

The Battle of Alamance: A Reanalysis of the Historical and Documentary Records

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On May 16, 1771, the Regulator movement in North Carolina came to a quick, stunning conclusion in a wooded plain near the present community of Alamance. A little over one thousand militia, led by Royal Governor William Tryon, defeated twice their number of Regulators in a short, but intense engagement. Although numerous scholars have produced works analyzing the causes and reasons for the movement as well as the aftermath of the engagement and its effect on rebellion and resistance in the colonial world, little focus has been given to the actual battle. Understanding what actually took place, the tactics and weaponry utilized, will allow for a proper contextualization of Alamance as an eighteenth-century engagement and perhaps highlight particulars of the battle that heretofore have been forgotten.

The events that led to the battle began in 1764 as a rebellion against local, and therefore by extension, Royal authority. Citizens in the Piedmont region of North Carolina demonstrated against what they considered exorbitant fees and taxes leveled by the local sheriffs and county courts. Historian Marjoleine Kars has provided the finest analysis of the myriad causes of this rebellion in *Breaking Loose Together*: namely the lack of currency that resulted in indebtedness in the Piedmont and subsequently led to the confiscation of farmers' land by wealthier regional elites, religious disputes between most Regulators' evangelical Protestant beliefs versus the Anglican faith of the wealthier class and the eastern portion of the colony, and the political inspiration the Sons of Liberty found in the actions of the Regulators. Kars also addressed the nineteenth and early-twentieth century development of the myth of Alamance being the first engagement of the American Revolution.

The rebellion remained localized until May 1768, when the Regulators petitioned directly to Tryon for redress. As the petition by the Orange County Regulators noted, their argument was not with the Crown or with Royal authority at large, but instead only with “tyranny.” After all, the Regulators did not see themselves as rebels *against*, but rather as defenders *of*, the rule of law and Royal authority. The main object of their anger in Orange County was Edmund Fanning, local Crown official. On May 1, Fanning ordered the arrest of William Butler and Herman Husband, two of the leading Regulators in Orange County on trumped up charges that they had incited mob violence in Hillsborough. Fanning however would also be charged by the court with extortion for his methods of tax collection.¹

In July Tryon visited Hillsborough ostensibly to hear the Regulators’ complaints. Instead he made the situation worse, by declaring any large gatherings or assemblies of Regulators to be illegal. In addition, the taxes he had begun leveling for the construction of his New Bern seat – derided as “Tryon’s Palace” - had turned into a rallying cry for Regulators wherever he traveled. Tryon declared that the Regulators were “pursuing measures highly criminal and illegal” by refusing to pay taxes, and that they appeared intent on “destroying the Peace of this Government.” After calling out the Orange County militia, only a handful of whom responded, he then moved into the backcountry, attempting to raise the militias of Rowan and Mecklenburg Counties with equal lack of success. Tryon returned to Hillsborough on September 19. The Superior Court opened shortly thereafter, hosting the trials of Butler, Husband, Fanning and others. While

¹ *Colonial Records*, VII, 770-771; Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina*, 144-146.

Husband was found not guilty and Fanning convicted, the court fined him only one penny per infraction.²

Numerous lawsuits were brought against Fanning and other officials in the March 1769 court, although most were thrown out or dismissed. Tryon dissolved the General Assembly in May and ordered new elections. Regulators in Anson, Orange, and Granville eagerly clamored to get their supporters, including Herman Husband, elected. Nevertheless the following year saw much of the same. Although Regulators had been appointed to the General Assembly, local positions remained in the hands of the same elites as before. By the September 1770 meeting of the Superior Court, Orange County Regulators had had enough. A mob of several hundred marched on Hillsborough. They dragged Edmund Fanning from the courtroom and beat him unmercifully in the streets, extending their assaults to several other attorneys, justices of the peace, and the sheriff. After two days of violence the Regulators departed Hillsborough, leaving in their wake terrified local officials and thoroughly ransacked and destroyed buildings including Fanning's home.³

Reports soon circulated that the Regulators were intent on marching on New Bern as well. In response Tryon called out the Pitt and Craven militias to defend the roads leading to the capital. Nothing came of it, as the Regulators had given up their approach. When the Colonial Assembly convened in December, Tryon made sure that no such riot would ever go unpunished again. Samuel Johnston of Chowan County introduced the Johnston Riot Act, which proclaimed that any individual joining in a group of ten or more, which did not disperse within an hour of being so ordered, would be deemed a

² "Tryon to the Regulators, August 13, 1768," in William S. Powell, James K. Huhta, and Thomas J. Farnham, eds., *The Regulators in North Carolina*, 158-160; Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 152-160.

³ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 174-185.

felon and thereby could be maimed or killed on sight. On December 20, three days after the adoption of the Johnston Act, the assembly expelled Herman Husband and had him imprisoned on the charge that he had incited the September riot in Hillsborough.⁴

Husband remained in prison in New Bern until February 1771. He was released when it became apparent that no witnesses could be found who would testify that he was present at or a party to the riot. Husband's release did not appease the Regulators. His expulsion and imprisonment, in addition to the passage of the Johnston Act, seen by many to be in direct violation of British law, only helped expand the Regulation movement. In March, when Regulator leaders called for several public meetings, Tryon became enraged. On March 18, he asked for and received his council's approval to march against them and to "force an obedience to the laws of their Country." The following day, Tryon began organizing his army.⁵

This was Tryon's second time leading men into battle. He had entered the British military in 1751 as a 24-year-old lieutenant in the 1st Regiment of Foot Guards, considered the most elite unit in the British army and a suitable place for an ambitious youth looking to advance his place in society. With the outbreak of the Seven Years War, Tryon likely was eager for action. He experienced combat only once however, in a completely bungled 1758 British expedition to take St. Malo on the French shore. Hit once in the thigh by a spent musket ball, Tryon barely escaped with his life while being evacuated from the shore under fire. Unable to force his way onto an already heavily laden boat, he grabbed onto the "ring of the anchor at the stern," and was drug through the water back to the main transport vessels. In doing so he was hit again by a second

⁴ Ibid., 187-191.

⁵ Ibid., 194-196.

spent ball, this time in the back of the head. Knocked unconscious, he would have drowned had not one of the men in the boat noticed him and pulled him aboard. Consequently, his one foray into combat had not been exactly glorious. Tryon remained in the army, holding the rank of captain and lieutenant-colonel in the 1st Foot Guards while Royal Governor, yet he never held a field position again until 1771.⁶

Tryon's early failures at military glory may explain his enthusiasm for organizing his army. He began by dispatching a flurry of letters to the colony's militia colonels in late March and early April, calling for the raising of 2,550 men. His official orders called for each county to provide from one to four companies, with each company consisting of a captain, a lieutenant, an ensign, two sergeants, two corporals, one drummer, a clerk, and fifty privates. Each detachment also was to have a field officer to oversee them. Men were to receive a bounty of forty shillings for their enlistment and two shillings per day while on the expedition, with eight pence per day withdrawn for provisions. The colonels were instructed to take "No volunteers but those that are hearty, spirited, and can submit to a ready obedience in orders."⁷

Each militia colonel was instructed to provide his men with "a pair of leggings, a cockade, and a haversack." The use of the term "leggings" seems to indicate gaiters, but may in fact indicate trousers or what were known as "overalls." Gaiters were generally tarred leather or painted leather partitions that one wore from the knee or mid-shin down over their shoe tops. How Tryon expected the colonels to produce those in such a short amount of time is unclear, as is his instruction regarding cockades and haversacks, the production of which would have been somewhat labor intensive. He purchased 608

⁶ Paul David Nelson, *William Tryon and the Course of Empire*, 9-10.

⁷ "Tryon to Colonels of Militia, March 19, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 378-379.

haversacks on April 18 in New Bern, which presumably were meant for the militia battalions. He also paid a Dobbs County merchant on May 7 for 31 yards of “oznabrigs for haversacks,” and again on May 11 for 674 yards of “bedtyke for shotbags.” Tryon also bought “5 doz. Vest buttons for shotbags.” For their eight pence a day stoppage, the men were to receive either one pound of pickled pork, and one pound of wheat flour, or one and a half pounds of fresh beef and one and half pounds of corn meal. The men were to cook their rations in camp kettles distributed within each company, 200 of which he purchased in New Bern on April 18. Each company was to have a two-wheel cart and two horses for baggage, but could hire a four-wheel wagon if necessity called for it. The baggage horses, as well as those of the senior officers, were to be the only horses taken on the expedition.⁸

Tryon also organized two artillery companies, one raised for service with the western detachments under Col. Hugh Waddell and another that would attach itself to the governor’s main army commanded by Col. James Moore. The latter detachment was to be enlisted in New Hanover County and consist of one captain, two lieutenants, two sergeants, two corporals, one drummer, and fifty privates. They would receive the same pay, rations, and necessaries as the men of the infantry. Initially the unit was to be armed with six half-pounder swivel guns taken from Fort Johnston. However, Tryon reinforced them with “two light field pieces” that he received from New York courtesy of Maj. Gen. Thomas Gage, the commanding officer of all Crown forces in North America. Gage also sent six drums and “four Union colours, or two pair of Union and two pair with Red fields, with the Union in the Upper Canton” that Tryon requested. Tryon purchased “4 pair Union colours” in New Bern on April 18. Aside from these sets of flags, records

⁸ Ibid.; *Colonial Records*, XXII, 438-439, 442, 454-455.

indicate that Richard Caswell paid a local seamstress for a set of “ensigns” for the Dobbs County battalion. The order suggests that several of the battalions may have also had colors. The exact appearances of Caswell’s flags remain unknown but they were probably some variation of the British colors requested from New York or purchased by Tryon.⁹

Tryon sent his requests and instructions out to the militia colonels of 29 counties. By May 16, his army was comprised of a little over 1,000 men, including detachments from Craven, Carteret, New Hanover, Dobbs, Onslow, Johnston, Orange, and Beaufort Counties, as well as artillery, rangers, and light horse. Tryon himself maintained a fairly heavy retinue of adjutant-generals, quartermasters, and personal staff. Included among them were some of the most socially connected men in the colony. Samuel Cornell, the wealthiest man in North Carolina and a Tryon ally who had loaned the governor nearly £6,000 for the construction costs of Tryon’s Palace, served as an advisor and confidant. Willie Jones, one of the wealthiest and most powerful planters in Halifax County, joined late in the expedition as an aide-de-camp. Richard Blackledge, a Craven County merchant, served as commissary general in charge of feeding the troops, and quartermaster duties were left to important Wilmington politicians and militia officers Robert Howe and Alexander Lillington. Claude Joseph Sauthier, an Alsatian

⁹ “Tryon to James Moore, March 25, 1771,” in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 384; “Tryon to Robert Schaw, March 30, 1771,” Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 387; “Tryon to Thomas Gage, March 19, 1771,” in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 380; *Colonial Records*, XXII, 438-439; Richard Caswell Pay for Ensigns, Tryon Papers, North Carolina State Archives

cartographer and geographer, served as the superintendent of the expedition's artillery and stores, as well as the "Director of Baggage Wagons."¹⁰

Determining exactly how many men served with Tryon's army is difficult. The only extant military return made of the army is from a few days after the Alamance engagement. Adding the men who were killed or wounded to those numbers gives some idea of how large a force was assembled. The two largest units within Tryon's army were the Orange and Dobbs County militia battalions. The Orange County militia, led by Col. Edmund Fanning and Lt. Col. Francis Nash, formed a battalion of four companies consisting of a little over 200 men. Roughly equal in size to the Orange County detachment, Dobbs County retinue also fielded four companies of nearly 200 men, under the command of Col. Richard Caswell and his second-in-command Maj. Francis Mackilwean. One intriguing distinction that the Dobbs County battalion had over the Orange County men was that, while both battalions fielded drummers, the Dobbs County contingent also boasted a Scottish bagpiper named Daniel Lockhart.¹¹

The next largest formation within Tryon's army was the Craven County militia. Tryon's order book and journal, as well as the return of May 22, all show Craven County as having three companies present. However, Sauthier's map of the approach march and battle of May 16 only shows two Craven County companies. Nevertheless, it appears from all other documentation that three companies took part in the engagement. Perhaps Sauthier simply was mistaken in his drawing of that portion of Tryon's line. The three

¹⁰ Jerry L. Cross, "The Provincial Militia at Alamance Creek: A Roster of Citizen-Soldiers Serving Under Governor William Tryon in the Campaign Against the Regulators, May 16, 1771." Reported submitted the Research Branch, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, 1986.

¹¹ Cross, "Jerry L. Cross, "The Provincial Militia at Alamance Creek: A Roster of Citizen-Soldiers Serving Under Governor William Tryon in the Campaign Against the Regulators, May 16, 1771"; "Return of the Army Whilst Encamped at Herman Husbands on Sandy Creek, May 22, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 461.

company battalion, headed by Col. Joseph Leech and Lt. Col. Richard Cogdell, consisted of over 160 men. The Onslow and Carteret County militias came with the Craven County detachments from New Bern. Carteret boasted one company of about 60 men led by Col. William Thomson while the Onslow detachment consisted of a smaller company of around 50 men led by Col. William Cray.¹²

Three other small detachments rounded out the line infantry of Tryon's army. Col. John Ashe, perhaps the most powerful political leader in southeastern North Carolina, commanded a two company battalion from New Hanover County consisting of roughly 95 men. Two very small companies of Johnston County militia, led by Col. Needham Bryan, and consisting of about 60 men total joined as well. On the day of the battle, one platoon-sized company was left to guard Tryon's camp and was not engaged. The smallest infantry formation in Tryon's army, a Beaufort County militia company consisting of around 40 men, also was present.¹³

Specialist troops included Tryon's pioneers, artillery, rangers, and light horse. The pioneer detachment was comprised of a squad of Surry County militia led by Sgt. Gideon Wright. The intrepid sergeant somehow had avoided Regulators in the west but, unable to unite with Gen. Hugh Waddell's militia forces, chose instead to join Tryon. Shortly before the battle, Wright's men were put under the command of Ens. Alexander Gillespie. Their roles in the actual engagement remains unknown, but they would probably have been used to clear brush in advance of the army during Tryon's approach march.¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ May 11, 1771, Tryon's "Order Book," in William S. Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 691.

Col. James Moore, a powerful planter and politician from New Hanover County, led the artillery detachment assigned to Tryon's army. Initially the unit consisted of one small company of New Hanover men, but Tryon's order book and the May 22 return confirms that Col. Robert Salter's Pitt County militia company had been amalgamated into the artillery to boost their numbers to nearly 120 men. Their armament consisted of six swivel guns, each capable of firing a half-pound or pound ball, mounted on some form of light carriage and the two "light field pieces" sent by General Gage from New York. The latter weapons were two three-pounders, the standard light field pieces of the British military at the time. The swivels came from Fort Johnston, which was garrisoned partially by trained militia artillery men recruited from New York, but the militiamen from New Hanover who came with Colonel Moore had likely trained at the fort. The unit may have also been recruited from sailors, who would have been well versed in artillery. The New Hanover contingent therefore likely provided some training for the Pitt County volunteers prior to the engagement.¹⁵

The small ranger detachment, numbering 60 men from Craven County and led by Capt. Christopher Neale, acted as the light infantry of the expedition. The term "ranger," today synonymous with the U.S. Army Rangers and Special Forces operations, originated with gamekeepers in fourteenth-century England. In America, the term took on a military definition in the late seventeenth-century for militias "ranging" on the colonial frontier. The French and Indian War saw the further development and publicity of this military meaning through the exploits of units such as Rogers' Rangers. Neale's men were not experienced combat soldiers or frontiersmen and thus the "ranger" sobriquet is

¹⁵ Tryon's "Order Book," May 9, 1711, in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 689.

misleading. Nevertheless it suggests that they were light moving troops, mostly comprised of the youngest, quickest individuals in the Craven County militia, and it is quite likely that the outfit was actually the missing fourth company of the Craven County battalion. Tryon may have simply organized the fourth company into a ranger unit.¹⁶

A company of light horse, or cavalry, rounded out Tryon's army. The unit was formed shortly before the engagement from a number of "gentlemen volunteers" from eastern North Carolina. The volunteers had joined the army apart from their own militia units, in which many of them were actually officers. The official returns indicate that Tryon's light horse company consisted of 22 men led by Capt. Lemuel Bullock. How each man was armed remains uncertain, but North Carolina militia law required light horsemen to carry a pistol, sword, and carbine. Being that it was an amalgamated unit, the armament likely varied dramatically per individual.¹⁷

Several questions traditionally have remained unanswered concerning Tryon's army at the time of the engagement. First, were they uniformed? Both nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists' conceptions of the engagement show Tryon's men in the traditional uniform of the regular British soldier or "redcoat." Images such as these were consistent with constructing the memory of the engagement as the "first battle of the Revolutionary War." However, the image is completely false. Tryon himself, being a British field officer in a line regiment, possibly wore his 1st Foot Guards uniform. An analysis of his staff, as well as the known battalion and company officers has yet to demonstrate any other regular or provincial service veterans. The fact that Tryon

¹⁶ "Tryon to Captain Christopher Neale, April 23, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 405.

¹⁷ Tryon's "Order Book," May 12, 1771, in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 691-692; "Return of the Army Whilst Encamped at Herman Husbands on Sandy Creek, May 22, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 461.

explicitly ordered such veterans to receive seniority in commissions suggests that one or two may have had such experience. If so, perhaps those men may have been uniformed.

The militia would have been clothed in civilian dress, perhaps wearing some form of symbolic clothing denoting them as members of Tryon's army. In the six weeks prior to the engagement, Tryon purchased over 1,200 yards of ribbon and 4 yards of yellow camblet for cockades. Particularly interesting is Tryon's purchase "for the Craven & Carteret Regiments" of 263 pairs of boots, as well as 74 pairs of scarlet garters and 100 pairs of common garters. Tryon must have bought out every single boot and shoemaker in New Bern with that order. The choice of two different color knee garters is intriguing. Did the various colors differentiate one company from another or denote rank? For the remainder of the campaign Tryon made several more sizable purchases of garters and ribbons, suggesting that they were used in some fashion to denote membership in his army. He also purchased 21 yards of oznabrigs for hunting shirts in early May - enough to outfit seven or eight men, although there is nothing to indicate who received them.¹⁸

Shortly after the battle, Tryon ordered his men to cock their hats on one side with an oak sprig, perhaps indicating that the cockades had worn out during their cross-colony march and the engagement. References exist regarding trousers and breeches, as well as hunting shirts and even a "blue hussar's coat," among the militia. The men likely wore a combination of slouch and cocked hats. The presence of a number of Scottish highlanders in the Dobbs County battalion suggests that Scotch bonnets may have been present. It is highly unlikely that kilts would have been worn by the latter, but perhaps trews – traditional, narrow legged Scottish trousers – could have been. In addition, a few men

¹⁸ *Colonial Records*, XXII, 438-439, 454-455, 458-459.

may have been wearing the leggings or gaiters prescribed by Tryon, although there is no good documentary evidence for it.¹⁹

Questions remain as to the type of weaponry Tryon's army carried. The 1766 North Carolina militia law required men to carry "a well fixt gun" as well as a "cartouch box, sword, cutlass, or hanger, and have nine charges of powder, made into cartridges, and sizeable bullets or swan shots." In addition, he was to have "three spare flints, a worm, and a picker." Failure to have any of the items would result in various fines. Whether or not the militia called out in 1771, or militia in general for that matter, could abide by such regulations is unknown. Skilled leatherworkers would be necessary to make cartridge boxes. Crude swords, especially small hangers, could be constructed fairly easily by local blacksmiths from farming implements; the leatherwork necessary for scabbards might have been lacking in some rural areas. Cartridge boxes indicate the use of smoothbore weapons, either muskets or fowlers, because riflemen never used pre-made cartridges in the eighteenth century. Extant accounts show the purchase of cartridge boxes, as well as reams of cartridge paper, throughout the campaign. In addition to buying over 800 pounds of gunpowder and 1,300 pounds of lead shot, Tryon also bought over 70 pounds of swan shot, indicating the use of buck-and-ball rounds. These loads, consisting of one .65-71 caliber musket ball and three to nine smaller .20-30 caliber balls, could only be fired from a smoothbore musket. Such weapons available to North Carolinians at the time of the battle included non-military firearms such as fowling pieces; however, those particular guns would not have held a bayonet. Nearly a thousand

¹⁹ "Tryon to Colonels of Militia, March 19, 1771," Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 378-379; Tryon's "Order Book," May 22, 1771, in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 701; Tryon's "Order Book," June 14, 1771, Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 711.

British Long Land Pattern muskets, more commonly known today as the Brown Bess musket, had been sent from Great Britain to North Carolina during the French and Indian War, along with Dutch firelocks purchased by Royal Governor Arthur Dobbs. Again indicating the use of smoothbore muskets, bayonets are documented in correspondence concerning the expedition and battle. Nevertheless several individuals petitioned the General Assembly to pay for their loss of rifles, indicating their presence as well.²⁰

The Regulator “army” remains little-studied, in part because of an almost complete lack of records concerning its organization, arms, and even the names of those who served in it. From those Regulators whose names are known, it can be inferred that the majority of those present at Alamance came from Guilford, Orange, and Chatham Counties. Groups from Surry County were apparently on their way, but it is unclear whether they arrived in time to participate. Even the size of the Regulator force remains uncertain, with estimates from individuals present at the battle ranging from 600 to 2,000. Nineteenth-century Whig chroniclers as well as some early twentieth-century historians, attempting to position the Battle of Alamance as the first engagement of the Revolutionary War, developed an image of the typical Regulator as a backwoodsman, clothed in a fringed hunting frock, carrying the frontiersmen’s rifle, and facing off against British redcoats. Like the British redcoat mythology, this depiction of the Regulator is equally wrong. The majority of the Regulators would have been clothed identically to their brethren accompanying Tryon’s army, as is indicated by the fact that Tryon had his men wear cockades. By doing so, Tryon’s men could distinguish themselves from their enemy since their clothing and accoutrements alone would not. It is possible, although

²⁰ *Colonial Records*, XXIII, 760-765; *Colonial Records*, XXII, 418, 433-439, 454-459; *Colonial Records*, V, 215, 218, 236-237.

unsupported by any of the extant records, that the Regulators did the same, perhaps with branches in their hats, or a cloth tied around one arm.

Another question concerning the Regulators is their organization, or lack thereof on the day of the battle. Sauthier's map of the engagement shows the Regulator army as simply a cluster of companies without any sense of formation or battle line. Some authors have suggested that there was no organization, and that the Regulators simply fought as a mob. This seems highly unlikely. When it came to military training and tactics, the Regulators were in reality no different than the men they faced across the field. Despite what many nineteenth and early twentieth-century historians thought, prior to the winter and spring of 1771, the Regulators were members of their county militias, and were in many ways no different in military training and occupation than most of their contemporaries in Tryon's army. Therefore, it seems likely they would have elected their own officers and formed some assemblages resembling companies or platoons prior to the engagement. Perhaps the most prescient statement concerning the Regulator army's military capabilities comes from the account of a militiaman published in the *South Carolina Gazette* on June 6. The militiaman stated that "we saw them going to the places they had agreed to occupy, and these were best calculated to secure themselves and annoy us. They had waited to receive us, so had an opportunity to chuse [sic] their ground, and it must be confessed they chose it with judgement. The ground they paraded upon was the place they wished us to stand at; and as they contrived to station themselves, it was the only ground we could not without action obtain." The statement does not indicate a mob, or rabble, but instead a force well versed in the use of terrain.²¹

²¹ (Charleston) *South Carolina Gazette*, June 6, 1771

As for weaponry the Regulators would have been armed much like Tryon's militia. Their arms would have been comprised of fowling pieces, Brown Bess muskets, and perhaps a few rifles. The fact that Tryon's men found numerous shot bags and powder horns on the battlefield after the engagement indicates that cartridge boxes may not have been that common. Arguably, the uniformity of weapons would not have been the same among the Regulator companies as was likely in Tryon's army, but the types of weapons remained consistent. They lacked artillery, and therefore would either need to close with Tryon's men quickly on, or retreat to the cover of woods to negate Tryon's advantage. In essence, two similarly armed and dressed armies, albeit one much better organized and having the advantage of artillery, met on the field at Alamance.

The two weeks prior to the May 16 engagement were quite stressful for Tryon. He had his own army in the field and that of General Hugh Waddell in the western counties. Although Tryon had hoped that Waddell could raise 750 men in Rowan, Anson, Tryon, and Mecklenburg Counties, word arrived that only 250 volunteers had fallen in. On May 2, several young men from the Rocky River and Sugar Creek Presbyterian Church congregations in Mecklenburg County blew up wagons of ammunition that Commissary General Moses Alexander had commandeered for the western army. Seven days later a mob of 2,000 Regulators surrounded Waddell's army in Rowan County, forcing him to retreat across the Yadkin, and effectively knocking his force out of the campaign.²²

While things were going poorly for Waddell in the west, Tryon himself had been thoroughly frustrated raising troops. In Wake County only 80 of the county's 400 militiamen mustered, and of those only 22 volunteered to serve. Only after Tryon

²² Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 197-199.

surrounded the militia with his own army could he get the 50-man quota required from Wake. The disgruntled troops were formed into a light infantry company and detached from the army. Receiving word of Waddell's position, Tryon continued his march west, through Hillsborough on May 11, and camped along the Great Alamance Creek on May 13. Word arrived that a large body of Regulators were encamped nearby, and for two days the opposing sides remained only a few miles from each other. On May 15, riders appeared from the Regulator camp with letters from their leaders entreating Tryon to fall back, and reminding him that "The Interests of the Whole Province and the Lives of his Majesty's Subjects are not Toys, or Matters to be trifled with." Tryon, committed to a military engagement, replied that they would receive his answer the next morning at noon. He obviously sent out small reconnaissance teams to locate the precise position of the Regulator army. The Regulators captured one of the squads, comprised of Capt. John Walker and Lt. John Ashe, on the morning of May 15. After being taken, the men "were stripped & tyed [sic] to a tree and both most severely & cruelly whipt [sic] with small Hickory sticks," and remained hostages at a home in the rear of the Regulator camp.²³

In the evening hours of May 15, Tryon set forth his orders for the following morning. His army was to march at 7:00 AM with no drums beating. One wagon, with provisions, another with ammunition, and a third carrying the surgeon's medicine chest, were to follow the army. A company of the Johnston County battalion would remain in camp as guards. Tents were to be left standing, with the remaining wagons and carts drawn up in a hollow square around the camp. Tryon ordered that, while on the march,

²³ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 198-199; "Petition of the Orange County Inhabitants to Tryon, May 15, 1771," in Powell, *The Regulators*, 453-454; May 16, 1771, Tryon's "Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 722.

the discharge of three cannon would signal the command to form a line of battle, while five discharges would be the order to commence the attack.²⁴

Little is known about what activities occurred in the Regulator camp the night before the battle. Unlike Tryon's army, the Regulators may not have actually considered there would be an engagement the following day. They likely spent the night like previous ones in their camp, with no extensive preparations being made for a battle. References to the making of lead shot however are extant, as are those mentioning the cleaning of weapons, although these would have been fairly common activities. Historian Eli Caruthers recorded a story by one Regulator veteran who had been preparing loads that night, and that when he had "moulded twelve balls they stopped."²⁵

Although he gave the order to march at 7:00 AM, accounts indicate that Tryon's army did not leave their camp until 8:00 AM the following morning. They marched in a column of companies, likely four men abreast west along the Hillsborough to Salisbury Road, also known as the Trading Path. After they had reached a distance of roughly two miles from camp, Tryon ordered his army to "form the line, to see if the several detachments knew their stations." Having completed the drill, "the lines were again reduced into a column & continued on in their march." When his army was a half-mile from the rebel camp, Tryon ordered his men into line of battle.²⁶

Tryon arranged his army into two lines separated, according to most contemporary accounts, by nearly 200 yards. Each line, consisting of several battalions and companies, would have been two- or three-ranks deep, the standard British fighting

²⁴ Tryon's Order Book, May 15, 1771, in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 720.

²⁵ Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 156-157.

²⁶ May 16, 1771, Tryon's "Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 722.

formation. Neale's Craven County ranger company held the northernmost flank of the first line. A three-pounder and its crew separated his unit from the next outfit in line, the Craven County battalion. South of that battalion stood the Beaufort County company, as well as the six swivel guns and majority of the artillerymen. The left (southern) flank of Tryon's army consisted of the Orange County battalion and the Carteret County company. The two units were separated by the second three-pounder, an identical formation to those units on the right (northern) flank. The right flank of the second line of Tryon's army consisted of the New Hanover and Johnston County companies. The Dobbs County battalion and the Onslow County company comprised the left flank. Sauthier's map does not show the location of the light horse company during the fight, but it is assumed that they were probably supporting the rear of the lines one of the flanks, the standard practice in the eighteenth century.

Tryon's army continued advancing within 300 yards of the Regulator line until met by three individuals coming from their camp. At about 10:30 AM, Presbyterian minister David Caldwell, Robert Mateer and Robert Thompson, the latter two outspoken Regulators, rode out to the governor hoping to halt the potential bloodshed. Tryon apparently sent Caldwell back to the Regulator encampment, keeping Mateer and Thompson as hostages. He also sent forth his aide de camp Captain Donald Malcolm and the Sheriff of Orange County offering the Regulators an option - if they laid down their arms, dispersed, and surrendered "their outlawed Ringleaders," he would not attack. Tryon also offered an exchange of seven Regulator prisoners for the two militia officers

captured the previous evening. Failure to do so would result in a violation of the Johnston Riot Act and, therefore, open warfare.²⁷

For the next hour, Tryon awaited an answer. Tensions between the two armies escalated. Samuel Cornell, present either in the center or on the right of the first line, recorded in a letter written to New York merchant Elias Debrosse on June 6, that the Regulators reacted to Tryon's offer with cries of "Battle, Battle!" He further noted that the two armies had drifted "within 30 yards of each other, and some within 10." Cornell reported,

never did I see men so daring and desperate as they were, for during the expiration of the hour the governor gave them to disperse they would even run up to the mouth of our cannon and make use of the most aggrieving language that could be expressed to induce the governor to fire on them, for the actually seemed impatient.

Cornell also provided evidence that a brief, but bloody hand-to-hand combat event occurred prior to the first guns being fired:

Indeed they were so bold and hardened in their villainy as to run up to our first line before the battle began and wounded some of our men with cutlasses. But they all met with their deserts; some where run thro' [sic] with bayonets and others taken prisoners much wounded. Indeed none made their escape.

No other contemporary account mentions this preemptive strike. But Cornell, who was wounded in the engagement, was present, and the remainder of his narrative of the engagement agrees with other memoirs of the battle.²⁸

Several other accounts mention the Regulators baring their chests towards the militia line, or waving their hats and "telling them to come on." Nevertheless, historian Eli Caruthers recorded several statements that suggest that some Regulators bided the

²⁷ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 198-199; Caruthers, *The Life of Caldwell*, 152-154; May 16, 1771, Tryon's "Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 721-722

²⁸ Cornell to Elias Debrosse, June 6, 1771, British Records Series, North Carolina State Archives.

hour with more peaceful pursuits. One Regulator veteran he interviewed stated that the younger rebels were taking part in “athletic exercises, wrestling, jumping,” and that he himself was “engaged in wrestling with another young man, when Patrick Mullen, an old Scotchman who had been in the British service before he came to America, but was now a Regulator, came up and told them they would be fired on in a very few minutes.”²⁹

The Regulators, having heard Tryon’s terms, and faced with subjugation by force, openly rejected the order to disperse. Malcolm and the sheriff soon returned, and reported that they had read Tryon’s letter to four different bodies of Regulators, all of whom rejected it. David Caldwell attempted to give a speech imploring them to lay down their arms, but was waved off by some of those more eager to fight. Other Regulators, namely those whose religious convictions forbade fighting, including Herman Husband, slipped away to the west. When Tryon received the Regulator rebuke of his terms, he sent another message demanding that the exchange of prisoners be immediately affected or he would begin his attack. According to an account published in the June 13, 1771 *South Carolina Gazette*, “Immediately after a considerable body of them [Regulators] appeared in sight, and wave their hats, daring the men to advance...his Excellency sent an aide de camp to inform them that the hour had elapsed, and that he should fire immediately. They called out that he might fire and be damned.”³⁰

Exactly what occurred next remains uncertain. Tryon’s journal reports “the Governor being suspicious that they were only protracting the time and that they might out wing his flankers by the superiority of their numbers, sent them word he should wait

²⁹ Caruthers, *The Life of Caldwell*, 152-156.

³⁰ May 16, 1771, Tryon’s “Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents,” in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 721-722; Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 152; (Charleston) *South Carolina Gazette*, June 13., 1771.

no longer for the prisoners and cautioned the rebels to take care of themselves as he should immediately, at the return of the messenger, give the signal for action.” The sound of a gunshot echoed across the field. When the smoke cleared, Robert Thompson lay dead just in front of the first militia line. Accounts differed over exactly who shot Thompson and why. The *Virginia Gazette* for June 6, 1771 claimed “His Excellency was much insulted by them, particularly one fellow, whom he shot dead on the spot, as he was approaching him.” Council member and judge Maurice Moore, writing under the pseudonym Atticus, penned an open letter to Tryon published in the November 7, 1771 *Virginia Gazette* stating, “I can forgive you, Sir, for killing Robert Thompson at the beginning of the battle; he was your prisoner, and was making his escape to fight against you.” Caruthers explained Thompson’s death by arguing that he was not “escaping” but rather walking away in a silent protest against his being made a hostage. He noted that the Regulator account published in an eighteenth-century Tennessee newspaper, *The Weekly Times*, suggested that Tryon “seized a gun from some one who stood near, and shot him with his own hand.” Caruthers’s version, later repeated by other late-nineteenth century historians, makes Tryon appear guilty of murder. Historian Marjoleine Kars has stated that Tryon ordered Thompson executed, and therefore did not actually pull the trigger, but does not provide a piece of evidence directly exonerating Tryon.³¹

According to Caruthers, Tryon, apparently conscious that he had just committed a crime, instantly sent a rider with a white flag towards the Regulator lines. However the Regulators, having witnessed the execution, immediately opened fire on the flag bearer.

³¹ May 16, 1771, Tryon’s “Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents,” in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 721-722; (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, June 6, 1771; (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, November 7, 1771; Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 152-153; Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 201.

Contemporary evidence suggests Tryon carried a fusil and possibly a pistol during the engagement. It seems far fetched that a sitting royal governor would commit murder in front of nearly 3,000 citizens of his colony. Nevertheless, someone fired, and Robert Thompson died. Rumors swirled after the battle, and Thompson's death became symbolic in America of the effects of tyranny gone unchecked. Ethan Allan, later leading a farmers' rebellion in New York, would use Thompson as an example of the "cursed doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance."³²

Thompson's death brought tensions to a climax. According to most contemporary sources, Tryon immediately ordered his artillery to open fire. Accounts of the actual fighting range considerably. Navigating through the myths, exaggerations, and discrepancies for the truth is an almost herculean task. Oral tradition states that Tryon had significant difficulty getting his men to fire. Francis Xavier Martin, who in 1829 wrote one of the first objective accounts of the battle, stated that Tryon, in desperation, ordered his troops to, "Fire, fire on them or on me." Tryon would have been at the center of his army, perhaps behind the first line. He himself said nothing about his men delaying their fire. However if they did, it is not likely something he would have reported. Samuel Cornell wrote two weeks after the engagement that the fighting began when Tryon "gave orders to Colo. [James] Moore, who had the Command of the artillery, to fire, who instantaneously obeyed the Order by firing one of the Cannon. This began the Engagement, a little before 12 o'Clock."³³

If the armies were indeed at the distance of 25-30 yards as indicated by nearly every contemporary source, then they opened fire at the most effective range for a

³² Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 154; Michael Bellesiles, *Revolutionary Outlaws*, 99.

³³ Francois X. Martin, *The History of North Carolina from the Earliest Period*, II, 282; Cornell to Debrosse, June 6, 1771, British Records Series, North Carolina State Archives.

smoothbore musket of the period. The term “whites of their eyes” refers to 30 yards and was the optimal range at which to fire a first volley for maximum damage during the eighteenth century. The fact that some of the loads probably included buck-and-ball would have resulted in a close-range bloodbath. At 30 yards, the light field pieces of Tryon’s army would have been firing grapeshot almost like large-scale shotguns, and even the smaller shot from the swivel guns would have been effective.

Joseph McPherson’s account of the distance of the initial firing, given to Archibald Murphey and later used by Caruthers in his *A Sketch of the Life and Character of David Caldwell, must be discounted*. A 23-year-old Quaker, McPherson was at Alamance not as a Regulator, but as a spectator according to his testimony. He incorrectly claimed that Tryon had “four small swivels and two six pounders” and that the firing began before the Regulators had even responded to Tryon’s initial proclamation. Furthermore, McPherson asserted that he had been so close to Tryon’s men at the initial fire that he overheard one artillerist admonish another that “the gunner aimed to low” when one of the cannon balls landed in front of the Regulator lines. The account cannot be accurate. Tryon had three pounders not six pounders, six swivels and two field pieces, and the artillery would have been firing at point-blank range at 30 yards, and therefore would not have fired low. If they had depressed the barrel so low that their load actually struck in front of the regulators, the velocity would just as likely have sent the solid shot bounding into the Regulator ranks.³⁴

Militia accounts of the battle suggest that the encounter was quite a long, bloody affair. Tryon, in his official report to Lord Hillsborough written two days later,

³⁴ Archibald De. Murphey, n.d., Regulator Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 155.

The Action was Two Hours but after about half an Hour the Enemy took to Tree Fighting and much annoyed the Men who stood at the Guns which obliged Me to cease the Artillery for a short Time and to advance the first Line to force the Rebels from their Covering. This succeeded and we pursued them about a Mile beyond their Camp and took many of their horses and the little provision and ammunition they left behind them.

Tryon's official returns indicate losses to his army of 9 killed and 61 wounded. His journal of the expedition provides a few more details:

The Artillery began the Fire which was instantly seconded by a Discharge from the whole of the first line. The Action was hot on both Sides tho' the Rebels soon took to the Trees, from whence they kept up a Bush Fire for near two Hours, at the Expiration of which Time, their Fire slackened considerably. The Artillery was ordered to cease, and the Army to advance in the best Order the Circumstances would admit of. This soon drove them from the Trees and whole Rebel Army Fled in great Confusion, leaving behind them near Twenty prisoners taken in the Field, Fifty horses, with saddles, provisions, and a small Quantity of ammunition. The Army pursued not more than half a Mile beyond the Field of Battle, to a House where were found in a Garret, Mr. Walker and Lieut. Ashe.³⁵

Tryon's aide, Samuel Cornell, who was wounded by a musket ball in the thigh commanding either portions of the Craven County militia on the first line right flank or while rallying troops in the center as an aide to Tryon, reported that after the initial artillery fire "immediately ensued a very heavy and dreadful firing on both sides, which continued about 2 ½ hours when the Rabble were so galled by the artillery and so hard pressed by our men, they were obliged to give way." He further noted that "the killed and wounded on our side are about 70, but of the rabble there upwards of 300."³⁶

Newspaper accounts published in the aftermath of the engagement further add to the militia accounts, as most, if not all, came from sources within Tryon's forces. The initial report of the battle in the *Virginia Gazette*, published May 30, 1771, was

³⁵ "Tryon to Lord Hillsborough, May 18, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 458-459; May 16, 1771, Tryon's "Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 721-722

³⁶ Cornell to Debrosse, June 6, 1771, British Records Series, North Carolina State Archives.

completely inaccurate. It noted that Tryon only had 500 men, the Regulators numbered between 1200 and 1500 men, and stated that “their two chiefs, [Herman] Husband and [James] Hunter, had a conference with the Governor, who gave them two hours to lay down their arms.” The report noted that the “fire from their cannon and musketry, which did great execution, there not being above fifty yards distance between the two parties; and killed it is said, to the Amount of a Hundred and sixty men.” The account stated that 7 of Tryon’s men were killed, and nearly 40 wounded.³⁷

The following week, on June 6, the *Virginia Gazette* published a “corrected” account, stating “From the different accounts we have been able to collect since our last, of the Battle in North Carolina, we find that the Description we then gave of it varied but in few Particulars from Reality.” This account, much more detailed than the first, offers many interesting, if perhaps exaggerated, particulars. “Both parties fought with great animosity for Two hours and upwards; the Artillery was discharged six and thirty times, and one shot struck a tree, which in its fall killed thirty odd of the Regulators.” It continued, “One man, it is said, of the Governor’s party, was so much incensed against the Regulators, by whom he had been threatened, was determined upon an ample Revenge, or losing his life; for it is thought that he killed upwards of thirty with his own hands, walking backwards and forwards on the flank of his party during the engagement, and charging with as much coolness as if hunting squirrels.” The “Regulators were badly conducted, and fought in the utmost confusion, their ranks being in some places a Hundred Men deep, and that many of them were unarmed.” Tryon himself was credited with fighting bravely, having “his horse killed under him, and the breech of the gun he had in his hand shot away.” The account credited Tryon’s men with killing 160

³⁷ (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, May 30, 1771

Regulators, but now added 200 wounded, of which 40 were captured, while Tryon's army was credited with losing two killed and sixty wounded.³⁸

South Carolina newspapers also followed the events in North Carolina, and on June 6 the *South Carolina Gazette* published two of the most detailed accounts of the action. The first, given by "A Gentleman of Hillsborough, who was in the Battle of the 16 ult.," stated that the battle lasted upwards of "two hours, wherein not more than two-thirds of [Tryon's] troops were engaged." The anonymous correspondent further related

Little before twelve the signal for battle was given, and the hottest engagement ensued that, perhaps, ever was fought in America by the same number of troops. The firing continued without intermission for near an hour, when the artillery became too hot for service, and were withdrawn to cool; whereupon a considerable body of Regulators, believing this a signal for retreating, again rallied, and came boldly to the charge, but they were suddenly convinced of their error.

The second description was provided by "An officer of distinction in Tryon's army." He noted that the Regulators approached Tryon's army first, yelling insults and baring their chests in open defiance. This behavior, the officer noted, "incensed our people to such a degree, that it was difficult to keep them from rushing upon the enemy." Watching the eagerness of the militiamen to respond, the commenter noted "was a happy presage of the victory which ensued, and gave the officers of the army the pleasing and certain assurance, of not being deserted by their men; which in men new raised, and many of them connected with the rebels, was a circumstance not impossible to suppose might happen." The remainder of the officer's account provides the most comprehensive account yet located of the engagement:

Being informed that the insurgents had an intention of putting Mr. Walker and Mr. Ashe in the front of their line, a message was sent them by his excellency, that as he should keep the prisoners we had, in a place of safety, he depended they

³⁸ (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, June 6, 1771

would do the same for Messrs. Walker and Ashe. They returned no direct answer to this, but said, they would give them up, provided his excellency would give up ALL we had taken of theirs. This unequal exchange was extremely grating to the Governor, as it implied a concession on the side of government, not quite consistent with the resolutions we had taken, but all of us joining in a petition to his excellency, to comply with it, lest they should hang up Walker and Ashe, he was so good as to grant our request, and sent them word, provided they would send the gentlemen to him, he would send our prisoners (in number seven) immediately to them. They agreed to this, but being very tardy in the execution, and our people complaining that standing in the sun began to make them faint, and clamoring to advance upon the enemy, it was thought advisable to lead them on. We marched in profound silence, and in exact order upon them, their advanced guard and our first line met almost breast to breast. Our troops were ordered not to fire till they received his excellency's orders, so that they were almost mixed with those of the enemy, who were stationed at a little distance before their main body; they then slowly retreated to join their army, bellowing forth defiance and daring us to fire. We proceeded till within 20 or 25 yards of them, when we halted. They continued reviling us, daring us to fire, and asking us, why we delayed? That battle, battle was their wish; many of them advancing towards the artillery, opening their breasts, and defying us to begin. The greatest part of their army were then open to us, and within 30 yards; but his excellency had promised not to fire upon them till the prisoners were delivered up, and till he gave them notice; and he would not break his word even with those infatuated wretches. During this time we saw them going to the places they had agreed to occupy, and these were best calculated to secure themselves and annoy us. They had waited to receive us, so had an opportunity to chuse [sic] their ground, and it must be confessed they chose it with judgement. The ground they paraded upon was the place they wished us to stand at; and as they contrived to station themselves, it was the only ground we could not without action obtain. We were entirely open to their fire, most of them as well secured as possible from ours, and as the greatest part of our artillery were in the road, they disposed their best troops to attack them. – in this situation we impatiently expected the word fire. Upon return of the adjutant, sent to receive Walker and Ashe, who brought word they would deliver them in half an hour, they were told, that we could wait no longer, and if they did not immediately lay down their arms, we should immediately fire upon them. “Fired and be Damned” was their answer. The Governor's conduct can never be too much commended. He seemed present at every place, gave his orders with a composure and judgment which did him honour [sic], and greatly contributed to the success of the day. The officers and men behaved with bravery truly commendable, every order received was punctually executed; a regular and continual fire was kept up, and no exposure of person was dreaded or avoided. The hottest fire fell upon the artillery company, who (both officers and men) behaved in a manner truly brave and spirited. The artillery was served in a manner which did as much service to the cause, as honor to those concerned in the direction of it; about thirty were killed and wounded out of this small corps, which, in proportion to their number, you will think considerable, as it was served

by two small companies. They killed and wounded a great many of our people (the number I do not know exactly) and amongst these are one or two officers, only one killed. By accounts we received from the insurgents, and from some who have since the battle come in and surrendered themselves, they had above two hundred men killed and wounded. They fought us with a spirit that would have done them honor, in a good cause. We have taken a good many prisoners, among them some outlaws, who, I fancy, will be instantly hung up. We pursued them a good way from the field of battle, but our men being greatly fatigued, and our wounded requiring attention, we were ordered to return to the field, from which we marched into camp, where now we are.³⁹

A week later, on June 13, the *Virginia Gazette* published a third installment. This account must have been based off of the narrative provided by Samuel Cornell, as the wording is almost identical to that in his June 6 letter to New York merchant Elias Debrosse. The account stated that the battle lasted a little over two hours, and that the “Regulators, hard pressed by our men, and sorely galled by the Artillery, which played incessantly on them with Grape Shot, gave way on all Sides, and were pursued to the Distance of a mile through he woods and bushes, our troops making a great slaughter among them, as they did not make a regular retreat, but ran in great confusion to all quarters from whence they apprehended the least danger.” The piece claimed less than 10 killed and nearly 60 wounded for Tryon and 300 dead and 30 captured Regulators. It also noted that among the captured items were “hunting shirts, wallets of dumplings, jackets, breeches, powder horns, shot bags, etc.” Tryon was again credited with having fought bravely. This version related how he “had his bayonet shot away with a musket ball.”⁴⁰

South Carolina newspapers published in the second week of June provided their readers further information concerning the engagement as well. The June 13 copy of the *South Carolina Gazette* published what was reputed to be Tryon’s account of the

³⁹ (Charleston) *South Carolina Gazette*, June 6

⁴⁰ (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, June 13, 1771

engagement given to the citizens of Wilmington. The version bears very little difference from the account he gave Lord Hillsborough, but additionally claims that “a hot fire was kept up on both sides for about an hour and a quarter.” Tryon stated that the “rebels” lost “about 100 men, 200 more wounded, and upwards of twenty taken prisoner.” The *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, published for the week of June 10-17, in addition to repeating Tryon’s version of events, provided something no other extant paper had yet done; a breakdown of the casualties in Tryon’s army by county of origin. The paper listed: 3 men wounded from Onslow County, 3 killed and 14 wounded from Craven, 3 wounded from Carteret, 8 wounded from Orange, 1 killed from Dobbs, 11 wounded from Beaufort, 1 killed and 15 wounded from James Moore’s artillery company, and 1 killed and 7 wounded from the Pitt County artillerymen. The overall total was given as 6 killed and 61 wounded, of whom the paper made note “3 are since dead.”⁴¹

On June 27, the *Virginia Gazette* published its final version of the engagement titled “An Authentic Relation of the Battle of Alamance, the 16 Day of May 1771.” The account is almost an exact copy of that given as Tryon’s personal version of events related in the June 13 copy of the *South Carolina Gazette*. The account differs only slightly from the others, claiming that “a hot fire was kept up on both sides for about an hour and a quarter, when it abated a little from the enemy. The cannon was [sic] ordered to cease firing, and the whole army to advance. Then the first line, after engaging three quarters of an hour longer, drove the enemy out of the field, and gained a complete victory.” The piece further noted, quite accurately, that nine of Tryon’s men were killed

⁴¹ (Charleston) *South Carolina Gazette*, June 13; (Charleston) *South Carolina and American General Gazette*, June 10-17

and “about fifty wounded,” in exchange for 100 dead, 200 hundred wounded, and 20 captured rebels.⁴²

Regulator accounts of the battle are almost non-existent. On August 15, 1771, the *Virginia Gazette* published “A letter from a person in Carolina to his friend in Pa., May 27, 1771.” The anonymous author was either present at Alamance, or was relating information given to him by a Regulator. The account argued that Tryon “fired on them, with both great and small arms, about fifteen minutes after they had his promise to an hour to consider of his terms.” Referring to the Regulators as “country,” the individual noted that “The country, who had not the least order of discipline, but as every man had run together, as it were, to quench the devouring flames, the most part without arms or ammunition, fled at the first fire.” The letter mentions that 300 of the Regulators “stood and returned fire for three quarters of an hour, in which time the Governor struck his colors, hoisted a white flag, and beat a parley, but the country, being quite ignorant of any signals or terms of war, kept a constant firing, as long as their ammunition lasted.” No other contemporary account mentions the “white flag” or “parley,” an eighteenth-century term related to a flag of truce. The author closed his piece with the belief that seven Regulators were “killed on the spot, and two more fell, after running some distance; eight more are since dead of their wounds, and two or three more not yet out of danger” and claimed that fifty-seven of Tryon’s troops were dead.⁴³

Eli Caruthers’s *Sketch of the Life and Character of David Caldwell* provides another source for the Regulator version of events. Caruthers interviewed several elderly veterans of the engagement and recorded their anecdotes while visiting the battlefield.

⁴² (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, June 27, 1771

⁴³ (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, August 15, 1771

These accounts must be examined with a degree of caution as they were given nearly seventy years after the event. The Joseph McPherson narrative is rife with inaccuracies and what may have been imagined rather than real memories. Although McPherson was emphatic that, as a good Quaker, he did not participate in the battle, he noted that both of his brothers did, as Regulators. In one passage of his narrative he stated clearly that, at one point in the battle, Tryon's forces were actually forced back and that "some regulators, among who were two of McPherson's brothers, one older and one younger than himself, now rushed forward and seized the cannon; but when they got them they had no ammunition, nor did they know how to work them." Caruthers, in relating this passage, noted that a Regulator veteran with whom he conversed also mentioned the Regulators taking the guns.⁴⁴

Caruthers also heard of the "white flag" incident mentioned in the August 15 account. He wrote, "Regulators have generally said that he [Tryon] sent out two flags at different times, both of which were shot down." The first of these, it was claimed, was Tryon's mea culpa for the shooting of Robert Thompson, and an attempt to send forth a flag to stop the battle before it began. The second was recorded by Caruthers as having been sent out shortly after the firing began. According to the informant's testimony, "The meaning of this nobody knew except an old Scotchman, who had served in the army, and who called out 'it's a flag, don't fire.' Three or four rifles had been fired; and the flag fell; but whether the bearer was killed was not known." After the flag fell, Tryon's army supposedly fell back, abandoning their guns. No other sources support this statement, but it is intriguing that Regulator veterans told Caruthers of incidents recorded in the August 15, 1771 letter published by the *Virginia Gazette*. Could this recollection

⁴⁴ Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 155-156.

simply have been a rumor, first propagated in 1771 that became fact in the minds of locals by the 1840s?⁴⁵

Another Regulator account utilized by Caruthers is noted as having been a “written, or the matter furnished by a man who had been a Regulator and an active agent in the whole transition.” The only portions of this document known to exist are the tantalizing sections excerpted by Caruthers. It notes that “The Regulators were not prepared for battle; for they had no higher officer than a captain. Montgomery, who commanded a company of mountain boys, was considered the principal captain; and he fell about the second fire from the cannon.” The account goes on to note that the Regulators “all soon fled and left the field except James Pugh from Orange County, and three other men who had taken a stand near the cannon. They were defended by a large tree and a ledge of rocks. Although half of the cannon were directed against them, they could not be driven from their position, until they had killed fifteen or sixteen men who managed the cannon. Pugh fired every gun, and the other three men loaded for him; but at length they were surrounded.” Caruthers also noted that all the Regulator veterans he had interviewed agreed that they fled upon running out of ammunition.⁴⁶

Despite such contradictory accounts, it is difficult but possible to determine, with a fair degree of accuracy, what happened at Alamance. First, we must accept that although the militia and newspaper versions are likely biased towards Tryon’s army, they are perhaps the best contemporary primary sources available. Using those as our base, we can develop a picture as to what occurred around 12:00 PM on May 16. Shortly before noon, Tryon ordered his artillery to open fire. At 30 yards, the two field pieces on

⁴⁵ Ibid., 154-155.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 156-157.

the flanks and swivel guns in the center would have done havoc to the Regulators who were to their front. Tryon's journal tells us that the volley from the cannons was seconded by a volley from the entire first line of the militia. It seems to indicate that this was one solid volley, fired at precisely the same time by each militia company on the first line; a difficult maneuver to perform with several regular battalions, much less multiple militia companies who had not actively drilled together previous to the battle. Other accounts indicate the firing was done by platoons within each militia company, something far more practical and likely. Again, at 25 to 30 yards, the militia volley was an optimal range for damage. Therefore many Regulator casualties occurred in the initial seconds of the battle.

Nearly every primary account indicates the battle took two hours. This is an extremely long duration for an eighteenth-century engagement of the size of Alamance. Guilford Courthouse, fought ten years later, involved three times the number of men on a battlefield ten times the size, and lasted two hours. Most eighteenth-century engagements involving less than 3,000 men fought in North America were over in 20 to 30 minutes. Nevertheless, contemporary accounts of Alamance indicate that the actual firefight lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to a little over an hour followed by another 45 minutes to an hour-and-a-half of pursuit. If the two sides had remained standing 25 to 30 yards apart for over an hour constantly firing there would have been nothing left of either side. Therefore, the Regulators must have quickly retired into the woods, perhaps after firing a ragged volley in response, putting distance between themselves and the militia line. Tryon's journal supports this, stating "the Rebels soon took to the trees from whence they kept up a bush fire for near two hours." If so, depending on how much distance they had

put between the militia line and their own, the battle may have become one of rifles versus artillery. If the distance between the two sides became over 75 yards, smoothbore muskets became somewhat useless accuracy-wise. Unfortunately, no account provides much detail as to how thick the woods must have been.⁴⁷

One other factor, unfortunately not mentioned in any of the correspondence of the day, would be the impact of gun smoke on the battlefield. If eight cannons, nearly six hundred muskets, and the Regulator weapons were fired in the initial seconds of the engagement, the field would likely have been covered in smoke. Sources are few and far between for detail as to the weather the day of May 16, 1771. The account provided in the *South Carolina Gazette* for June 6 carries the phrase “our people complaining that standing in the sun began to make them faint,” indicating that temperatures may have been quite high. It likely also indicates the lack of a cool breeze or wind. Moravian accounts mention the Regulators fighting in their shirtsleeves, and indeed several jackets were captured on the field. These facts may indicate that the day was quite hot and humid. If true, and if there was little wind, gun smoke would have inundated the battlefield, making spotting and firing on the enemy difficult and time consuming.⁴⁸

Another major issue involves ammunition. A good rifleman could fire one to two aimed shots per minute, while a trained militiaman could probably get two to three shots off in the same time. The militia would not have been firing at will, but by platoons, companies, or divisions, and therefore would have been practicing ammunition discipline. Extant accounts indicate that each Regulator was likely carrying 10 to 12 rounds, and the militia likely carried the same. Militiamen carrying cartridge boxes would

⁴⁷ May 16, 1771, Tryon’s “Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents,” in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 721-722.

⁴⁸ Adelaide Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, I, 457.

probably not have had more than 12 to 15 loads. Participants would have run out of ammunition fairly quickly in an intense fight. Gun flints would have also worn out after about 15 to 20 rounds had been fired. Tryon apparently had a reserve of over 400 flints, but those would have had to be brought up in the ammunition wagon and individually distributed.⁴⁹

Consequently, the majority of the firing, after the initial volleys, probably came from the artillery and the riflemen of both sides. Newspaper accounts, Tryon's letter to Lord Hillsborough, the identified casualties, and at least one Regulator account support this theory. The June 6 *South Carolina Gazette* reported "The hottest fire fell upon the artillery company, who (both officers and men) behaved in a manner truly brave and spirited. The artillery was served in a manner which did as much service to the cause, as honor to those concerned in the direction of it; about thirty were killed and wounded out of this small corps, which, in proportion to their number, you will think considerable, as it was served by two small companies." The *South Carolina and American General Gazette* furthered this account, stating that the artillery detachments suffered two killed and twenty-two wounded; a twenty-percent casualty rate. Tryon, in his May 18 letter to Lord Hillsborough stated, "After about a half hour the enemy took to tree fighting and much annoyed the men who stood at the guns which obliged me to cease the artillery for a short time and to advance the first line." Finally, the Regulator version of events published in *The Weekly Times* account provides the story James Pugh and his three compatriots were engaged in a firefight with the artillery stating, "Although half of the

⁴⁹ *Colonial Records*, XXII, 439.

cannon were directed against them, they could not be driven from their position, until they had killed fifteen or sixteen men who managed the cannon.”⁵⁰

Given the evidence, it is apparent that the damage wrought by the Regulators on the artillery caused Tryon to order a general advance of his first militia line. Tryon and Cornell were explicit in their descriptions that only the first line of the militia was engaged. Nevertheless, numerous casualties were incurred by militia companies in the second line. Either the Governor’s troops were marching on a downward slope towards the Regulators, and thus exposing troops in the rear, or some shots managed to pass through the ranks of the first line and hit the second.

If the various accounts are to be believed, Tryon was obviously in the forefront of the advance and made an inviting target. Narratives mention Regulator shots striking the breech of his fusil, passing through his hat, and knocking the bayonet from his weapon, as well as killing his horse. In the Moravian communities, rumors spread that Tryon had even been wounded. Tryon did not apply for reimbursement for a horse after the battle, as would have been customary had he lost a horse. If he had been mounted, which does indeed seem likely, he would not have carried a fusil, a smaller version of a British musket which had become the standard sidearm of British regular infantry officers fighting in North America during the French and Indian War. He may very well have had such close calls, and the wounding of his aide and confidant Samuel Cornell may support such stories. If they did occur, however, Tryon never mentioned them in his writings.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Tryon to Lord Hillsborough, May 18, 1771, in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, *The Regulators*, 458-459; *The Weekly Times* account is given in Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 156-157

⁵¹ Adelaide Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, I, 457.

The June 13, 1771 *Virginia Gazette* account offers an interesting commentary, mentioning that the “Craven and Beaufort detachments, in the right wing, sustaining a very heavy fire for near half an hour, and the Carteret and Orange detachments, on the left wing, Johnston and Cumberland detachments, also by Colonel Waddell from Salisbury, and in a much better condition to reduce them to obedience.” Although the passage is confusingly written, misidentifies the Johnston detachment as being on the left wing, and wrongly indicates a Cumberland detachment and Waddell were present, it seems to suggest that men on the right wing faced tougher opposition than those on the left. Casualty figures seem to bear this out. The only officer of Tryon’s army killed in the engagement, Ens. William Bryan, was from the Craven County battalion. Eight of the wounded whose names and origins are known, were from Craven County, although it remains unclear whether those men were from the line companies or ranger detachment. Five of the known wounded were from Beaufort County. Hugh Williamson’s 1812 *History of North Carolina* includes a statement that “Capt. Potter commanded a company of thirty men from Beaufort: fifteen of these were killed or wounded in the action.” Although Williamson offered no evidence to substantiate the claim, and he mistook Capt. John Patten for “Capt. Potter,” he may have heard the story from a participant and it does seem to correspond to the *South Carolina and American General Gazette* account which states that Potter lost 11 wounded. In comparison, only four of the casualties were from the Orange County battalion. Three Carteret County men, the unit comprising the extreme left flank, were among the known wounded.⁵²

Intriguingly, identifiable casualties and newspaper accounts show that at least one Dobbs County militiaman was killed and possibly three were wounded and that the

⁵² (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, June 13, 1771; Hugh Williamson, *History of North Carolina*, II, 276.

Onslow County detachment took three wounded. However, according to the militia and newspaper narratives, these units, posted along the left flank of the second line, were never engaged. So how did they incur casualties unless the first line, at least on the left flank, advanced down slope and thus exposed the Dobbs and Onslow detachments? Two other explanations may exist. If the Regulator lines overlapped the left flank of the first line, whether during the initial firefight, or while the first line advanced, shots could have hit the Dobbs and Onslow men. The wounding of several of the Carteret County militiamen indicates fighting on the extreme left flank therefore it is possible that Regulators actually managed to temporarily flank the first line.

Another explanation may be found in Williamson's *History of North Carolina*. Although unsubstantiated, Williamson wrote that "Col. Fanning, who commanded the left wing, unused to action and deficient in courage, fell back with the whole of his regiment, except Capt. Nash and his company." If Fanning fell back, and the Dobbs County militia was sent forward to support him, the actions could explain the Dobbs casualties. Such a development might also support Regulator accounts of "taking the guns," if the rebels rushed forward while the Orange County battalion was falling back and struck either the artillery on the far left wing of Tryon's army or those in the center. However, no other extant accounts support this scenario and Williamson's source for his information is unknown. As Fanning's reputation was even more damaged by his participation as a Loyalist officer in the Revolution than it had been at the time of the Regulation, it is entirely possible Williamson provided a biased, partisan attack on

Fanning wrapped in historical fiction. Unfortunately the explanation for the Dobbs County and Onslow County casualties remains elusive.⁵³

The advance into the woods was quite difficult for the militia. Fighting within woods in the 1770s was a disorganized, bloody affair. British regulars were taught to fight in “open order” when engaging in the woods, each man being spaced eighteen inches apart and moving rapidly in small sections. The militiamen, with the possible exception of Capt. Christopher Neale’s ranger company, were not trained in fighting in the woods. Numerous casualties may have been incurred by both sides in the confused fighting, which probably broke down into squad-level actions. Some of the fighting may have been hand-to-hand, with short swords, clubbed muskets or rifles, and bayonets. In addition, the sergeants and junior officers would have carried halberds and spontoons; polearms with axe heads or spear tips.⁵⁴

Within a short time after the militia entered the woods, the Regulators apparently fled. The pursuit continued through the woods for some distance, and then apparently moved onto an adjoining farm where they liberated Captain Walker and Lieutenant Ashe, who had been captured before the battle. A Regulator passing through Salem five days after the engagement related that “they had stood the first two rounds from the Governor’s troops, during which many of their people fled, and then they also had retired some distance.” Moravian accounts further noted that “the terrible cannonading of the Governor’s troops had badly frightened the Regulators, who had thrown down their arms and run, even leaving the hats and coats which they had taken off before the

⁵³ Cross, “The Provincial Militia at Alamance Creek: A Roster of Citizen-Soldiers Serving Under Governor William Tryon in the Campaign Against the Regulators, May 16, 1771”; Williamson, *History of North Carolina*, II, 149.

⁵⁴ See Matthew Spring, *With Zeal and With Bayonets: The British Army on Campaign in North American*.

engagement.” However, those Regulator veterans interviewed by Caruthers claimed that they “did not fly until their ammunition failed (was expended).” One claimed that he had fired a dozen times “and had done execution every time except once when his gun choked in loading.”⁵⁵

During the pursuit, whether by accident or design, the woods caught fire. In his 1905 work *Some Neglected History of North Carolina*, William Edward Fitch quoted a report by Gideon Wright that Tryon ordered the woods fired to drive out the Regulators, and that “in consequence, some of the wounded, unable to get of the field, were roasted alive.” Fitch stated that the report credits the reference to John Henry Clewell’s *History of Wachovia in North Carolina*. Clewell does indeed record that the June 1 entry of the Salem diary, states that Wright reported such an action. However, Adelaide Fries transcription of the same source indicates nothing about Wright giving a report, but that

Martin Armstrong and his brother also came; he had not been to the Governor, and appears not to be in much favor of him. He told us a few particulars about the battle on the 16th of last month. He had counted 13 dead Regulators at the place of battle, and others had been found later, half burned, in the woods which the Governor had had fired. They probably had about thirty wounded. On the governor’s side there were three killed and about twelve wounded.

Either Clewell had access to a different version of the Salem diary than Fries, or he took liberties with the actual account, perhaps in order to put Tryon in a more damning light. Tryon said nothing in his official reports about intentionally setting fire to the woods. It is possible that he did. However, it seems an unlikely order for a commander to give whose troops were in those woods at the time. Equally possible is that cartridge papers, still smoldering from having been fired, fell upon dry leaves and ignited the blaze. Such

⁵⁵ Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians*, I, 457-460; Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*, 155-156.

accidents were common in eighteenth-century battles and took place at Guilford Courthouse during the Revolutionary War.⁵⁶

Between 2:00 and 2:30 PM the pursuit and the battle came to an end and the casualty collection and policing of the battlefield began. Casualty figures for Tryon's army are known as a result of his after battle orders, May 22 troop returns, and correspondence with Lord Hillsborough. Nine of Tryon's men were killed in action, and another sixty-one wounded. It remains unknown how many of the wounded later succumbed to their injuries, although one newspaper mentions the deaths of three. Regulator casualty figures are much more difficult to ascertain and range considerably depending on the source. On May 18, Tryon reported that the casualties of "the Enemy cannot yet be ascertained but conjectured at two or three hundred." Tryon's journal only notes that fifty horses and 20 prisoners had been taken in the field. Endorsed on the reverse of the official return of his army is the notation "After the battle near 100 of the Rebels (who stiled [sic] themselves regulators) were found dead on the field of Battle." *Virginia Gazette* accounts vary considerably. The paper first claimed that 160 Regulators were killed and a hundred captured. That figure then changed to 160 killed, 200 wounded, 40 captured. A third account stated that "300 were found dead on the field of next morning and a very great number wounded" and that "about twenty or thirty were made prisoners." The paper finally settled on 100 hundred killed, 200 hundred wounded, and 20 taken prisoner. Samuel Cornell stated that Tryon's army "captured sixty-three horses and 30 prisoners" and that the casualties of the "rabble" were "upwards of 300." In contrast, Caruthers's informants claimed that the Regulators lost 9 killed and 27

⁵⁶ William Edward Fitch, *Some Neglected History of North Carolina*, 224; John H. Clewell, *History of Wachovia in North Carolina*, 109-110; Fries, *Records of the Moravians*, I, 460.

wounded, and that only 15 or 16 of their men were captured. The Moravian account that claimed Tryon fired the woods supports this statement. However, the individual who gave that account arrived several days after the battle, and it is possible that some bodies had already been moved or buried. Another account given to Moravians shortly after the engagement mentioned that “eight of the Regulators fell at the place of battle, not counting those found in the fields.” These numbers are similar to those given in the August 15 *Virginia Gazette*.⁵⁷

Instead of remaining on the battlefield as victor, Tryon ordered his army to return to the camp at Alamance. Wagons transported his killed and wounded, as well as several wounded Regulators, back to the original camp. That evening, Tryon had the wounded of both armies brought to his own tent for care. Small parties of Regulators likely returned to the field that evening, carrying off their dead and wounded as best as possible, although the Moravian account noted that bodies still lay exposed days after the engagement. The August 15 *Virginia Gazette* account agreed, and noted “The slain, on the side of the country, lay unburied, except two, who were stolen away by their families.” One anonymous former rebel informed the Moravians that he had passed a spring where he saw “many hats and guns lying, but only three men, who were nearly dead. One, the lower part of whose body was shot away, begged him for God’s sake to

⁵⁷ “Tryon to Lord Hillsborough, May 18, 1771,” in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 458-459; May 17, 1771, Tryon’s “Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents,” in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 721-722; “Return of the Army Whilst Encamped at Herman Husband’s on Sandy Creek, May 22, 1771,” in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 461-462; (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, May 30, 1771; June 6, 1771; June 13, 1771; Samuel Cornell to Elias Debrosse, June 6, 1771, British Records Series, North Carolina State Archives; Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians*, I, 458-461; (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, August 15, 1771.

give him a drink, and he had brought him water in his hat. Another had part of his skull shot away.”⁵⁸

Faced with such contradictory accounts, it is difficult to determine how many Regulators were killed or wounded. However, Tryon’s order that the army’s wagons be utilized to evacuate the wounded of both armies, as well as the nine dead of his army, provides a clue. Tryon’s returns indicate that his army had four ammunition wagons, twelve provision wagons, and two medical wagons. If a wagon of the period could hold six to eight wounded individuals lying prone, or a combination of up to ten wounded sitting up and lying prone, and if Tryon brought every single wagon he had from the camp, then he could have evacuated roughly 100 to 180 people. Subtracting Tryon’s men from the figure means that he could have taken 30 to 110 injured Regulators from the field, far fewer wounded than reported in the newspaper accounts. Nevertheless, it seems highly unlikely that Tryon’s men would have unloaded their provisions and ammunition from every wagon in the army. It is also known that Tryon’s wagons did not pick up all of the wounded Regulators, but perhaps only those who were not ambulatory. On May 19, a man arrived in Salem asking “in the name of James Hunter, the chief of the Regulators,” for any Moravians with medical experience to come to his house “and attend to the wounded there, as the surgeon who was with them did not have the necessary instruments (there being about twenty wounded men there.”⁵⁹

The following afternoon, at 5:00 PM, Tryon ordered the dead of his army interred with full military honors at the Great Alamance Creek campsite in front of the artillery.

Tryon stated that he was sympathetic to “the brave men that fell and suffered in the

⁵⁸ Fries, ed. *Moravian Records*, I, 458; (Williamsburg) *Virginia Gazette*, August 15, 1771.

⁵⁹ Fries, ed. *Moravian Records*, I, 457; “Return of the Army Whilst Encamped at Herman Husbands on Sandy Creek, May 22, 1771,” in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 461-462

action,” but upon reflecting “that the fate of the Constitution depended on the success of the day, and the important services thereby rendered their King and Country, he consider[ed] this loss (though at present a cause of affliction to their relations and friends) as a monument of lasting glory and honor to themselves.” Local tradition states that the Regulator dead were interred in the cemetery of a nearby church however other accounts indicate they may have been buried on the field. Historian Benjamin Lossing sketched the battleground during a visit in the 1840s. The notation to this sketch states,

This view is from the south side of the Salisbury Road, which is marked by the fence on the left. The belligerents confronted in the open field seen to the north of the road beyond the fence. Between the blasted pine tree, to which a muscadine is clinging, and the road, on the edge of a small morass, several of those who were slain in battle were buried. The mounds of the graves are by the fence near where the sheep are seen in the picture. The tree by the roadside is a venerable oak on which are many scars produced by stray bullets on the day of the battle.⁶⁰

Lossing also noted that he was told the battlefield had changed considerably. He wrote that “the rock and the ravine from whence James Pugh and his companions did such execution with their rifles are now hardly visible. The ravine is almost filled by the washing down of earth from the slopes during eighty years. The whole of the natural scenery is changed, and nothing but tradition can identify the spot.”⁶¹

On the afternoon following the engagement, Tryon executed one of his prisoners, James Few. Few, a twenty-five-year old Orange County carpenter, and father of newborn twins, was hanged from a tree near the militia campground. Precisely why Few was chosen for execution remains something of a mystery. The June 6 copy of the *South Carolina Gazette* reported that he was “an active officer in the Regulator army.” Known

⁶⁰ May 17, 1771, Tryon’s “Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents,” in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 722-724; Benjamin Lossing, *Fieldbook of the Revolution*, II, 592-594

⁶¹ Lossing, *Fieldbook of the Revolution*, II, 594

locally as a radical who believed “he had been sent from heaven to relieve the world from oppression,” Few was twice given the opportunity of a pardon in exchange for renouncing his beliefs, but refused. Moravian accounts state that “the Governor twice offered him pardon, when the rope was around his neck, but he preferred to die, and the Governor turned aside weeping, and let him be hanged.” Tryon later blamed his own troops for the hanging, stating that, “it was a necessary sacrifice to appease the murmurings of the troops, who were importunate that public justice be immediately executed against some of the outlaws.” He further noted that “without which satisfaction some refused to march forward, while others declared they would give no quarter in the future.” Orange County inhabitants claimed after the war that the real culprit was Edmund Fanning. Fanning had supposedly seduced Few’s wife before the two had been married, and continued to hold bitter feelings towards his romantic rival. Whatever the reason, Few was the only man executed without a trial. The other prisoners remained under guard with Tryon’s army.⁶²

On May 18, the second line companies of Tryon’s army marched west, passing over the battleground, to Lowe’s Mill. They were followed the next morning by the first line companies who were still attending to their wounded. The casualties were placed in a makeshift hospital established at Michael Holt’s plantation, just west of the battlefield. There were several small scares, as Regulator forces remained in the area. During the night of May 18 and 19, a militia sentry was shot in the shoulder and another was captured. Moravians who had ridden towards the battlefield that evening were fired upon

⁶² Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 201-202; Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians*, I, 459.

by both Tryon's advance guard and a group of Regulators, demonstrating how close in proximity the two forces remained.⁶³

Hundreds of former Regulators rode into Tryon's camp at dawn on May 20. Three days previous the governor had distributed a proclamation offering a pardon to all former Regulators, with the exception of those captured on the field or those already outlawed, who would turn in their arms and take an oath of loyalty to both local and Royal government. Samuel Cornell estimated that nearly 1,300 former rebels accepted Tryon's offer and "surrendered themselves, laid down their arms and taken the oath of allegiance." Tryon's men collected two wagonloads of arms and sent them to New Bern for storage with the promise that at a later date the owners could come and reclaim their property.⁶⁴

For the next week, Tryon and his army ranged through the Sandy Creek area where the War of the Regulation had first started. They burned the homes and plantations of all major regulators in the area, including those of James Hunter and Herman Husband. Evidence that Tryon also burned the homes of less infamous Regulators, perhaps even the rank and file, can be found in the Revolutionary War pension of David Blalock, who claimed that his father "was killed in a skirmish attempting to supply the regulators." He also stated, "My father's house was burned down and my mother left helpless." Tryon dispatched Fanning "to form small detachments to apprehend any of the outlaws who may be skulking in the neighborhood,"

⁶³ May 17, 1771, Tryon's "Order Book," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 698; May 18, 1771, in Tryon's "Order Book," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 698-699; May 19, 1771, Tryon's "Journal of the Expedition Against the Insurgents," in Powell, ed., *The Correspondence of William Tryon and Other Selected Papers*, 724.

⁶⁴ "Governor Tryon's Proclamation, May 17, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 456; Samuel Cornell to Elias Debrosse, June 6, 1771, British Records Series, North Carolina State Archives.

thus providing him with an opportunity to exact his revenge on those who had attacked him at Hillsborough. Throughout the area, Tryon's men pillaged and burned farms, destroying or taking their crops.⁶⁵

On May 28, the army departed for the Deep River area, and three days later crossed the Uwharrie River. They met with General Waddell along the way, who reported that he had left the remainder of his army at the Yadkin River. On June 1, the army marched for the Jersey settlement along Abbott's Creek and captured Benjamin Merrill, a Regulator captain who had been leading Regulators towards Alamance when the battle occurred. Edmund Fanning roused Merrill from his sleep and forced him into irons in front of his startled wife and children. The army camped at Merrill's plantation for two days, destroying crops, burning farm fences for firewood, and pasturing the army's horses in farmers' fields.⁶⁶

The following day, June 4, the armies of Waddell and Tryon united and marched for the Moravian settlements. They arrived in Bethabara that evening and camped just outside of town. The Moravians noted that "all the leading men in the country" were present, but also remarked on the "pitiful sight" of "forty prisoners bounded two and two." Tryon's men remained in the town from June 5 through 9. Several thousand more Regulators came in to surrender and take the oath. By that time Tryon had given the oath to more than 6,400 men, or about three-quarters of the free male population of the Piedmont. Tryon distributed a proclamation among them stating that anyone bringing in

⁶⁵ David Blalock, Revolutionary War Pension, October 15, 1833, S3011, Microfilm 805, Roll 95, National Archives; "William Tryon to Edmund Fanning, May 24, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 467.

⁶⁶ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 203-204.

Herman Husband, James Hunter, Rednap Howell, or William Butler, dead or alive, would receive £100 or 1,000 acres of land.⁶⁷

On June 6, Governor Tryon held a special celebration in honor of the birthday of King George III's complete with a twenty-one gun salute. The army, after marching through the community with Moravian "musicians leading the way playing on the trombones and violins," put on a special display demonstrating "all the maneuvers they used in the battle with the Regulators." That night, Tryon's army celebrated with great revelry, in part because of his purchase of 160 gallons of beer and 160 gallons of whiskey for the men. Thus, the men of the two armies each received one pint of beer and one pint of whiskey per man. Tryon capped off the drunken festivities with a fireworks show. A Moravian journalist recorded that "when it was quite dark His Excellency set off rockets in front of his tent. The windows looking on the square were illuminated."⁶⁸

After a full day resting, and likely recovering from hangovers, Waddell's forces were dispatched on June 8 to intimidate Regulators still under arms in Tryon County (present-day Lincoln County). The main army left Bethabara for Hillsborough on June 9. Five days later they arrived, after an eighty-five mile march, and camped one mile east of town. That afternoon, June 13, despite the pleas and petitions of Orange County residents, Tryon ordered the burning William and Mary Few's farm, the parents of the man he had executed at Alamance. Two days later, the trials of fourteen of his prisoners began. In speedy tribunals, in which one of the justices later said Tryon used "every

⁶⁷ Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians*, I, 462-467; "Governor Tryon's Proclamation, June 9, 1771," in Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*, 473.

⁶⁸ Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians*, I, 466-467; *Colonial Records*, XXII, 463.

Influence” he could to ensure guilty verdicts and death penalties, twelve of the fourteen were condemned to hang for violating the Johnston Riot Act.⁶⁹

Tryon personally selected the place of execution, choosing a small hill just east of Hillsborough overlooking the town. At 11:00 AM on June 19, his entire army formed in a square around the gallows. A large crowd surrounded the square, waiting to see if Tryon would offer last minute pardons to any of the condemned – a common eighteenth-century practice at executions. Tryon offered six men their pardons, before executing the other six. Names of four of the hanged are known: James Pugh, the rifleman who had played havoc on Tryon’s artillery; Benjamin Merrill, who had not even been present at the battle; Robert Messer, a Regulator officer; and Robert Matear, who had been taken hostage by Tryon the morning of the engagement. With their deaths, the War of the Regulation came to a close. Tryon discharged his army, and on June 21, left for New Bern, where a ship awaited to deliver him to his new post as the royal governor of New York.⁷⁰

Tryon arrived in New York on July 8 amid the glory, and infamy, that the War of the Regulation had brought him. He served as an able administrator of the colony and granted large tracts of land to King’s College, which became Columbia University. During the American Revolution, he attempted to repeat his military glory. After taking part in a bungled conspiracy to capture George Washington in 1776, Tryon received the rank of major-general of Provincials. In April 1777, he led 1,800 British troops in a raid on Danbury, Connecticut. After pillaging the town, his men fought a short, but successful engagement against Patriot forces at the Battle of Ridgefield. The British

⁶⁹ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 204-207.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

government rewarded Tryon with a regular commission as colonel of the 70th Foot. Perhaps recalling his actions during the War of the Regulation, Tryon shocked many British leaders by claiming that the only way to defeat the rebels was “desolation warfare.” Shortly after the burning of Danbury, he wrote, “I should, were I in authority, burn every committee man’s house within my reach.” His extreme views became reality in July 1779, when he led an expedition in the destruction of Fairfield, Connecticut. Despite hardly any Patriot resistance, Tryon burned the village; including 83 homes, 2 churches, 54 barns, 47 storehouses, 2 schoolhouses, the courthouse, and the local jail. George Washington wrote in response that “the intrepid and Magnanimous Tryon” only made war on “Women and children” in order to “add luster to Arms and dignity to King.” Tryon fell out of favor with many senior British officials as a result. In 1780, he departed the colonies for Britain, never to return. He spent the remainder of his life in London, with his family, until his death in January 1788.⁷¹

The two men perhaps most responsible for War of the Regulation, Edmund Fanning and Herman Husband, both left the colony afterwards. Fanning went to New York as Tryon’s personal secretary. In 1774, he was appointed surveyor-general of the colony “in consequence of my losses, sufferings, and services during the insurrection in North Carolina.” During the Revolution, he commanded the King’s American Regiment, a unit comprised of New York and New Jersey Loyalists. He was wounded twice during the war and was instrumental in preventing the destruction of Yale University, his alma

⁷¹ Paul David Nelson, *William Tryon and the Course of Empire*, 90-93, 150-152, 157-158, 170-171; William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, VI, 55-56.

mater, by British forces. He served as lieutenant governor of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island in the 1790s, before retiring to London where he died in February 1818.⁷²

Tryon and Fanning's arch-nemesis, Herman Husband, lost nearly everything he owned in the conflict. An outlaw and fugitive, his home and plantation destroyed, he fled the colony disguised as an itinerant preacher under the assumed name of "Tuscape Death." Husband settled in the frontier of western Pennsylvania in 1772. He resumed using his real name in 1775, after he was pardoned by Tryon's replacement, Governor Josiah Martin, and was elected a member of the state assembly. After the war, Husband became an anti-Federalist and from took part in the Whiskey Rebellion, a farmers' uprising in western Pennsylvania against an excise tax imposed by the Washington administration. Arrested and imprisoned in 1795, Husband was eventually pardoned, but died shortly after his release from prison.⁷³

The majority of those individuals who took part in the Battle of Alamance returned to their homes and attempted to rejoin society. The Colonial Assembly issued pensions to men of Tryon's army who had been disabled by their wounds, as well as to the mothers and widows of those who had been killed. After the Revolution, the state and local counties apparently assumed these payments, as disabled veteran Isaac Reed was still receiving a yearly grant of £20 from the Craven County Courts in 1802. Tryon's destruction of farms in the Piedmont and the provisioning of his army from local crops caused widespread food shortages the following winter. Many of the Regulators, fed up

⁷² Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, II, 181-183;

⁷³ Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, III, 242-243; See William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebellion*.

with their situation and scared of further retribution, migrated farther and farther west, becoming members of the Watauga settlement.⁷⁴

The philosophical and historical legacy left by the War of the Regulation and the Battle of Alamance is almost as complex and intriguing as the actual engagement. As word of the engagement spread, northern Sons of Liberty and like-minded pro-independence groups latched onto the Regulator plight as an example of imperial tyranny. Men such as Connecticut scholar Ezra Stiles, the future president of Yale, wrote “What shall an injured and oppressed people do, when their petitions, remonstrances [sic], and supplications are unheard and rejected; they insulted by the Crown officers, and oppression and tyranny (in the name of government) continued with rigor and Egyptian austerity!” Historian Marjoleine Kars is careful however to note, “Anxious to retain the support of their own lower classes, they wrote with spirited sympathy for the Regulators while emphasizing the parallel with the imperial struggle, neatly diverting attention from issues of class toward collective oppression to the crown.”⁷⁵

In North Carolina, the reaction among the Sons of Liberty was completely opposite. Emphatic that the Regulator movement was a localized rebellion, based more on economic class and standing than a struggle against British imperial tyranny, North Carolina Sons of Liberty attempted to distance themselves from the Regulators. They saw no connection between the Regulator struggle against local elites and what they viewed as legitimate opposition to the British government. On July 30, 1771, the New Bern Sons of Liberty went as far as to burn in effigy the printer and two writers who had

⁷⁴ Craven County, North Carolina, Court Minutes, March 1802, North Carolina State Archives; Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 207-210.

⁷⁵ Ezra Stiles Diary, June 18, 1771, quoted in A. Roger Eckrich, *Poor Carolina: Politics and Society in North Carolina, 1729-1776*, 200; Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 208.

published anti-Tryon statements in the *Massachusetts Spy*. Two years later, when Josiah Quincy, a Massachusetts Son of Liberty, visited North Carolina, he was shocked to find that North Carolina's Revolutionary leaders including Robert Howe, Cornelius Harnett, and William Hooper, were adamant that the War of the Regulation bore absolutely no parallels to the Independence movement.⁷⁶

This distancing of the Regulation from the struggle for Independence continued into the American Revolution. When Scottish highlanders and other Loyalists began forming along the Cape Fear in the winter of 1775 and 1776, they were referred to derogatively as "Regulators." James Hunter, a Regulator commander, and John Pyle, a Chatham County doctor and Regulator, who may have acted as their surgeon following the battle, were among the Loyalists at the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge in February 1776. Many of the Patriot leaders opposing them, including Richard Caswell, James Moore, John Ashe, and John Alexander Lillington, had served against the Regulation as officers in Tryon's army. Caswell became North Carolina's first state governor later that year. His son, William Caswell, present at Alamance as a junior officer, served as a company commander in the Continental army and later as a general in the North Carolina militia. Moore became a Continental brigadier general before dying of disease in 1777. John Ashe served as a general in the militia, but was severely defeated at the Battle of Briar Creek, Georgia, in 1779. Lillington, formerly the assistant quartermaster general of

⁷⁶ Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*, 209; *Boston Gazette*, July 15, 1771; Josiah Quincy, Jr., "Journal of Josiah Quincy, Jr., 1773," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 49 (1915), 457-458, 460.

Tryon's force, served as both a Continental colonel and as a militia general during the conflict.⁷⁷

Comparison of the militia muster rolls for Tryon's army during the Regulator movement with militia and Continental army rolls for the Revolution demonstrate that two-thirds of the identifiable officers of Tryon's army saw service as Continentals or militia for the Patriot cause. Robert Howe, formerly of Tryon's staff, became North Carolina's highest ranking officer in the Revolution as a major general in the Continental army. Francis Nash, second in command of the Orange County battalion at Alamance, served during the 1777 Philadelphia campaign as the commander of the North Carolina Continental brigade and was killed in action at Germantown. John Patten, the captain of the Beaufort County company, who may have lost nearly half his men in the battle, became a Continental colonel and was captured at Charleston in 1780. John B. Ashe, taken prisoner on the eve of Alamance, commanded a North Carolina Continental regiment during the war, as did Thomas Clark, Tryon's provost-general. In contrast, only five of Tryon's officers are known to have actively supported the British: Tryon himself, Edmund Fanning, Samuel Cornell, Farquhard Campbell, and Lewis Henry De Rossett.⁷⁸

America's earliest Revolutionary War historians, such as David Ramsay and Mercy Otis Warren, completely ignored the War of the Regulation. The earliest eighteenth-century histories of North Carolina, written by Hugh Williamson, Francis

⁷⁷ Bobby G. Moss, *Roster of the Loyalists at the Battle of Moores Creek Bridge*; Lawrence E. Babits and Joshua B. Howard, *Fortitude and Forbearance: The North Carolina Continental Line in the Revolutionary War, 1776-1783*, 140-141, 178, 190.

⁷⁸ Jerry L. Cross, "The Provincial Militia at Alamance Creek: A Roster of Citizen-Soldiers Serving Under Governor William Tryon in the Campaign Against the Regulators, May 16, 1771.," Babits and Howard, *Fortitude and Forbearance*, 128, 142, 171, 192, 195; Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, II, 56-57, 181-183; Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, III, 314, 435; Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, VI, 55-56.

Xavier Martin, and J. Seawell Jones never claimed that the Regulation and Revolution were related. Williamson and Martin simply did not make any such connection, while Jones noted that the Regulators fought to destroy “domestic tyranny.” Even Eli Caruthers, whose 1842 account provided one of the first pro-Regulator versions of events, did not directly tie the Regulation to the Revolution. However, the feeling must have existed at least colloquially in North Carolina. Revolutionary War veteran David Blalock, whose Regulator father had been killed by Tryon’s forces, stated in his 1833 pension declaration that his father’s death “infused into my mind an intense hatred of *that nation* which I shall carry with me to the grave.” His use of the phrase “that nation” seems to indicate a mental association with Tryon’s army, the British, and the Revolution.⁷⁹

The effort to establish Alamance as the starting point of Revolution began with the Whig historians of the mid-nineteenth century. In 1851, John Hill Wheeler first put such an assertion in print, declaring that Alamance represented “the first blood spilled in these United States, in resistance to exactions of English rulers, and oppressions by the English government.” Two years later, Francis Hawks published an essay asserting that Herman Husband and Benjamin Franklin were close friends and confidants who worked with one another to fight British tyranny and stated that from the ground covering the dead Regulators’ graves, “grew the flower of freedom.” In 1855 historian George Bancroft, in his multivolume history of the United States, mentioned the Regulators as rebels against the mother country. Four years later Calvin H. Wiley’s *North Carolina*

⁷⁹ David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution* and Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*; Williamson, *History of North Carolina*; Martin, *The History of North Carolina from the Earliest Period*; Jones, *Defense of the Revolutionary History of the State of North Carolina*; Caruthers, *Life of Caldwell*; David Blalock, Revolutionary War pension.

Reader, a school textbook, stated in increasingly flowery language that “They [the Regulators] ran together at the call of Liberty, and without any captain but her; and on the memorable field of Alamance fought the first fight in the great cause which ten years afterwards united all the colonies. Here, at Alamance, fell the first martyrs; here the free genius of America was first sprinkled with the blood of patriots.”⁸⁰

During the Civil War most North Carolinians were far too involved in their own conflict to spend time honoring an engagement nearly ninety years old. Nevertheless, the connection between Alamance and the Revolution persisted in various ways. When Company E, 13th North Carolina Infantry enlisted in Alamance County, they named themselves “The Alamance Regulators” and when Company K, 47th North Carolina Infantry did the same, they called themselves “The Alamance Minute Men.” The latter company was the only unit from North Carolina named with the Revolutionary war term “minute men.” Though yet unproven, it seems obvious that the reference was made in correlating Alamance and the Revolution. Although not connecting Regulation to Revolution, a party of vigilantes in Pitt County adopted the title Regulators during Reconstruction. Fighting against the efforts of the Freedmen’s Bureau and Republican administration, the newly born Regulators acted much like their eighteenth-century counterparts. The vigilantes robbed tax collectors, seized court documents, and ransacked the county courthouse in Greenville. However, unlike their earlier brethren,

⁸⁰ John Hill Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina*, from 1584 to 1851; Francis Hawks “Battle of Alamance and the War of the Regulation,” in *Revolutionary History of North Carolina*, ed. by William D. Cooke; George Bancroft, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent*; Calvin H. Wiley, *North Carolina Reader*.

these men led more of a criminal enterprise than a peasants' uprising and were eventually crushed by police patrols, not overwhelming military force.⁸¹

Although the Civil War and Reconstruction put a temporary hold on most commemorations of Alamance as the first strike for independence, the effort resumed in the years surrounding the national centennial. An 1876 lithograph drawing by Felix O. C. Darley titled "Sketch of Governor Tryon and the Regulators" shows Tryon in full military uniform, flanked on both sides by British grenadiers confronting a mob of Regulators. The British regulars, sporting their foot-tall bearskin caps, were purposefully introduced to make the viewer's mind connect to similar depictions of the fighting at Lexington and Bunker Hill. The illustration was most recently used as the cover of Marjoleine Kars's *Breaking Loose Together*. Although Tryon himself might have been in his 1st Foot Guards uniform, not a single man of his army was a British regular and furthermore not a single member of a British grenadier company was serving in North Carolina in 1771. Nevertheless, the implication that Tryon and the War of the Regulation were directly connected to the Revolution is blatantly obvious. Four years later, in 1880, a monument was erected at Alamance battleground. The marker inscription reads, "Here was fought the first battle of English oppression in the colonies, May 16, 1771." That same year, historian John Wheeler Moore continued pushing the argument of his namesake John Hill Wheeler. Apparently confronted by the fact that most Regulators later served as Tories, Moore became the first to argue that they had done so because they

⁸¹ Louis H. Manarin, *A Guide to Military Organizations and Installations of North Carolina, 1861-1865*; Mark L. Bradley, *Bluecoats and Tar Heels: Soldiers and Civilians in Reconstruction North Carolina*.

had taken “stringent oaths” to the crown following the Regulation, and that their religious beliefs would not allow them to be broken.⁸²

In the last decade of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth, the contention that the Regulators were proto-Revolutionaries hit its apex. In 1891 historian John Fiske asserted in his history of the Revolution that North Carolinians committed the first act of rebellion against Great Britain anywhere in the colonies. He was challenged three years later by John S. Bassett who wrote that “the Regulation was not attempted as a revolution. It was rather a peasants' rising, a popular upheaval.” Bassett, quite fairly and correctly, indicated that, “the recent publication of *The Colonial Records of North Carolina* must lead to the rewriting of much of the State's colonial history.” Bassett argued that earlier writers had “been handicapped by having to use as sources of information narratives that have been prepared by one or the other of the parties to the struggle. They have not had access to the now published mass of documents, which, as might have been expected, throw new light on many features of the movement. The desire to use this light has inspired the present paper.” With such newly available material, Bassett argued convincingly that the Regulators were not Revolutionaries because they did not attempt to overthrow the local government, much less that of the King and Parliament. He noted that the Regulation did not make the War for Independence inevitable and that “the Regulation was aimed at agents of government; the Revolution struggled for principles.” Bassett did admit that the Regulation offered a

⁸² Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*; John Wheeler Moore, *History of North Carolina from Discovery to the Earliest Times*.

“grand object lesson [in armed resistance] to the whole country” that would later benefit the Revolution.⁸³

North Carolina historians followed Bassett’s lead. In his 1903 analysis of Tryon’s administration, Marshall De Lancey Haywood became the first to point out in detail that the majority of Tryon’s commanders later served as Continental officers, noting that “If the Regulators were Patriots, and Tryon, while operating against them, was playing the part of a tyrant, then the above men were either the tools or the dupes of a tyrant.” Haywood used several examples of the Regulators’ own words in which they professed their devotion and loyalty to King George III and their unwillingness to overthrow a government. Like Bassett, Haywood argued that the Regulators rose in response to corrupt local authorities, and that their struggle was connected to the British imperial system only in that, by confronting the governor, they were, by extension, fighting against a tool of the British Empire. He noted, “Exactly wherein the British – either King or Parliament – had anything to do with alleged irregularities of county officials in the backwoods of North Carolina is difficult to see.” R. D. W. Connor, the Secretary of the North Carolina Historical Commission, wrote one of the most cogent arguments in his 1919 *History of North Carolina*. Connor noted that,

“The Regulators were not contending for a great constitutional principle lying at the very foundation of human government such as inspired the men who fought the Revolution. Every grievance of which the former complained could have been removed by their own representatives in an assembly chosen by the people; the American people sent no representatives to the British parliament. The former, therefore, resisted oppressive methods of administering laws passed by their own

⁸³ John Fiske, *The American Revolution*; John S. Bassett, “The Regulators of North Carolina,” in *The Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1894, 141-212.

representatives; the latter it need scarcely be said, revolted against taxation without representation. One was an insurrection, the other a revolution.”⁸⁴

However, the argument in favor of a proto-Revolution Alamance would not die.

In 1902, the Colonial Column was unveiled at Guilford Courthouse. One of the monument’s bronze plaques commemorated the death of James Pugh who was “executed by the British governor.” Despite the fact that those living in North Carolina in 1771 were all British citizens, the implication is again clear: The Regulators were fighting against the indignities of the British. Three years later, perhaps as a response to Haywood, U.S. Army medical officer William Edward Fitch produced the most fervent argument to date in favor of the battle’s Revolutionary legacy. In the preface to his *Some Neglected History of North Carolina*, Fitch wrote

“The Struggle for American Liberty and Independence which began at the ‘Battle of Alamance’ was a momentous event in the great drama of the world history’s history, which led up to the signing of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence. At the ‘Battle of Alamance’ was kindled the flame, though small in the beginning, that eventually, Vesuvius-like, spread with the rapidity of a wild forest fire, until the oppressed of the thirteen colonies were aflame with righteous indignation and unitedly determined to forever throw off the YOKE of British oppression.”

Fitch provided little evidence to support his claims, although he did make an interesting argument that the men who opened fire on Lexington Green in April 1775 were not seeking to overthrow a government either, and that they, using the same argument Bassett and Haywood held against the Regulators, could not be seen as Revolutionaries.⁸⁵

Progressive historians of the early twentieth-century latched on to Alamance as a prime example of class conflict in the colonial period. Frederick Jackson Turner was

⁸⁴ Marshall De Lancey Haywood, *Governor William Tryon and His Administration in the Province of North Carolina, 1765-1771*, 168-169, 186; R. D. W. Connor, *History of North Carolina*, 318-319.

⁸⁵ This plaque is currently on display at the Alamance Battlefield State Historic Site; William E. Fitch, *Some Neglected History of North Carolina: Being an Account of the Revolution of the Regulators and the Battle of Alamance, the First Battle of the American Revolution*, 14-15.

adamant that “it was not the first battle of the Revolution,” but admitted “in a sense that the battle of Alamance was a conflict against privilege, and for equality of political rights and power, it was indeed a preliminary battle of the Revolution, although fought against many of the very men who later professed Revolutionary doctrines.” Expanding on Bassett’s statement that it was “a peasant uprising,” some progressive historians of the 1950s and 1960s such as Merrill Jensen and Richard B. Morris associated it with the Revolution in attempting to make broader arguments about class in general while others simply saw it as Bassett had; a localized economics-based conflict.⁸⁶

Aside from the progressives, consensus historians of the 1940s and 1950s argued that the Regulation was an internal sectional conflict that had little to do with the Revolution. This was posited first by Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager in their survey texts for American history published in the 1930s. In 1954, Hugh Lefler and Albert Newsome followed their lead with the publication of *North Carolina: History of a Southern State*. Lefler and Newsome, arguing that it was purely a sectional fight between factions in the colony, cast aside any notion of a proto-Revolutionary movement. By the later 1950s and 1960s, other historians took the theory of sectionalism to task, pointing out that neither all the Regulators nor the pro-Tryon forces were from their particularly appointed sections. These scholars argued that the Regulators were simply people reacting to a particular and immediate set of circumstances. Instead of a wide-spectrum class conflict or a sectional divide, the Regulation should be viewed simply as a localized rebellion brought on by a specific set of wrongs placed on backcountry farmers. Historian John R. Alden argued this theory in

⁸⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 119-120; Merrill Jensen, *The Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution, 1763-1783*; Richard B. Morris, *The American Revolution Reconsidered*.

his *The South in the Revolution, 1763-1789*, in which he asserted that the Regulation was “not exclusively or even basically one between Piedmont and the Tidewater” but one specifically originating in localized injustices. Alden remained emphatic that the Regulation was not connected to the Revolution.⁸⁷

North Carolina historian William S. Powell presented a nuanced mix of views in his 1949 pamphlet, written mostly for students, concerning the engagement. Powell’s account, perhaps the most balanced since Bassett, presented the rebellion as a movement focused on local grievances, but also immersed in sectional conflict. He was quite clear that the Regulation was not a fight against the British government. He noted, “Tryon’s troops, after all, had been militia from North Carolina, and not royal troops from England.” Although Powell made it clear he did not see the Regulation as part of the Revolution, he followed Bassett’s lead in conceding that the importance of the Regulation in relation to the Revolutionary War was the influence it had on other colonists. Powell argued “In Pennsylvania and Massachusetts where the people were on the verge of revolution the press gave lurid pictures of the struggles of the oppressed North Carolinians.” However incorrect or exaggerated those images may have been, he suggested that they did indeed have an impact on people’s thinking and their consideration of armed resistance.⁸⁸

During the Bicentennial period, the image of Regulators as Revolutionaries rose again. The cover art of a local Alamance County publication honoring the two-hundredth anniversary of the engagement depicted a band of Regulators, bearing rifles and outfitted

⁸⁷ Samuel E. Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*; Hugh T. Lefler and Albert R. Newsome, *North Carolina: The History of a Southern State*; John R. Alden, *The South in the Revolution, 1763-1789*, 152-163.

⁸⁸ William S. Powell, *The War of the Regulation and the Battle of Alamance*, May 16, 1771, 26.

in fringed coats, firing from the woods into ranks upon ranks of British redcoats advancing towards them. Reenactments at the site included individuals dressed as British redcoats and members of Royal Highland regiments. Although the general consensus among academic historians had established that the Regulation was not the precursor to the Revolutionary War, popular history and local mythology would not surrender the case.

In 1971 William S. Powell, James K. Huhta, and Thomas J. Farnham published *The Regulators in North Carolina: A Documentary History, 1759-1776*, allowing readers access to the pertinent documents associated with the War of the Regulation. The following year the best historiographical essay concerning the Regulators was written by George R. Adams in *North Carolina Historical Review*. Four years later Marvin L. M. Kay produced an article arguing the Alamance as class conflict stance in Alfred Young's *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*. Kay continued his argument in collaboration with Lorin Lee Cary in 1978, as part of a series of essays published in *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution*.⁸⁹

From the 1980s to 2000s, few academic works appeared concerning the Regulation. Wayne Lee included the conflict in his *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina*, offering an interesting exploration into how the Regulators went from rioters to a military force. But in 2002 Marjoleine Kars's *Breaking Loose Together*, appeared. Kars's assessment is the most comprehensive and best

⁸⁹ Powell, Huhta, and Farnham, eds., *The Regulators*; George R. Adams, "The Carolina Regulators: A Note on Changing Interpretations," *North Carolina Historical Review*, XLIX, 345-352; Marvin L. M. Kay, "The North Carolina Regulation, 1766-1776: A Class Conflict," in Alfred Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in American Radicalism*, 71-123; Marvin L. M. Kay and Lorin L. Cary, "Class, Mobility, and Conflict in North Carolina on the Eve of the Revolution," *The Southern Experience in the American Revolution*, ed. by Jeffrey J. Crow and Larry E. Tise, 109-151.

explanation of why the Regulators rebelled and how Tryon's colonial administration responded. The War of the Regulation and the Battle of Alamance are simply too complex to be lumped into the specific categories laid out by most academic historians of the past century. It is too easy to depict it as a class or geographic conflict in an either-or fashion. The war was not that neat. As Kars correctly shows, the movement must be explained through a multitude of explanations ranging from local grievances to political sectionalism and, perhaps, most important for her, religious radicalism. Although her analysis of the actual engagement is short, and incomplete, the book remains the most thorough critical study of the period. Still, the book's cover pays homage to the historical myth of the War of the Regulation as a conflict against the British government, which Kars herself does not accept.⁹⁰

Aside from Kars's book, most people interested in the War of Regulation and Alamance will likely be drawn to the Division of Historic Sites website and hopefully the battlefield itself. The website itself remains quite judicious concerning the engagement's roll in the coming of the Revolution, taking the Powell and Bassett stance that the Regulators' actions served as a lesson to future Revolutionaries. The battlefield provides an excellent opportunity to explain this backcountry rebellion in its proper context. The recent film shown to site visitors does a nice job of laying out the uprising, as well as the battle. However, the site needs a better walking path, perhaps with wayside markers for visitors. Although the flags currently used to identify the Regulator and militia lines and camps are nice visual points of reference for the visitor, their layout is inaccurate.

Tryon's army deployed from the east and advanced in line down the Hillsborough Road

⁹⁰ Wayne E. Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War*; Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together*.

(now Battlefield Road) to the west. The flags, in their current state, are at about a 45 degree angle from what they should be. A proper archaeological investigation is warranted before the construction of such a walking path or the realignment of the current flags proceeds, in order to identify and verify the various points of reference for the engagement.

Whether one considers Alamance the culmination of a peasant uprising against oppressive local government policies, the first battle of the Revolution, or an “object lesson” for the leaders of the Revolution, the site is a North Carolina treasure. A modern analysis, both historically and archaeologically, is necessary and warranted. Such an effort can only further the commemoration of the battlefield and those who fought and died there in a fashion befitting the site’s significance to North Carolina’s colonial past.