook of the Church of England, printed in London in 1773, which has the following inscription:

| Mary Kenan her book |
| Steal not this book for fear |
| Of shame from above and below |
| Is the owners name April 26th 1754 (?) |

Mary Kenan
Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, Inc.

Bulletin

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Meeting

Time: TO BE ANNOUNCED.
Place: TO BE ANNOUNCED.
Speaker: TO BE ANNOUNCED.
Subject: TO BE ANNOUNCED.

Wm Kenan his name and pen
May you be bless with all that heaven can bestow

William Kenan was Mary's brother, and we surmise that he was making this prayerbook a gift to her on the occasion of her birthday. Since he used her maiden name, we assume that he made this gift before her marriage but after 1773 when the book was printed. From a deed, registered in the New Hanover County Register of Deeds, Book K, p. 169, we learn that Herrall Blackmore and "his wife, Mary" sold a lot of ground in Wilmington on October 21, 1778. That puts their wedding between 1773 and 1778. From a reckoning of the activities of his descendants, we can narrow the birth of his son, Edward, to the year 1775 and hence conclude that Herrall Blackmore and Mary Kenan were married in 1774. In 1774 events other than a wedding claimed the attention of people in the colony of North Carolina. On August 25, 1774, North Carolina held its first provincial congress in New Bern and elected William Hooper; Richard Caswell and Joseph Hewes as delegates to the Continental Congress to be held in Philadelphia that fall. Governor Josiah Martin was furious, but he could not stay the tide of revolution which was spreading across the territory. The Continental Congress (Sept. 8-Oct. 26) drew up a declaration of rights and grievances and petitioned the King and made addresses to the people of Great Britain and of British America. A Continental Association was formed which banned all imports and exports to the British Isles and all consumption of British goods. "Committees of Safety" were to be established in each colony and in each seaport town. The "United Colonies" were organized for serious business. The first entry of the Safety Committee at Wilmington, dated November 23rd, 1774, reads:

At a meeting of the Freeholders in the Court House at Wilmington, for the purpose of choosing a committee for said town, to carry more effectually into execution the Resolves of the late Congress held at Philadelphia, the following names were proposed and universally assented: Cornelius Harret; Jno Quince; Frs's Clayton; William Hooper; Robert Hogg; Jno Ancrum; Arch'd McLain; Jno Robinson; James Walker. The committeemen adjourned until 6 o'clock that Evening. On November 26, 1774, the committee addressed an "admonitory circular letter to several gentlemen" who kept horses for racing to abide by the ruling of the Congress that horse-racing was an expensive diversion from their common cause and should be readily relinquished "at a time when frugality should be one of our leading virtues."

On December 14, 1774, the committee met at 6 o'clock and was informed by Mr. Herold (sic) Blackmore that "he imported since the first instant in the Sloop Mary and the Brig—(antique?), five negro slaves, and craved advice how to proceed, as he had given orders for the purchasing and shipping said slaves, previous to the resolutions of the provincial Congress." The committee "desired" Mr. Blackmore not to sell or send them out of town but be accountable for them at the next meeting. Three days later the committee learned "upon enquiry that one of the slaves imported by Herald (sic) Blackmore was ordered after the publication of the resolves of the provincial convention of this province, and in contradiction thereto, and that he had at that time an opportunity to contradict the orders he had given for the other slaves." Mr. Blackmore confessed that he had sent "a copy of the provincial resolves to Granada." The committee gave the "opinion"—that the said slaves (should) be re-shipped and resolved "that all other slaves imported since the first day of this instant, or which may be imported, shall be re-shipped from this province." On January 21, 1775, four other men were rebuked and ordered to re-ship "sundry negroes" which they had imported since the first of December. Also at this January meeting, the committee resolved:

That it is the opinion of this committee, a meeting of the merchants and traders of the town are necessary in order to agree about the rates of goods, they have for sale to prevent, as far as possible, any advantage being taken from the present situation of this province, with America in General, rating goods higher than they were formerly sold at..."
It was that April when British troops, under the command of General Thomas Gage, fired on American citizens in the towns of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts. This "shot heard around the world" awakened a new sense of patriotism among the colonists, and many openly vowed support for the common cause. In Mecklenburg County resolutions were passed, nullifying all authority of the king’s officers and declaring the citizens of that county "a free and independent people." In Wilmington all householders were forbidden to export or sell gun powder, and in Edenton the property of a Loyalist was seized.12

Already Governor Martin had sent his wife and children to New York and had written for guns and men. His opinion that the greater part of the colonists in North Carolina was loyal to the crown must have had some influence, for when the British Parliament cut off all trade with the colonies for the "disorder that prevailed," North Carolina was exempted. The governor ordered six cannons placed before the royal palace in New Bern, but they were carried off by a "mob stimulated with liquor," so he said. Fearing the rumors that the Palace was to be seized by the New Bern Safety Committee, the governor had the remaining cannon spiked so that it could not be used against the government. The ammunition was hid in the cellar and garden, and on May 24th, the governor fled toward Fort Johnston near old Brunswick which was across the river from Wilmington.

Governor Martin reached the fort on June 2nd and found in need of repair with only a small supply of ammunition; worse, however, was the morale of the troops. Many deserted and others intimated their reluctance to fight friends and neighbors. Having served as an officer in His Majesty’s army, Governor Martin began making plans for defending the fort. He reasoned that if he could hold off until men and weapons could be assembled, help would be coming from Boston and then from England. He was confident that he could recruit 3,000 troops in North Carolina, and apparently he counted heavily on the Scots and the Scotch-Irish in the Cape Fear settlements.

Wilmington’s Safety Committee knew that, with Governor Martin inside, Fort Johnston would become a rallying point of royal supporters and a possible British stronghold for warships and the sending of British soldiers. On June 19th North Carolina’s delegates in the Continental Congress urged the Safety Committees to support the revolutionary movement, declaring that "the fate of Boston was the common fate of all" and that they should form themselves into a militia and preserve their small quantity of gun powder, for "the crisis of America is not at a great distance." In their appeal to Mr. Samuel Johnston to call another Provincial Congress, the Wilmington Safety Committee reported (July 13th):

Our situation here is truly alarming, the Governor collecting men, provisions, warlike stores of every kind, spiriting up the back counties and perhaps the Slaves, finally strengthening the fort with new works, in such a manner as may make the Capture of it extremely difficult.13

Fearing any further delay, the Wilmington Committee sent out a call for men to aid in the destruction of the fort. However, there was doubt about the legality of their proposed act and, perhaps out of personal consideration for the governor’s safety, they informed his excellency of their plans and allowed him to escape to a small British warship, "The Cruiser," which was anchored in the river. On the night of July 18th the militia and minutemen, under the leadership of Robert Howe, John Ashe and Cornelius Harnett, seized the fort and burned its buildings.

Two days later when the "restraining act" of trade with Britain went into effect, the Safety Committee at Wilmington declared that North Carolina would not accept the advantages "thrown out" to it by that law and would not be seduced into deserting "the common cause of America." Governor Martin retorted (August 8th) with his "Fiery Proclamation" in which he denounced all the Safety Committees and especially the one at Wilmington. He accused them of circulating "the basest and most scandalous Seditions and inflammatory falsehoods" which were calculated to mislead the people and to turn them against His Majesty. He stated that his "immediate vengeance" was "restrained by pity for the innocent, misguided and deluded people" whom he considered as "the blind instruments of their atrocious leaders."14

On August 20, 1775, one hundred and eighty-four delegates met in Hillsboro as the Provincial Congress of North Carolina and professed allegiance to the Crown, but they denounced (on August 25) Governor Martin’s "Fiery Proclamation" and consigned it to be burned by the common hangman. Since Governor Martin had "deserted" the colony, a temporary government of forty-five members was chosen for the "regulation of the Internal Peace, Order and Safety of this Province."15

Despite its burning by the common hangman, Martin’s proclamation gave notice that members of the Safety Committees were marked men. Whether or not this warning had any effect on their decision, it is interesting to note that six men who had been elected that fall to serve on the Safety Committee at Wilmington declined. At this critical time, Herrill Blackmore stepped forward to cast his lot with the American Cause. We do not know when he came to this decision or what factors entered into it. Certainly his business interests dictated his remaining loyal to the crown, but there is mention in his will of a "sliver hilt of a sword." If this fragment of a weapon meant so much to him to be included in his will, it could have had great significance in deciding the course of his life. Had it been used in another cause for freedom from tyrannical rule a century before and had been passed down with sentiments which now determined his decision? (The Cause of Parliamentary government under Oliver Cromwell had been fought for and then lost when the monarchy was re-established in 1660.) What battle it had been used in or what meaning it held for his owner, we do not know; we do not know that it entered the picture at all. But that "sliver hilt of a sword" meant a great deal to Herrill Blackmore and may have been very significant at this time in his life. At any rate, the minutes of the Wilmington Safety Committee for Friday, November 17th, 1775, states:

Agreeable to the notice of yesterday the Freeholders met at the Court House and elected Cornelius Harnett, Achd Maclaine, John DuBois, John Dunham, John Kirkwood and Hered (sic) Blackmore to serve in Committee in place of James Walker, William Cambell, Samuel Campbell, Andrew Ronaldson, John Quince and John Robeson who declined to serve.16

Apparently the difference about the importation of those slaves was now forgotten; and when he was asked to serve
the cause of the colony against the crown. Herrall Blackmore, now at great risk, took his place with the American patriots. On Wednesday, December 20th, the Committee, with Herrall Blackmore present, heard the request of Jonas Dix and David Thompson of Massachusetts and Rhode Island for "a pass to travel to their respective families." However, failing to give "a satisfactory account" of themselves and there being "more circumstances" that appeared "inimical to the American Cause," the two men were placed under guard of Captain Dixon's company until further inquiry could be made about them. Later they were searched and swore that they were "friends to America," whereupon they were released on December 22nd.17 The concern of the committee was not without foundation, for about that same time two other men, Donald Macdonald and Donald McLeod, had appeared in New Bern and were so persuasive in their tales that the New Safety Committee not only permitted them to continue their journey but even warned them against the activities of Governor Martin. Both Mr. MacDonald and Mr. McLeod were officers in the British army and had been sent at the request of Governor Martin by General Thomas Gage in Boston to organize the loyalists in Eastern North Carolina. As soon as Governor Martin heard that they had arrived, he made MacDonald a brigadier general and McLeod a lieutenant colonel.18 Soon there were reports of a gathering of the loyal clans at Cross Creek which had been re-named Campbellton in 1762 (now Fayetteville). This community was the "capital" of the Highland settlement and had become a significant river port and the center of a "wagon trade" for the vast region extending westward as far as the Moravian settlement at Salem. (Continuation of this article in the next bulletin)

FOOTNOTES

5. The title page of this prayer-book is missing. For the Psalms, the title page reads: "A New Version of the Psalms of David, titled to all the tunes used in the churches. By N. Brady, W.D., Chaplin in ordinary and N. Tate, Esq. Poet-Laureat, To His Majesty. London. Printed by Richard Hill, for the Company of Stationers. M. DCC. LXXIII. And are to be sold at Stationers-Hall, near Ludgate Street, and by most Booksellers." The inscription given in the text is found on the back of this page.
7. Edward bought land in 1799, which means that he was at least twenty-one years old and confirms the wedding date of his parents as being prior to 1778. Also Edwards’s daughter, Nancy, was given her portion of her father’s estate in 1813, which means that at that time she was at least eighteen years old (the legal age for females). This puts her birthday in 1795 and her father’s in 1775.
9. Ibid., pp. 1090-1091.
10. Ibid., pp. 1098-1099.
11. Ibid., p. 1113.
15. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p. 363.