

A CAROLINA WOMAN OF THE REVOLUTION: SUSANNAH SMART

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[FOOTNOTES ADDED BY WILLIAM LEE ANDERSON III]

The county of Mecklenburg, N. C., so famous for its battles, the spirit of its people, the prowess of its heroes, and the noble daring of its women, during the Revolution struggle, has many records of heroism written in the hearts of the inhabitants, which have never been made public. The history of the Scottish Presbyterians of the whole Catawba region, will be remembered with thrilling interest, and told to youthful generations as an example both political and religious, as long as the principles of true republicanism and the love of liberty shall reign in the land. One of these home pictures which have found no place in the great gallery of history, I shall offer to the reader. The subject was living in 1851, ninety years of age, keeping house by herself, and entertaining travelers; having twenty or thirty negroes under her charge, and dispensing with the services of an overseer. The intelligent gentleman who furnished the details of this sketch — D. G. Stinson, Esq. — said her servants were better trained than any he ever saw, and appeared perfectly happy, as did their indulgent and venerable mistress. The late Colonel Dickinson was a relative of Mrs. Smart, and visited her shortly before his departure for Mexico.

The maternal grandfather of our heroine, Thomas Spratt, was of Irish extraction, and removed from Pennsylvania to Mecklenburg County; beginning the first settler who ever crossed the Yadkin in a carriage, for such luxuries were unknown in those log-cabin days. The first court convened in the county was held in his dwelling. He had two sons, who fell in battle, and six daughters, one of whom was the wife of Colonel Thomas Neil,

who commanded in the campaign of 1776 against the Cherokees, and was noted for his bravery and services. Another daughter married Colonel Thomas Polk, who, with his son William, served with distinction under the immediate command of Washington, and was, besides, celebrated for his efforts in the cause of public education. To him Mecklenburg was indebted for the establishment of Queen's Museum, or Liberty Hall. Ann Spratt, another daughter, was the mother of the subject of this memoir. She married John Barnett, who also emigrated from Ireland. Mary, their oldest daughter, was said to be the first child born between the Yadkin and Catawba Rivers. She married Captain James Jack, the bearer of the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence to the Continental Congress. Mr. Wylie, of Charleston, is one of her descendants.

Susannah Barnett was born in 1761. As her family and connections were conspicuously active in the Revolutionary war, her earliest recollections were of its stirring events. She was present at the great gathering of the people at Charlotte, on the 19th and 20th of May, 1775. The provincial convention of North Carolina had assembled at Newbern, in opposition to the proclamation of Governor Martin, and had approved of the acts of their representatives in the Continental Congress of the united colonies. On the 19th May, handbills were brought by express, containing news of the battle of Lexington, which had taken place exactly a month before. These were read to the vast assemblage, and filled all with enthusiasm. Then there was no sectional feeling; but the same sentiment pervaded the masses north

and south. An attack on the liberties of Massachusetts was viewed as an attack upon Carolina. It was a glorious day for old Mecklenburg; and often described by Mrs. Smart as “the day of throwing up of hats.” The love of country and liberty fired the hearts of all classes. The brother of Susannah, William Barnett, though but a lad, was bent on joining the patriots. He persuaded an old negro, Derry, to hide his clothes in the weeds, and swinging himself from the window by a rope, one night, he went to Charlotte, volunteered, and did excellent service in the snow campaign of 1776.¹

In 1780, in that darkest period of the Revolution for the Carolinas, when, after the fall of Charleston, British military government prevailed everywhere, the state — in the language of General Greene — “cut off from the Union like the tail of a snake;” the inhabitants forced to take protection or flee the country, Susannah, with the rest of her family, gave all possible help to the refugees. She was accustomed to say, in after life: “Oh, how we love the people of Fishing Creek, Chester District (S. C.). They suffered so much, and periled everything rather than receive British protection. I saw the Rev. John Simpson, of Fishing Creek with these very eyes, assist my mother in serving and making up new meal bags, in June, 1780; while the refugees of South Carolina were collecting and forming their camp below, at Clem’s Branch.”² One day, a dusty, travel-weary party of fugitives arrived at the large three-story log house occupied by John Barnett, and craved hospitality: it was GENERAL SUMTER with his family. His wife, a cripple from infancy, was placed on a feather bed on horseback, with a negro woman behind to hold her on. She had fallen off several times, and her face was black with bruises. Her son, Tom, a boy of sixteen, was with them, and a young woman, their housekeeper, named

Nancy Davis. She told their kind hosts how the British and Tories had come to Sumter’s house; how she had locked up everything, and flung the keys among the grass in the yard; but it availed nothing; the enemy fired the house, and all was soon a pile of ashes. General Sumter’s family, who had escaped with difficulty, were received most warmly, and remained here more than a month.³

After the slaughter of Buford’s men at the Waxhaws,⁴ the wounded were brought to Barnett’s house. Susannah saw her mother feed six men, who had but two arms among them. Her father and two brothers were at the battle of Hanging Rock.⁵ Trembling for their fate, Mrs. Barnett went to Charlotte to obtain tidings, and there heard of the battle, and the death of Captain David Reid. Overwhelmed with apprehension, she burst into tears. A friend — the aged John Gaston, of Fishing Creek — rode up, and inquired of her the news. “Oh,” she replied, “we have dreadful news from the battlefield; Captain Reid is dead; your son, Alexander, was left near the bluff ill of the smallpox, and is since dead; your three sons, Robert, Ebenezer, and David, are among the slain, and Joseph is severely wounded.” Such was the story of a single family in those times! The aged and bereaved father turned deadly pale, but uttered not a word. The wounded were brought to Charlotte, where our heroine remembered seeing Mrs. Mary McClure in attendance on her gallant son, who, with his lieutenant, Bishop, afterwards died of his wounds. In crossing the river, the matron had lost her bonnet, and walked bareheaded by his side; Mrs. Bishop also attended on her husband. The Gastons and McClures were old acquaintances of the Barnett family. William McClure, distinguished as a surgeon in the army, was a student at Liberty Hall, and was often sent on horseback to the river, by

¹ actually November–December 1775

² 25 June–4 July 1780

³ March 1781

⁴ 29 May 1780

⁵ 6 August 1780

Mr. Barnett, when he wished to visit his mother.

The defeat of Gates,⁶ and the memorable surprise of General Sumter,⁷ filled the country with terror and dismay. Early on the morning of the 19th of August, 1780, the road was full of soldiers and fugitives, making their way to Charlotte. General Sumter, with one or two of his aids, rode up to Mr. Barnett's house, dismounted, and entered. "Mrs. Barnett," he said, "do let us have something to eat, if only a piece of Johnny-cake and a cup of milk!" The matron answered: "General, I have fed more than fifty men this morning, but I'll try." Some provision had been laid by for the family; it was then produced and set out for the General. While eating, he turned to Susannah and said: "Miss Sukey, please to arrange my hair; but never mind combing it, it is so tangled." His hair was long, and rather light-colored. The young lady, during his repast, clubbed it up as well as she could, tangled as it was. In reply to Mrs. Barnett's inquiry, how it was that the American soldiers and patriots were all flying? Sumter said: "It was indeed a surprise; the enemy crossed the creek before we know of it, and was in the midst of the camp; I was in the MARQUIE asleep at the time, and was carried out at the back part, and mounted a horse that stood ready, which, however, was soon shot down from under me. I obtained this one I now have; not a very good one, to be sure, and the saddle rather the worse for wear. So I am here. You see I have lost my cocked hat and fine feathers; but this old hat, torn in the rim as it is, has sheltered my head from the burning sun; it was the gift of a noble soldier." With many thanks for his breakfast, and a hearty shake of hands, the General then mounted his horse, and went on his way to Charlotte.

Another of the refugees from South Carolina was Walter Brown, with his family, the father

⁶ 16 August 1780

⁷ 18 August 1780

of the distinguished divine, Dr. John Brown, so celebrated for his zeal and eloquence. This old and feeble man had been plundered of everything, and came to seek shelter and protection. His family was for some time at Barnett's house. At length the news came that the British were advancing on Charlotte.⁸ Mrs. Barnett, standing at the door and looking anxiously down the road, perceived some one approaching. "Sukey and Jenny Brown," she cried, addressing her own child, and the pretty daughter of her guest, "run out to the road and inquire the news." The traveler was a lad on a sorely jaded horse; the face of the rider was very long and sunburnt. Susannah asked him whence he came? "From the Waxhaws," was his reply.

"Do you know Major Crawford!"

"To be sure I do; he is my uncle."

"And who are you!"

"My name is ANDREW JACKSON."

"What is the news about the British!"

"They are on their way to Charlotte."

"What are you doing down there!"

"Why, we are popping them occasionally."

The long, slender face of the stripling was lit up with a pleasant smile, and bowing with the grace and ease of a polished gentleman, he said: "Good-morning, ladies," and went on his way. As he passed the house, Mrs. Barnett had a full view of his yellow cheeks and long face, and she laughed heartily when she heard of his remark about "popping" the enemy.

"Little Andy," as young Jackson was called, was followed by an advance of some 300, under the command of Colonel Davie, who had a skirmish with the British by night, at Wahab's in the Waxhaw settlement.⁹ Jack Barnett, the brother of Susannah, was of this party. As Davie's dragoons went up the lane, he saw something in the corner of the fence, dismounted and saw it was a Tory, whom he knew, named Dixon. The Tory threw down

⁸ 7-11 September 1780

⁹ 20-21 September 1780

his gun and ran; Jack was left on foot, his horse having gone on with the mounted troopers. The fighting just then commenced, and while the young soldier was making his way towards the scene of action, the flashing of the guns showed him the cornrows in the field, and the bullets whistled around him so thickly, he "seemed to be," to use his own words, "in the midst of the discharge of three hundred guns;" yet he escaped, bearing Dixon's weapon in his hand. Passing through the lane, he took to a tree for shelter, fired at two British dragoons the came near, and went on. Presently he was challenged by some of the Americans, and gave the countersign. "Jack Barnett, is that you!" called out Will Polk; "where is your horse?" "The last I saw of him," answered Jack "he was running after Charlie Polk." "Get up behind me, then," said the other, and the two galloped off together. In this battle, Thomas Spratt, then over fifty, received three bullet wounds, and was carried from the field to his own house. A party of British soldiers not long afterwards arrived there.¹⁰ They were told that Mr. Spratt was ill; but they insisted on having the house for their own sick, and the owner was removed into the kitchen. It was here Major Frazer,¹¹ of the British army, died, while Cornwallis and Rawdon both stood by his bed, and averred, with lifted hands, that "he was one of the best officers who had crossed the ocean." A Scotch physician was in attendance; he afterwards went into the kitchen to examine Mr. Spratt.

"What is the matter with you, maun?" he asked.

"I have a fever." The physician felt his pulse, and exclaimed: "Why maun, you are wounded!"

"And what if I am?" said the patient. "Ah, I am fearful you have been fighting against your lawful sovereign, King George."

¹⁰ 15 October 1780

¹¹ Possibly Lieutenant Alexander Fraser, 71st Regiment, known to have died 15 October 1780.

"I have been fighting for my country, and if I was well, I would do it again," replied Spratt. "Well, well, you are a brave soldier, and I'll dress your wounds for you," said the Scotchman; and he did so, and attended on him as long as the British troops occupied the house.

These unbidden guests took from Spratt over a hundred head of cattle, hogs, &c. When the time came for marching, the army formed line before the door, and then formed a hollow square, with their drums muffled. These played a mournful air; till at length the army deployed, and took up the line of march with a lively tune and a quickstep. The cause of this ceremony was the punishment of one of their own soldiers, whose body hung from the limb of a tree, he having been executed for an alleged attempt to desert, and join Davie's troops.¹²

Mr. Barnett's house was also visited by the British soldiers, who plundered it of everything. When one of the horses was brought up and bridled for their use, Mrs. Barnett walked up and pulled off the bridle. Some of the men threatened to kill her. "You can do so," she answered, "I am in your power; but if you do, you will be punished for it." Seeing a crock of milk which the intruders had brought from her cellar, she passed near, and pushed it over with her foot. The infuriated solders rushed at her, swearing they would cut her to pieces. "do it if you dare!" said she, with an air of haughty defiance; "you will be shot at from every bush in the country." They did not molest her, but went away without the milk or horse.

Some two weeks after this affair at Wahab's, a young man named William Ellet, whose brother had been killed, came to Barnett's house, having with him a Tory prisoner. After eating, he drank freely, and recurring to the scenes of the battle, and his brother's death,

¹² Also mentioned in Michael McLeary's pension application.

he became violently excited, and struck his prisoner on the head. The blood spouted from the wound. Mrs. Barnett persuaded Ellet to go into the house, and while she endeavored to pacify him, the Tory made his escape. The compassionate matron took a cup of water, and went in search of the wounded man. Tracking him by the blood, she found him lying behind a log, two-hundred yards from the house, gave him water, and bound up his head. This incident, among others, may show that kindness was often interchanged between enemies.

The residents in the country found it necessary to hide their negroes, and some carried them beyond the Yadkin for safety. Barnett's were concealed out of the house. The British took thirty or forty from the plantation of Colonel Thomas Neill. Mrs. Neill went to Charlotte, then in possession of Lord Cornwallis,¹³ and applied to him, requesting that her slaves might be restored. Cornwallis coolly told her she should not have them. She pleaded that most of her children were daughters, raised without knowing how to labor, and that she could not well get along without servants. "You will have to teach the girls to work," gruffly replied the officer. "But let me have some of the negro children," persisted the matron; "they are attached to me, and I to them." "You are a cunning old woman," said Cornwallis; "carry home the calves, and the cows will follow; get the young negroes, and the old ones will run off and go back." With this answer she was dismissed.

Mecklenburg had but few Tories. Some of the wealthy took British protection, but not one in a hundred; and these who did, had occasion to repent very surely. The case of one may be mentioned as strikingly illustrative. He was at heart a patriot, and all his connections were Whigs, and when he took protection, he soon found it a bitter cross to him. When it was ascertained that the

British were going to retreat to Winsboro', he sent his wife (whose maiden name was Mary Wilson)¹⁴ to Captain Barnett on an errand she was bid to conceal from old Mrs. Spratt. Mary was highly respected by the Whigs, who were willing at all times to do her a service, while they disapproved of her husband's course. She took Mrs. Barnett and Mary Jack apart, and told them what she wanted the captain to do for her. On the morrow, she said, two British officers were to dine at her house; she wished to captain to collect ten or a dozen men well armed, and come up in the rear. Her husband would give them a signal by coughing, when they were to fire off their guns in rapid succession; he would run off with the two officers — his guests; they were to give chase, make him a prisoner, and bear him off in sight of the officers. This little plot was literally carried out. The husband was taken prisoner; the two officers made their escape to Charlotte, where the British dragoons were ordered out for the rescue of the captive. They made no great effort, however, merely whooping when they came near the place of his capture, and firing off pistols; while Captain Barnett took the road to Nation Ford, his men surrounding the pretended prisoner with drawn swords, before every house they passed on their way.

From every quarter the news reached Charlotte of the capture of this individual. His wife performed her part to admiration; weeping and lamenting his probably fate in the hands of those murderous bushmen who killed His Majesty's foreign soldiers in cold blood; while the children went about the house crying in right good earnest for their father. The QUASI prisoner, meanwhile, was brought into the presence of Colonel Polk,¹⁵ from whom he received a severe lecture, and wept like a child. Captain Barnett told him he might thank his wife for what had been done for him, and warned him if he ever got into

¹³ 26 September–12 October 1780

¹⁴ Not too subtle reference to Ezekiel Polk.

¹⁵ Thomas Polk, brother of Ezekiel Polk

such another scrape, he might get out of it the best way he could. The British issued a number of handbills (for they had a printing-press at Charlotte), and had them posted up all over the county, warning His Majesty's subjects not to molest or take anything from Mrs. — , the wife of the protectionist. In the following January, when the British army was again approaching Charlotte, this same man fled precipitately with his family, and travelled as far as Pennsylvania, nearly killing his horses in his flight. His experience was a warning to others. After his departure, Colonel Polk placed the family of General Sumter in his house.¹⁶ Little Tom went to school in the neighborhood more than six months. The young women of the vicinity, while the enemy were in possession of Charlotte, were removed by their friends, beyond the Yadkin. Miss Barnett was taken away with the rest, and did not return till some time in October.

Shortly before the British left Charlotte, the Whigs captured an express on his way to Camden, ¹⁷ bearing a letter from Lord Cornwallis, which stated that he intended to leave the town; the inhabitants being so hostile to him that they killed his men from every bush, in cold blood, while they were engaged in collection forage for his army. Before the enemy retreated from the place, they buried their dead in Liberty Hall, and burned down the building. This college was the same which the British government refused to charter under the name of Queen's Museum. From this seat of learning, many eminent men in Church and State received their education, who have done honor to their country.

Susannah Barnett was married in 1795, to George W. Smart. She had three children, whom she lost, and her husband died in 1809.

¹⁶ March 1781

¹⁷ 12 October 1780 on Camden Road at Little Sugar Creek, Also mentioned in Michael McLeary's pension application.

He built the house she occupied in 1851. She lived usually alone, and gave accommodation to travelers who passed, as the road lay near. William H. Crawford, of Georgia, one of her most esteemed acquaintances, always stayed with her, as he went to and returned from Washington. She became extensively acquainted with men travelling in the south, and having a retentive memory, knew almost every family, their pedigree and connections, for several generations. Young or old might find her ready to converse on any subject. "I have lived at home," she was wont to say, "and yet I have seen two of our Presidents. I knew Andrew Jackson; and many a time little Jamie Polk has passed along the road there, with his breeches rolled up to his knees. He was a bashful little fellow."

Mrs. Smart was reared in the doctrines of the Presbyterian church, and remembered all the ministers who occupied the seven pulpits in Mecklenburg at the time of the Revolution. She talked with interest also of the politics of the day, and read the newspapers, even at the age of ninety. She informed Mr. Stinson, on his visit to her, that one of her relatives had been telling her of a political meeting to be held in York district, and had advocated the secession of South Carolina from the Union. She intimated to him that she had heard of this new device, and had also been informed that many of the good, gifted, and great, of South Carolina were NOT in favor of secession. For her own part, she said: "the North and South stood shoulder to shoulder I the times of '76. We should settle our family bickering at all times by a compromise."

The stump speeches delivered at this period brought to her mind the time when she was a girl of fourteen. For hours at a time she remembered to have heard the Reverend James Hall, of Iredell, who was also a captain of dragoons. There he stood upon the stump, in his fringed hunting shirt, his broadsword by his side, haranguing the people. Although young, she understood

every word of his soul-stirring speech. His theme needed no big words to set it off; it was the liberty taught us in the Bible and the Church, at the family fireside. The response to the orator was the noble daring of patriots, in the maintenance of national and individual

rights; and every bush in old Mecklenburg was vocal with the rifle's report, driving back the ruthless invader. Then the United States formed one country; and a Washington led her armies.